

Tele-Social Music Making

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Background

My involvement in sustained telematic performance and collaboration began a year ago, in December 2006, when I proposed an interdisciplinary research group to be co-led with three colleagues at University of California-San Diego (UCSD); Adriene Jenik a media artist in the visual arts department, Shahrokh Yadegari a sound designer/composer and Victoria Petrovich, a designer in the theater and dance department. My personal interest in telematic performance grew out of the pragmatic need to find an alternative way to perform, due to the worsening restrictions in travel with a double bass since 9/11. The promise of telematic performance, to transcend physical place, seemed a logical step with interesting social, environmental and potentially unique artistic possibilities.

Pauline Oliveros had told me about her coordination between the Tintinnabulate ensemble at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), and Chris Chafe's SoundWIRE ensemble at Stanford University. Both were very supportive of our getting set up with the JackTrip software, which Chris had authored. In early September, over dinner in Guelph, Ontario, Pauline patiently spelled out the process and procedure and generously shared RPI's technical, administrative, and artistic documents, which became the blueprint of how we at UCSD, would approach our intercampus collaboration, with support from The Center for Research in Computing in the Arts, (CRCA) at California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology, (CalIt2). We had agreed that for the first five weeks, we'd hook up solely with RPI. We literally had one hour a week to work together and generally at least half of that time was struggling with the technical issues of hearing and seeing image.

Water Naught

Even before connecting with Tintinnabulate, I had considered using Walter Thompson's Soundpainting language as an interdisciplinary interface because of its versatility and my prior experience as a Soundpainting conductor. Since Sarah Weaver, an expert Soundpainter, was already Soundpainting the "TeleCello Concerto" between RPI and Stanford, it made total sense to use this common language for "Water Naught" between RPI and UCSD.

In Soundpainting, a "palette" is a category for any composed or preconceived event. As a class assignment, I requested that the two ensembles break down into smaller groups consisting of three to five people from both campuses and create six palettes based on metaphor, which I defined as a verbal descriptor of an image, phenomena, or concept. Each group was asked to generate a three-minute performable event from this idea. The only other requirement was that all rehearsals, communication, and brainstorming sessions be conducted on the internet.

Following Pauline's model for Tintinnabulate, we created a class Gmail account with shared password, and communicated using a combination of softwares including Google Calendar, iVisit, SKYPE, IChat, and as last resort, the phone. We posted our results on Google Documents for all to read and collectively edit and update. This process went on in stages for five weeks leading up to the performance. The range of our palettes and the interpretation were broad. Realizations of metaphors included "interference, tempo phasing, states of water from ice to vapor, pantomime, and the networked stage." My group palette consisted of five members including Pauline on conch shells and harmonica, Sarah on trombone, Stephanie Loveless singing and text, Jefferson Pitcher on electric guitar and myself on bass. Our metaphor was to realize the 'changing states of water.' We had discussed this in terms of the ecological implications of global warming. Step by step we were evolving a plan to orchestrate this idea.

I'll never forget our rehearsal on October 22nd when this palette took on a personal dimension. Only Pauline Oliveros, Sarah Weaver and myself were free to meet that evening. After struggling on iVisit, we finally abandoned this software and connected on SKYPE each of us at different locations on the East Coast. I was speaking from my hotel room in Amherst, MA, having just driven five hours on a short East Coast tour. All day long I had been in hourly communication with my wife, as fires were raging in San Diego, as close as five miles from our home in Encinitas. Jefferson, was at the hospital with his wife, nervously monitoring her premature labor contractions. All of our intentions to work together were trumped by the reality of people we knew and cared about, potentially in harms way. Pauline, a former resident of San Diego, suggested that we meditate on all of this, sending our vibes of concern, to our friends, family, and the unknown fate of our colleagues and class ensemble. For minutes we silently sat, still connected on SKYPE, each tuning-in on our own meditative levels. After a long while, I realized I was unable to concentrate on our work and broke the silence and excused myself from the rehearsal. Yet still, it was a profound bonding experience, perhaps a moment of telematic sanity. Through the telematic medium we connected on a much different level and in a real sense, with a sensibility greater than ourselves. Due to this new collective experience, our palette took on a personal significance; we ended up naming the piece "Water Naught."

Three Ways

"Three Ways" was conceived as a feature for the string trio of Chris Chafe (cello), (a four-channel midi cello) at Stanford, Curtis Bahn-dilruba (an ancient Indian folk instrument with motion sensors on the bow to MaxMSP patches) at RPI, and myself on electro-acoustic bass at UCSD, with members of the total ensemble gradually joining in. Initially the idea was to have members of the total group to gradually join at their discretion. This proved to be unsatisfying due to the tendency for the density of thirty improvisers to accumulate quickly and stay at the same level. After studying a composite list of all of the participants and which instrument they played, I proposed nine different contrasting and cascading orchestrations; each consisting of four members, one from UCSD, one from RPI, and two from Stanford. There were also special features, for several of the main directors, including a sax feature for Jonas Braasch, an unaccompanied solo for Pauline on harmonica, and a feature for Curtis on dilruba with voices.

We had only had one rehearsal with Stanford's SoundWIRE prior to the dress rehearsal, so I had little knowledge of the improvisational sensibilities of the members of SoundWIRE. I made choices based on orchestrations rather than any informed sense of improvisational potential. I cued each new grouping with a hand signal. The final orchestration included the entire ensemble; it became a moment of collective density, followed by a coda for Chris, Curtis and myself.

Evaluation

On an artistic level, the November 16th telematic performance was successful as a first performance; equal to any other first performance of an electro-acoustic concert I've been involved with before. The way we conceived of performing telematically, in this case, was as an alternative concert hall as opposed to a new performative model using technology. In fact, there were four concert halls each with its own perspective: UCSD, RPI, Stanford and the virtual space over the internet.

Our ability to make effective musical choices was directly based on our ability to listen, hear, and interact. Careful procedures of sound check, panning, and mixing certainly need to be refined, however, the tools seem to be in place to do so. I cannot underestimate the advantage of our weekly rehearsal and careful planning of the logistics for each step. After the performance, I circulated a questionnaire to all the participants. The questions included:

1. Your name and role in the performance
2. Was this telematic performance successful from your point of view? Artistically, technologically, socially?
3. While performing, did you have a sense of group "presence?" i.e. that you were participating as one large ensemble or rather simultaneous streams (live and remote,) or three separate ensembles?
4. Did "latency" prove to be an issue you were conscious of while participating? If so, how did it affect your choices?
5. What suggestions could you propose to make and improve the telematic performance experience from the artistic, technological and/or administrative levels?
6. Please share any other pertinent perspectives or unexpected observations that may not be covered by these questions.

A brief summary of the responses:

There was a general consensus that our performance was successful on the artistic level, especially considering time limitations.

There were a variety of responses whether or not a sense of group "presence" was experienced, including perceiving all three senses of space, to only our own.

There were several valid and useful critiques about improving the rehearsal process, including the use of text chatting to address tech issues.

There were different reactions to the ease of performing telematically but surprisingly there was unanimous impression that "latency" was not an issue once we were performing.

In my experience of latency, there was one moment while co-conducting "Water Naught" with Sarah Weaver; I could see and hear her preparing a group cut off with Tintinnabulate. Recalling that our video software, IChat had a greater latency than the audio, I followed the aural cues from Sarah rather than the visual cues, resulting in a unison cutoff.

In our concert, we did not test the limits of playing 'in time,' i.e. steady tempo. When there was synchronous tempo, it was visually cued, and occurred only locally, not between groups and locations. I wonder what automatic listening/interpreting skills will we develop, if any, to equalize this inherent temporal delay of twenty milliseconds? Will the medium lend itself to any novel solutions in performing time based music? I would be interested in investigating the temporal tolerances in telematic performance.

Social Dimension

The most intriguing aspect of this process has been on the social and human level, not on the technological one. Telematic communication is rarely plug and play. This kind of dialogue requires a new level of patience in interacting with others; with a commitment and will to communicate. In many ways the improvisatory sensibilities of quickly assessing a situation, determining the right choices, tempered by the reality of what is or isn't possible, with the will to "make it work" are the operative principles. Telematic communication promotes a unique sense of group sharing. Each tool has a different communicative "tempo" allowing for different types of information. For example, chatting, has dual characteristics on the one hand there's a more contemplative quality due to the time it takes to type out an idea, but it's still a way of communicating contemporaneously with someone. I find this way of tele-collaborating not only effective for sharing ideas and info, but in its own ways, subtle and equally conducive to sharing feelings, humor, and real creative interchange.

There's a kind of telematic etiquette, which Pauline Oliveros has identified about group space, where one is always conscious of virtual communicants. In my interaction and collaboration with Sarah Weaver, day-to-day communication through SKYPE and chatting, took on new dimensions

that went beyond email missives. It was a true creative communication, akin to music making, but at a different “tempo.”

Sarah Weaver and I would audition ideas and organize the logistics for each week’s class. Prior to this project, I barely knew Sarah, yet for the past three months using the telematic tools we’ve communicated daily and in depth from three thousand miles away. I feel that I’ve shared with her a unique kind of collaborative process, one that I can’t imagine having happened any other way.

Conclusions

Telematic performance isn’t a replacement for live performance, but rather an alternate venue that has the potential of artistic intimacy. Telematic performance will only transcend the novelty stage, if there is a performance practice that is driven by rich art making ideas.

The November 16, 2007, concert continues to reverberate, thanks to new friendships, deadlines, and the need and will to make something rewarding happen. I look forward to mining the musical and interdisciplinary art possibilities of the future.