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Intercultural and interdisciplinary approaches to creative music education: An Australasian perspective

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Abstract

Music education throughout the world is adopting a ‘creative turn’ in both the ways information and skill is transferred, as well as the underlying organisational ethos that complements this education. Music education is arguably resisting universal and homogenous approaches to music education, embracing increasingly differentiated perspectives, practices and local beliefs that assert against globalising trends. Organisations are confluent in their approaches to incorporating localised intercultural and interdisciplinary approaches evident in music making. This study investigates a Creative Music Intensive that brought Australian music students together with Indigenous Australian and Korean p’ansori musicians in a two-week residential exploratory and experiential music-making event. This intercultural exploration facilitated action, interplay and development of ‘possibility thinking’ relating to deep conceptualisations of inter-culturally shared music making and the wider interdisciplinary connections. Such practices offer music and music educator students institutions and communities critical and creative practices that resist centrifuged ideas and affirm ‘locality’ and community as the epicentre from which new knowledge, creativities, industry and bipartisanship can be found and negotiated. Intercultural collaborative music-making can promote empathy, knowledge and deep collective unity and solidarity at a critical time in music education.

Keywords: intercultural music, improvisation, Indigenous music,

INTRODUCTION

The creative experience of music making remains a dominant driver in social transformation and change, where and practice of improvisation is seen as a significant element of cultural production, collectivisation and sociality. The practice of improvisation provides environments that acknowledge and promote difference, that foster intercultural and transnational music making and discourses that challenge the totalizing assumptions of creative expression. New understandings of improvisation fracture reifying narratives by considering experiences and interactions spanning physical, interpersonal, and socio-cultural

interactions, and the ability of improvisational activities to enhance relational senses of empathy, curiosity and foster inter-subjective spaces through which we perceive, feel, sense, and communicate. These deeper understandings of improvisational music making are powerful signifiers of the way we collectivise, organise and make sense of experiences originating from these social interactions. New conceptions of creative experience promote the possibility and growth of rich and diverse cultural and historical tapestries that can generate new thoughts, actions, imaginations and pro-activity in music education, and the social relationships that this creativity fosters.

Improvisation throughout the world represents a large and complex field of cultural practices that represent concepts of alternative community formation, social activism, rehistoricization of minority cultures, and critical modes of resistance and dialogue that are in evidence” (Fischlin & Heble, 2004, p. 2). The redefining orientation of jazz and improvised music not solely as a global diaspora of African-American jazz, but as a creative blending of diverse local and imported music considers how diverse local cultures, concepts and understandings can reinterpret and redefine improvised music. As Lewis suggests, “individual improvisers are now able to reference an intercultural establishment of techniques, styles, aesthetic attitudes, antecedents, and networks of cultural and social practice” (Lewis, 2002, p. 234). Improvised music is thus best understood and reflected socially via locations inhabited by musicians who come from diverse cultural backgrounds and musical practices, who have chosen to make improvisation a central part of their musical, social and cultural discourse and expression.

Asserting a worldview, geographically situated, or localised improvised music is reflected in myriad communities and multicultural spheres of musicking that evolve practices through collectivisation, synthesis, appropriation, and innovation (de Bruin, 2016a). Yet, amidst a globalized, connected world of hegemonic influence and power, music making and music learning is crafted by localised perspectives, beliefs, interpretations and adaptations of tradition that reflect improvisers’ creative experiences as authentic and in-the-world in which they live (Heidegger, 1962). Investigating musical creativities through localised intercultural, collective/collaborative lenses reveals how the situated and contextualised nature of participation evolves as a source of meaningful representation of knowledge, action and learning. Observing creative musical production allows “joint products of all the people who cooperate as a network of people cooperating”, contributing to the construction of objects and actions through collective activity (Becker, 1984, p. 35).

Improvising musical ensembles embed ways of knowing, doing and being, and offer penetrating and insightful experiences that cultivate a growth mindset of exploration, experimentation and creativity. Musical creativity within improvisation can be understood “by an analysis of its specific historical and local, national, international and relational contexts” (Burnard, 2012b, p. 37), where creative outputs are dependent and open to participatory and discursive meaning-making processes and procedures as they interact and negotiate within the social spaces of convention, tradition, communities and creativity. A proper understanding of these processes requires interrogation of the ways communities’ acknowledgement of improvisational creativity is generated, fostered and shared, and how they collectively comply, manipulate or even subvert codified practices. The production of improvised music is evolved through practices differentiated by distinctive creativities that are temporally mediated and constructed through self-technology (de Bruin, 2016b; Foucault, 1977; Monson, 1994).

Creative communities of musical practice dispel the myth of set stylistic tenets and fixed norms of behaviour. Improvisers can engage with the notion that whilst the personnel

bring a certain sonic palette, the act of improvisation implies that music will always change through interpretation and manipulation of the sonic moment. Sounds cannot be fixed and are not objects. Sounds can ascribe a fingerprint of identity, of history and tradition, but are created in a world of activity rather than artefact. The improvisers field of production is a mediated one in which ideas, concepts and identities take on added meaning in the way new practices are shaped and old practices fractured. Improvised musical creativities can reveal an illuminating locus of rich and diverse cultural values, discourse of and about practices in ways that reshapes and reconsiders musical creativity within improvised music ensembles.

INTERCULTURAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

New insights and interpretations of the world grasped through local perspectives can perceive the idea of a world-space in which we consider the local as a ‘micro’ and detailed manifestation of global variety. Such view-points enlighten how localised communities carve out special niches both within their cultures and inter-culturally. Local understandings legitimise situated creative music-making practices, narratives, and how they build bridges across diverse global contexts and locations. Rather than globalisation as a dialectical phenomenon that distances the local from the global within a continuum of divergence or even contrary occurrences, asserting localised perspectives affords regional, societal and ethnic complexity and diversity of knowledge and meaning making (Giddens, 1991). Amidst a 21st century world of increasingly differentiated perspectives, practices and local beliefs, affirming local practices asserts against globalising trends and centrifuged practices and affirms ‘locality’ and community as the epicentre from which new knowledge, creativities, industry and bipartisanship can emanate.

The investigation of localised music education practices explores the unique relationship existing between the arts and interculturality, where collective music making can transcend distances between groups of people by creating interconnections between seemingly disparate cultures, and how they merge, learn and create from each other. Intercultural music making can promote interdisciplinarity by engaging across the boundaries of art, culture and space. It can reveal inter-relational and dialogical action and reflection, situational understanding and collaborative emergence (Sawyer, 1999) involving new systems, the creative ‘in the moment’ manoeuvrability of possibility improvisers utilize, and the unpredictability and ephemeral nature of process and product. Absorbing and transferring narrative, sonic and visual information represents choices made by improvisers regarding how they translate their understandings into resulting works they produce. Such ‘intermedial translation’ (Albright 2014, p. 219), and the choices made by improvisers working in response to each other as they synthesize multiple traditions, concepts and creativities are significant and powerful modes of knowledge construction.

Analysis of localised practices can yield richer understandings as to how the ‘local’ interprets and evolves from the ‘global’ and inform ‘local’ knowing. It can reveal new ways of understanding musicking, but disclose ramifications to intercultural and interdisciplinary streams of knowledge that can be gained from immersion in these practices. As Ball (2012) suggests, we learn from practical experiences and build practical knowledge systematically on the phenomena that can further serve communities and the wider good. Interdisciplinary investigations can allow people to share complex ideas that transcend national, racial, or socioeconomic boundaries, just as the challenges we face as a global society must transcend these same boundaries (Sheridan-Rabideau, 2010). Operating as powerful generators of cultural synthesis and cross-pollination of knowledge, localised initiatives and innovations can enrich and influence global, world-wide formal learning practices of improvised music.

THE AUSTRALIAN ART ORCHESTRA CREATIVE MUSIC INTENSIVE

The Australian Art Orchestra is a professional ensemble that explores the meeting points between disciplines, cultures and local perspectives of improvised music making. Through performance and educational practice the organisation seeks to imagine and create new musical forms that reflect the diversity and energy of 21st century music making. The Creative Music Intensive (CMI) outreaches to young and developing improvisation students from around the world, with the aim of facilitating new ways of creating improvised music. An annual event now in its fourth year, these musical experiences fashioned by the AAO and CMI are committed to creating musical and cultural futures that integrates Asian and Western influences as an essential cultural fabric of the region.

Contextualizing the study

This study reports on the 2016 CMI event, a ten-day practice-based residency of 20 young, emerging student improvisers from throughout Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region, and several culturally diverse internationally regarded master improviser/ educators. The cultural focus of the 2016 CMI was vitalised by the integration of two cultural streams: Korean and Indigenous Australian culture featuring p'ansori singer Bae Il Dong, American based Korean improviser Sunny Kim, and the Young Wagilak traditional songmen- Daniel and David Wilfred from Arnhem Land, in northern Australia.

Data were collected using multiple sources, including online information, documents and interviews with participants that was used to construct a diverse narrative enquiry approach. The focus of the interviews was the exploration of perceptions and scope of engagement in learning. Questions were open-ended and interviews semi-structured to allow participants the opportunity for deep reflection. The data generated from the interviews were analysed utilizing a cross-case, inductive analysis approach (Patton, 1990).

Wagilak people: Daniel and David Wilfred

The Wagilak speaking songmen of South East Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, are custodians of one of the oldest continuously practiced cultures on Earth. The Wagilak people's song- or manikay- brings to life the cultural expression and celebration of tribal ancestors, country, law and congress. Through performance and iteration, congress and interaction, manikay continually evolves and progresses, replenished and rejuvenated by each new relationship, "maintaining vitality and authenticity through the passing from leader to leader of successive generations of Wagilak elder" (Caruana & Lendon 1997, p. 26). The wider Yolngu society, of which the Wagilak are a part of advocates for the sharing of culture through a bicultural approach between autonomous Yolngu cultural systems of Arnhem Land (Morphy & Morphy, 2013). The Yolngu seek difference as a way of perpetually revitalizing their culture, where difference is seen as complementary (Yunupingu, 1993).

Bae Il Dong

Bae Il Dong is highly regarded as one of Korea's finest p'ansori singers, a style of epic story singing emerging during the mid Chosŏn era (1392-1910). Bae Il Dong, a performer steeped

in the eastern school (*tongp'yŏnje*) of p'ansori street opera, is one of the few contemporary singers to follow the traditional method of learning through isolation.

The students

The 20 students were selected via a written response to the perceived benefits they felt their music could gain from such a collaboration, what they could take back to their musical communities, and what they felt they could offer the CMI as an improvising musician. The participating cohort of students invited to the 2016 CMI included cellists, keyboardists, saxophonists, trumpeters, percussionists and vocalists.

The event consisted of daily lectures, small ensemble workshops and open group practical sessions that explored cultural traditions of Arnhem Land manikay (song) and Korean traditional p'ansori. The CMI consisted of a daily program divided into the transmission of specific information and skills development during morning workshops presented by the leaders, and practical application of these skills in the context of music practice in the afternoons/evenings. The sessions explored meeting points of these two ancient musical traditions, and encompassed a diverse range of influences including Arnhem Land manikay, Korean p'ansori singing, live electronic processing of instruments, jazz instrumental and vocal improvisation, Pan-Korean rhythmic concepts and extended instrumental techniques.

These intense and immersive musical experiences fostered collaboration and development of new music using tools and ideas discussed and taught during the residency. As a module of learning, the participants immersed in the varied modalities, the entanglement of cultures, voices, experiences and conceptions of aesthetic. In this sense, artefacts and histories transcended the special and temporal boundaries of each participant, producing a vital and rich assemblage through which they created, circulated and affected new knowledge and an evolving socio-musical aesthetic.

Participants shared their thoughts and reflections on how the project promoted engagement in creative musicking and further meanings evolving from their music-making:

This intercultural exploration allows me to explore the music and myself, and ask 'What is it in Korean music that I can take that can nourish my own conceptions in music?' There are strong ceremonial and culturally significant musicians from their communities, who, like us all, are curious and interested in sharing their ideas and music, and also reflect on why we do what we do when we come together to make music (Personal interview)

Intercultural improvised music establishes situations of action and interplay where musicians push each other into bringing different perspectives into a sonic discourse. Exploration in this way allows the musicians to leave behind safe-zones and expose themselves to the internalised structures the community has created, resisting against 'mannerism' and breaking away from previously 'learned' constraints and restrictions of thought. Collectively the performers disrupt and dismantle their previous modes of musical production, and through new fields of permissibility reinterpret and reassess the knowledge streams and trajectories of learning possible. The participants immersed in a linguistic mediation that promoted the means through which thinking of intercultural aesthetics could develop, and translate musical experience into insight. Intercultural synthesis and exploration resounded with an in-practice design thinking approach of ideating, prototyping and refining, affecting their own rhizomal construction of concepts from intersecting, overlapping and interconnecting plateaus of information (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) negotiated in and through musically, socially and culturally shared processes:

I am negotiating music making with musicians who bring a compelling sense of the present, the future and a historied past. The music that I have made has only seemed to belong to the present, and I am a changed person and musician because of this interaction.

Our intentions haven't been to just learn another form of music and imitate, or take aspects of culture and music out of their original contexts and transplant. By finding ways to play together, making musical conversations, we draw on various traditions in new ways that we will take back to our musical communities.

(Participant interviews)

If key characteristics of this group creativity are improvisation, collaboration and emergence, then the latter aspect is central to the way cultures become understood, absorbed, redefined and expressed. Sawyer (2015, p. 96) refers to "*groupmind*" as a means of describing the emergent and intuitive flow possible in highly interconnected and inter-penetrative music-making. Such interactional dynamics are an important aspect of collaborative music-making that promote empathy, knowledge and deep collective unity evident in this intercultural experience.

DISCUSSION

Improvisation takes the materials of existence- community, knowledge, and willingness to learn and share, and forges the reshaping of possible relations musicians have with each other. In doing so participants not only acknowledge but embrace the notion that they and their music will never be the same. Whilst one can argue this symbolises that alternatives to orthodox practices exist and are available, intercultural opportunities of this kind in improvised music more eloquently provide an ideological positioning that holds profound ramifications to the way we think, identify and operate socially and educationally. Intercultural improvisation can provide an alternative social organisation that responds to both historical contingency and community needs. Framed by a creative merging of collective needs and possibilities, improvisation can challenge the traditions of cultural creation, evaluation, curation, and conservation of music and the arts. Cultural sharing allows for possibility and divergence in definitive ways that assert difference, community, the significance of localised perspectives, and the contribution they can make to global practices.

A significant attribute perceived from these performative and reflexive activities was the way the performers 'self' uncovered connections to previous understandings of their world of traditions and their rootedness to it. The improvisers genuine development, ability to feel, to empathically collaborate, and to live in close contact with their collaborators promoted deep and lasting learning. This further substantiates the importance of the sustaining qualities of localised actions and events, and how local innovations can offer perspectives that may intersect and replenish more universal approaches to arts education. Improvisation as praxis—that is, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Friere, 2005, p. 49) can inform education of making learning a far more empowering, liberating and transforming experience for all.

Utilising shared musical cultures as a basis for change and metamorphosis involves the sharing of spaces, perspectives, knowledge and risk-taking in the classroom that allows "our collective listening to one another to affirm the value and uniqueness of each voice" (hooks, 1994, p. 84). Reflecting on the transformative power prevalent in our classrooms, hooks suggests they can be dynamic, unpredictable, and challenging:

But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we

have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom (p. 207).

Intercultural improvisational practices challenges orthodoxies of knowledge, artistic production, critical social engagement, and how education may harness these attributes for the greater good. The study, using the CMI as an exemplar, places creativity, dialogue and intercultural understanding at the centre of activity. When we engage in the intercultural and interdisciplinary we already challenge what is taken for granted, the status quo, the ‘centre’ of dominance. We attribute importance to complex, hybrid and diverse cultures and ethnic groups and how they live respectfully side-by-side, and teaches students that music is to be experienced, played and lived through pluralist perspectives that can resound in our own music-making, artistry, and practice.

Intercultural and interdisciplinary musical experiences allows education to support the emergence of identities that can reconstruct society and break the ethnocentric approach that still dominates the social sciences (Castells 2010). Teacher education that reaches beyond “a basic anthropological framework” (Jenkins 2008, p.116) allows teacher practice to impact more deeply in social inclusion, integration and equity by creating unity, solidarity and the “need to learn the art of living with difference” (Bauman 2010, p.151) and navigate in a world in which cultural diversity exists within the closest neighbourhood.

The role of the music educator becomes a significant factor in increasing social inclusion, integration and equity, optimising the cultivation of collective understandings in which teachers identify and operate as societal change agents. By acknowledging and valuing local difference, knowledge assimilation and wider learning amongst communities, the fixed practices, canonized repertoires and expectations that dominate music and arts learning can be dismantled. Empowering local practices and regional specific differences can increase the self-reflexivity of regional and national blind-spots and enhance more intensively a sociocultural imagination into holistic educational structures.

University and school environments can become a place for culture making and the source for creating intercultural knowledge and understanding. School music departments can be places where student experiences socially and culturally integrate, unify local sharing of visions, aims and collaborate through a ‘fusion of horizons’ in music education (Gadamer, 2006). At a time when understanding, respecting and celebrating difference requires sustained vigour and revitalisation, musical initiatives and movements that bring people together and actualise local intercultural activity are of paramount importance.

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