Critical Studies in Improvisation
Études critiques en improvisation

Prepared for the Worst . . . and the Best
The Mannlicher Carcano Radio Hour Continues Keeping People Together During COVID-19

Brendan Kent

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Article abstract

When physical distancing became necessary as a result of COVID-19, I wanted to find out how to make music in real time over the internet. Fortunately, I found the Mannlicher Carcano Radio Hour! This improvisational collective has a history of networked performance—now facilitated via the conferencing platform Zoom—that stretches back to its origins in experimental call-in radio collage during the 1990s. This 'community voices' piece describes some of the ways participants from around the world join together on Saturdays to improvise and socialize as a networked community.

Prepared for the Worst . . . and the Best: The Mannlicher Carcano Radio Hour Continues Keeping People Together During COVID-19

Brendan Kent

When I started working on my master's thesis this year at Carleton University, I was interested in how interactive sound installations could facilitate people coming together to participate in a shared sonic experience. When physical distancing became necessary as a result of COVID-19, it no longer seemed possible to do this research. My supervisor, Dr. Ellen Waterman, suggested that the questions about participation, inclusion, and access that I was interested in could be posed in the context of online music-making. I quickly learned that at the moment when a paradigm shift was occurring in how people would interact for the foreseeable future, numerous communities with a long history of performing at a distance were already in place to continue the practice of real-time musicking. So, in April of 2020, I began playing music online with people from many places around the world—and have continued to do so at least once a week ever since.

The group that I have been most active jamming with is the Mannlicher Carcano Radio Hour (MCRH). This improvisational collective has a history of networked performance—now facilitated via the conferencing platform Zoom—that stretches back to its origins in experimental call-in radio collage during the 1990s. The show is now broadcast one week after its performance via radio stations like Guelph, Ontario's campus-and-community radio station, CFRU 93.3 FM.

In a 2002 *Musicworks* article about MCRH, Ellen Waterman—musician, scholar, and Mannlicher participant—notes that the sounds of the jam can sometimes "[catapult] the listener into a sort of B-movie soundscape" (42). Undoubtedly, the aesthetic produced by the wide array of instruments, samples, sonic manipulations, and chance occurrences is not for everyone, but I have noticed that the jam is responsive to the improvisers present on any given Saturday. There may be a "Mannlicher sound," but anyone willing to join in is free to manipulate or even contradict that sound in any way they please. Waterman emphasizes the ethos that "the primary organizing principle is [. . .] an organic and unselfconscious use of sound, which recognizes no bias" (42). I suspect that this approach to improvised audio collage is one way the jams can be easy for newcomers to join in. The collective's aesthetic attitude is also ideal for the unpredictable nature of lo-fi technological mediators and facilitators like terrestrial radio, Skype, or Zoom.

MCRH was prepared for the inevitabilities of physical distancing and continues to evolve during the pandemic. Since the lockdown started, Mannlicher Carcano has seen old members return and new members join, and the increased number of participants has not only been sustained but appears to be growing. The jams take place every Saturday from 2:30 to 4:30pm EDT and are open to anyone who wants to join in. The only requirement for participation is that you adopt a "Mannlicher name." New improvisers can choose their own MCRH name or ask to be given one by the group's members. These names often incorporate puns—or are just plain silly—reflecting the fun-loving nature of the Mannlicher collages. One might have noticed that the name of the collective itself is a bit strange, taking its inspiration from a rifle! For the curious readers out there, my MCRH name is Mickey Dismantle.

The jams during the pandemic have retained the audio collage style that will be familiar to fans of the group. One significant development that Zoom has allowed for is an increased use of

visual and film art in the jams, which are being published on the MCRH YouTube playlist as of July. The improvisers now readily respond to both the audio and visual cues of their peers, pointing to the power of a practice that is open to multiple modalities of expression.

The creativity of the jams is great, but the social component of MCRH feels like the central motive for the Saturday meetings. The jams are always bookended by conversations where participants talk about anything from concerns about the virus to weekend plans or film recommendations. Reflecting on my experience playing networked music during this time of ongoing uncertainty leads me to the seemingly mundane, but crucially important fact that having a regular time to play music is incredibly valuable. I also find it remarkable that Zoom and other platforms have allowed me to stay connected and make music with friends and family, but also to meet many people who I would likely not have had the chance to meet in-person.

Mannlicher is certainly about fostering a community and welcoming new members, and they are just as open when it comes to how the collective sounds: when they say they "recognize no bias" in sounds, they really mean it! A very small sample of the instruments you might hear includes accordions, granular synths, smartphones playing videos from the internet at half speed, all manner of vocalizations, electric and acoustic guitars, music boxes, typewriters, bells, and golf balls rolling around in bronze bowls. The type of improvisational practice that Mannlicher Carcano is engaged with seems to overcome differences and obstacles—not by glossing them, but by making affordances for them and exploring them as legitimate contributions. I think this is one of the strongest arguments for giving improvised networked music a try. This ethic celebrates and works with, rather than against, latency and interrupted connections but also allows for a variety of different views of what music, sound, and creativity can be.

Speaking of latency, it is one of the main challenges to real-time performance over the internet, and the primary barrier to playing rhythmically and in time with others. I view latency as an affordance rather than an obstacle and embrace the unpredictable and novel syncopations that result from it. However, if jumping into an enthusiastically anarchic collective to make music online in real-time seems daunting, I can assure you that there are plenty of familiar ways to improvise online with others. Emphasizing sonic textures, timbres, and layers rather than punctuating rhythms can create an ambient atmosphere that works well, even with many participants. Another approach features one performer generating a backing track through steady rhythmic playing while other improvisers play freely in the foreground. The common reference point of the backing texture provides a unity to the sounds of the soloists. Stable background textures can also be created with samples, sequencers, or fixed media—as long as it repeats, it creates a beat! I have found that call and response with others works very effectively; even with people on different continents, an intimate dialogue can emerge.

I cannot understate how important jamming with Mannlicher Carcano has been for me during the pandemic, both creatively and socially. However, my optimism about real-time networked music-making does come with some apprehension. I worry about issues of internet access and literacy as well as the security and privacy concerns that come with online activity. I wonder how the need to socialize is in tension with the amount of time we are engaging with technology. What is the environmental impact of networked music-making? Given that we are not all logging in from the same physical places or with the same equipment, how is our ability to participate being impacted? Who is not joining in? Who wishes they were? And what are the structural barriers to participation?

Works Cited

Waterman, Ellen. "Making No Noise: The Mannlicher Carcano Radio Hour." *Musicworks*, No. 84, Fall 2002, pp. 36–43.