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Re-imagining Creative Music-making Creative Music Series #8

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Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article abstract

Within days of Vancouver locking down in March 2020, NOW Society's artistic director, Dr. Lisa Cay Miller, crafted an imaginative means of engaging local and international improvisers in an online series, Creative Music Series #8 (CMS#8). The series showcased not only the musicians' improvisatory skills, but their compositional abilities. Drawing upon conversations with musicians who took part in CMS#8, Parmela Attariwala reflects upon how the series shaped the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic for her and fellow improvisors involved in the series. She also considers the artistic potency enabled by the mode of creation developed for CMS#8.

Re-imagining Creative Music-making: Creative Music Series #8

Parmela Attariwala

As I gaze out my window in mid-July of 2020, four buses are lined up on the short block where they all stop for passengers before turning and heading uphill towards the university. It occurs to me that the snakes of buses are back to their pre-pandemic frequency, entertaining my eyes as they have for much of the year between when I moved here, in March of 2019, and when COVID-19 left the streets empty one year later. While buses continued to operate in Vancouver through the spring, they rarely had need to stop.

Of course, in my anxiousness to exchange a view of Toronto concrete for Vancouver mountains, I had not noticed the bus stop sign next to the place I chose for my new home. For many, a bus stop close to one's front door is a convenience. But when one needs to make recordings from home during a pandemic (and bus wires are two metres from one's window), the sounds of buses contribute an unexpected challenge to the ideal recording environment. Buses and my neighbours downstairs, whose Zoom calls I heard all too clearly.

~

Like so many musicians who have access to a cellphone, a computer, and the Internet, I have been charged with making recordings at home over the past few months. I have also watched many such home recordings, with varying amounts of distress (orchestral musicians attempting to play together) and delight (pop musicians at home without hyper-production). When I became a part of NOW Society's Creative Music Series #8 (CMS#8), though, I realised this was going to be something different. The process intrigued me enough to ask NOW's artistic director, Dr. Lisa Cay Miller, whether I might write about it. When she agreed, my ethical query for access became another layer formally structured into the overall project.

Between June 25 and July 21, 2020, I had conversations—some one-on-one and some in groups—with twenty artists involved in the project (including both engineers). Although Miller and I had formulated questions to ask the musicians, the opportunity to simply converse—about the project, and about ourselves as musicians and improvisors—became its own reward. Initially, we thought to include snippets of the conversations into each night of the CMS#8 broadcasts, but time shifted gears suddenly for me with the death of George Floyd, jumpstarting my responsibilities as a diversity consultant.

The Evolution of CMS#8

On March 18, as Vancouver began shutting down, I and twenty other local musicians received an email from Lisa Cay Miller asking if we would be interested in recording short solo sets—one person at a time over a three-day period—at "8East", the physical hub of NOW activities. The recordings would become Creative Music Series #8 (CMS #8). Scant days later, as the city shut down completely, Miller cancelled the onsite recordings. But she did not cancel the series; she transformed it.

For sound engineer Sheldon Zaharko, "this whole thing started as, 'can [you] record for three days at 8East.' And then it was three months."

Miller reached out to improvisers in Vancouver and to a group of Amsterdam musicians originally slated to play at Vancouver's 2020 Jazzfest. She was concerned not only for their lost

income, but for their emotional and mental wellbeing. Over the subsequent few weeks, the number of people involved in CMS#8 swelled from twenty-one to forty-one. Ultimately, the project involved thirty-six improvising musicians, two sound engineers, a video editor, and two support staff. Some lived mere blocks from each other; others, thousands of kilometers away. Miller crafted a complex schedule of sound and video file exchanges that resulted in a seven-day online series broadcast between June 27 and July 3, 2020.¹

Through numerous emails and two Zoom meetings, Miller explained what she wanted from each of us: four audio tracks (and, if possible, simultaneously recorded videos), two of which would contribute to trios and two to sextets; and later, audio track interpretations of a graphic score she was composing.

I am not sure anyone but Miller and the engineers completely understood how the project would unfold. But for one month, we had responsibilities.

Amsterdam-based engineer Ron Ruiten described the project as “a lifesaver. Anything to keep my mind off my mind.” Meanwhile, for guitarist Ava Mendoza,

When COVID hit, I had a hard time just playing the guitar. I'd been playing full time for most of last year, so I had gigs and things to practice. And that was all out the window... I finally had the chance to practice what I wanted to, but I couldn't figure it out. [This project] kicked me out of the rut I was in. (Mendoza)

We had a schedule of upload dates, and a responsibility to our colleagues to be generous with the space we gave them in the architecture of our improvisations, especially when ours was the first (“bed”) track.² In listening back to the final product, the generosity is palpable (but who recorded first is not). Drummer Ben Brown recalled leaving an extended silence on his bed track and being surprised to hear that subsequent players did not dynamically fill it.

Violinist Meredith Bates suggested that not having the opportunity to be “responded to” meant that “ideas had a cap on them,” and erhu player Lan Tung felt that *not* being in a room together prevented musicians from “going strong” for extended periods. Yet, the musicians who said they missed being physically present with others chose to participate in CMS#8 as a reciprocal act of generosity to Miller and to their fellow improvisers (Bates; Reed; Samworth; Thorne). Those who were skeptical about the process were most surprised by the outcome.

For many musicians, the process offered something different to the usual improv gig. Saxophonist Karen Ng, and guitarists Jasper Stadhouders and Ava Mendoza felt the process allowed them to think compositionally,³ while flautist Anne La Berge felt it offered greater artistic depth. The drummers noted having the opportunity to strategically choose their instruments/objects before recording, and Andromeda Monk, playing a no-input mixer, appreciated controlling their mixer's output in a way that would be impossible live. Pianist Róisín Adams felt the process triggered more imaginative thinking—including imagining others' presence or absence, while, for Viviane Houle, the experience was “magical and joyous ... like we were in the room together.”

Although no one mentioned it directly, we brought another act of generosity to the project and to each other: that of offering the best of ourselves—whether in terms of figuring out (or learning) how to make the best recordings possible given the circumstances, or taking multiple tracks and choosing the best one. Ng “created a fort” of fabric in her overly reflective room and borrowed recording equipment from friends. For Cat Torens, living in Brooklyn, “It sometimes took hours

to make the recording because there would be firetrucks or babies crying or people yelling outside my window.” Adams wondered whether her “scraping the piano at midnight” gave “the children upstairs nightmares.” And Houle begged a bee to stop buzzing around her equipment long enough for her to record a take.

I also recorded late at night: playing quietly because of COVID-19 sound rules; ensuring my neighbours were not downstairs; hoping my gear was charged enough to get through a take; and being ready to hit record in the gaps between transiting buses. As I played, existing in the flowstate between expressing what was in my inner ear and what I heard through my headphones, I sensed my trio colleagues—whom I had never met—more intimately than people I’d played with dozens of times.

On the night of my group’s broadcast,⁴ I felt something I had not felt in so long I barely recognized it. I felt excited and happy—happy to hear the depth of these works to which I had contributed a part, works that were infinitely more than the sum of each person’s contributions. They were not traditional improvisations; they were multi-authored compositions that reminded me of Linda and Michael Hutcheons’s advocacy for shared authorship (Hutcheon and Hutcheon). CMS#8, conceived by Lisa Cay Miller, created a new way of composing and of connecting. The engineers created beautiful vessels to hold and display the potency of our artform.

Notes

¹ For details on the motivation and logistics behind her curation of the CMS#8, please see Miller’s contribution to volume 2 of these special issues of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*.

² Each person’s first recording was a “bed” track upon which others layered their tracks. The engineers acted as conduits (and to a certain extent, acoustic architects). They received each individual track, EQ’d it, added it to other existing tracks for that particular trio or sextet, and then passed the merged file on to the next person, until each person in the group had contributed a part. When the pieces were finished, musicians could ask for alterations (panning or reverb). Both engineers said they kept the files “natural,” making adjustments to individual musicians’ room sounds (ie. adding reverb) only when asked for alterations.

³ Unlike Ng and Mendoza, Stadhouders recorded in single takes (Stadhouders).

⁴ There are four videos from the night’s broadcast. Two videos (“[Undergrowth](#)” and “[soft breath hard air](#)”) feature the trio of myself, Tommy Babin, and Melissa Hubert. The other two videos feature the sextet of myself, Tommy Babin, Aram Bajakian, Onno Govaert, Melissa Hubert, and Lisa Cay Miller (“[plomaft](#)” and “[dinner](#)”).

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