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Before Nightfall: A Case-Study of Distributed Creativity in a Contemporary Art Music Ensemble

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Abstract

The past three decades have witnessed a growth in research that queries the view of creativity as the sole endeavor of a “genius” creator. Studies emerging from cultural and social psychological perspectives argue that creativity is distributed, drawing on social interaction, communication, and collaboration as key elements in creative work. Theories of creative collaboration and collaborative creativity not only recognize the distributed social processes outlined above, they also acknowledge the need for creative teams where complementary knowledge and skill sets are distributed across the group. Such complementarity (rather than replication) provides a greater diversity and depth of knowledge and skill and potentially yields more diverse creative outcomes. Whilst distributed creativity has been explored in some arts making contexts, as yet there has been little investigation of distributed creativity in music making contexts.

This paper aims to investigate this gap through a case-study investigation of a unique music creation project, *Before Nightfall*. *BN* is a series of artistic encounters between a contemporary percussion ensemble and internationally renowned guest artists, with each encounter occurring across the course of a single day. Starting in the morning, ensemble members and the guest artist begin the creation of a new collaborative work, developing musical, spatial and conceptual structures that form the basis of a concert-length piece, performed before nightfall.

The paper reports the analysis of one event developed on-line during the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020. The lockdown restrictions created a further shaping force on the collaboration: not only did musicians create the work in the 8-hour period, this was also largely undertaken in isolation and/or on-line, with the final presentation of the work via video.

The 6-member team was comprised of 3 percussionists, a sound engineer, a sound artist and a film-editor. Data were generated through: audio-recording and transcription of 2 planning meetings prior to the scheduled project day; video recordings of musician experimentation and collaboration on the day of creation; and, post event video-prompted interviews that draw on excerpts of the final presentation to elicit perspectives of the collaborative and creative processes. This case study reveals how musicians have engaged in and adapted their collaborative practices through the social isolation of the pandemic and illustrated the working dimensions of distributed musical creativity. These findings raise critical questions concerning the juxtaposition of collaboration in the contexts of social isolation and the role of technology in mediating and initiating new forms of creative collaborative practices.