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Equality in Isolation Virtual Mobility, Accessibility, and Belonging

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Article abstract

This article follows the pandemic practice of The London Improvisers Orchestra between April and June 2020 from the perspective of a Malaysian musician. Virtual mobility and accessibility, isolation and belonging: traits and tropes of the COVID-19 life.

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Equality in Isolation: Virtual Mobility, Accessibility, and Belonging

Pei Ann Yeoh

The London Improvisers Orchestra (LIO) performs once a month, typically on the first Sunday of every month. Membership in the orchestra is loosely based on a recommendation by another member, and a mailing list includes both past and current orchestra members. The list's function is to communicate details of the next performance and administrative announcements. Although participants are never quite sure who will turn up on performance day, feedback on attendance is given to the moderator so that some measure of concert promotion can be undertaken. Between 2016 and 2018, I was a member of the LIO: participating, in part, as a research student. Naturally, my participation stopped once I returned to my home country of Malaysia. Although I was unable to contribute meaningfully to any performance, I continued to receive the monthly emails, which evoked feelings of nostalgia.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, LIO has rallied to keep the music going virtually. Contributions are made through a call that is sent out in the monthly emails and then submissions are joined together according to the specifics of the piece. The completed pieces are published as an album on LIO's Bandcamp page. The month of April was a call for twenty-second solos, reflecting the length of handwashing recommended by public health organizations. The resulting piece, "We Stay Apart Because We Love Each Other. Love Is Stronger Than Greed," joined the submissions together sequentially in the spirit of collective improvisation, although it was more of a "collected" improvisation.¹ Still, it seemed momentous to be making music with musicians who would otherwise not have been able to participate in the monthly meetings. The track brought together musicians from all over the world: Italy, Germany, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Denmark, Japan, Malaysia, USA, and other parts of the UK.

It struck me as significant that collective improvisation should find, in the face of global isolation, greater opportunities for participation. Technology has provided accessibility in the form of virtual mobility. Even as we are unable to play with each other, we can certainly play for each other, and make music together indirectly. However, stitching together multiple real-time performances means there is no performance interaction, only a submission to the performance structure. Yet, the lack of creative interaction does not undermine aspects of immediacy and spontaneity typically found in live improvisation. Indeed, the interactions that we perceive as occurring in live improvisation also submit to a structure that rationalizes an end. Therefore, improvisation should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end.

May 2020 came with a new proposal for a piece entitled "Sustaining the Music."² Using a cue from LIO's conduction lexicon for creating a sustained sound (flat palm outward), each submission was to be one minute long. All of the submissions were then made available in a cloud drive and members of LIO could use them to create single- or multi-track collages of no more than ten minutes. In some ways, this proposal allowed members to "conduct" the orchestra—and the symbolism of this act was not lost on me. Conducting reveals power plays and exposes creative relationships for what they are: subjective, with uneven treatment for who may be heard through express invitation of the conductor to improvise. As LIO performs mostly under a conductor, participation in collective improvisation is dependent on him or her. It is rather like improvisation on-demand, as conduction signals are given to musicians in the orchestra throughout the performance. In other words, LIO musicians do not interact with each other except through the conductor. This may mean that, unlike in free improvisation, some musicians are not heard or not expected to contribute unless given the opportunity by the conductor.

However, in the virtual LIO setting, a common standard of participation has provided equal opportunities for all to be heard. The call for May's piece also afforded greater autonomy for each member to direct the collective through their submission. It is not quite the same as conducting the orchestra, but it is equally affecting. This does not mean that subtle power differentials will not be in play when manipulating these collages, but removing the immediate presence of the sound owner strips away some, if not all, unconscious prejudice. One would assume that each track would be given at least an initial playthrough, offering somewhat of an equal footing for each submission to be considered based on its creative merits.

New questions about the nature of improvisation emerge when developing pieces through recorded snippets. To what extent can we apply improvisatory instincts if crafting the piece calls for a great deal of deliberation and listening through each track repeatedly? How can we interact with each submission spontaneously while still fulfilling the requirements of the call? Some degree of chance could be conceptually incorporated in the piece to allow for some level of improvisation. But the fact remains that crafting a piece from forty different tracks requires previewing and analysing available tracks while deliberating on the preferred outcome. Such creative decisions are ultimately shaped by a musical idiom that is both personal and mutual. Improvisation is not an activity that is arbitrary or random. Furthermore, is such compositional process any less valid than the process of real-time improvisation, which engages with both personal and shared experiences to determine a creative outcome?

The proposal for June 2020 was a series of chain reactions to be set in motion by one member.³ Each member could then improvise with the track and either pass it on to another member of their choice (with their agreement) or send it back to the moderator if they considered the track to be complete. There are some inherent complications in generating chain momentum, but this play-and-pass method offers interesting avenues for improvisation. It provides a way for creative interaction to grow organically as various orders and combinations of musicians enter at each layer. There are also opportunities to participate in multiple chains, interacting with the same base chain but with a different mixture of musicians. However, social influence plays a part in passing on the chain. Most musicians rely on prior experience of each other to inform their decisions about to whom they should send the track. This creates a distinct disadvantage for members who are less familiar with the collective, and therefore may have fewer opportunities to express collaborative intentions and fewer invitations to follow up in a collaboration.

As the above examples demonstrate, membership and creative relationships underlie the social construct of LIO, and indeed, any creative effort. Can an improviser belong to a collective having never formally met the other members or having had the opportunity to perform with them—especially when they are increasingly unlikely to do so in the near future? On the other hand, should this matter when exploring improvised forms of music? Is improvisation not the avenue by which we challenge our familiar routines and expand our sonic encounters? Even as we acknowledge that improvisation is not an arbitrary practice, how far do we allow creative relationships to influence and dictate the construction of the music, especially in the case of isolated improvisatory practice? While I was not invited to collaborate on other chains, my follow-up chain collaborator was someone I knew well. My choice was based on musical intent but also informed by earlier social interactions with said collaborator. For all that I can claim to have had musical experiences with many in LIO, it is also my social experiences that have influenced my creative choices.

There are a number of questions that emerge about socialization and its impact on creative relationships. For instance: how will the performing arts thrive in the "new normal" of social distancing when the number of people who can gather in one place is controlled? Which people might we further entrench into invisibility if a smaller group of musicians must be

selected? How can improvisation be a vehicle for testing which boundaries and limitations can be transcended? There is much to laud about the increased accessibility and equal opportunities offered by isolated performance—my virtual experience highlights that much. Yet, the virtual construct is no substitute for real-time experience. My experience also shows how superficial and naïve my expectation of belonging was in light of my access to equal participation. The nature of improvisation and creative work depends on building relationships that go beyond just participating in a musical experience. Instead, creative work shapes, and is shaped by the social experience, which creates an environment in which we can truly belong. This may be the hardest challenge yet as we try to move into a post-COVID world, full of uncertainties about how we can socialize and interact.

Notes

¹ See londonimprovisorsorchestra.bandcamp.com/track/we-stay-apart-because-we-love-each-other-love-is-stronger-than-greed.

² See londonimprovisorsorchestra.bandcamp.com/album/sustaining-the-music.

³ See londonimprovisorsorchestra.bandcamp.com/album/chain-reactions.