

Avoiding 'Rona and Passing the Track: When 50 Years of the Canadian Electronic Ensemble Challenges the Limits of Pandemic-Era Live Improvisation

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Résumé de l'article

Pendant les mois qui ont suivi l'instauration des mesures de distanciation sociale de la pandémie COVID-19, les musiciens ont dû orienter leurs pratiques créatives, trop souvent avec l'insatisfaction causée par le temps de latence et la séparation physique des collaborateurs et du public. Cet article examine un projet de distanciation sociale de l'ère pandémique mené par le Canadian Electronic Ensemble (CEE), intitulé *Pass the Track (PtT)*, qui a débuté en 2020 et a été publié sur Bandcamp en 2023. Je positionne d'abord la pratique créative de l'EEC dans le cadre de l'improvisation libre électronique en direct (Andean 2022) et des catégories d'existence (Sanden 2013). J'analyse ensuite le processus et les résultats de *PtT* pour soutenir que, malgré l'absence de conscience spatiale et temporelle, le projet perpétue la valeur du CEE sur la collaboration et montre la vivacité.

AVOIDING ‘RONA AND PASSING THE TRACK: WHEN 50 YEARS OF THE CANADIAN ELECTRONIC ENSEMBLE CHALLENGES THE LIMITS OF PANDEMIC-ERA LIVE IMPROVISATION

Alexa Woloshyn

“LIVE” MUSIC IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

COVID-19 pandemic restrictions proved devastating for musicians and music practices across genres and countries (Cai and Terry 2020; van de Werff et al. 2021; Woodward et al. 2022). For some live improvisational practices, the loss of spatial and temporal liveness was likely insurmountable. For other live electronic practices, such as laptop orchestras, networked (i.e., no spatial liveness) performance had already been part of the practice, with research and experimentation in place to address the biggest enemy of networked collaboration: latency. For example, Canadian Electronic Ensemble collaborator Jesse Stiles was in the middle of a recording project for his Congregation of Drones when the pandemic began. Half of the album was recorded in person with collaborator Pauline Kim Harris; the second half was recorded long distance but in real time. Further, the journal *Organised Sound*’s special issues on the topic of live electronic music improvisation were interrupted by the peak of the pandemic restrictions. In an article from this journal, “Co-Sounding” (2021), Otsa Lähdeoja and Alejandro Montes De Oca spoke to how they had to shift one model of collaborative improvisation to account for the new physical distancing measures. Musicians everywhere had to adjust. And those in live improvisational practices faced an increased challenge.

This article is about *Pass the Track* (PtT), a recording project started by the Canadian Electronic Ensemble (CEE) in the midst of these challenges in 2020. The project was motivated by three realities. First, the group had not released an album since its newest member David Sutherland had joined the group officially in 2017. Second, the group’s residency at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in February 2020 had inspired a new drive to perform and record. Third, the restrictions of the then-new COVID pandemic realities meant that in-person collaboration (which had always been their approach) was not possible. The Canadian Electronic Ensemble (CEE) is a small, live, Toronto-based

electronic ensemble that officially formed in 1972. The group has had anywhere from three to six members, with a long history of collaboration with guest performers and composers. While the ensemble's name suggests an obvious focus on electronic instruments and gear, several group members (past and present) and guests have also performed on acoustic instruments, with varying levels of processing. The current membership of the CEE is as follows: Rose Bolton, John Kameel Farah, David Jaeger, Jim Montgomery, Paul Stillwell, and David Sutherland.¹

The *Pass the Track* project provides an essential case study for expanding our understanding of how the pandemic impacted musicians. In this example, it's a niche genre that is already under-served in the literature: live electronic improvisation. Narratives of electronic music creative practice, particularly within the institutional context (for example, universities) have focused on studio-based composition. But as James Andean writes in his 2021 editorial for *Organised Sound* 26 (1), "Scratch beneath the surface and one finds that inside quite a number of electroacoustic composers there is an enthusiastic improviser eager for an opportunity to step into the light; and there are many who are perhaps more broadly recognized in the electroacoustic community for their compositional output, who are also active onstage as electroacoustic improvisers" (1). Andean has addressed this scholarly lacuna with two special issues in *Organised Sound* on electronic music and improvisation, contributions that demonstrate a new seriousness around studying improvisation in electronic-focused contexts and acceptance of the long-standing ubiquity of electronic improvisation.

This article is predicated on two pre-existing arguments. First, liveness in electronic music manifests in situations beyond only spatial and temporal liveness (Sanden 2013). Second, live electronic improvisation has some unique paradigms (Andean 2022) due to its timbral legacy in electronic music studios and its challenge to acoustic cause-and-effect relationships (Emmerson 2007). I assert that the CEE's *Pass the Track* project should be evaluated as live electronic improvisation despite the lack of spatial and temporal liveness between the collaborators.

In this article, I briefly summarize the CEE's typical approach to improvisation, based on ethnographic observation of their rehearsals and performances. I then analyze the *Pass the Track* (PtT) project, articulating the ways in which it is founded on the CEE's approach to improvisation, collaboration, and co-composing. I focus on the ways in which this project deviates from their improvisational practice based on traditional liveness, which Sanden identifies as spatial and temporal liveness (2013). My analysis integrates James Andean's paradigms (2022) of group performance in free improvisation (some of which could apply to non-electronic composition) with Sanden's categories of liveness.

1 For an overview of the CEE's activities since its origins in the early 1970s, see my recent book *An Orchestra at My Fingertips* (2023). Because the *Pass the Track* project began in 2020 and was released in spring 2023, it is only minimally mentioned in the book. This article focuses on the *Pass the Track* project because of its specificity to our pandemic times as well as its testament to the flexibility of this long-standing group.

I argue that *Pass the Track* was a creative pivot necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdowns, one that was specific to the CEE's collaborative values, alongside aspects shared by many other musicians forced into virtual contexts. I emphasize that *Pass the Track* reflects the CEE's ability to perpetuate core values while being flexible to new contexts. This balance of flexibility while maintaining clear social values and sonic aesthetics has been exhibited across the CEE's five decades and is an essential ingredient to their long-term viability. *PtT*, however, does mark a departure from the CEE's typical application of "liveness," due not only to the requirements for collaboration outside of shared time and space but also because of post-production choices. How is *PtT* live electronic improvisation? Why might it matter if it is or not?

THE CANADIAN ELECTRONIC ENSEMBLE: COMPOSERS–IMPROVISERS–PERFORMERS

Across the five decades of the Canadian Electronic Ensemble, the group has approached performance through a range of practices: from notated and pre-programmed elements to hybrid notated-improvised pieces; from works composed by the group members to works by non-CEE members; from little to no improvisation to completely improvised performances. Most of the CEE's past and present members are also composers in a conventional Euro-American classical sense: they compose notated pieces for performance by European classical instruments. Many members earned post-secondary degrees in composition and have made and continue to make a partial living through composition. Thus, the CEE has been an outlet for pre-determined creative ideas communicated through European classical written notation. Because the group has primarily—though not exclusively—been performing on electronic instruments and gear, sometimes notation has had to be modified from what one reads in a typical acoustic score. For example, notations regarding settings, the start and stop of tape delay, and so on, can be found alongside staff notation of specific pitches.

Despite this strong presence of pre-determined, notated elements, the CEE's practice has also always included improvisation to some degree. Since the early 2000s, the CEE's concerts have been almost entirely improvised, with each improvisation generally lasting about 20 minutes. A focus on improvisation has allowed the group to be flexible with performances, as individual members have had to be absent for individual concerts or for extended periods. An improvised concert means it's okay if a member is suddenly sick and can't make it. The members enjoy the risk of improvisation, the sonic dialogue as they listen and respond to each other, and the surprises (good ones, they hope). And they love the music they make collectively: sounds that can only be achieved through the collective, as each member has a particular set of gear/instruments, skills, and habits, or what Linson and Clarke call "distributed cognition" (2017).

The CEE's live performance practice exhibits liveness beyond the traditional elements of spatial and temporal liveness. From Sanden's seven categories within his theory of liveness in mediated music, liveness of spontaneity and

interactive liveness, and to a lesser extent, corporeal liveness, are most illuminating in an analysis of the CEE. Sanden's understanding of liveness is not the same as "live performance itself" (2013, 3) but rather a *concept* foundational to music's meaning that rejects an easy binary between live and recorded. The presence of these categories of liveness that are perceived by listeners of the CEE's music can persist even in contexts that seem to step away from co-called "live" music.

PASS THE TRACK: A HYBRID PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

Pass the Track was a very different recording project for the group. They have released several albums since their debut LP in 1977, but I will compare it to those in the last three decades. *MEGAJAM* (released in 2000) was a 1992 concert of live improvisation, and, as the title suggests, it included a large group of eighteen musicians made up of CEE members and long-time friends and collaborators. The CEE's first ensemble-only live album was *Live in Cabbagetown*, recorded in 2008 and released in 2013. This album also consists of only live improvisations. With these two albums, the listener is invited to perceive interactive liveness and likely to assume a liveness of spontaneity, given their overt label of "live improvisation." While a recording means a listener is not in the room where it happened, they can assume an original temporal and spatial liveness based on the information provided about the two events. In 2014, the CEE released *Bluffer's Lookout*, which was their first studio album since *Supertrio* (1996). This means that *Bluffer's Lookout* was not a recording of "real-time composition," like the live albums. Nonetheless, liveness can still be perceived, such as corporeal and interactive liveness.

Pass the Track is a sort of hybrid album in that it is based in the CEE's free improvisational practice. However, because of the asynchronous realities of collaboration, it bears resemblances to *Bluffer's Lookout* with their ability to record multiple takes and apply significant post-production edits. However, because the group couldn't share space and networked temporalities were unrealistic for them at that time, they had to adopt a temporal approach that was more akin to studio creation. David Jaeger (2020) tells the story that it was Farah who asked Stillwell for some material over which he could improvise on the piano. The time at CMU had been refreshing for Farah, who had been spending a lot of recent time in solo performance and improvisation. The group improvisations at CMU, with both the CEE alone, as well as with the Exploded Ensemble, had reminded him of the pleasure of group improvisation. Stillwell created some drone material for Farah, and he recorded improvisations atop this. Soon, the group had the idea to add more of its members to the sonic conversation, one by one. *Pass the Track* was born.

Here is a summary of the *PtT* project: Each member took a turn to record a track solo. The track was then passed along to a second member who would improvise and record with what they heard. This track was then passed along to the third member, and so on, until all six members had contributed a track. The resulting album has six tracks, meaning that each member had

the opportunity to be the first to lay down a track and send the CEE down a particular sonic path.

This album is significant in the CEE's output for three reasons. First, this is the first album with newest member David Sutherland. Second, it is the result of a COVID-required shift to atemporal collaboration. Third, because the project did not require spatial or temporal liveness, members Rose Bolton and John Kameel Farah were able to participate. These two members had been less active with the group in the last few years because of other performing, composing, and teaching responsibilities.

PARADIGMS OF LIVE IMPROVISATION WITH THE CEE

Pass the Track emerged after an intense week of live electronic improvisation, a specific practice within the broader world of electronic music, or even live electronic music. Andean (2022) has developed four paradigms of group performance in free improvisation, arguing that one performance may contain more than one paradigm, as some are not mutually exclusive. His paradigms are not exclusive to the electronic/electroacoustic realm, but he sees "substantial common ground between free improvisation and electroacoustic music" (2022, 107) through an emphasis on expanded timbral resources and listening practices.

Andean's paradigms can be applied to the CEE's current live performance practice, during which the group co-composes in real time through primarily—and sometimes exclusively—electronic means. The CEE exhibits the particular skill set that Andean outlines as required for group (as opposed to solo) collaboration: "the art of communicating musical intention to other performers through sound alone; the ability to respond to unanticipated shifts in musical direction with speed and dexterity; being adept at balancing the need to take creative responsibility through one's own musical contributions with the need to leave ample space for other performers to do the same, etc." (106–7). Andean's definition of free improvisation, though, does not always apply to the CEE. Andean qualifies "free improvisation" as an improvisation in which nothing has been discussed or pre-planned, and an improvisation does not rely on established conventions of genre, such as form, structure, and micro-musical details (107). The CEE does typically rehearse before a performance. Ideas that were shared during rehearsal may show up in a performance, but they are just as likely not to. Due to the possibilities of pre-sets and other pre-programmed elements, some sonic aspects may have been created before the performance. However, I do not see this as a violation of the values of "free" improvisation, as no one expects a performer to start completely from nothing, with a stringless guitar or an un-tuned piano, for example. Andean's paradigms can emerge from both the performer and listener's perspective. For example, the paradigm called "sound composition" could be the paradigm emphasized by a particular listener, while this is not a priority for the performers themselves.

These paradigms are useful in illuminating the CEE's improvisational practice overall and identifying the idiosyncrasies of *Pass the Track* through a

combination of performer and listener (i.e., the author) perspectives. Andean's four paradigms are as follows:

1. Sound composition: the improvisation is an "evolving composition" or "real-time composition" (108). The focus is on its musical features, and this is how the improvisation is judged.
2. Social communication: the improvisation is a social exchange between the improvisers in various compositions and communication strategies. For instance, there may be a duet between two members of an ensemble, and their interaction could be characterized as interruptive.
3. "Parallel play": each improviser is concentrating on their own contribution and they trust that the simultaneity of their contributions will be "rich and interesting" (109). Their internal focus does not mean indifference to their collaborators: this is a paradigm based in trust and familiarity. Oftentimes this paradigm is found in contexts in which it is difficult to listen to individuals specifically and to discern each individual's contribution.
4. "One beast with many heads": the improvisation becomes a flow or trance experience as each individual performer loses themselves to the collective sound. The result is "all performers working together towards a unified goal" (109). While the first three paradigms can be employed by listeners, Andean argues that this fourth paradigm cannot be known with certainty by a listener: only a performer can confirm that they "lost themselves."

I will first explain which paradigms I have found most prominent as a listener to CEE concerts and what I've heard the CEE members discuss. I will then compare and contrast these conclusions with the paradigms mobilized in the creation and dissemination of *Pass the Track*. This comparison will illuminate how *PtT* can be considered part of the CEE's live electronic improvisational practice.

Andean's first three paradigms emerge at many CEE performances. Certainly, the group creates an interesting sound world for each improvisation, with a collection of digital and analog synthesizers, soft synths, and sometimes acoustic instruments under various degrees of live processing. Their performances do not include special lighting, and they keep their physical gestures to a minimum—moving only what is necessary for their sound creation. This means that their focus is on the sounds created in their real-time composition as opposed to other performative aspects that might be present in other live groups. A listener is invited to focus on the improvisation as a sound composition, though the degree to which one is familiar with or enjoys electronic music is likely to shape how much time one spends in this paradigm.

Social communication seems to be important to the CEE, based on what I have heard and how the CEE members talk about their collaboration. While the CEE can build dense textures and it is often difficult to discern who is doing what (Woloshyn 2023), this small ensemble still allows a listener to mostly make out the different sonic lines as they are created live. In addition, the CEE's aesthetic does not fall within the genre of noise music in which the soundscape becomes too dense for anyone—performers or listeners—to perceive sonic ideas emanating from specific performers. The CEE's typical approach to live improvisation is for one member to be elected to “go first” and then for each member to have an opportunity in the performance to begin an improvisation. Once that first member has performed for about 20–30 seconds, someone chooses to join in, making the solo a duet. This slow expansion of the texture from solo to duet to trio, and so on, is typical for the CEE, and it reflects the CEE's emphasis on social communication and on playing with each other as human individuals. This communication also includes rejecting certain ideas presented in real time or offering contrasting ideas. As a listener, I frequently think about the CEE's live improvisation in these social metaphors: dialogue, conflict, interruption, and so on. The lack of physical interaction, though, means that many listeners may have to guess which human bodies are participating in the social communication.

The choices that the CEE makes to create these moments of social communication sometimes seem to be driven by a concern with the first paradigm: sound composition. Why might a CEE member interrupt another member sonically? Why might they enter the dialogue? When does the solo become a duet and then a trio? I hear these shifts through the lens of sound composition: some musical or sonic aspect is considered the best addition to “the evolving piece of music and [the collective] shaping [of] that piece of music as it unfolds” (Andean 2022, 108).

The third paradigm is the least emphasized in how the CEE presents themselves: “parallel play.” Yet, it seems inevitable that members will become very focused on their own contribution and pay less or little attention to their collaborators. Andean explains that trust and familiarity allow the collaborators to focus on themselves, and those are two values the CEE purports. Andean suggests that “parallel play” is likely to occur in musical contexts that are extremely loud and extremely fast; neither of these is typical of the CEE's performance approach. Therefore, it seems that “parallel play” is not a typical paradigm from the perspective of the CEE. However, I believe that listeners could easily listen to the CEE through this paradigm.

While the “one beast with many heads” is a paradigm that requires confirmation from the performers' perspectives *and* it is likely a rare flow event, this experience is a goal for the CEE. And I suspect they would say they have achieved it at various times in their performance history—that they “sense ... multiple performers all working together to achieve a single compositional aim” (Andean 2022, 115). Certainly, given that the CEE's sound emanates almost entirely from loudspeakers, “it is difficult to single out any individual performer's contribution” (115), leaving only the collective composition: “the

piece works through its shifting landscape of textural layers, with all performers working hand-in-hand to establish these layers and to shape a counterpoint between them as the piece unfolds” (115).

While the CEE’s sound is not dominated with loud, dense textures that make it impossible for anyone to keep track of individual lines, it might be difficult for listeners to perceive the contributions of each member. With sounds emanating from loudspeakers as opposed to from a specific instrument source, with performers’ actions often hidden behind their gear (or lacking cause-and-effect consequences), and with listeners unfamiliar with electronic music practice (in general or with specific gear, such as a soft synth musician’s lack of experience with a hardware modular synth), a listener may only hear the live group improvisation as “parallel play,” or “the combination of these individual improvisors performing simultaneously [to] collectively produce something worth listening to” (Andean 2022, 109).

Given the production realities of *PtT*, Andean’s last two paradigms are mostly or completely absent. The CEE did not perform a live improvisation in real time together. So, the idea of flow, or achieving the “one beast with many heads” is impossible. Nonetheless, I could imagine a scenario in which Stillwell—as the CEE member in charge of most of the album’s post-production—could take an improvisational approach to some of his editing, responding in real time to what he hears. At times the breakdown of the group into separate tracks could disintegrate in his perception. However, because this imagined situation would still only involve one human in real-time, it fails to meet Andean’s “one beast with many heads” paradigm.

The third paradigm of “parallel play” is also much less present—if at all—than any traditional live improvisation. The process of handing off the existing tracks to one additional member at a time means that the layering is slowly built. Someone who performs as track one, two, or three, for example, is likely easily perceiving the different layers. And even those members who are in positions five or six, for example, are likely paying very close attention to those contributions already provided by CEE members. Instead, the CEE’s focus is on the first two paradigms. In this way, *PtT* is very similar to the CEE’s live improvisational practice. During a talk at the CEE 50 Hybrid Symposium, CEE members mentioned often contributing very little if they were joining a track near the end of its circulation: they felt there wasn’t much that needed to be added. This statement reflects the group’s emphasis on sound composition: they want to co-create a piece of music that “works” (based on their aesthetic values) as opposed to emphasizing their individual contribution. However, because multiple takes can be recorded and material can be dramatically edited in post-production, *PtT* cannot fully achieve the paradigm of live sound composition. While each track is a collective composition created with some real-time elements and without pre-planning, material can be “re-ordered or re-arranged” (Andean 2022, 108). *PtT* was the CEE’s attempt to maintain real-time composition “in a linear fashion, without recourse or second thoughts” (Andean 2022, 108), but the forced temporal and spatial isolation meant that second thoughts were entertained and implemented.

Their approach to musical/sonic choices in *PtT* shows how the CEE thinks of those choices as social communication as well, prioritizing each member as a layer of communication. The out-of-time nature of *PtT* means that their focus on “a web of evolving musical interactions between the individual performers” (Andean 2022, 109) is not happening through real-time collaboration. But the CEE viewed the process of *PtT* as highly collaborative, as a project that was firmly within the values and practices of the CEE. However, the negotiation of textures and dialogues had the benefit of reconsideration. Any performer could re-record a portion of their improvisation, or even record multiple takes and choose their favorite. In addition, post-production was completed mostly by Stillwell. Stillwell removed parts of people’s tracks, something that cannot happen during a live CEE performance. These choices were fully supported by the group, however, because they trust Stillwell to produce tracks that align with the CEE’s sound—or at least how they hope they sound.

This post-production editing may be one reason why the *Pass the Track* tracks are shorter than most live performances. Here, most are around the 10-minute mark, either a little shorter or a little longer. The exception is “PtT2,” which is 15 minutes. In addition, it seems that the ability to sustain a real-time collaborative composition was curtailed when one was forced to improvise alone. The first improviser for each track was, in effect, recording a solo improvisation, which for some members of the CEE was completely atypical for their practice.

PASS THE TRACK: CHALLENGING THE LIMITS OF “LIVE” COLLABORATIVE IMPROVISATION

I will briefly discuss three examples from *PtT*: 1, 4, and 6. My analysis will prioritize how I perceive the paradigms functioning at any given time, and I will only surmise about the CEE’s engagement with Andean’s paradigms.

“PtT1” was the first track started by Stillwell and Farah, with Stillwell creating drone layers and Farah improvising his piano material (both acoustic and processed) above them. It remains a piano-centric track, though various synth layers take prominence at times. Through the recording alone, it’s nearly impossible for me to assign the various sounds to the individual musicians, other than Farah’s piano and Bolten’s viola (typically heavily processed). So, I listen to this track mostly through the paradigms of sound composition and “parallel play.” The textures of the opening are particularly well-suited to hearing social communication because of the sparseness; each entrance seems to be part of an intentional dialogue, filling the moments of relative inaction from other members and expanding the timbral range. Though Farah is clearly the initial focus of the opening (the lead “speaker”), other members take over the conversation. One early moment, for example, occurs around the two-minute mark: Farah’s twinkling, atonal piano playing is busy again, but busy synth gestures take over my attention. Because of the acousmatic nature of the recorded medium, I’m unsure if it’s Montgomery or Jaeger that has taken over. However, even if I had been watching them perform live, I still may not have known. In live

performance, the gesture to sound relationship of the laptop (which Jaeger uses) remains elusive (Cascone 2003), especially if he faces the audience, with his screen and fingers hidden from view. Throughout “PtT1,” I find it easy to perceive social communication because the attentiveness and responsivity of the different parts is easier to perceive, or at least to imagine.

“PtT4” had Rose recording an initial track; she also mixed this track after each member had recorded an individual take. Because of Rose’s leadership, this is track is dominated in its opening by sound and textures created by her processed viola. Pizzicato creates a rhythmic vitality that invites the piano (Farah) into similar rhythmic energy: a clear moment of social communication. The additional synth layers contribute to a rhythmic disruption that is essential to the CEE’s sound: disrupting a sense of groove through a regular pulse. A disruption is both a gesture of social communication and an essential sonic gesture within their sound composition. Because of the CEE’s emergence from Euro-American studio-based institutional electronic music (see Demers 2010), they tend to avoid or minimize regular pulses that could establish a feeling of groove associated with EDM (Woloshyn 2023). As with “PtT 1,” I listen to this track through the lens of “sound composition.” This is due in part to my assumption that this is the CEE’s priority as well as the acousmatic listening context that allows me only to engage directly with the sounds of their collaboration and not any visual input. Despite the lack of visual input, I hear the CEE’s dialogue throughout the track, and it’s not difficult to imagine based on my past experiences.

“PtT6” is initiated by Jaeger. And it sounds very clearly like the type of soft synth material he typically contributes to the CEE’s sound. It invites the other members to engage in a slow-moving, dense, atmospheric improvisation. With little exception, this track remains dense, which makes it difficult to perceive individual acts of communication. Listening to this track as a sound composition and as “parallel play” is easy for me. Bolton and Farah are the last two to join this track. Their late contributions, when the textures were already dense with synthesizers, are likely the reason why I can perceive very little from their (processed) viola and piano, respectively. The dense sound composition takes over. Any moments of perceiving “parallel play” rely entirely on my memory of the CEE in live collaboration.

This familiarity with past live experience seems to be a crucial assumption for both the CEE as they created *Pass the Track* and for their audience. The CEE was trying to continue collaborative improvisation, but outside of real time rather than relying on dissatisfying networked technologies. Each track they received was a best attempt to bring the creative voices of their fellow bandmates into their sonic space. I suspect that, like me, a listener familiar with the CEE’s live performance approach would also imagine them as they listen to this (as in, they would assume a liveness of spontaneity and imagine a corporeal liveness) and that they would rely on the assurances of social communication and “parallel play” in the CEE’s live improvisations while listening to *Pass the Track*. The project is clearly a departure from the CEE’s desired creative practice. And in that way, it’s both a risk and a lesson. The CEE could have been dissatisfied with the process and felt *less* like an ensemble rather than more; and the audience could

not have embraced *Pass the Track* as an enjoyable sound composition and only bemoaned the loss of witnessed social communication and “parallel play” (not to mention the complete impossibility of “one beast with many heads”). But, in fact, the CEE showed itself and other electronic music improvisers that collaboration was still possible, even while compromising the values of temporal and spatial liveness that are so critical to these improvisational practices.

A FUTURE FOR THE CEE AND LIVE ELECTRONIC MUSIC

One could conclude that *Pass the Track* has absolutely nothing to do with live electronic music or live electronic improvisation. However, given the CEE’s creative practice, which is entirely centered around live electronic improvisations, it is necessary to analyze the project from the lens of live electronic improvisation. Its deviations from notions of liveness and live group improvisation were predicated on outside forces—that is, the COVID-19 Pandemic. And the project reflects many of the new realities for musicians seeking community and collaboration in a COVID and post-COVID time. *Pass the Track* was the CEE’s creative attempt to perpetuate their live electronic improvisational practice while adapting to the restrictions of the time, and thus, the album reflects a temporal and spatial rupture from the CEE’s typical performance approach. And as artists were forced to adapt temporalities, spaces, and connections to collaborate and share music, the CEE released *Pass the Track* in 2023 on Bandcamp, one important platform for building and maintaining an audience beyond shared space.

Collaborative improvisation tends to rely, at minimum, on temporal liveness. But Sanden has challenged us to think about liveness beyond spatial and temporal components. So, an atemporal project like *PtT* could still be collaborative improvisation. Furthermore, improvisation scholars Vijay Iyer (2000, 2004) and George E. Lewis (2002) emphasize listeners as improvisers—particularly when listening to improvisation. Just as Andean and Sanden both center the listener’s perspective in perceiving liveness and live improvisation, *Pass the Track* invites the listener to embrace the spontaneity of listening to a recording by “posing alternative paths, experiencing immediacy as part of the listening experience” (Lewis 2002, 233). As listeners, then, we are well equipped to answer the call: to embrace live electronic improvisation in diverse and unexpected circumstances, ones that might better address the need for diverse, safe, and accessible creative spaces—virtual or otherwise.

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ABSTRACT

For months after instituting COVID-19 pandemic social distancing measures, musicians were required to pivot their creative practices, too often with the dissatisfaction caused by latency and physical separation from collaborators and audiences. This article examines a pandemic-era, socially-distanced project by the Canadian Electronic Ensemble (the CEE) entitled *Pass the Track (PtT)*, which they began in 2020 and released on Bandcamp in 2023. I first position the CEE's creative practice within live electronic free improvisation (Andean 2022) and categories of liveness (Sanden 2013). I then analyze the process and outcomes of *PtT* to argue that, despite the lack of spatial and temporal awareness, the project perpetuates the CEE's value on collaboration and exhibits liveness.

Keywords: Canadian Electronic Ensemble, improvisation, pandemic, collaboration, liveness

RÉSUMÉ

Pendant les mois qui ont suivi l'instauration des mesures de distanciation sociale de la pandémie COVID-19, les musiciens ont dû orienter leurs pratiques créatives, trop souvent avec l'insatisfaction causée par le temps de latence et la séparation physique des collaborateurs et du public. Cet article examine un projet de distanciation sociale de l'ère pandémique mené par le Canadian Electronic Ensemble (CEE), intitulé *Pass the Track (PtT)*, qui a débuté en 2020 et a été publié sur Bandcamp en 2023. Je positionne d'abord la pratique créative de l'EEC dans le cadre de l'improvisation libre électronique en direct (Andean 2022) et des catégories d'existence (Sanden 2013). J'analyse ensuite le processus et les résultats de *PtT* pour soutenir que, malgré l'absence de conscience spatiale et temporelle, le projet perpétue la valeur du CEE sur la collaboration et montre la vivacité.

Mots-clés : Ensemble électronique canadien, improvisation, pandémie, collaboration, vivacité

BIOGRAPHY

Alexa Woloshyn is an associate professor of musicology at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Her first book *An Orchestra at My Fingertips: A History of the Canadian Electronic Ensemble* was published in 2023 by McGill-Queen's University Press. Her current book project "Unsettling Sounds of Indigeneity: Reckoning with the White Possessive in Settler-Indigenous Sonic Encounters" emphasizes place-based ethical musicking and is an accounting for settler colonialism in music education, performance, and ethno/musicology and her own positionality as a settler listener and scholar. Woloshyn's work has been published in the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Circuits: musiques contemporains*, *The American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, and *MUSICultures*, as well as chapters in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Music Production and Popular Music* and *Politics of Hope: Queer and Feminist Interventions*.