

A Practice Model for Sympoiesis in Improvisatory and Comprovisatory Musicking

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This project is practice-based research that investigates a practice model for sympoietic¹ musicking in the field of contemporary free improvisation and comprovisation. It is driven by my interest in socio-musical sound engagements, and particularly relational connections between humans and instruments (physical material objects and electroacoustics). I explore this relationality with sound-energy-movement continuums with tools based on embodied, and movement-based practices for listening, interpreting and responding.

One of the prominent characteristics of 21st century musicking practices is the interest in the transformation of the roles of composers, performers, instruments, works, and audience. This shift has grown out as a response to Eurological discourses in music historiography, based on a hierarchical, human-centred, and essentialist model of music making and reception. In the last couple of decades, there is a concentration of scholars calling for a new discourse, with new voices and narratives to bring about a paradigm shift. This shift emphasizes social, collaborative, non-hierarchical, non-human-centred, and embodied music-making processes. Primary importance for this shift is to better understand, listen, respond, share processes, and to be able to think together which impacts the circulation of meaning within systems of music making.

I consider one key perspective in this shift Georgina Born's (2010) proposal of a "fully relational and reflexive, social and material conception of all musics," which highlights insights from empirical research focused on listening as musical experience and the relational analysis of musical subjects and objects (pp. 89). In line with Born's statement, building on, and springing from some of the prominent questions and topics in musicking practices today, this project's research questions proposes a critical practice of 1) creating from within socio-musical, sympoietic, and interactionist spaces; and asks how practitioners can 2) unfold negotiations of this space as broadly and explicitly as possible; to explore the ways that it could afford, 3) expressing transparent, honest, relational, and interactionist accounts of music-making.

Within this paradigm shift, non-human involvement in musicking has become valuable field, significantly expanding cross-disciplinary approaches and offering new relational onto-epistemologies in sound engagement.² Many models in this field explore shared agency within the complex entanglement of instrument, sound, and human relations. Sarah Hardjowirogo highlights historical models where the instrument shares agency with the performer, requiring negotiation of shared control. Scott McLaughlin sets conditions for sonic relationships between performer and unpredictable, unstable performance environments, exploring interactions between technique and instrument. Lula Romero views composer/performer and materials as engaged in intra-action, understanding the resulting music as emerging from their mutual interference. Anne Warde (2021) suggests music making provides an opportunity for those who construct music to model a world we'd like to perceive and experience through creating social, physical, and tactile environments (pp. 89). These approaches integrate theory and practice through interactionist models, exemplifying alternative perspectives that highlight unique experiences, contributing to a broader understanding of the field. The proposed research aligns with these models and asks: *What can performing and composing with a reframed perspective of material agency be and do, differing from, and expand upon what Eurological free improvisation and composition has introduced since the mid-20th century? Could these perspectives call for a new kind of musician, artistic practice, or aesthetics? What practices or training can the model provide to develop new skills, extending dispositions and abilities? How can the aesthetic sensibilities of listening, interpreting, and responding be articulated, enacted, and evaluated in such a socio-sonic practice?*

¹ The word "sympoiesis" is coined by Donna Haraway. It means "making-with". She states nothing makes itself, everything starts from relation.

² The concept of musical instruments possessing their own agency (Bates 2012) has gained significant attention and has been widely debated, both in artistic programs (Jenkinson 2004; de Campo 2014) and in theoretical discussions (Kim 2007; Magnusson 2009). The exploration of the ontology and epistemology of instruments looking into instrument design, as well as new models for relationality between instrument and performer focusing on interfaces of relation bring new valuable discourses into the field. (Sarah Hardjowirogo 2017; Scott McLaughlin 2021, 2022; Lula Romero 2021; Thor Magnusson 2019; Philip Auslander 2010; Morin 2007; von Foerster 2003; Sève 2005; Andrew Pickering 1995; Tim Ingold 2008b.)

Research Methodology: I will work through artistic research that investigates, 1) A theoretical framework that holds together a variety of situated perspectives and onto-epistemological postures integrating strands of queerfeminist, new materialist, posthumanist theories based on sympoietic musicking; 2) Explore this framework through an experimental practice exploring entangled, and contingent relations between musical subjects and objects to understand how these relationships shape musical experiences and meaning. This includes shifting the onto-epistemological standpoint of human-centric musical perspectives to sympoietic practices with agential other-than-humans—specifically instrument-human relations in new materialist perspectives—3) Methodologically, the project will explore these through a set of companion-musicking-tools based on embodied practices integrating somatic, movement-based, and gestural approaches, exploring sound-movement continuums for listening, interpreting and responding. Temporal Semiotic Units (TSU³), Laban-Bartenieff system⁴, Gesture archetypes⁵, Spectromorphological analysis⁶ will be adopted and adapted in the practice; and new tools are expected to emerge from within the practice.

The research will create a series of maps that are a corpus of workshoppable exploration exercises, practice examples, analyses, and theory for improvisers and composers to explore, discuss, and co-develop the model in sympoietic musicking relations. I will investigate these postures and relations through a) my individual practice; b) further develop them collaboratively with four highly experienced improvisers that have important contributions in the field of contemporary free improvisation, as well as c) workshopping the model periodically in single-time encounters with other experienced and less-experienced improvisers⁷.

The Outcome: The research will result in a monograph, supplemented by an online open-access platform—such as the Research Catalogue—designed for artistic research, capable of hosting multimedia documents. The book and digital extension will present a comprehensive cartography encompassing theoretical and conceptual frameworks alongside practical applications. These applications will include scores, graphics, texts, annotated rehearsal recordings (audio/video), interview transcriptions, videographies highlighting key aspects of performances (e.g., playing techniques, discussions with collaborators), as well as analysis and evaluation files. The cartography will embody multivalent perspectives, onto-epistemological and aesthetic readings of results—proposed by me and my collaborators—tying into larger socio-musical, cultural, and political contexts. During the course of the research, I also aim to produce 1) one article discussing theoretical and conceptual framework in relation to the maps submitted to a journal such as Contemporary Music Review or Perspectives of New Music, and 2) one artistic research exposition publication—such as the Journal for Artistic Research—explaining investigations of me and my collaborators improvisatory and improvisatory practices through the research model.

The goal of my research is to render bodies sensitive, capable of being affected, and response-able to one another within sonic sympoietic relations. By doing this, I aim to co-create spaces to listen and respond with this affection, and to open spaces of negotiation and discussion. Building on this, the overarching objective of the research is to develop a practice model that cultivates attentive listening, responsive interaction, interpretation, and shared musicking processes. Such a model has potential in cultivating engaged practices to negotiate and think together, consequently influencing the circulation of meaning within systems of musicking. I consider that these meaning mechanisms not only play a role in musicking practices for music makers, informing creative processes, but are also instrumental in co-constructing social structures, values, shaping musical experiences and relations we build around these practices.

³ TSUs are developed by the Music and Informatics Laboratory of Marseille in 1992. TSUs consist of nineteen movement trajectory models that express three features: Basic information about the unit, Morphological descriptions, and Semantic meanings.

⁴ Laban-Bartenieff Analysis was devised in the early 20th century, by Rudolf Laban to describe, interpret, and document human movement. It is a multidisciplinary approach, that is coupled with a set of vocabulary for articulating, visualizing, interpreting, and documenting human motion.

⁵ Annette Vande Gorne (2018) introduces ten gesture archetypes for introducing and embodied thinking-making into acousmatic composition.

⁶ "Spectromorphology," coined by Denis Smalley (1986), describes sound shapes based on the interaction between sound spectra and their changes over time. It is a tool for aural perception, helping to explain and analyze sounds, events, structures, and space through accessible descriptions.

⁷ The single-time workshops could involve, interested improvising staff and students at the University of Leeds. with the goal of building a community of students who are eager to gain experience in improvisatory and improvisatory approaches.