

Signale Graz Soirée Talk Transcription
A Model for Sympoiesis in Improvisatory Musicking
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Today I will be talking about a **practice model** I've started developing in my **improvisation and composition** process.

It is driven by my interest in socio-musical sound engagements, and particularly **listening into** various **relational connections** between **humans, and instruments (material objects as well as electroacoustic processing)**. I explore **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 has grown out as a response to Eurological discourses that make up the bulk written historiography of music creation, based on hierarchical, one-directional, human-centred, autonomous, and essentialist model of music making and reception.

For about couple of decades now, many music scholars propose a paradigm shift in musicking processes that points towards a social, collaborative, non-hierarchical, non-human-centered, 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 love how Georgina Born¹ (anthropologist, musicologist and musician) states it—she asks for a "fully relational and reflexive, social and material conception of music; one that indicates the kinds of insight offered by empirical research, which takes listening-as-experience and the situated, relational analysis as musical subjects and objects as its focus" (Born, 2010, p.89). My practice asks questions about how such a practice could be realized.

So let me start by introducing **some** of the **general concepts** that inform my process, and get more **specific** as I go, providing **how I work with them in my practice so far**.

I'll very briefly introduce three concepts that are interlinked. Let's start with the concept of **intra-action**, that shapes my understanding of relationality. I'll present a more theoretical part of my research today, and will present practice examples and musical outputs in lecture-concert format on December 13th.

Intra-action: Intra-action is a neologism introduced by Karen Barad (2003) (theoretical physicist and feminist theorist). In the more common term interaction, entities exist before they encounter one another; they maintain a level of independence. In Barad's intra-action, these entities emerge within their relationship, not outside of it.

This puts forth the understanding that becoming starts from within relational movements and acts, presupposing that these entities come into existence through their ability to act. Here relation and action are entangled factors determining that agencies are not fixed and separable ontologically.

This perspective gets rid of a static and essentialized understanding of self/other as well as active/passive roles.

Agency is not something that someone or something has, it is about enactment.

Agency is doing/being relationally, contingent on exchange. Starting from such entangled relationality, I am interested in sympoietic relationality.

¹ Born, G. (2010). "For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn." *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 135(2), 205-243.

Sympoiesis: The word “sympoiesis” is coined by Donna Haraway (scientist, biologist, philosopher and feminist scholar) “Sympoiesis simply means “making-with.” She states that “Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing... That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.”

And this calls for what Hannah Arendt (the historian and philosopher, one of the most influential political theorists) stated as “training one’s imagination to go visiting” she writes:

“To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting” (Hannah Arendt, from Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy; as cited in Haraway, 2016, p.126).

Donna Haraway interprets and expands on this, she writes: Both Hannah Arendt and Virginia Woolf both understood the high stakes of training the mind and imagination to go visiting, to venture off the beaten path to meet unexpected, non-natal kin, and to strike up conversations, to pose and respond to interesting questions, to propose together something unanticipated, to take up the unasked-for obligations of having met.”

So here the notion of, “training the mind and imagination”, of “tracing the unexpected” and “proposing something unanticipated together”, leads to heightened listening-responding practices that engage experimentation, and sympoiesis which I am interested in.

There is a **desire to visit and inhabit** each other’s worlds, to live through consequences that arise in relations; even if only temporary and partially through an improvisation practice. And **to do this politely!** And by the word, polite, I refer to Donna Haraway’s “polite inquiry”

Polite Inquiry

The politeness Haraway talks about is not about manners but rather, an epistemological posture: A “polite” practice **rejects perspectives of objectification**, where the **listener, gazer** projects and imposes one’s own desires and fantasies onto the **listened, gazed**; which assigns hierarchical relations and more importantly **static, active and passive roles and boundaries** to agents. Becoming a polite inquirer, is about 1) inviting levels of unknown into the relational process where one does not easily jump to simplistic definitions; 2) attending to the other in a practice that is interested: **to give, to bring forward, render capable, to let be** rather than to tame, control and manipulate; 3) basically, the practice it is about becoming a **responder and facilitator for things to come** up from within relations; to **trace, open up to understand, respond** to and **negotiate** with them.

From this place, let’s turn to how may one “go visiting” through an intra-active, polite posture in a sympoietic practice for musicking. And of course, there is an endless sea of possibilities think with sound through such approach. Here, let’s go ahead and look into the strand, that I started exploring in my own practice.

In my practice, I explore how a **sympoietic instrument-human-space entanglement** is investigated from a **performer’s perspective** in an improvisational, comprovisational processes.

Eventually, my overall goal is to create a workshoppable model to introduce to other performers, and create a cartography of possible responses and relations to and with the model, allowing a plane to think and make together.

Let me first introduce my approach of working with my instrument:

Material Agency

I work with material agency following a new materialist perspective in building relations between instrument and human.

Simply, material agency proposes that there is an agentiality, a capacity for action² within materials. The anthropologist Tim Ingold states that the historically-conventional approach to understanding agency affects our relations with materials around us. He explains:

“I suggest that the problem of agency is born of the attempt to re-animate a world of things already deadened or rendered inert by arresting the flows of substance that give them life. In the EWO [environment without objects], things move and grow because they are alive, not because they have agency. And they are alive precisely because they have not been reduced to the status of objects” (Ingold, 2010, p. 7).

Working with my instrument as agential materials, I start from a place that does not assume that inanimate objects are “non-agential”. In such pursuit, I visit new materialist practices.

New Materialism

New materialism is an evolving movement seeking to comprehend connections between humans and the material world.

New materialism suggests that material is not static and stationary; and it has emergent properties that carry the capacity to cause changes in our action and engagement with them.

Today, new materialist understanding of instruments is an emerging field offering a rich plane for relational onto-epistemologies in sound-engagements³. These approaches challenge historically conventional ontological status of the object as externally bound. Recognizing agency in objects, changes ones’ view of material from inert to a dynamic one, which opens possibilities for instrument-human collaborations. In a way, this allows the self a fresh look into questioning of how objects shape one’s ideas and movements, how do we engage and co-create with them.

In my practice engage with non-human involvement, that moves out of treating instruments as passive things that are to be “mastered, controlled and manipulated” but recognises them as agential forces, seeking collaborative postures that will affect the musicking processes: my thinking, moving, sensing, listening.

My explorations are so far, grounded in my practice as a pianist in the realm of improvised music, in which I use preparations, by objects placed within it, utilising inside-piano techniques, and live electronic processing.

The shapes of the objects, the sounds they produce, the possible movements that my and their body afford together, the sensorial response I get from our interaction all inform my listening and responding.

Working with objects bring theory down to earth, building a connection between the physical and abstract, thinking and doing.

² There are various approaches when it comes to new materialist practices. This research follows feminist strands of thought especially focusing on Barad’s (2007) approach interested in intra-active thinking of material agency. Barad’s approach brings relationality and performativity of agency to the heart of the engagement, and stresses that agency is an action: it is empirical, it is bodily production, and it is enacted through relations.

³ See McLaughlin, 2014, 2022; Pickering, 1995, 2010; Ingold, 2008b; Davis, 2019 (As presented above)

Instrument-Human Contingency

In setting a plane for collaboration between instrument and human I explore a non-fully controllable, indeterminate system with the instrument, the main focus is not the techniques themselves but rather the sympoietic way that they're brought into relation with human improvisors as agents in their own right (though still subject to human agency).

- 1) The system could include new, unusual techniques of playing, working through un-mastery
- 2) Adding external physical objects, with non-controllable, non-predictable behaviors,
- 3) Live electronic processing that makes the system unstable,
- 4) Changing postures of play (through what-if, as-if experimentation) such as playing-on, playing-to, playing-in, playing-by, playing-nearby, being played by, the instrument etc.

Rather than to give the responses that one envisions or anticipates, such practice allows learning to participate with an instrument that has the capacity to resist intentions of the self; throwing-off the habitual human experience off center.

The system of relation then, is quite fragile, as there might be unexpected, unintended results, where a performance might fall apart and pick itself up. **These** elements of rupture, of being on the edge I find opens up an expressive territory that I'm interested in.

I like working with these objects in this relational zone because of the significance of their physicality, the risk, potential, and imprecision involved in their behavior. It keeps me on my toes, opens a heightened field of attention; **reminding me to be gentle and attentive in listening, sensing, moving and playing.**

This contingency allows a polite, improvisation posture that entails a form of attention, care, flexibility, and ability to move fluently through thresholds of balance between stability/instability, flow/rupture, and predictability/ unpredictability.

Such practice opens a field for cultivating ways to sustain each other constructively, lively, playfully, and creatively in sympoietic musicking.

Let me now introduce three of the object types, my collaborators.

Neodymium magnets: As preparations on the strings, they afford great flexibility they can be removed in an instance and still create endless microtonal nuances and multiphonics. Some magnets can break off little splinters when hitting together too suddenly, which then changes their shape and makes them sit or vibrate on the string in a new position, bringing out yet another sound world.

I love the aleatoric element they entail, when throwing small, cube-shaped magnets on the strings, which land in unpredictable positions, sometimes playing multiphonics, sometimes exact notes, sometimes transient percussive sounds on the metal frame.

Wooden sticks: The wooden sticks come different places. Some sticks have a knot in their wood, some don't. Some are very dense, some are very light, hence making their behaviors very different.

The shape of the stick when cut by machines following mathematical proportions generate more predictable overtones. Ones I collected in walks randomly etc, give unpredictable overtones.

One thing that is still very fascinating for me is that, according to which spectra is resonating within the body of the piano, they respond differently, if I play them alone, together, combining them with other processes.

A Marble Stone Egg-shaped: Heavy, stone. I let it resonate on the hitch pins behind the bridge, it buzzes when a corresponding pitch/spectrum is resonating, and not others. I also use it in combination with other techniques and objects, for example, I bow a string with one hand and roll the ball over that string with the other, making a sound resembling a pigmy flute. etc.

Piano & Object relations

All objects I use afford flexibility in terms of being placed and removed from the piano-body, allowing a fluid improvisation response, on top of this, they are piano friendly.

I think of the piano as some kind of Pandora's box. You open it up and it's a box of tricks, amazing sounds that come out of it. What's so fantastic about having a very close study of one instrument is that you can discover all kinds of multiple worlds, micro-worlds inside that instrument, so it becomes almost like an ensemble work in a way.

Altering and individualizing the piano facilitate a flexible instrument/performer relation, which changes during a piece and with every performance. This openness and idiosyncratic adaption of material—of the instrument, objects, and sound—is an essential aspect in my musicking practice.

Rather than thinking of the objects as tools to fulfill a purpose I assign to them, they stimulate an artistic imaginative process and prompt ideas.

Getting to the core of **how I think and act musically** means engaging with the relationships that I develop with these objects through experiences that they provide and the responses that I receive from them.

Rather than creating a "how to" guide of playing, I am interested in understanding how each object shapes my thinking, relating, sounding, aesthetic choices, these stories reveal complex layers of the process of musicking.

The specific shape, weight, and materiality of each object invites and triggers actions, gestures, and sounds, thereby suggesting ideas and structures.

Let me introduce some of the playing methods; most objects can be performed in multiple nuanced ways, covering many different playing techniques, here are just some... I found that Magda Mayas (a pianist), has made maps, of objects and playing methods, which I adopted then adapted and built on.

I could so far categorise all my playing methods under eight categories:

PLAYING METHODS

1. Tapping/releasing: Produces sound through touching and releasing my finger or an object or the string
 2. Plucking/exciting a string through grabbing under it with fingers or an object and releasing it in an upward motion
 3. **Bowing**: Producing a sustained sound through movement along the strings, or vertically along the sticks and fishing line attached to strings with fingers or objects, or using ebow.
 4. Scraping/Rubbing: movement along the strings or soundboard with fingers or other objects, with pressure/force, containing noisy sound components
 5. Striking/ hitting the strings, metal frame, etc., in a downward and sideway motion with hands or objects
 6. Sliding movement along the string/metal frame with an object, with little amount of friction
 7. Initiating setting an object/the instrument in motion beyond further control of the sound's development
 8. Strumming/Stroking Setting (several) strings in motion through horizontal movement across the strings
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Working with electroacoustic processes, I here again work with some indeterminate processes... As I am not a programmer, I adopt these processes, at times find tweaks on max forums etc.

- 1) **Delays: Pitch Hack**: One example, is a single delay line that could reverse parts of audio, randomize the transposition interval and fold the delayed signal back into itself. Giving me random segments of what is played in different forms: pitch, envelope, speed etc.

- 2) **Granulation:** Another examples is using granulation: One processes I use takes incoming audio and writes tiny grains to a buffer while simultaneously playing back a cloud of grains from the same buffer. Creating a "real-time" granularization effect using the last 1 second of collected fragments. The audio recorded to the buffer is decomposed into harmonic, percussive, and transient components using the FluCoMa toolbox (<http://www.flucoma.org>) allowing the Timbre parameter to control the balance between these components.
- 3) **Resonator:** Resonance effect that is triggered with onset detection, detects pitch (partials). All of the partials are slightly randomized based on the envelope settings to create a more complex harmonic fadeout.
- 4) I am **Wanting to build:** A process where while I am bowing sticks, it detects the pitches (partials) and spits out random pitches (from a group of pitches-that are inherent in the sticks themselves). This eventually will create a dialog with the sticks, as they resonate with the given frequency and can shift pitch, bringing in another layer of indeterminacy.

And if any of you would have some processes that you would like to share and/or experiment with me, I would be very interested in collaborating, experimenting and trying out things together.

Okay next I'll introduce the motion trajectory tools I'm working with, and finally showing some cartographies I am working with.

Motion Trajectories & Gesture Archetypes

I treat sound, objects and gesture as a set... interlinked. I am interested in working with an embodied, movement-based musicking practice, where musicking is not understood as the organization of "sound objects" or the "instrument", but as the organization of "embodied-sonic situations" a composite entangled relationality.

So, in exploring relations with the instruments and their behaviors, I work with gesture and motion trajectory models as tools. I am interested in addressing the role of our bodily activity and the tactile-kinesthetic sense in epistemology and to work through the "bodily knowledge", **knowing in and through the body**.

Gesture and movement form a **structural part** of sound-producing processes and as such function as **active agents** in the extended understanding of relations.

Let me briefly introduce the tools I work with, Temporal Semiotic Units (**Unités Sémiotiques Temporelles**), and The Gesture Archetypes.

Temporal Semiotic Units & Gesture Archetypes

TSUs are developed by the **Music and Informatics Laboratory of Marseille** in 1992, by a group of composers and interdisciplinary artists led by François Delalande. TSUs consist of 19 movement trajectory models that express three features: Basic information about the unit, Morphological descriptions, and Semantic meanings. Let me give an example:

Wanting to start: There are various sounds, attempting to begin moving, trying to initiate motion. This unit is made of two repeated phases that carries a form of reiteration implying an effort to commence, initiate an action. The reiteration occurs is not same and varies each time.

1. First phase is relatively short and has a shape that is described as "articulate" by MIM researchers.
2. The second phase acts contrary to the first through one or more parameters of the sound, could be in forms of silence, suspension, holding back, pushing back etc.

There is a feeling of unease that is caused by the effort to initiate the flow action, however not succeeding in doing so.

Next is energy-motion models developed by Annette Vande Gorne, for electroacoustic composition she calls gesture archetypes in her book “Treatise on Writing Acousmatic Music on Fixed Media” (2018)

She introduces 10 gesture archetypes together with Guy Reibel’s practice play sequence (séquence-jeu) to serve as tools within electroacoustic composition.

In play-sequence, by means of a performer, a sounding object-body and a microphone, the composer explores various gestures of sounding capabilities of the object. The goal here, was to introduce intentionality that links gestural and bodily listening within electroacoustic composition.

FRICTION

Friction is the raw energy produced when two surfaces come into contact. Transitioning from a sliding state to a stop, it examines the unstable states and equilibria between these two poles. These sounds are proprioceptive.

- Friction results in a line-point relationship. The dynamic of the line, the dynamic and the point and all the intermediary phenomena: going from one state to another within a single phenomenon.

- Dynamic of the movement, not necessarily 'straight line'. It can be smooth, granular, intermittent (fragmentary, scattered, irregular).

- The factor of <speed>, and the typological criterion of matter, <grain>, come into play as perceptive variation for friction, as well as the sustainment criterion <iterative>: sustainment of the sliced and repeated sound.

Both models are descriptive enough to guide, motion and movement yet loose enough to trigger imagination.

Translation of Working with TSU and Archetypes

In working with these tools, I’m not interested in making direct translations, creating a dictionary. I’m interested in what their **companionship** does to the relation with the instrument.

In the end, these tools work with **mimesis** or a form of **translation**. All mimetic acts end in flawed acts, and you always come upon holes in the meaning in translation; it is always there in the mind of the performer. There is something maddeningly attractive about the untranslatable, about a gesture that evaporates in transit, as it’s transformed version appears in sound, movement, sensorial experience determined by the composite factors that played role during this translation.

So, I am interested in working with these cuts, these creative mis-reading, mis-interpretations and not dismiss them when they appear. This experience of imperfection, brings a form of energy that emerges that otherwise doesn’t emerge, and enriches the music giving it other dimensions.

The movement trajectories are applied to (material) objects, various physical gestures, sonic gestural expressions, and sensorial information, electroacoustic translations etc. I apply these mapping the similarities and differences between sounds, movements and material.

I understand the act of sympoiesis in this context as an attentive negotiation and re-organization of these active agents and the creation of musical structures on micro and macro levels.

Next let me introduce how did I start working and how it evolved in the two and a half months since I started.

CARTOGRAPHIES

Creativity is complex, messy, rich, convoluted and diverse, so it is quite a challenge to find the approaches and documentation methods for both understanding and working with the elements in the process as well as communicating them as transparently as one can.

These efforts can tend towards the technical or prescriptive in seeking to apply structured forms of objective analysis, which leads to unveiling the process in overly simplified ways.

And although oversimplification helps understand parts of partial functions, structures; it can also obscure the full potential of the subjective, the embodied practice, the aesthetic concerns, the intangible... so an undulation is needed.

At times, the process of developing methods become the main aim, at other times the focus is on the artistic work being created...And the maps, and connections could be turned into scores, audio papers into audio scores etc. and I look for possible contagion zones.

THEORY: Where I unpack, elements trying to reveal details, about **objects, playing methods, sound types, sensorial information** their relations to **movement trajectories**. Looking into relationalities between them through the theoretical and conceptual postures I introduced earlier.

PRACTICE: Directly playing with these movement trajectories, practicing cultivating awareness in tracing relationalities between the objects, playing methods, sound types, sensorial information, and movement trajectories, and later analyzing them.

So I work both top-down and bottom-up processes.

(IM)POSSIBILITY: The endless nuances that emerge in trying to pin-down the sound types, and playing methods as well as their relation with archetypes and TSU are impossible to entirely capture in such maps.

Yet the attempt of collecting, mapping, comparing, systematizing, connecting, and repeatedly performing helps revealing details, and connections.

To take things apart, dissemble them into detailed components, helps see their connection to the whole –but it only makes sense by coupling it with the practice, so the taking-apart does not have to do with redefining, but about cultivating an awareness in practice.

ENSEMBLE: David Pirro invited me to work with his Live Electronics class students, to compose for them. And as my end goal was to bring the model in contact with other improvising performers, I said the model is at its early stages but would be happy to see what comes up in this early-stage contact, to invite another movement and perspective from within practice.

He asked for all 6 performers to have a control of live processing of their own sound. However, the technical possibilities including hardware as well as latency issues, of six performers doing live processing, as well as having 6 performers with indeterminate processes, and to do this in 4 classes was not going to be possible. So, the level of indeterminacy in electroacoustic processing dropped greatly.

I realized I will not be able to introduce the model in depth especially going into contingent instrument-human relations. So, in thinking what would be an interesting way to create a common ground in both my research and working with the ensemble, I decided to limit the archetypes and TSU by making a composition and explore possibilities within this simple structure for the rest of my stay. Doing a focus study. (this is the overall form)

I recently started to make use of a repetitive playing-listening a single flow of gesture-TSU organization, starting to build some connections. I'll comparatively and systematically continue listening to and mapping different aspects of the results. Which I'll be presenting on the 13th of December—> In a lecture-concert, alongside where the ensemble will also perform.

The goal is to cultivate awareness, and afford activation of a range of complex listening modes, each with their own selective attention: the specificities of these listening modes can, allow explain the choices that one makes in combining and working with movements, sonic and physical responses and therefore allow situated thinking/making. This is a beginning sketch.

For Performers

One of the goals of this research is to eventually 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, adopt and adapt.

My goals are to gather their approaches of engaging with the tools, postures of the model through video, audio session of playing together and interviewing each other. The outcome will be a cartography that includes theoretical and conceptual information as well as practices and application examples in the forms of scores, graphics, texts, commented rehearsals (video/audio files), transcriptions of interviews, that explain and highlight various aspects of performances. Me and my collaborators' choices, and various means that guided us in making these choices will be illustrated and explained. The cartography will embody multivalent perspectives, holding within itself contradictions and congruences between various aspects of the processes.

I don't understand the model as a fixed and transferable entity, but as something which is mentally and physically learned and needs to be continuously re-learned, re-performed, and re-invented.

SITUATED KNOWLEDGES: In joining approaches, and views, I would like to close by reading a short snippet of what Donna Haraway Calls Situated knowledges, as she expresses this notion of making-with, and being with ever so beautifully.

"Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular... Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits (the view from above) but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions-of views from somewhere." (Haraway, 1988, p. 590)

IN CLOSING, my main question is to find ways to co-create with these extended relationalities, with human and instruments, and movement trajectories, through complex systems that depends highly on **attending, noticing, caring, it is about training the imagination to go visiting.**

I have only began to scratch the surface of possibilities in my practice so far, and excited about what it will keep unveiling.

Thank you so much for lending your ears to me, and now I would like to lend mine to you, and to get feedback, comments, questions, suggestions; anything.
