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**Power in the moment: using autoethnographic narrative to unlock understandings of collaborative performance**

Abstract:

Autoethnography provides a useful and valid way to research collaborative music performance as it enables the researcher to study their personal practice in relation to other musicians. However, the representation of data from collaborative performance creates some problems. It is here that narrative plays a vital role in being able to capture the essence of the moment from the perspective of the performer, through the use of evocative text. In examining the musical collaboration between a pianist and a choir, the analysis of the narrative data provides a rich understanding of the unseen aspects of collaborative practice in music performance, while also providing an exemplar for other creative artists who are researching the experience of artistic practice. This case study demonstrates that evocative autoethnographic narrative is a significant tool for this type of research activity, and can have wide application in the creative arts.

Biographical note:

Professor Judith Brown AM is the Director of the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music within CQUniversity, Australia. She supervises a number of post-graduate students in the creative and performing arts and continues to perform regularly as both a solo and collaborative pianist. Building on this creative practice, her doctoral thesis used autoethnography to examine the experience of flow in collaborative music performance as a piano accompanist. In 2009 she was the recipient of the CQUniversity Vice-Chancellor's Teacher of the Year Award, and in 2010 she received an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Citation for outstanding contributions to student learning. In 2017 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for significant contributions to music education and the community.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Autoethnographic narrative – Creative arts research – Collaborative music performance – Piano accompanist

## **Introduction**

Collaborative music making involves the joining together of diverse personalities and musicians with varying skill-sets and levels of understanding about interpretation of repertoire (Good and Davidson 2002). The collaboration takes time to nurture and develop, with the success of these collaborations relying as much on the carefully honed social skills as the advanced musical skills of the participants. No music collaboration is as challenging as a choir with their piano accompanist: one pianist, one conductor, eighty choristers – over eighty personalities and musical skill-sets to tightly rehearse and then bring together in one performance (Berenson 2008). When all of these personalities and skill-sets gel to form a choir, inspiring things can happen creating exciting and intense experiences (Gabrielsson 2011). Many hours of exhaustive rehearsal and tedious repetition of skills is often required before a public performance, but the intensity of these music collaborations can result in memorable and enjoyable music performances that bring a deep sense of exhilaration and enjoyment to all participants in the collaboration.

Studying the phenomena of these intense music collaborations presents many challenges. A video or audio recording of a music performance provides a documentation of the experience from the perspective of the audience. It allows participants to recall elements of the performance, and can confirm their own experience of the performance. However, as a communication medium, it fails to document the personal experiences of the participants in a way that can facilitate further analysis and investigation. The video or audio recording tells us about what happened in a performance from the perspective of the audience, but it does not tell us how the performance unfolded for the performers individually and what they experienced in the midst of the music collaboration (Dahl and Friberg 2007).

Autoethnography is a methodology that allows researchers to explore personal experience as well as the experience of those who are involved in the phenomena under study (Ellis 2004). However, it is narrative that provides one of the means of generating data that can then be used to analyse the phenomena (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr 2007). In a temporal activity such as collaborative music performance, a narrative account, written after the event, brings to the fore an insiders' perspective, shedding light on what happens in these moments of inspiration in the midst of the performance. A similar process was used by Bartleet (2009) in her autoethnographic study of a conductor of a music ensemble. Her use of evocative narrative draws the reader into the unique experience of one participant in a music ensemble, namely the conductor, and thus allows for further investigation into the phenomena of collaborative performance.

The narrative account of a collaborative music event between a pianist and a choir is provided later in this paper. It is written from the perspective of the piano accompanist and is part of a larger autoethnographic narrative that documents many memorable and intense experiences of collaborative music making. This discussion will explore how narrative can be used to unlock understandings of collaborative music performance, with particular reference to a piano accompanist performing with a choir.

### ***The autoethnographer: piano accompanist as collaborative artist***

Before exploring the role of narrative in understanding intense collaborative music making, it is important to tease out some of the terms associated with collaborative music performance. The term ‘accompanist’ has been used for centuries to describe the person who provides musical accompaniment, usually on piano, for a singer or instrumentalist (Burkholder, Grout and Palisca 2006). Over the last thirty to forty years the nomenclature has changed and the term ‘collaborative pianist’ or ‘associate artist’ has come into use (Graves 2009; Katz 2009), especially when one considers that the work undertaken by a pianist in the performance of a violin sonata of Brahms or Beethoven, for example, is far from the conventional understanding of ‘accompanying’. In these works the artists perform music that is individually challenging and they equally contribute to the final artistic product. Collaborative music making also occurs in larger ensembles and is a musically challenging activity as well as being intensely social (Carucci 2012). While Clift and Hancox (2001) relate that singing in a choir can have considerable benefits for health and well-being, even the accompanist of a choir can experience the emotional, physical and psychological connection that occurs in a choir that can provide intense joy and personal satisfaction (Berenson 2008; Service 2012).

However, in order to participate effectively in such collaborative music making experiences, the pianist needs to spend a lot of time practicing alone to gain the necessary skills to achieve even a moderate level of competence (Nielsen 1999; Wiest 2004). There are many studies that have attempted to tease out what makes an expert musician. Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer’s widely cited study (1993) asserts that it takes no less than ten years to move from novice to expert performance in any discipline and is achieved through deliberate and targeted practice. Hallam’s study (1998) confirms that musical expertise was determined not only by the time spent practicing, but also by the time spent learning. The data gathered in her study also confirmed that playing in music ensembles such as orchestras, bands and chamber music groups ‘rehearses the skills necessary for the development of musical expertise’ (Hallam 1998: 127). Therefore the collaborative pianist must bridge the divide between solo performer and ensemble participant. They need the physical skills, artistic knowledge and experience of the solo performer, yet they need to also possess a degree of empathy (Mansell 1996; Davidson 2005) that allows them to contribute to music making within an ensemble on an equal footing with all other ensemble participants. When all these elements come together for a collaborative pianist (Moore 1962; Katz 2009) such collaborations can result in memorable experiences of collaborative music making.

### ***Autoethnographic narrative: an excerpt***

In large choirs, the bond between conductor and accompanist is a unique one. Some conductors will take a quite dictatorial role in the musical direction of a performance. Indeed, directing a large group of people, such as a choir, in a performance requires a number of important leadership qualities. My own experiences with choral conductors have been most memorable when the partnership between conductor and accompanist

is on a more equal footing. This type of mutual respect can create a formidable partnership that can drive the whole group of performers as one musical body. These partnerships are, however, put to the test in competitions such as eisteddfods as this next experience recalls.

The eisteddfod had reached its third and final day. The auditorium was filled with expectant performers, eager to demonstrate their abilities, and an audience of keen listeners, drinking in the feast of fine music. The eighty performers filed onto the stage filling the choir stands. They knew the routine well by this stage yet the high level of concentration was palpable as everyone focused their attention on the conductor. I fixed my gaze onto the music but I also I had the conductor clearly in my peripheral vision. I needed to have my total concentration on the music I was about to play yet, at the same time, have a focused awareness of the conductor and his every move. We were all quite close together on the stage so we could almost hear each other's breathing and respond to the musical nuances that were to be created in performance.

The piece was *O Fortuna* from Carl Orff's choral work *Carmina Burana*. It begins with several bars of thunderous chords, the choir and piano playing in exact rhythmic unison. '*O Fortuna, velut luna, statu variabilis*' (Orff 1965). The drama of the music instantly changes as the low, clipped melody is held suspensefully over a driving rhythm in the bass. '*Semper crescis, aut decrescis, vita detestabilis, nunc obdurate, et tunc curat, ludo mentis aciem, egestatem, potestatem dissolvit ut glaciem*' (Orff 1965). Even as the harmonic changes urged us on with excitement, we held the tempo rock steady and the dynamics stayed hushed and menacing, creating a sense of foreboding and tension. I watched intently as the conductor held us all back, keeping the volume at *pianissimo* level and the tempo controlled, driving the tension higher and higher.

When we finally arrived at the *fortissimo* section, he released our sound like a spring and I too burst into the piano passage with gusto. '*Sors salutis, et virtutis, michi nunc contraria, est affectus, et defectus*' (Orff 1965). I felt a sense of being carried along with the intensity of the music as if in a blur, yet at the same time there was an increased level of concentration for I knew I could easily get lost with the speed of this music. The final section is marked *presto* and together with the conductor we raced with exuberance towards the end. We had never performed it at that speed before, but the adrenalin shot from the intensity of the performance pushed us all along. Such was the concentration of the whole choir that we stayed together to the end, breathless yet exhilarated.

The audience reaction was enthusiastic for they had sensed the raw energy of the performance. The adjudicator also felt the energy and awarded the performance first prize against choirs that sang in a more measured and controlled way. The collaboration between conductor, pianist and choir had pulled off this memorable performance and cemented the trust in this multi-faceted partnership. It was a clear example of collaborative music making in action. As accompanist I was an integral part of that partnership and felt I had an equal role in the musical direction of each performance. It is an ongoing relationship and one that continues to be challenging and musically satisfying for me (Brown 2011).

### ***Research design and analysis***

This research was driven by a desire to explore what happens in collaborative music performance and to express the moments of intense music performance in a way that could be studied and conveyed to others. Autoethnography provided a tool whereby I could examine my own experiences and self-other interactions within my culture of collaborative music performance (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Bartleet and Ellis (2009) comment that autoethnography is particularly useful for creative artists and musicians who have been turning to this methodology to align their practice with new research paradigms (de Vries 2006; Järviö 2006; Dunbar-Hall 2009; Emmerson 2009; Schindler 2009). The data was assembled to create an evocative narrative, thus drawing the reader into my experiences. The use of narrative in autoethnographic research is particularly useful in defining the turning points in our lives or those moments that live in the memory as exceptional circumstances (Webster and Mertova 2007). This type of writing, with its use of rich description, brings to the foreground subjective experiences that would otherwise remain hidden.

The larger narrative from which this excerpt is drawn, takes a chronological approach and uses vignettes, that Humphreys (2005) suggests provides a way of creating an autobiographical narrative that focuses on particular experiences rather than the whole of a life. These vignettes could also be considered as small case studies (Stake 2005) that outline particular events and circumstances, yet when considered together, allow the researcher to explore connected themes through these varied lived experiences (Flyvbjerg 2006). Consistent with the approach taken by many narrative researchers (Barrett 2009; Coulter and Smith 2009), I have used significant document artifacts including personal diaries, audio and video recordings of concerts, and personal scrapbooks of memorabilia including press cuttings, photos, and programs of concerts to inform the content of my narrative.

The analysis of the narrative data follows the approach adopted by Chang (2008) who exhorts autoethnographers to approach their analysis with a level of rigour acceptable in the social science discipline. Chang suggests that by reading and re-reading the data, themes will emerge from the data. While this approach is 'akin to grounded theory, where researchers work inductively and present their findings in the form of traditional categories and theory' (Ellis 2004: 196), Chang's approach to the analysis of qualitative data requires the researcher to:

- (1) Search for recurring topics, themes, and patterns;
- (2) look for cultural themes;
- (3) identify exceptional circumstances;
- (4) analyse inclusion and omission;
- (5) connect the present with the past;
- (6) analyse relationships between self and others;
- (7) compare yourself with other people's cases;
- (8) contextualise broadly;
- (9) compare with social science constructs and ideas; and
- (10) frame with theories (2008: 131).

This approach was useful in the analysis of my autoethnographic data as it incorporates both analysis and interpretation combining a 'zoom-in' and 'zoom-out' approach (Chang 2008: 129): 'zooming in elicits ethnographic details; zooming out engenders overarching cultural themes' (129). Chang's approach to the analysis of autoethnographic data addresses issues surrounding the rigour of this type of research. By covering the analysis from all viewpoints, the theory can be compared and

contrasted with similar theory and other studies on intense experience in collaborative music performance.

### **Narrative themes**

A series of narrative themes were identified.

#### ***Focused attention***

One of the first themes to emerge from the analysis of the autoethnographic narrative was that of focused attention. The narrative excerpt included in this paper described an exhilarating performance experience of accompanying a choir in a performance of *O Fortuna* from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. As the piano accompanist, I play a unique part in the performance of the work, as I need to modulate my attention (Chun, Golomb and Turk-Browne 2011) between my own playing, the directions of the conductor and the choir as a whole. The performance was particularly memorable because the level of my attention to several outside factors was achieved at one time: I was able to attend to my own performance in a highly skilled way, I remained focused and attentive to the instructions from the conductor during the performance, and the musical reaction from the choir was also within my attention, heightening the intensity of the experience, making it a memorable and personally satisfying collaborative music performance.

#### ***Immersion in the performance***

The analysis of the autoethnographic narrative also highlighted my complete immersion in the performance, which is another result of the high level of focused attention that I experienced in this collaborative music performance with the choir. While this was a physically demanding performance, there was also no mental energy left for any other thoughts other than those associated with performing the music. This created a performance intensity and adrenalin 'rush' that lingered for several hours after the performance. The memory of this performance remains as a clear memory of strong musical experience (Lamont 2012, Bjerstedt 2013) in collaborative performance.

Gabrielsson (2010: 566) asserts that many people report a strong experience with music while singing in a choir. 'The voice gets support and resonance from others, and it sounds better and louder than otherwise. One is part of something greater, sharing the expression and power that the choir may achieve.' Although I was not singing in the choir, my role in this performance placed me in the center of the action between the choir and the conductor. I was totally immersed physically and mentally in the performance. The skills needed by a pianist to accompany a choir may seem effortless by the casual onlooker, but this does not take into account that my performance was only generated through highly disciplined mental activity, supported by many years of dedicated practice that allows the physical performance to sound so easy.

This is one of the characteristics of the phenomenon flow as defined by the American psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1975) who described an experience of highly focused attention when one is engaged in a challenging activity where participants often recall themselves being 'lost in the moment' and eager to participate in this activity for the sheer enjoyment of it, rather than for any extrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). He postulates that, 'although the flow experience appears to be effortless, it is far from being so. It often requires strenuous physical exertion, or highly disciplined mental activity' (2002: 54). However, the merging of actions and awareness through immersion in the performance adds to the optimal experience as it eliminates self-doubt and questioning. 'In flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic' (54). When the skills and challenges are finely balanced so that one experiences a sense of enjoyment in stretching the skills to meet these new challenges, the experience can become so focused that 'there is no excess psychic energy left over to process any information but what the activity offers. All the attention is concentrated on the relevant stimuli' (53).

### *Narrative theme: loss of self-consciousness*

The third theme to emerge from the analysis of this autoethnographic narrative was the loss of self-consciousness. In the example from the narrative, it is clear that I was not distracted by thoughts outside of the activity and my mind was totally focused on the task at hand. It was not that I had totally lost control in the situation or was unaware of what was happening in the performance but rather there was a sense of being 'keenly sensitised to tonal quality, volume level, nuance of melody and rhythm, harmonic progressions, pacing, melodic intervals' (Schneiderman 1991: 90). During this same performance, I became totally aware of all aspects of the music so that they totally dominated my attention to the exclusion of everything else.

The loss of self-consciousness presents an interesting paradox in the study of the collaborative music performance. The act of performance is a subjective experience for each participant, but in collaborative music performance one's attention needs to modulate between the self and the 'other' (Kokotsaki 2007) in the ensemble. Personal levels of attention are difficult to analyse in the actual moment of performance. The analysis of one's attention while in the moment of collaborative music performance would require a level of self-consciousness that would stifle the depth of the experience and is impossible to achieve. Schneiderman describes this phenomenon as experienced by herself in music performance:

When I further attempt to define the very special state of mind I feel during this immersion it is elusive. If I ask myself 'what am I thinking?' or 'where is my attention focused?' my focus shifts to the training of attention itself and what I am thinking changes. The brain cannot examine itself (1991: 89).

It is only afterward, when the activity is over, can reflection and self-consciousness be used to examine the experience that has been enriched through the new skills and fresh experience. This is the powerful role of narrative as a means of creating data that allows for the analysis of the collaborative music performance experience.

As a musician, I have found the experience of writing this narrative both difficult and empowering. Difficult because written text is not my usual mode of expression ... However, the process of creating this written narrative has been empowering because through this means I have found a way to document some of the elusive aspects of music performance ... The narrative has enabled me to recreate some of the thought processes and personal struggles that have resulted in memorable performances (Brown 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The autoethnographic narrative excerpt provided herein documents one of the many collaborative performances I have experienced with a choir. The use of descriptive language and scene setting creates an evocative narrative that illuminates the many psychological phenomena that occur in the act of collaborative music performance and is therefore more useful than any electronic recording of the performance. Whereas a video recording may have shown the events from the perspective of the outsider, it is the narrative account that provides the key to the inner workings of the collaborative partnership, albeit from the perspective of the piano accompanist. These phenomena are not noticed by the audience, and may not even be perceived by the other performers in the ensemble. However, it is the narrative that provides rich data for analysis and can help to unlock understandings of collaborative music performance between a choir and a piano accompanist.

The use of narrative to provide data to analyse individual artistic practice also has implications for researchers working in a wide range of other artistic disciplines, and particularly those that are temporal in nature, such as dance, drama and other types of music performance including solo and group performance. These narratives provide data for many individual case studies in these temporal arts and, as Flyvbjerg (2006 2011) points out, 'a discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and that a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one' (Kuhn 1987, ctd. in Flyvbjerg 2006: 242). These types of narrative and their associated analysis and discussion provide important exemplars of artistic practice that bring these experiences into the open to promote greater understanding of artistic activities. Such experiences are difficult to capture with conventional means such as video and audio recording, and so the narrative comes to the fore as a notable tool of research in the creative arts. Through narrative, the mystery of artistic practice can be investigated and studied, documenting many exemplars of artistic practice to enrich our understanding of the arts, and the creative arts in particular.

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