

On collaboration in art and in research into art

I distinguish between collaboration in research into art and collaboration in making art. I am at ease with the two being one thing; but that requires a degree of finesse involving knowledge of the needs of each.

My research current is entitled Notation for Sound Art involving live presence. I am looking at *the interrelation between notational systems and use of voice in modes of performance ranging from text-sound composition to more hybrid forms, especially those involving what has been called conceptual improvisation – a term I have taken from Phil Durrant*.

By “notational system” is meant *any structure of signs that can be inscribed and shared by a network of performers to communicate ideas for vocal and related actions within composition/realisation. This might include executable script*.

It is practice-based research which means that I can't do the research well without making new art, and that means doing so collaboratively.

So, Notation. And Notation in an inherently collaborative situation, making a performance piece.

One or more persons prepares something directive for others to do. They may all be the same people. There may be only one of them. I shall come to that later. They may or may not be going to perform there and then; or at all; but we are dealing with multiplicity: multiple contributors, perhaps; multiple themes; transpositions of themes; developments – and this whatever the art or the research (if the research allows for speculation).

Multivoice, which comes into almost everything I do now, can be achieved by multi-channel spatialisation; and that can be effected algorithmically. It doesn't have to be **done** directly.

Yet that still leaves the questions of who or what decides – there has to be a prime movement of some kind somewhere (doesn't there?!).

The same problems and worries attend the who-does-what-and-why of collaboration in all its manifestations.

I saw a documentary recently which suggested that Edward Elgar's wife made him go and compose every day, and encouraged and / or

chided him while he worked; or, it was suggested, he would done rather little. That has been on my mind.

In a collaboration, you don't want someone who takes over, as if they're the boss. Nor do you want someone who waits to be told what to do, as if they're on a wage and reluctant. And this applies to the solo operator too, because as individuals we have conflicting ambitions and desires.

We want more than cooperation. And the documentary showed the effects of others than Elgar's wife, men and women, though seemingly more often women, who encouraged his creativity, rather than just his labour.

So I must distinguish between *cooperation* and *collaboration*.

For many, the words are synonyms; but the distinction I want to make is real.

As personalities, human beings are more plastic and various than you may believe. Also we are all less original than many believe.

A great deal of our behaviour is little more than stimulus and response; although it does not feel like that because we are so complex.

I suggest that each of us is a distributed network. It is possible, with the appropriate monitoring equipment, to know when a person has made a decision some little time before they know themselves that they have made it.

When you decide to, say, stand up, actually you may experience the reception of news, in your news-receiving process, of the decision to stand up from somewhere perhaps deeper within you but certainly somewhere less self-aware. There is no one place in you that is you.

I am not a neuroscientist. What I am saying to you I came to some time ago by reflection of various kinds which originated mostly in reading linguistics material; and by self-examination.

But *Nature Neuroscience* published in 2008 a paper by Soon, Brass, Heinze and Haynes entitled **Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain** (*Nature Neuroscience* 11, 543 – 545). And there it is suggested that people commit to at least some decisions before they are aware of having made them. At the very least.

Whether or not this has implications for free will or not is interesting, but beyond my scope here. There are all sorts of cum hoc and post hoc pitfalls.

More likely than anything that might come out of such a debate is that we exercise conscious control of some but not all of our actions. That is: unconscious processes play a much larger role in our behaviour than we might acknowledge readily.

And what we call self-awareness may be the production of a feeling of free will before an action; plus the assumption that we have exercised free will after an action.

Such feelings of intention and our actual behaviours would then emerge from the brain processes outside of what we call awareness, which is itself a feeling produced by brain processing.

By analogy, the physiology of the eye is increasingly well-known, as is the nature of the image it produces. It is quite different to what the brain shows us. The eye does not filter data; but the brain does; just as the brain fills in to show us visual information which the eye has not actually given us to match the brain's expectations.

As they say in North America: Go figure.

Such speculation, and perhaps it's no more than that, could be misused as an excuse for tyranny on the grounds that we only think we are free or are experiencing pain et cetera.

Yossarian in *Catch 22* complained that everyone was shooting at him. "But, Yossarian, they're shooting at everyone," was the response. Yossarian would have none of that: "What difference does that make?" he asked.

If you think you are being bullied, then to some extent you are. We may conclude that it is your problem, one requiring assistance, but the bully cannot logically just dismiss the claim and certainly not on the grounds of their intention. Similarly, tyranny remains tyranny even if we think we or others are machinelike.

We can observe from experience that we have different versions of ourselves for everyone we know. Anyone who is always the same is more than a pain and by no means, we think, socialised. It is our nature to be various and consistently inconsistent.

That's why being in groups can be so interesting: versions of ourselves have to be superficially standardised; and individuals' relationships have to be reconciled. We are, each, many.

"I contain multitudes," said Walt Whitman. That may have been tied up with his New England Transcendentalism; but it is clear, I believe, from the context, that it bears on what I am saying:

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I like to say that we are federations, negotiating conflicting desires within ourselves.

It should, therefore, be possible for us to work closely together, perhaps as if we are, if not at one and as one, then federated.

In my collaborations with John Drever, I could say "John, you do the sound engineering and I'll do the graphics." That is something like how we started; and, operationally, we have to acknowledge that we are separate organisms and cannot both be doing the same thing at the same time, pace Zaphod Beeblebrox and his two heads.

But we, John and I, go further and differently to that.

It shouldn't be a big deal, especially in areas approaching music and drama. It's unusual perhaps in what Charles Bernstein calls official verse where there seems to be an immutable notion of the solitary artist creator.

I have heard David Harsent, an accomplished poet, saying that poets must expect the words of their libretti to be made subservient to the creative demands of the composer – the context was Harsent's work with Harrison Birtwhistle. (Is that cooperation or collaboration?)

I'm not an expert by any means on Britten, but it seems from what I have read that he could be pretty hard on his librettists, casting them off rapidly.

This is an immense subject and I am tip-toeing on its shell.

What John Drever and I have sought to do, at least in my story of it, is to find a way to make art together where, as far as possible, we balance our individual aesthetics, much as an individual artist

balances a variety of aesthetic ambitions with possibly turbulently federated desires.

We cannot easily acquire each other's skills. Guy Begbie told me that the ability to engineer with paper is just a matter of practice. I think that's like the story of Michelangelo saying that sculpture is just knocking off the material that you don't want. Yet one can get to the point where artists utilise each other's skills by trying to see and plan both as themselves and as their collaborators.

Now as I name the parts of my aesthetic universe, John Drever is one which in our case we have not got. Not today. But we do have Benedict Taylor – and what a piece of work! Noble in Reason! infinite in faculty! how like an Angel! the paragon of animals; well, I like him. His instrument is the viola.

We improvise to a much greater extent than I and John Drever in that improvisation is really all we do, so far; whereas John Drever and I build structures within which we improvise.

Most of the time John Drever and I use my texts. Benedict and I have been wider-ranging, for historical rather than aesthetic or ideological reasons.

The common factors in these somewhat overlapping collaborations are that we spend a lot of time talking and ensuring some mode of individualised socialization. We don't plan the work but we conceptualise and plan modes of the work that we do.

I am fortunate in my collaborating colleagues and who are now my friends. It is true friendship, I believe, but maybe one rooted in respect rather than entirely common interests. If we were not working together, we, some of us, might not spend so much time together. But it's still friendship; and it needs to be. (I have a friendship as that word is normally understood in which we do not see each for nine out of ten years and now hardly speak; we have email but use it intermittently; I suppose we can imagine each other speaking, we know each other so well.)

That documentary on Elgar is still in my head; as is the surprise of an acquaintance regarding the strength of emotion shown in *Enigma Variation 9*, Nimrod, to Augustus Jaeger, Elgar's friend and music editor, rather than to his, Elgar's, wife.

I don't find it at all remarkable; and I'll try to explain that.

Rightly or wrongly, I have Edward Elgar and Thomas Hardy in adjacent and possibly linked mental boxes; and I have thought often of the manner in which Hardy rediscovered his passion for his wife Emma Gifford once she was dead. I found it rather despicable when I was young and didn't know enough.

The importance of Jaeger to Elgar may never be known fully; but much can be said of it. And its location at the centre of Elgar's awareness of himself as a composer, for me, needs no further explanation. Elgar's wife may have chivvied him; but she does not seem to have had the empathetic grasp of Elgar as artist that Jaeger had. It is perhaps the difference between low level *cooperation*, and *collaboration*. I am speaking of something which is probably separate from and other than conjugal passion.

Society offers an ideal of companionship and support which many do not achieve; and some then mourn both the loss and the lack. Silly. Well, misguided.

I'd like to mention a few other of my collaborators.

Tina Bass, I have mentioned. That is a friendship and one I value greatly. And Guy Begbie, too, whom I find companionable. It is difficult to keep in touch due to distance and commitments; and it is the desire to make work which is the driver now; but we remain friends, I believe, and it makes it easy, perhaps possible, to work.

I may not dedicate anything to him; but then I do not turn to him as maybe Elgar turned to Jaeger. I do know that I can throw images and ideas at him and they will come back recognizably still mine and recognisably not mine but energized for me as he changes their order, their aspect ratios, their materials or their contexts; or all of those.

Some of you may have seen Richard Tipping when he spoke here last autumn. That's another artistic relationship made rather difficult by distance. The cooperative elements of it work fine; collaboration as I mean it is rather more difficult because most of the time we are separated by a distance almost half the circumference of the planet; but we have, as you may have seen, collaborated a little.

Guy and I have known each other over a decade and we do really need to be in the room together to get the collaborative spark;

although we manage to prepare for it by email and post. Just as Tina comes down to London regularly.

It's not for me, alone, that she comes down; not at all. We are both keyboard junkies enough that we can do a great deal over the wires.

But live presence is all in all, like the thunderstorm in Frankenstein films. And she comes to the *Writers Forum Workshop* to be among heterogeneous artists who sometimes go in for fairly impressive cooperation which sometimes achieves collaboration.

I have more than once alarmed people by saying that there is a lot of Eros in collaboration; so now I try to preface what I am saying. I find it tiresome to keep saying that I am not urging people to have sex together or even lust after each other as a means to artistic creativity.

I did once try to include a lover in some of my performances and it was a disaster. I thought she wasn't understanding me and she thought I was hectoring her.

Briefly, then, what Plato did with *eros*, in the Symposium, is to suggest that it, *eros*, starts with sexual attraction and then extends into The Good that one senses in the object of one's desire.

Now, in my argot, that's a sort of thing I tend to dismiss as "too Platonic"! Yet I'll persist with it for a moment or two because so much of our thought derives from him; and, in the spirit of what I have said about not being as unique and separate as we like to think we are, we need to pay attention to where our ideas have come from if we want to work with them.

We have to listen, as an essential to cooperative and collaborative action. The Symposium posits a desire in us for wisdom and a need for completion and wholeness.

We all have to work well with each other or we do not get very far; and that is a truth I take to be self-evident. It is, though, the opposite of how we do things generally, out in what we may call the *Blag Society*.

If we pay attention to each other's perceptions, we are more likely to act with something that we might well call wisdom because we see more widely than our individual inclinations might allow.

I am not saying that collaborative work is better than individual work, solo work, whatever we call it; but I am questioning how solo that solo

work is; and considering the implications of that. Remember what Sir Isaac Newton wrote to Robert Hooke in 1676: “If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Not that Newton was much of a collaborator; not, for instance, compared to Hooke.

Herbert Marcuse, in his **Eros and Civilization**, builds on Freud and on Marx. You need to know them to see what he’s doing really, but I want to do this in seconds so that we all get home tonight; so trust me, please, and hang on

Eros here, the take on it I want, is creative energy; and it is opposed to repression of instinct. Get it right as an artist and you are on the way to not alienating your own labour.

Right now, as a Fellow of Goldsmiths, I feel rather unalienated! I work rather hard and I work alone and with people, as seems appropriate, without much having to meet pointless targets, or to explain myself to people out of sympathy with my objectives.

I am assessed, of course, but, so far, that has been reasonable and proportionate. I am studying notation, one of the means by which we work together with each other, and I do work with others, using their knowledge and abilities but without I hope exploiting them -- and that last point goes straight back to the Symposium.

It is seeing our work as a social act. And art and research are social: respect, listen, reconsider, doubt and trust.

In research, cooperation is often what is wanted. One does one bit; and another person another bit. In my case, I am what Laurence J Peter called “a floating apex”, the Principal Investigator in a team of one.

In performance, collaboration, as I am using the term, an attempt at sharing creativity, is, I suggest, essential. It is, however, a matter of degree. Following a directive score is likely to be cooperative. The more indicative the score, the more likely that individuals’ *creativity*, whatever we mean by that, will be important. But it can be hard. Musicians often improvise but within constraints; and, it can be, a series of solos. I have nothing against that. For a number of years I went every Tuesday to St Ives Jazz Club and listened to groups doing that.

Constraints are an important element of making art; and I hope that some of what I have said today will staunch any sense or expectation you have of “self-expression” as somehow particularly authentic.

Just express, remembering the biological origin of that word.

Note that I am not proposing crowd-sourcing. Nor even finding collaborators with the supposedly right skills. Of course, you want the right skills; it’s hardly worth saying.

I am proposing something of an holistic approach, an approach of doing some things for the sake of it, taking the complexity of things in one. We analyse to understand, but then we should synthesise, certainly in art practice.

Out there, in what the indigenes think is a real world, they tend to approach problems like draughts players, not chess players; so that they analyse but without appropriate planning; so their response to each problem creates another.

I am not proposing a problem-solving approach. Try to resist seeing things you do as problems.

And please try not to see things as challenges. Just do them.

D H Lawrence had a good phrase for a Good life. He said: Be a good animal.

If an animal just can’t do something, it doesn’t modernise its environment. It does something else.

[This talk was given at Goldsmith’s, University of London on 12th February 12, 2011 as part of a cross-disciplinary graduate seminar on collaboration. It was followed by a performance by Lawrence Upton (voice) and Benedict Taylor (viola) from Bob Cobbing’s **with your tongues** (*Writers Forum* 2001, 2011)]