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Give: Transatlantic Collaboration Through Conversation

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GIVE: TRANSATLANTIC COLLABORATION THROUGH CONVERSATION

Abstract: Artistic collaborators Kate Ledger (pianist) and Ray Evanoff (composer) discuss their working process in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Conversation provides the model and impetus for this process, an ongoing responsive exchange in which their individual artistic identities co-evolve into forms neither could individually envision, in global circumstances that have acutely disrupted the normal mechanisms providing such social interaction. Artistic values, musical specifics, metaphorical frameworks, and larger references are examined, as well as the role these various elements serve in their art's realization and evolution. Their model is an adaptive, personalized framework for making art responding to an environment where the conventional explanations for doing so have been undermined.

Keywords: Give, Covid-19 pandemic, transatlantic collaboration, pianist, composer

Covid-19 and the exercising of physical distancing has forced us as artists and as people to re-evaluate communication and collaboration. The social vacuum created by the pandemic is not filled through the most immediate means. It is essential

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to communicate with people outside of scheduled meetings with dictated purposes (Galea, Merchant and Lurie 2020, 818). We find ourselves having to make an effort to return meaningful personal communication to our daily lives.

This truth has become a tool for our – pianist (Ledger) and composer (Evanoff) – artistic practices. It has emphasized the value in who we work with. It has underscored the humanity of making things together, how creating connects us, how work and friendship intertwine and augment the meaning of our practices. Our ongoing artistic project *Give*, begun early in the pandemic, has thus been as much a vehicle for socialization as it has been a means to make music. It has afforded us catharsis amidst uncertainty and facilitated creativity.

As collaborators living on different continents, working digitally has always been a necessity. Yet the pandemic's restrictions on socially sharing artwork has pushed us to more fully realize the potential of working and presenting online. This has led us to integrate hitherto-marginalized aspects of the project, i.e. rehearsal, dialogue, failure. Our resulting practice is increasingly a meticulous, sprawling examination and expression of the work between composer and performer. We have broadened beyond creating new musical works to discovering new collaborative roles for each other and new formats to more fully express our creative dynamic.²

So our outward adaptation to the present social disruptions brought about by COVID-19 is subtle, particularly as the world has accepted online platforms as increasingly integral forms of communication (Merchant and Lurie 2020, 2012). Yet the worldwide communal reorientation of artists has reverberated through and found likeness in our personal collaborative practice, rooted in our ongoing exchange of ideas. Equal parts verbal, sentimental and artistic, our work together is independent of teleological justification. It is a collaboration through friendship that finds extension in artistic document rather than primarily existing in service of an end product. The music is not a corollary metaphor to these non-musical items but an individualized instantiation: friendship as the genome given expression in sound.

We feel the influence of global circumstances in our work, pace, and method. The conventional fulfilment of a project between composer and instru-

2 We refer to our video lecture-recital: "Small(s) for solo piano (2020 –): transatlantic collaboration + conversation in 2020-2021," *Noisefloor* 2021, Staffordshire University, <https://noisefloor.org.uk>. We saw the symposium's circumstantial requirement to present digitally as an excuse to experiment with how we could present *Give*. With much of our remote collaboration already steeped in online sharing, plus the extensive rehearsal needed to execute *Give*'s challenging notation, Ledger used video to document the music's ongoing artistic and technical progression. This was playfully intercut with recorded conversations between herself and Evanoff, highlighting the ever-presence of surrounding dialogue. Video allowed her to present her full experience of *Give*: a chronology of sketches, how she practises, how she interprets, plus anecdotal snippets of how certain passages feel to play. Although this may be how we had to work, due to the pandemic, the nature of *Give* and our collaboration feels at home here and provides an audience with the lesser-seen areas of a music-making practice. The lecture-recital video: <https://youtu.be/JI6BJWVxqM>

mentalist, i.e. live performance, is unavailable, leading us to more fully interrogate the suspect nature of relationships built on outcomes. In addition to adapting to new mediums of presentation, we find ourselves embracing a form of open-ended conversation and play. It is an alive and lived-in space, one that uncompromisingly represents the world's current predicament. It embodies the adaptation, survival, and self-learning being carried out by so many. It provides a form of therapy, or is simply a space to mutually express and appreciate.

* * *

Conversation is where we begin; it ignites our practice. We use it to consider our reasons for collaborating, how we situate as artists and how we work. We inquire. We learn how one's meaning inflects the other's. We follow leads, discover associations – environmental, athletic, instinctual. Conversation itself has become rooted in and part of the realization of our project: aesthetic discussions and performance critiques coincide with comparisons of the weather or the vaccination protocols of our respective nations. The exchange fosters its own purposes, not all of which are fully pursued but the overall openness to any direction and every possibility is fertile and vivifying. Our working method is the opposite of getting down to business; it's a wait and see.

Conversation is multi-faceted and multi-directional. It fosters an arena of topics, inclusive of our preferred subjects and personal joys. They carry potential for new creative ground and invite that which is already forming our practice(s). Through this we encounter extremes of detail, examining our music both expansively and microscopically. The specific attack of a chord, its context, its shape, its tone, its feel, and its purpose fill our conversations. We look closer at a chord, gather its data, and eventually redefine its identity. And so we are creating extensions of the music, creating new definitions and moving beyond the traditional boundaries of a 'score', a 'composer'; a 'performance', a 'performer'. Conversation refines what it is we are creating. We value it and the life it comes from, just as we value a sound and the body it comes from. We continue to be informed by it, serving us with both methodology and meaning.

The Arena of Topics, The Spirit of Tactics

We acknowledge a mutual genuineness and honesty; we remain open and expect nothing in particular.³ Our collaboration is practised through discovery, dialogue, and play. Our efforts direct towards making and remaking, eschewing conventions which justify activities and relationships through the commodities they produce. This may be utopian, but only insofar as “utopia” is defined by how cultural paradigms differ from our actual wants and needs.

Our project thus becomes a means of rebuilding. Some of this repair pertains to the aspects of community and belonging that naturally follow from being physically present and active in a world where exercising social distance is not necessary. But in the process, we find ourselves reworking more entrenched conventions of being professional artists.⁴ We increasingly inhabit ways of working together that are unique to us: process becomes its own form of creation and expression.

* * *

Genuineness and honesty means we locate what is necessary for our practice, working within an environment of possibility we co-create. This reveals habits, complex emotions, flaws; we are comfortable with everything that arises as we are searching for what is *true*.⁵ We explore elements both actual and imagined; musical notation ignites both such responses. We work *rigorously* and in detail. We aspire to conserve everything that emerges from this process: musical, biographical, metaphorical.

Rigor is an attitude, a mode of undertaking and executing. Rigor is not opposed to play. We would argue that truly operating with rigor necessarily entails acting

3 We refer to the Zen teachings of Shunryu Suzuki for both reassuring sanctuary and active method: “When we do not expect anything we can be ourselves” (Suzuki 2002, 16). Resisting expectations means we avoid any premature selectivity or intention as “[v]arious desires start to behave mischievously” (Suzuki, 19).

4 One especial critique of such conventions and responding alternatives may be found in musician Bonnie Jones’ article “The Bonnie Jones Grant.” Jones outlines a pragmatic relationship to earned income that frees her art making from conforming to institutionalized preference and ascending the uphill slope of mythical meritocracy (Bonnie Jones 2016).

5 We refer to Konstantin Stanislavsky’s example of *truth*: the “*necessary*” action of actually searching for something (in Stanislavsky’s example, a purse) then trying to repeat this action but now, without a real need to do so. Here he explains “two kinds of truth and sense of belief of what you are doing. *First, there is the one created automatically and on the plane of actual fact*” (to literally search for a purse) “and second, there is the *scenic type, which is equally truthful but which originates on the plane of imaginative and artistic fiction.*” We posit that our actions are to always be looking for the purse. This endless search is in itself a *true* act (Stanislavsky 1938, 139).

with no consideration towards the future or a specified outcome, but rather paying full attention to the moment's exigencies. There are more than enough to occupy.⁶

We are both individuals equally concerned with our thoughts and our bodies. We find musical practice paralleling athletics in instrumentalizing the interior, where physical refinement is not just about strength, coordination and agility, but presence, focus, patience and discipline. Musical compositions become loci for conception, metaphor, philosophy; lived experience is the aesthetic force in our practices. We enjoy the messy reality of abstract conception meeting physical realization.

Embodiment in Sound

Our music embodies our values. We revel in its intense specificity; we use it to explore sonic, cognitive, and physical limits.

The material is continually built and rebuilt, interpreted and reinterpreted, from the ground up. It is rendered in discrete units possessing their own preoccupations, with no obligation to elaborate. Ours is a long-term dilation of this "low-level" mode of operation, which continues to provide fruitful soil.⁷

The concentrated nature of the music facilitates intimacy in composing, learning, and listening. Local complexity and nuance can be cultivated and pushed. We enjoy musical instances in their own right: events, like conversations, like relationships, are self-sufficient. An immense freedom of imagination emerges when musical ideas are allowed to unfold and scale to their own accord, be it on the page, at the piano, or through time.

The goal is to create music that begets, accommodates, and rewards infinite investment in each moment. It sits well within our fractured working environment: uncertain, adjusting and resourceful.

6 Suzuki again: "We say, 'each moment' but in your actual practice a 'moment' is too long because in that moment, your mind is already involved in following the breath. So we say, 'Even in a snap of your fingers there are millions of instants of time'" (Suzuki 2002, 16).

7 Ian Pace (2009, 180) uses the terms "top down" and "bottom up" when drawing a parallel between approaches to composing and learning complex music. A "bottom-up" approach uses the "low-level materials' own immanent properties and implications" to incrementally build a composition and/or an interpretation.

Stem Up: LH

80

ppp spz sfffz sfz mf

Piano

mp mp

5:4

Stem Down: RH

Excerpt from *Give* (2020 - present)

This musical cell holds its own playing solution. To unlock it, one must “act”, not “interpret”, perhaps using the notation as a “prescription for action” (Thomas 2009, 77). Here, actions are not performed but rather active responses that themselves construct the music. The requisite movement is actual, not “scenic” (Stanislavsky 1938, 139); it is true. This moment of reaction to a notation is where we converse, delve, and experiment. We coat this moment in specific material to instill panoramic performance realizations that flood consciousness but vivify the action.

The above excerpt pairs speed with pianistic gymnastics; these characteristics beg easy priority over articulation, dynamic, and rhythmic exactitude. But these latter details bear their own influence while honing a playing solution. Ledger’s instinct to move up the keys smoothly, uninterrupted, is disrupted by these deliberately nuanced indications.

The first note of this cell, middle C, is to be played by the right hand. Leaving this note quickly would allow fast and easy movement up the keyboard. But the note’s dynamic is not slight, and the tactile quality articulation details is not fleeting. The C’s combination of tenuto and staccato requires independent treatment. Just tenuto would permit more of the approach into the touch; just staccato would permit more of the release into the touch. Together, both approach and release must be mindfully factored into playing this note. It becomes self-enclosed, incapable of quick abandonment for the sake of an overall flowing gesture.

The mezzo-piano adds a further detail, requiring a delicate yet sung presence. A quieter dynamic would require less, allowing it to be stroked or flicked in transit.

A louder dynamic would permit less restraint and so could be 'grabbed' in transit.

The middle C is also a grace note, which has no measured rhythmic value but still exists temporally. It precedes more grace notes in the left hand (B5 flat and D7) all to be played before the fourth 32nd note of this eighth-note beat. The grace note's absence of rhythm means it is conceived separately i.e. it is 'out of time' as opposed to its 'in time' neighbors. However, the notated tempo provides no time for a conscious shift from 'out of time' to 'in time.' The dense activity of this entire cell makes concentration elusive: the performer's mind is scattered in attending to this multiplicity.

Discussing a single note in this way – the first of our finalized music – demonstrates our scale of intention and how it shapes the sound.

Integrating Through Metaphor

Working intently with such layered notational information can provoke instinctual responses, not the least of which have to do with doubt, fear, and stress and their physical corollaries. But these feelings relax over time as one is immersed in the music. Ongoing dialogue that acknowledges these challenges and responses with an open mind further facilitates this shift. Failure changes from being threatening to fascinating and fruitful. Discomfort serves as an introductory phase rather than an inescapable state. Extreme conditions provide opportunities for growth. There are endless discoveries on the other side of acclimating to these performative challenges.

We no longer react to notation; we develop a relationship with it. Ledger increasingly invites extensions of herself into a realization, interpreting in ways that extend beyond sound. She departs from middle C with a speed that feels too fast to hear. The keys under her fingers push back. She arrives at the top of the piano, where notes collide in the first and only downbeat. Her right arm forms a wing, elbow extending out and rising upwards, bringing shoulder to ear. Her ribs open and rotate around her spine, accentuating the height and shape of the wing. Her body becomes a constellation.

Understanding her movement this way⁸ crystallizes a specific physical association with this musical passage. This provides clarity.⁹ Her navigation therein be-

⁸ Ledger has pages of notes exploring various metaphorical and poetic readings of her playing movements. Another paragraph pertaining to the same musical passage: "Attacking the E flat is like chopping steel with an axe; dangerous and likely to be mis-judged if there is a shred of doubt. The thin blade of the axe might slip and scratch the smooth shiny surface of the steel. The inevitable slip is caught by the F, then the F sharp, almost like a wobble after landing off-balance. It's not a graceful movement and requires re-iterated firmness to remain secure."

⁹ Such practice can also be helpful in formulating interpretive strategies for the more uncommon and fanciful notations in the music. An example of this, the spz, which applies the suddenness of a sforzando to a much quieter overall dynamic level, will be discussed later.

comes definite and personal. She is not a performer playing a composer's music: it is our music rendered jointly. All worthwhile performance has this personalized quality but our shared sense of authorship is strengthened by our wider context.

Metaphors such as these, both physical and fantastic, soften the hard, technical edges of the music. They also deepen our conversation, drawing attention to often-marginalized facets of how we make and learn and do. Our process is circuitous, allowing Ledger's learning and performance to feed back into Evanoff's composing, one's imagination inflecting the other's inflection of the other.

Blind Spots

We inspect our music and our process, discussing interpretation and meticulously analyzing recordings. This exchange reveals each other's blind spots: habits in movement and musical diction that are best observed by outside eyes. It is hard to be self-aware of such small, unconscious, bespoke negotiations being made between imagination and notation, notation and body, expectation and reality. When noticed, they are often regarded as errors, things to be corrected. Our shared work instead brings them into the open, mutually interrogates them, and then turns what we observe into musical material. The work self-perpetuates in one long ongoing sublimated rehearsal.

$\text{♩} = 80$ (Stem Up) *mf* 5:4
 1 1 1 1 1
 Piano
 3:2 *pppp* (Stem Down)
 Excerpt from Give (2020 - present)

The striking rhythmic nature of this cell unapologetically exposes any metrical inaccuracies. Travelling between the second and third chords is particularly irksome; the leap is large and occurs at a rhythmically narrow point. A focus on achieving rhythmic accuracy meant the dynamics, articulations and even note lengths became marginalized.

Through inspection of the cell, such marginalizations were obtrusively audible to Evanoff; to Ledger, they were less obvious.¹⁰ To her, they justifiably contributed to her realization and were not objectively unreasonable. It was difficult to extrapolate the “visceral” nature of this maneuver from its sonic result so to her, marginalizations had a purpose and represented the realization.¹¹ Here we encountered our first blindspot: an impulsive moment of action with its own concerns, i.e. to be rhythmically accurate. This habitual reversion happened outside of Ledger’s conscious awareness, and so needed wider conversation to draw attention to it.

Extensions

Composing in discrete segments that are then learned and reflected on together allows us to evolve material in mutually pertinent ways. We each provide an opportunity for the other to become aware of our habits, cultivating directions for our work that neither of us could foresee. This welcomely includes the unexpected.

A key aspect of Evanoff’s music as evidenced in the earlier excerpts is speed: there is a beloved feeling of propulsion and flurry, of overflow, enhanced by the friction between incumbent speed and the layered detail of each sound and action. This has been an overarching and elaborated upon characteristic of Evanoff’s music for years.

Ledger expressed her frustration with the shortcomings of this speed in conversation, after having learned and played the earliest entries of *Give*. She articulated a sense of lost opportunity for intimacy with the tactile complexity of individual actions given the incessant need to move forward, to physically and mentally consider the forthcoming music instead of fully attending to what presently is. Framed in this way, from a friend and collaborator speaking not hypothetically but in response to their lived experience of preparing and executing the music, provided a perfect lens to critically re-evaluate such aesthetic presumptions and to move the music into a new space.

10 These takes can be found on Ledger’s YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/YM24wU8Vl18> and <https://youtu.be/ITlVKQvHH50>.

11 We refer to Arnie Cox and “grasping gestures” (2006, 48): “... sounds are evidence of the motor actions that produce them, and our comprehension of sound involves comprehension of the relevant motor actions.”

Excerpt from Give (2020 - present)

The subsequent entry of *Give* composed in response to this dialogue thus explores the interplay of articulative complexity and dynamic nuance with a deliberately distended tempo and minutely specified sustaining durations. These rhythmic elements do not just allow the pianist's hands and mind to linger but require it, engaging them through initiation to resolution in terms of timing, tactility, and interpretation. The tenutos in full and in parentheses, paired with different durations, articulations and dynamics (for example the *ff* and *fff* chords) required specific definition but provided another opportunity for metaphor. For Ledger, the music instantly expanded. Its intense requirement to linger, and define, permitted each uniquely articulated attack to daringly encompass beyond the page.

The return of the *spz* now as an initiatory attack was a true gift. Ledger found joy in fully realizing the dichotomy of this articulation; what it required and meant. She played with the traditional definition of *sfz*, “literally ‘forced’ and ‘forcing’” (Taylor 1989, 79) to hone an instant yet stifled release of energy.¹² She battled with the natural decaying nature of her instrument whose characterization of tone lies substantially in the point of attack. She found that a purely technical, physical solution didn't provide the approach for specifying this attack so considered more

12 We considered Gyorgy Sandor's “thrust” technique to create a “sudden electric-shocklike contraction during which the body appears to be motionless.” This extends to “assuming the right position for this action” and engaging the body in a holding position that is able to absorb the shock of the “thrust” (Sandor 1995, 109).

actual means. Moving outside a musical realm, she extended the execution of the *spz* towards something akin to real experience: a sensation of opposing forces; a gasp.¹³ This attack now included a pre-imagined state of mind as preparation for initiating movement. She internally built imagined noise and tension directly before playing this chord. This caused the *spz* to burst out and be full of character: “almost all of the muscles of the body are involuntarily and momentarily thrown into strong action, for the sake of guarding ourselves against or jumping away from danger, which we habitually associate with anything unexpected.” (Darwin 1872, 284) And so this is not just *x* seconds of music, but something not so easily definable in terms of creative process plus final product. Its boundary includes the conceptually thorny realization of something that is known but in non-musical terms.

The resulting interplay of musical and performance considerations thus emerged directly out of our ongoing conversation concurrent with and interwoven into composition. The music’s course is shaped by both of us distinct of our individuality.

* * *

Our methods and materials have been given space to grow in a context where the usual rhythms of life have been so disrupted. There is an obvious increase in time when there are less commutes, less concerts, less visits. This benefits our meandering, outwardly-sprawling way of making music together, in which the project’s materials and methods can evolve in their own, often-unexpected directions. After over a year of concerted effort we agree that we have only just begun.

Such spaciousness both is and is not a luxury when resulting from global crisis that has produced overt catastrophe and yet has been experienced so personally. We are speaking to more than silver linings: we find vital meaning working in this way that resonates with us. We are meeting needs that are deep-seated but which have dilated in our present time. Our such working relationship has not emerged presently out of happenstance: we are responding to “special opportunities for meaning making ... and for turning crisis into opportunity” (Venuleo et al 2020, 2). We are reclaiming and revitalizing collaborative creative practice for ourselves, in a time already seeing people reassess their intentions, how they spend their time and what they pursue: “when events of this magnitude occur, we cannot return to ‘normal’ life as we knew it. As our world changes, we must change with it.” (Walsh 2020, 910)

Our work is obviously oriented inward. Dictating its relevance to a wider community feels presumptuous and unduly limiting. However, in the context of wider

13 Charles Darwin: “Every sudden emotion, including astonishment, quickens the action of the heart, and with it the respiration. Now we can breathe...much more quietly through the open mouth than through the nostrils. Therefore, when we wish to listen intently to any sound, we either stop breathing, or breathe as quietly as possible, by opening our mouths, at the same time keeping our bodies motionless” (1872, 283).

practice, we find we are not alone in our need for change.¹⁴

We feel a definite shift in our working experience and what results when prioritizing process and relationship over product and profession. We feel this method actualizes our values and results in work that excites us. We foster such a vital, personal working method amidst the pandemic because it is a form of response available to us as individuals to the peculiar intersection of the crisis, artistic practice, and the already-marginalized position of artists in contemporary society. Evidencing this practice to others feels if nothing else a cathartic display responding to unreasoning natural and human disasters. We find ourselves grounded by the comforting reality of friendship and its expression through art in a time when the basics of daily life can so excruciatingly not be taken for granted. This charges the work and leads us to discoveries. It has changed what we require from artistic partnerships. It has afforded us new avenues of personal satisfaction. It provides us with a practice that is more deeply lived and felt.

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¹⁴ *The New Virtuosity: A Manifesto for Contemporary Sonic Practice* by Cat Hope and Louise Devenish is an example of how musicians are re-orienting themselves in the 21st Century. It is a result of similar dissatisfaction with how sonic art is created and presented; it looks to remove limitations and redefine how we can work. (Hope, Devenish 2020)

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GIVE: TRANSATLANTIC COLLABORATION THROUGH CONVERSATION (summary)

The present environment, shaped by the effects and conditions that come with a worldwide pandemic, is disrupted, disconnected and uncertain. However, such disruption has provided the chance to reassess and rebuild. Artistic collaborators Kate Ledger (pianist) and Ray Evanoff (composer) take note of this, see its relevance for their own practices, and use it as creative means. Already dissatisfied with the assumed conventions of artistic practice, they find the space and reasoning to further a personalized collaborative practice. This article aims to outline this practice and how their methods for collaboration connect to wider social needs that are emphasized in the present crisis.

Their method is conversational, mutually fostered, and inclusive. Their dialogue bridges geographical and socially-restricted distance, and enables them to create personalized tools for discovery, evaluation, and evolution. They explain the breadth of their conversation, and how it is instantiated in individual musical moments of their ongoing collaboration *Give* (2020-present) for solo piano. They jointly reflect on how their working process unearths individual artistic habits that are scrutinized together and then used to perpetuate their music. Their utopian perfectionism is handled playfully. Throughout, they make reference to wider influences on their working practice.

Conversation as collaboration allows them to create rigorously and infinitely. Their music embodies survival, adaptation and learning. It expands outside of a finished product and instead is an attitude that forever accompanies their intended practice(s). Despite working on *Give* for a year, they recognize still being at an early stage but anticipate the next moment that captures their imagination and excitement. As collaborators and long-term friends, respectful of and inspired by each other's values, they move forward as the pandemic begins to settle down, intending to continue to harness the lessons of its worldwide disruption within their shared artwork.

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