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INSIDE/ ข้างนอก

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Abstract

Through a series of anecdotes and reflections, composer Scott Wilson considers his 20+ years of experience of making music in, around and with people of Asia. Through this he espouses the importance of openness – especially to different ideas of working, knowing and learning – and emphasises the overwhelming value of collaboration.

Keywords: Intercultural, composition, world music

Introduction

'Beethoven is Japanese music'...

... or so someone once quipped to me many years ago – I only wish I could remember who. Though probably an off-the-cuff remark, this statement had a lasting influence on me. Born in late 1969, I was raised in a world that was generous in its provision of simplistic and too convenient binaries: West/East, Developed/Developing, Modern/Traditional, and so many others. A world more wilfully ignorant of the complications of coloniser/colonised, the convenient prevalence of English

as a lingua franca, and the hegemony of industrialised culture then I'd hope we are now. One still mired in ordinal subsets – not one world, but first / second / third ones, though it was far from clear that those crude distinctions made sense.

That statement was one of many prompts causing me to question and open my thinking, often in ways which rendered the nature of intercultural interaction, and the whole thorny territory of cultural ownership, far more complex and deeply problematic (for me in particular!) than I had thought.

It aims towards provocation in its assertion, certainly. But after all, why not? Western classical music has been a meaningful part of Japanese life since the Meiji era. Japanese musicians are amongst the foremost interpreters of this music. Japanese composers have embraced and grown this music world through their own works, making it all the richer. Professional orchestras and Western classical music festivals exist across the country, as does an impressive tradition of amateur classical music making. And Beethoven's 9th is nothing less than a December tradition in Japan, with annual performances all over the country. If Japanese Music means music which is a tangible and meaningful part of musical life there, then surely Beethoven and eurological[1] classical music makes the cut.

I relay this quote not in support of any notion of the universalism of any music, nor even to ascribe a necessarily positive value to cultural transfer. Certainly much of cultural value has been lost to the often grinding processes of colonialism or internationalism. Rather I am acknowledging a cultural reality of contemporary life, and one which has pervaded my experience and complicated my identity as well as those of people in post-colonial and/or rapidly modernising places.
Such an acknowledgement seems an appropriate starting place to reflect upon my experience of making art in, around, and with people of Asia. The process of

1 to use George Lewis' neologism, which I find more useful than the increasingly confused 'Western' (Lewis: 1996). I'm going to try to avoid the latter for the rest of this article.

that has been humbling, but formative, in an ongoing sense.[2] This discussion will be as much a personal reflection as an academic article, though years of teaching composition in a university have taught me those are not mutually exclusive categories. My hope is that my musings on this may be of some interest or use, even if only to demonstrate how confusing things are or perhaps how confused I remain! I hope what I offer is not an assertion of some limited idea of the truth but rather an opening for other maybe richer interpretations.

But to start I need to go back...

Beginnings

I grew up middle-class, male, and a descendant of (mostly) English and Irish immigrants in Vancouver in Western Canada. Like many 'West Coast' North American cities Vancouver exists as a fascinating collage of varied influences, including of course Asian ones as well as First Nations and colonial. Probably close to half the people I went to school with had Japanese, Indian, or Chinese surnames. My friends and I regularly enjoyed concerts by the leading Hindustani classical musicians. We attended karate and kendo classes at the local Japanese cultural centre in the suburb where I spent my teen years, and enjoyed the annual salmon festival, which brought together and celebrated diverse cultural groups through the shared love and cultural centrality of fish! While I would never deny the existence of racism there – Western Canada has a long and sickening if often underemphasised history of this – this multicultural situation was in a practical sense normal for me and most of the people I grew up with. We didn't question it, and it was only later that I came to understand the (somewhat surprising and puzzling to me in my naivete) expectations of cultural and racial homogeneity that obtain in other places, and the (horrifying) extent of the subtle and not so subtle racism, or unrecognised patterns of cultural conformity, that our outwardly heterogenous and polyglot city milieu often masked.

2 I'm going to insist that formative experiences are still essential for those of us in our 50s!

Indeed, though the largest city in 'British' Columbia, we often found ourselves looking west beyond the pacific to Asia[3] for ideas and inspiration, rather than east towards the older cities of North America and Europe, at least in terms of the surface of our day-to-day consciousness. Naturally 'Britishness' was there in tangible ways, though it wasn't what stirred our hearts much of the time, nor how we thought of ourselves. It was really only later, when I actually moved to Britain, that I came to understand how really 'British' Vancouver was, from the non-native plants in its gardens, through systems of government, to anglosphere notions of individual independence and cultural traditions; e.g. a strong tradition of amateur classical music making. But these did not manifest in a conscious identity. Britain seemed a world away, while Asia was somehow 'just' across the Pacific.

My friends and I – music nerds for the most part – hungrily sought out music from around the world, and from many different traditions and practices. I was lucky to have had a school music teacher who introduced me to music ranging from Harry Partch, through Bach to Shakti. The one thing I'm very sure we never talked about was Elgar! As an undergraduate, my first composition teacher, David Gordon Duke, introduced me to the amazing musical traditions of West Coast first nations cultures. (He had been an assistant to Dr. Ida Halpern, the early ethnomusicologist who did much to overcome the ignorance of this music within musicological circles.)

The Wrong Question

It was later however, when I went to Wesleyan University in Connecticut for my masters, that this cross-cultural experience took on a more practical dimension. Required to take a performance class, I joined the Wesleyan gamelan, led by renowned Javanese musicians and scholars Sumarsam and I.M. Harjito. (Though there had long been a gamelan in Vancouver, and many of my friends played, I somehow never joined.) Besides the surreality of the privilege of studying this

3 Yes, the 'East' was to the west in our minds. Another example of the unsuitability of these terms.

music as a beginner with such amazing musicians (studying rebab with Harjito felt a bit like taking up the cello and getting lessons with Rostropovich) it was perhaps my first experience of learning approaches to music which differed from those I was accustomed to. The latter involved codifying, explicitly verbalising – rules, in other words. “How many times do we repeat the first section before moving on”, I asked naively. “Don’t even ask,” I was told. It was explained to me that in one of the modes you tune the strings of the rebab to the purest just 5th you can, but substantially sharper than the same pitches in the rest of the ensemble. “How much sharper?” “Sharper than you think!”

I have many fond memories of my rebab lessons, and of Pak Harjito’s generosity, patience and human insight (he once claimed he could tell someone’s personality by the way they played the rebab – I believed him!), as well as what seemed to me as a beginner as the almost unapproachable refinement of his playing. But I also learned a lot about learning. “When you play rebab, you must delay, sometimes.” “Really, Pak? When?” “Sometimes.”

What an awakening! I had wanted it codified. I wanted a rule. I wanted my full on eurological Aristotelian explanation. He – I think – just wanted me to listen, to internalise, to ultimately be able to intuit what was in the style or not. This is something that naturally exists to an extent in the kind of music pedagogy I had experienced, but was not usually overtly forwarded, at least in composition studies. Of course, I would not want to reduce this contrast to some kind of cliched rational vs intuitive approach. A better way to consider it is perhaps as an example of emphasising contextual vs. non-contextual approaches to learning.[4] But the contrast between my expectations and what happened in those lessons started

4 Dieter Mack discusses this at some length in his article for Pulse. Mack, D. 2022. “A Journey with Fruitful Challenges and Without End: A German Musician’s Decades of Engagement with South-east Asian Music and Culture”. Pulse 1:1.

me asking questions about teaching and learning – and about music – that I'm still trying to answer more than 20 years later.

In essence, the problem in all these cases was that I was asking the wrong question, a question that betrayed a set of ingrained assumptions that prevented me from seeing what I needed to. I was however able to return the favour sometime later, when upon writing a piece for gamelan and orchestra (in contrast to how gamelan has often been incorporated in eurological music contexts, this was truly a gamelan piece that happened to have an orchestra in it!) In order to undertake this Harjito deepened his knowledge of Western notation, with impressive speed.

But he had questions. "How loud is mezzo forte?" he asked me, tapping the table to demonstrate. "This loud? *This* loud?" I found this a shockingly difficult question to answer, and in the end had to explain that while definable in a general sense, mf is always contextual and relational, and never absolute. That it is in some sense almost a musical way of being. I worried that sounded absurd to someone who hadn't grown up musically in the intellectual tradition of mf. But what else could I say? It was the wrong question.

Universally Specific

Spending two years in Wesleyan – the place that may have coined the term 'world music' – led to a constant reinforcement of notions of cultural relativism, and the need to challenge one's ingrained assumptions. But surprisingly contrasting ideas as well. Playing in the ensemble class of the incredibly prolific, thoughtful and energetic composer Anthony Braxton exposed me to a strange mixture of idiosyncratic concepts, framings, and terminology – all grounded in a bespoke sort of cosmology, and an almost post-racial optimism. Braxton never shied away in my experience from the difficult history of race in America and the idea of

a ‘trans-African’ musical continuum (including a vibrant experimentalism), or from what it meant to be a black avant-garde composer who mixed influences from Stockhausen and Sun Ra in equal measure. But there seemed to me to be a wonderful utopianism about what he was attempting to do. I always felt that he really did want all the music together, and he wanted all of us there playing, and really felt that we could overcome our differences by making music.[5] And the idea that experimental work could be not a negation but an affirmation of tradition also stood in stark contrast to the often roughly understood post-Adornian tabula rasa attitude that still dominated so much of the ‘new music’ discourse at the time. I found this idea deeply liberating. The overwhelming optimism of his work stuck with me, in part as a sense in which our difference and sameness as groups of artists could coexist in complementary ways, ultimately creating new identities while retaining the old.

Braxton was not the only ‘universalist’ in a department known for its development of the field of ethnomusicology however, and I would be remiss not to mention the influence of the scholar and pianist Jon Barlow. Barlow described himself as a ‘speculative music theorist’ – in the ancient Greek spirit of Aristoxenus and the Pythagorean School – but was really far more than that, and rather more difficult to pin down. Never teaching from old notes, his classes were always pass/fail, with the main requirement being that you show up and engage in good faith. Barlow thought you could learn a lot about music from reading Giordano Bruno and Emily Dickinson, or contemplating tesseracts. Already fairly advanced when I met him in what was to become a debilitating case of Parkinson’s disease, Barlow – once a fierce pianist – convinced the Yale Parkinson’s clinic that they had much to learn about the disease by analysing the daily recordings he made of Cage’s Etudes Astral,

5 In 2021 Braxton made comments on the ‘post woke time parameter’ that some have viewed as controversial. I’d say about this only that I think these words also come from a place of hope, positivity, and unity, and in my mind Braxton’s music, to the extent that it is ‘modernist’, has always represented the optimistic strand of that aesthetic development. https://www.grammy.com/news/2021-anthony-braxton-interview-12-comp-zim-quartet-standards

the only thing he could still play. His teaching was interdisciplinary, multimodal and inclusive. Like Braxton, Barlow stood as a sort of 'universalist' at a time when ethnomusicology was still strongly emphasising concepts of reflexivity and a radical and subjective cultural situatedness. I remember speaking about this incongruity with the noted ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin at the time, who said that while he felt that the development of ethnomusicology as a field provided an important contrast to and critique of more traditional musicological approaches, it might be time to consider some notion of universals again. Looking back, I think I emerged from the experience finding value in both approaches.

The Beauty of Pelog, or 'wrong', but nice

While at Wesleyan I had the privilege of meeting the wonderful kotoist Ryuko Mizutani, for whom I composed a slightly odd piece for bass koto – reconceived of as a sort of hammered dulcimer (using Ryuko's beautiful calligraphy brushes as 'hammers') – along with a recorded poem. This was perhaps the first time I had seriously attempted to compose something for an instrument from a tradition I'd not been immersed in. Though I had had an interest in Japanese culture since my teen years, there were many surprises about how this played out in practice. In my naivete, I think I imagined an insular classical tradition, which might require me to learn a new notation system. Instead I was told that most kotoists are very comfortable with Western notation, and shown examples from the extensive repertoire of such works written by both Japanese and non-Japanese composers. I quickly realised that the koto world was already very comfortable with an international and pluralist outlook, and apparently rather more worldly than I was! Similarly, rather than hirajoshi or another of the traditional tunings, I was told I could have any tuning I liked. In the end I chose a kind of just intonation, an early example of my exploration of this idea.

This flexibility proved very useful a few years later when Ryuko invited me to write a piece for koto and a Javanese gamelan group based in Tokyo, Gamelan Lambangsari. I found this an unimaginable challenge, but also really wonderful in the way that it brought together things that we had loved and shared. (Ryuko was also a member of the Wesleyan gamelan.) But the challenges were many: Tuning (most gamelan instruments have fixed pitches, but the tunings themselves are not precisely codified and vary somewhat from set to set), notation (gamelan was classically an oral tradition and ensembles use the Kepatihan cipher notation, if they use notation at all; thus it cannot be assumed that players would understand Western notation), and ensemble coordination (gamelans normally follow the drummer for the most part, as the conductor of Harjito's orchestra and gamelan piece discovered in the first rehearsals). I needed a solution that worked both musically, and practically.

In the end, after collaborative discussions with Ryuko and one of Lambangsari's leaders – I am a huge believer in composition as a collaboration between all involved – we arrived at a strange hybrid which combined elements of many of the things we collectively brought to it. The tuning was a mix of the Javanese pelog tuning with some notes from slendro. This was not uncommon in contemporary pieces, and normally gamelan sets are actually dual sets, one in each tuning. Lambangsari's set was tuned in the common 'tumbuk 6' arrangement, in which the sets have pitch 6 in common. (In fact Lambangsari's 'sixes' were not precisely matched, something which the koto part exploited.) I carefully designed the piece to be playable on a dual set, with each player able to reach the notes on the adjacent sister instrument, but to my amazement the players – with great enthusiasm and speed – went to the trouble of restringing the bars on some of the keyed percussion instruments, combining the notes of both scales, as they felt it would make it easier to play well, even if this meant adjusting to a new layout!

The notation adapted Kepatihan in a shared Western score-like layout, with separate staves and systems, using elements of proportional notation where appropriate alongside Western dynamics. Ensemble coordination was mostly worked out in rehearsal, but the score-like approach (with some old school cut and paste to reduce page turns in 'parts') worked well.

In contrast to my earlier experience of working with Ryuko, the experience of this piece put me face first into unexpected elements of Japanese culture when I travelled to Tokyo to attend the rehearsals and premiere. Yes, as I had previously learned there was an open, cosmopolitan and internationalist culture around contemporary music for koto. But I found myself dropped into Ryuko's circle, all young women, a number of whom lived with their teacher who was a kind of matriarch for the group. The composer Carl Stone, who has lived for many years in Tokyo, later explained to me something of what he had observed of this world. Mostly female with a relatively small number of teachers, it exhibited a perhaps insular intensity. The sense of community I experienced was fierce and inspiring! All the students flew into the work needed to realise the event, with no job too small or menial to be taken on. They, along with the gamelan musicians, literally stopped everything to make Ryuko's concert. I'm sure she had would have done the same for any of theirs.

Gamelan Lambangsari was equally surprising in some ways. Though I have never considered myself more than an adequate rebab player at my very best, and was always highly dependent on my teacher to even approach that, I was of course aware that one of the wonderfully inclusive things about Javanese gamelan is the way in which it allows participants of wildly varying expertise and experience to play together. Rebab however, is an 'advanced' instrument, and it is not uncommon to find community groups where nobody can play it. As such I felt I should offer to play the part myself, though I tried to make it clear that I was no virtuoso, and

I'd be very happy if there was someone better. They responded that of course they would be delighted that I do it. It was only later when I heard one of them testing vathe tuning of the instrument that I realised just how outmatched I was, and that my clumsy diplomacy had achieved the opposite of my desired outcome! This for me began a long pattern of reflection on differing cultural approaches to politeness and deference, and the many ways in which I could fail to communicate well because of them!

Upon discussion with Ryuko we settled on the title 漂う – Tadayou, or 'floating' – for the work. It both reflected the relationship between the solo koto part and the gamelan, sort of floating above it (at times almost like the suling or pesindhèn in gamelan), and seemed to suggest the way we now often float between cultures, near – like viewing from above – but not exactly always within. While musically much of the piece is quite free, it draws in a blurred way upon the piece Golek Lambangsari, in part as a nod to the wonderful Japanese group that played in its premiere.

Ryuko's kindness, care and discipline in all her work struck me deeply, and I was intensely struck when she tragically died a few years later of cancer. This was shortly before a visit I made returning to Wesleyan, and I was moved by how profoundly she had affected so many people there, as we met and reflected quietly on the loss. Some years later I realised slightly to my surprise that my piece Ember, which I was writing at the time, was really a dedication to her. It has nothing to do with koto, or gamelan tunings, but reflected perhaps the quiet fierceness of her way of being which remains an inspiration for me. Interactions, intercultural or otherwise, need not be only about surface aspects after all!

All this fed my growing fascination with the idea of tuning – I remember Barlow holding forth at length on the idea of 'E-ness' and realising that notes themselves are culturally mediated and ontologically problematic entities! – and an attachment to hierarchical (i.e. modal) approaches to pitch organisation. Not

all my explorations of this have had a cross-cultural angle, but a number have.

While living in Toronto, I was asked to compose a piece for the wonderful and long running Arraymusic ensemble. I turned again to Japan, and this time the ancient court music Gagaku. The resulting piece, Netori, is loosely inspired by the genre of tuning pieces of the same name. These serve as an introduction, setting the atmosphere and tuning the instruments. Fixating on this relatively small part of the repertoire I was not unaware, even then, of the possible comparisons with the infamous performance of Indian classical musicians at Woodstock, where the audience applauded after the tuning. But how those pieces sang to me! How wonderful to write a piece to find the tuning...

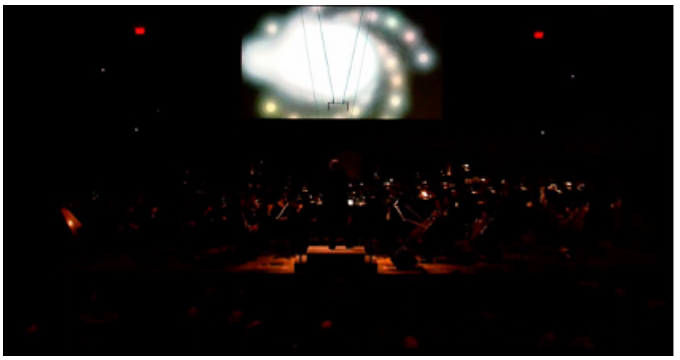
Later, in Birmingham I would return to pelog, which remained a fascination for me in its defiance of adequate approximation in equal temperament. A friend at Wesleyan had told me that for one of the modes of pelog, he'd heard one of the notes named as 'wrong but nice'. I loved that, and while I've never been able to find another source for that taxonomy, I did enjoy the wonderful heterogeneity of one of the naming schemes I did find: bem, gulu, dhadha, papat, lima, nem, barang. Translated from Javanese, these are head, neck, chest, four, five, six, thing, which became the name of a piece I wrote for the wonderful Fidelio Trio. It used a sort of adapted pelog scale, which the two string players must conform to. The piano part approximates this in equal temperament, creating beating effects like those in Balinese music, whilst avoiding note 4, which at a good 54 cents off the closest pitch is indeed 'wrong but nice' against it. Although the most overtly gamelan-y piece I'd written in terms of textures, it was not intended as a pastiche, but rather a hybrid. I wanted to compose something that somehow brought together so many different strands of my own musical life: western instrumentation, electroacoustic sound, gamelan derived ways of thinking[6] , modality, tuning. All of these seemed to

6 I had tried with some lack of success to encourage undergraduate composition students to adopt karawitan style structures and principles of organisation in an exercise as part my teaching at

me to be 'me', at least in some sense. An arrogant notion perhaps, with all the potential for contradictions and false claims, but I felt the need to try to untie that musical knot in a piece, nevertheless.

Media1: Head-Neck-Chest-Four-Five-Six-Thing" by Scott Wilson. Cross Currents Festival, Birmingham, 17th February 2016

I used pelog again later, in the last movement of my orchestra work Dark Matter. Though it was largely about sonifying particle physics data from the large hadron collider, it felt somehow natural. Not something I normally foreground when discussing that piece, however!



Media 2: Dark Matter by Scott Wilson, Conducted by Alex Pauk, and performed by Esprit Orchestra in Koerner Hall on April 15, 2018.

Bangkok Bound

For a number of years I have visited schools and higher education institutions in Singapore on behalf of the University of Birmingham. This makes sense, as Singapore, with its semi-British school model and English as a shared national language,

Birmingham. They mostly did produce gamelan pastiche, unfortunately.

makes a natural partner country in many ways.[7] Singapore is a 'soft landing' for Brits in Southeast Asia as one of my friends there once said. Over the course of these visits, I've been lucky enough to make many friends amongst musicians there, and to love the city and the unique way it brings so many musical and cultural currents together.

On one of these trips, I had the very great joy of being introduced to the Thai composer and educator Anothai Nitibhon. I had never been to Thailand, nor known many Thai musicians, and was deeply impressed by her enthusiasm, endless energy, and good humour about what she does, things I would come to recognise as common traits amongst the Thai artists I would come to know. She suggested I visit Princess Galyani Vadhana Institute of Music (PGVIM) where she works in Bangkok, which I did the next time I travelled to the region. This was only a short visit, but the innovative concept of the institution – combining eurological, Asian, and other music with an open attitude towards technology – struck me as impressive in its ambition, and a highly convincing idea of what a higher education institution in music might be in the 21st century. I also had the opportunity to meet a few of her colleagues, most notably the composer Jean-David Caillouët. [8]

The two of them invited me to participate in PGVIM's 'project week' in 2018. To my mind an absolutely fantastic idea, this involves a week where all normal teaching stops, and students are required to take part in one of a selection of intensive one-off projects or workshops. These are delivered by a team of invited guests. As an approach I thought it wonderful how this both created a great opportunity to bring in fresh ideas and attitudes, and provided a counterbalance to some of the limitations of normal HE music education. The flexibility of the institution to step out of the usual models and provide something innovative and inspiring is something I continue to deeply envy.

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7 Though this is true, I'm often amused by how confused about Singapore many British people seem to be. This seems particularly true of the Brexit-supporting 'Singapore-on-Thames' crowd, who don't seem to really understand how Singapore works, and probably wouldn't like it if they did.

8 I appreciate the somewhat parochial nature of referring here to the institution which hosts this journal and some of its staff. That said, I hope readers will grant me some understanding, given it's more or less impossible for me to give an accurate account of my experiences in the region without mentioning them.

And flexibility was something I found myself also forced to embrace for project week! For my contribution I had proposed a weeklong workshop in SuperCollider[9], the computer music language which has formed a major part of my practice and which I have been involved in developing for more than 20 years. I proposed that we might explore live coding (loosely a process of generating music using algorithms or processing that can be rewritten while it is running) as a form of improvisation. A few weeks before travelling it suddenly occurred to me to worry about spoken language as well! I knew that there were a variety of foreign lecturers at PGVIM, and that norms about teaching language were not as fixed as one might expect in a UK university, but still I realised (surprisingly late!) that I was about to embark on a fairly technical intensive course with a group of students who – however talented – might not share a common language with me at the necessary level. When I asked JD if the students would be sufficiently fluent in English, he said that some would, and that he hoped that there would be one who could help with translation.

Looking back, I now feel embarrassed at the small sense of panic I felt, but after a couple of days of consideration, I realised I just had to accept the fact that I could not control the situation as much as I might want to. The solution was to embrace flexibility! I chose to believe that something great would happen, perhaps not what I originally imagined, but great, nonetheless.

And I was right to believe that! The students were keen, creative, and flexible, and as suspected had varying levels of fluency in various languages. (Given my lack of anything but the most basic phrases in Thai, and as someone who has benefited immensely from the luck of having a current world language as my first one, I could hardly complain though!) There was indeed one student who was very good at translating, which was of course very useful. But in the end what was most exciting was the way in which we as a group adapted, evolved, and created the project together, in ways that were always flexible, and always imbued with an abundance of good humour and generosity. Some students took well to the ideas of live coding, others felt more comfortable playing and processing their instruments (they were seemingly all fine improvisers, and impressively of collaborating respectfully in creating textures in particular), so I decided to teach them a bit about machine listening

9 https://supercollider.github.io

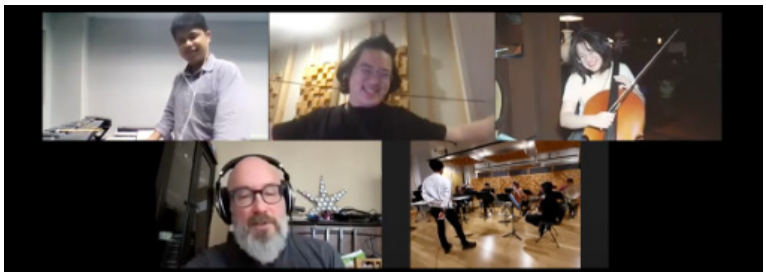
and interactive systems. In the end we had three sections to present, which in the week closing showcase event we agreed at the last moment to intersperse with contributions from groups led by Max Riefer (percussion ensemble) and Ty Constant (collective composition), to create a larger performance. I thought it was wonderful, and came away from the experience with a renewed faith in questioning my assumptions and insecurities as an artist and teacher.

Sometime later, when I invited Jean-David and Anothai to create a performance for our BEAST FEaST festival[10] based in part on the ASEAN sound archive, I had to explain something of this spirit to my colleagues. They did not know their work, and weren't sure what to expect. "It'll be great I said." "Yes, but what will it be?" "Something great!" In the end it was one of my favourite contributions to all of our festivals, and I think to some of our audience in some way an intriguing invitation into a bigger musical world.

Locked Down, Unlocked Up

During the pandemic, Anothai put me in touch with the young Thai composer Piyawat Louilarpprasert. In addition to being an innovative voice in contemporary music, Piyawat and the group of composers and musicians he works with are possessed of an amazing entrepreneurial spirit. Their ensemble Tacet(i) forms a core around which a range of activities, including an annual composer's course and a festival, revolve. Though operating at a very high professional standard, they again approach all they do with a pragmatic flexibility and good-natured enthusiasm. Piyawat invited me along with a number of colleagues to collaborate on applications to the British Council's Connections through Culture programme, which aimed to maintain networking and musical interactions during the pandemic restrictions. This involved Youtube presentations and performances of musical works by participants, alongside online electronic improvisations.

10 This is the regular festival we host with our large scale immersive audio system, Birmingham ElectroAcoustic Sound Theatre. See https://beast.cal.bham.ac.uk for more information.



Media 3: Mutation of Sounds and Dialogues: British Council Grant 2022
UK-SEA Asia Connections Through Culture

In April 2022 I was asked to develop a performance as part of PGVIM's Pulse Festival, alongside flutist Phataporn Preechanon (who I already knew from her work with Tacet(i)), PGVIM student and bassist Putter Ru, and the renowned

Thai ethnomusicologist and composer Anant Narkong playing traditional instruments. This was a wonderful opportunity to re-enter the world of live performance with three fantastic musicians at very different stages of their musical lives. This process again required flexibility, with a couple of focussed sessions with the two younger musicians, and Anant contributing (in ways which shifted the experience of the piece rather wonderfully) on the day of the concert.

I suggested basing the performance on a series of works I'd developed called *What if there's nothing you can do?* which generate electroacoustic textures using real time live-coded resynthesis of a single sample. For this version I adjusted the resynthesis so that the partials of the sounds were retuned to match a sort of Thai scale, in a strange blurring of harmony and timbre. The equal (or mostly equal) spacing of this scale provided a sort of modal ambiguity – not dissimilar to that you get with Messiaen's modes of limited transposition – that created a kind of suspended atmosphere against which the instrumentalists could freely contribute.

I extended this approach in a large-scale work for Tacet(i) and electronics which was premiered in December of that year, called ข้างนอก *(outside)*. In this, unable to resist undermining the above-mentioned ambiguity, I extended the same seven note scale to a sort of chromatic one, by adding 'leading tones' in between the almost equally-gapped notes. This allowed the piece to shift easily between novel modes, semi-tonal and atonal materials, and to suggest a variety of musics in ways which were not necessarily in keeping with their notions of being 'in tune'. The players responded to this for the most part with impressive facility and good-natured

flexibility. The piano and chimes parts were performed on keyboards and used synthesised sounds tuned to match the scale, and alongside the electronics these provided a fairly constant pitch reference. Putting aside the two notes that diverged most from equal tempered tuning, which required quartertone fingerings or similar techniques, this allowed the players to mostly adjust quite intuitively, perhaps using an approach that Pak Harjito might have approved of!

Outside

The title of this piece – roughly 'outside' in English – refers to this sense of being outside of any clear musical space, somehow both between places and nowhere at the same time. As such the work stands as maybe my most ambitious foray into the world of collaborative hybridity that my experience in South East Asia opened for me, and as a useful metaphor for the kind of layered twenty-first century musical

existence many of us now experience in daily life. Beethoven might be Japanese or Thai – or not, for different people.

But I want to be careful here: If this might seem to vaguely hint at some notion of a post-racial music, which might seem either wonderfully Utopian in the Braxtonian sense or naïve, at the same time I must abhor the erasure of difference and all the lost richness that might entail. After all, how fascinating our differences, whether embedded in broad cultural constructs of identity, or manifesting in the most individual quirks? How much more could we know of our own blind spots through learning what/how/why others see?

While it is tempting to make generalisations about cultures, I am aware that that path is a perilous one. Our 'universal' observations probably speak to us mostly about ourselves, our wrong questions, our assumed biases and prejudices. And that indeed is what I am most thankful for: The ways in which this work has taught me about myself and my biases, and thus perhaps weakened the limits I have knowingly or unknowingly enforced.

In the end, I have no clear or final answers to the questions these experiences have taught me to ask, nor can I clearly say who I am musically having lived them. Those readers who have undertaken similar explorations will recognise that this can be disorienting! I can offer them no grand solutions. But I take real comfort

in getting on with things, making music. I trust in the importance of collaboration, that we can together do 'something great'. Every piece, performance, or project is something we do together, teaching and learning as we go, asking better questions. I play with my friends, and I'm grateful for them.

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