

Collaboration, not just cooperationⁱ

My apologies in advance, in case they are needed, because this paper might seem to have jump cuts in it. I am aware that one does not always see one's own mistakes immediately after writing.

It was put together in two days, from a first draft of around 4000 words which I had put aside; and I had other things to do in those two days.

The basis of what I have to say is my work with John Levack Drever, made since 2004.

I'll start by playing a studio-produced recording, of Namely; so that you get a sense of what the work may sound like.

[Namely, first 4 minutes, played]

My artistic origin is in poetry. John is musical all the way down.

In 2008ⁱⁱ, at Warwick University, the poet David Harsent spoke of his collaborations with Harrison Birtwhistle. I recall his position as being that the needs of the music as manifested in the artistic decisions of the composer may do some violence to the writing as seen by the librettist, music-making comes first.

It seems likely to me that other models of poet-composer collaborations are possible and valid.

One such model, mine (ours, I should say, but I have not conferred), does not seek to separate artistic trades by rigid classification, where the result may be like plasterers coming on a different day with different demands to the electricians and they on a different day to plumbers.

The model of the solo artist makes assumptions; and one of them tends to see each of us atomistically separate from each other. I disagree with that.

And it may be that what John and I make can be classified as somewhere between Music and Poetry. I would prefer a more flexible view, easily represented by a Venn diagram.



This image is the first of a slide showⁱⁱⁱ. The next image is a performance we gave in Paris two years ago, to give an idea what it can look like. John is not visible, by choice; but he was there. The rest of the images are selected to give an idea of the range of indicative scores we use.

John's knowledge and assured and skilled facility is a great benefit to me, seeing myself, you will notice, as separate; but I am, to a considerable extent, keen on working with him because of his *Imagination*, and the manner in which it manifests itself.

For live collaborative performance, where the readings of the score are highly subjective, you have to be able to believe in your collaborator's ability to do what they are supposed to be doing and or their ability to cope with adversity; and their ability to surprise.

Collaboration helps us know from another's standpoint and also from their point of view; and it can take one into territory that might never have been chosen in solo work. What is possible is widened. One learns to cope in circumstances which might well not have arisen in one's solo work. One informs the understanding and response of the other.

One of our routine procedures is *talking* – chats over lunch for preference. We exchange opinions and ideas; but there is a current of inventing and proposing new approaches as well. This is not a desire to “make it new” necessarily, more desire to make it better than it would have been.

Generally, but not always, we work from visual poems of my authorship which we take as *indicative scores*.

When I perform them solo, the output may be sound poetry, if the distinction matters and if one favours that term. In collaboration, its nature seems to shift ground. Think, perhaps, of William Burroughs' *third mind*.

As visual poems, they are seen and read both as poems and as visual art; but, in performance, I approach them as a *sound singer*. Sound singing is a term which I have appropriated from the Canadian artist Paul Dutton.

Until I find a better term, that is what I do: I sound sing. I vocalise from the marks upon the page. And then...

I am very happy to have my vocalisations electronically manipulated; as I am happy to have sound, possibly acousmatic sound, added. Not any sound; that is where trust comes in.

The output of that manipulation and addition is fed back and becomes heard as sonic inscription, an expansion of the score, the original indication prostheticised^{iv}.

As to the traditions from which this work comes, I do not think that there is a straightforward answer.

Knowing where exactly one is becomes a problem in all areas where borders overrun each other and official borders.

I think of the way that the late Bob Cobbing was not represented in the recent ICA exhibition based on Ian Hamilton Finlay's P.O.T.H.

But of course that was concerned with concrete poetry on the page and in three dimensions; and not in sound.

But of course again, Cobbing did not accept that distinction.

I come back as I often do to the wonderful and simple response he gave to the question: Are you a poet a musician or an artist? "It depends who's paying me."

Sitwell and Walton's **Façade** might be seen as a forerunner of what I do with John, though Sitwell called her poetry Abstract. Her Façade poems stand alone from their musical setting too, as do my visuals. Yet John's work is not a setting of my poetry; nor is my poetry a libretto.

I learned much from the text-sound composition of Lars Gunnar Bodin and Bengt Emil Johnson and other members of the Fylking Language Group.

John Drever has worked with many poets. He seems to see us as all doing one various thing; and that is a healthy way of looking at

it, rather than hiving off the sound-emphatic and visually-emphatic poetry as separate from poetry-without-limiting-adjectives.

I perform live, my own and others' work, solo and in groups, with varying levels of improvisation. Some of it is poetry and some isn't... perhaps.

And I make solo sound works, text-sound compositions, having learned much from the Swedes at the Fylking.

I joined performance writer and director Chris Goode at Toynbee Studios last Saturday in a performance of visual scores by the USAmerican Michael Basinski, before Chris performed Kurt Schwitters' poem **Ursonate**, which, remember, is organised musically.

There's a lot of it about and much of "it" has been overlooked merely by being misclassified as exceptions to a rule which it did not accept in the first place.

Last week found me working with students at Laban where my vocal drawings were used, transposed and just altered, to indicate bodily movement.

I suggest that the image of solo poet, separate from musicians, sending work out in print, is a perturbation, an oddity brought about perhaps by the advent of the book and the possibility of the cheaply amassed personal library. It relates to the individual seen as an atom rather than a cell.

Urgent aside: We lack the poetry equivalent of **Late Junction** and other such *Radio 3* programmes.

There are *benefits* to collaboration. Yet speaking of benefits, as if collaboration is an off-the-shelf option, is a little odd.

One cannot collaborate (rather than co-operate) with anyone.
There needs to be a dialogue with flare.

Human relations require more than a basic fitness for the collaborative act. To appropriate a half-remembered line of D H Lawrence “It is the flow and recoil of our sympathies which really determine the quality of our collaborations.”

Collaboration is more than *co-operation*.

Co-operation is something we all do all the time. Life would be intolerable or impossible without it. There would be little pleasure without it.

But it does consume time and it does lend itself to lowest common denominator output. However, the oddity in behavioural terms is the solo operator; it is there perhaps that we should query the benefits of method.

In solo work, I need to work alone; anyone else would get in the way; and I am sure that John Drever would say the same of his solo work. Explaining what needs to be done – by whom? – would be a distraction; and to what end? Phrasing an explanation of an artistic decision is very slow compared to the time taken by the decision-making.

We can only work together when we know what we are doing; yet many of the decisions of art-making of any genre are best made when one doesn't quite know the why of the decisions.

I realise that this makes me vulnerable to a charge of what the geneticist Steve Jones sneeringly refers to as Arts Faculty Science; but there you go. I have survived sixty years. Ergo, I am fit.

I make my images. I take them to John and he may or may not accept them. He would almost certainly give reasons in that event; but I would accept “I don’t like it” if I had to. As we proceed, we keep talking to each other.

Only yesterday or the day before, I trailed a new semantic text for a possible publication; and he said “Or we could look at the last piece we did; there are still things to do there.” I didn’t need telling twice; we must remain consenting artists.

I shall not go through all our processes. That’s another talk.

The relationship of apparent solitariness and apparent companionship persists into the live performance space and time.

I like to think that there is a great deal of trust and respect between us. It has to be developed; and it must be maintained, as surely as one cares for the other in any association if that association is to survive.

My artistic life has involved many collaborations; but few have lasted this long or been this productive.

Pedagogically, then, encouraging co-operation and hopefully collaboration as part of learning is to know an essential element of human experience and need, as fundamental as nutrition and hygiene and emotional security and sense of self-worth. It is a sine qua non of emotional security and self-worth.

It involves us in understanding of the other, thereby giving meaning to self-experience.

Engaged cooperation is necessary to get anything worthwhile done and we should encourage it among those we instruct and mentor.

Received by an audience, what John Drever and I do may be indistinguishable from improvisation, although the likelihood is that a second time around we would be more likely to repeat quite closely – within some bounds – than in a more free improvisation.

We improvise, yes, but after having set fairly massive constraints of structure, imagery and duration upon ourselves.

We have performed with few constraints; and it was ok. Yet I value more and would expect others to value more those pieces that have been more heavily constrained.

That, too, is a significant pedagogical matter: experience teaches that it just is not true that if only we could free ourselves of constraint, and express ourselves “freely”, then we should make great art as a consequence.

It is a common delusion. It may work but it probably won't. It depends, and not upon our divesting ourselves of too many checks.

Self-expression is colloquially seen as authentic; yet it is a questionable concept likely to result in fashionable clichés.

What is the *self* and what is it to *express* a self? I think of Strindberg's description of his characters in the preface to his play **Miss Julie** as being collections of rags and newspapers. We present our own characters to each other; but they vary depending on our company and circumstances; if we are truly going to venture into our own interiors then we may need to give some shape to those metaphorical rags and newspapers.

I am similarly sceptical about *inspiration*. More often than not, the question “Where did you get the inspiration?” means “Where did

you get the idea?"; but it can open the door to the idea of an agency with its own purposes. Even that is ok. The danger is that we then say "Today, I have no inspiration so I cannot produce." That too is delusional.

Many artists are communicative planners. Others of us, myself included, tend to the back of an envelope, holding things in our heads.

I must not do that when I am collaborating. There ought to be clear statements that the other can understand; and preferably something on paper that they can read.

The ability to produce such communication is a transferable skill; and it is therefore of interest to us as pedagogues, over and above the quality of artistry.

Putting the emphasis on methodology is merely an enabling approach, leaving the artist free to do what they deem appropriate, when they have the skills and resources.

ⁱ Talk given at **Collaborative Processes in Music Making: Pedagogy and Practice**; University of Surrey; 11 November 2009

ⁱⁱ **Beyond the Lyric**, University of Warwick, Monday 3rd November 2008

ⁱⁱⁱ Images were taken from “Close to the literal”, “Verbal iteration” and “An insect on a leaf”

^{iv} This is an idea I took from Eric Mottram’s 1970s paper “A Prosthetics of Poetry: The Art of Bob Cobbing,” *Second Aeon*, 16/17, n.d.