

Non-hierarchical Music Creation: an interview with Gordon H. Williams for SHIFT:ibpcpa

1- What is 'non-hierarchical' music creation and how do you form it in your practice?

When I speak about 'non-hierarchical' music creation, I am responding to current practices which are enacted in a variety of musical settings, but especially in western classical (which was a central part of my musical education). In the western classical tradition, music creation (and more often music re-creation) is built on a model of hierarchy- a composer delivering a fixed score to professional musicians who follow the score exactly as instructed for a largely passive audience. This type of music making serves a purpose and can be used to certain ends (professionalized music making, museum-style maintenance, efficiency).

I am proposing (along with many individuals and groups) alternative ways of creating music (non-hierarchical, multi-hierarchical and anti-hierarchical) which focus more on community-building and relation-strengthening. In my own practice this looks like creating together and alongside other people (musicians and non-musicians), valuing the process as well as the product, and valuing openness.

2- In what ways do you try to understand human conditions through studying perception, cognition and communication?

Creating music with and for other people is a way to study interactions and relationships- even more so when the music creation process involves openness and improvisation. Some pieces that I work on do this more literally than others; for example, this past year I wrote a duet for flute and trombone (*In One of Three Ways*) for my friend Katie Daugherty. This piece took Paul Ekman's research on facial expressions as a jumping off point for creating a variety of moods with the different movements of the work.

3- How can we challenge dominant composer-performer relationships and bring the audience closer to collaborate in a creative process?

This can be a bit of a challenge (especially within the frame of western classical music), but the good news is that there are many interesting people and groups doing work in this field. Quite a bit can be achieved in composer-performer relationships through the use of openness and improvisation in writing and presenting music.

Working with audience members can be a bit more challenging because of the range of abilities and the very limited contact points, especially in terms of time. However strategies like spatialization in works such as John Luther Adams' *Inuksuit* (in which audience members can locate themselves within a large-scale outdoor performance) or technology in works such as Elizabeth A. Baker's *Three Aspects of Art as an Allegory* (in which audience members locates themselves within a purposely unbalanced mix of recorded sounds) can work to build this connection.

4- Do you think this could also extend to other art forms? How do you think this could change now due to the COVID-19 situation?

Yes, I feel confident that participation and relation can be realized in many forms. It is important to recognize that this way of working will result in certain aesthetics, processes and results- therefore it will not be the right fit for all people or for all situations. Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* is a fantastic history of participation in a variety of art forms for those interested in this subject.

Without a doubt COVID-19 will change ways of working for the time-being. Personally I think some of these changes will be maintained longterm, while other measures will only be temporary. I am hopeful that this period where many face uncertainty, restricted movement and other related challenges, will drive communities to be more aware of those who were experiencing these conditions before COVID-19 and who will likely continue to experience them after COVID-19 as well.

5- How are communities formed through your studies? Or how can they be formed?

Building community is incredibly difficult- it requires balancing needs, creating cohesion, negotiating agreements and much more. A great resource on this topic is *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten- the authors deeply discuss how study can be used as a strategy for community building.

Communities are primarily formed around shared interests (these can be both positive or negative). The types of communities that I am interested in building are those that are person-centered, non-/anti-hierarchical and experimental. One example of a community that I have been building is Hache Collective. In this collective, we attempt to study new ways of creating together in music creation- focusing on shared interests such as collective authorship, care, embodiment in music and education.

6- Can humanity push classical and contemporary music further or do you think everything has been done? How can we further push those boundaries?

Without a doubt new and innovative work can be done in almost any field (often under the banner of progress). The question that we need to be asking ourselves is 'what direction do we want to be heading in and what do we need to get there?'. The destruction that hundreds of years of 'progress' and 'development' have been wreaking are becoming more and more evident (indeed this was evident to many from the beginning). However, we can not return to ways of the past (these ways of being did not stand up to the challenges of racism, sexism and accumulative capitalism). So then the question for us as artists, activists and people is "what can we build upon and what do we build towards?".

7- How did you come to start making collaborative music?

When I started studying music education, I chose percussion as my main instrument. Unlike works for most other instruments, percussion compositions tend to be more open and often call on the performer to play a creative role in realizing the work.

Several years later when I studied music composition, I started from an interest in systems. I found that I was interested in incorporating openness in my work, so that others could play a larger role in the creative process. For collaborative music making to be successful (there are situations which are unsuccessful, both musically and collaboratively) there needs to be trust, communication and a willingness to listen to and attempt to understand each other. Therefore the focus of my attention in collaborative music making is focused in these directions.

8- What was involved in the creation of the Tacoma Lakes project?

In a way *Tacoma Lakes* is still in process. It is the most worked-on part of a six part series (the second part). Eventually I hope to "choreograph" the work as a collective bike ride, with both audience and musicians moving site to site to perform and witness each movement on site.

Tacoma Lakes started as a sketch, using graphics and a game-like set up. Hache Collective rehearsed the piece and gave some feedback and suggestions. We performed the piece around six or seven times with different musicians and in a variety of different set ups- trying out different ideas, changing parts, experimenting with electronics and audience participation. This past January (2020) we recorded a version of the piece at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. A few months later I decided to combine the video fo this performance with text.

For me it is important to move away from the model of the singular creator (genius, author, etc.) so I would like to recognize Amy Pekal, Charli Herrington, Gerardo Gomez Torres, Tomi Hilsee, and Ned McGowan as well as the members of Hache (Mauricio Diaz Reyes, Marc Gine Pedrocchi, Agustin Faundez Rojas, Miriam Osoro Garcia, Aida Alvarez Fernandez, Saul Ferrer Noya) who helped to create this work.

<http://ibpcpa.co.uk/>
www.gordonhwilliams.com