

Creative Orchestra Music (BHX): Developing a shared compositional  
language

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## Abstract

This research seeks to create a shared compositional language that can incorporate improvisational aspects by musicians from diverse musical backgrounds, and through this process create a micro-society consisting of these performers. It comprises a portfolio of works that are based around trans-idiomatic practices, all of which require creative improvisation to varying degrees. The result is new repertoire for creative music performers as well as new insights into the curatorial aspects of the compositional process, such as choosing ensemble personnel, and which approaches for improvisation to utilise. By expanding on the way composers such as John Zorn and Anthony Braxton set parameters for creative improvisation, I demonstrate how myself, and other composers that have followed them, can incorporate these aspects into our practice.

This series of ensemble pieces demonstrates the ways in which I curate personnel for each composition project as a result of their own musical backgrounds and idiosyncratic playing style, as well as exploring different approaches to composing for improvisers within compositional parameters. This leads to a new large-scale work, *Don't Exist Inside Your Own Head*, in which the personnel and the different options for creative improvisation are the factors that give the piece its compositional identity. The accompanying reflective commentary explains the compositional process, examining how and to what extent my curatorial approach has informed the works. The project proposes possibilities for how ensemble personnel and compositional frameworks can exist within creative improvising.

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# Introduction

The aim of this research project was to compose a shared musical language for a micro-society of creative musicians. I have done this by forming and establishing my own micro-society, with performers that I have been improvising with and for whom I have been composing. My overarching research question is:

- How can a composer write for a micro-society of improvisers from different stylistic backgrounds to create a shared musical language?

By answering this, I will be exploring these sub-questions:

- How does the curation of performers within specific ensembles and their idiosyncratic playing styles affect the compositional process?
- How is the compositional process effected by the circumstances created by the composer-curator?

This was achieved by creating projects and scenarios that allowed those societies to come together. I experimented with different ways of my own devising in an attempt to fulfil that ideal. This was done in both a compositional sense, such as combining different approaches to notation, and a curatorial one where I explored combinations of ensemble personnel.

With multiple interests in jazz, contemporary classical, noise, avant-garde and rock music, I see myself as a part of the lineage of creative music practitioners. I view this lineage as one that involves composing or devising pieces based around improvisation, whilst using a curatorial element to performances. I have devised, composed, and conceptualised pieces that address my research question and propose possible solutions. Throughout this process, I have been looking to create and establish a network of improvisers that I can utilise in different combinations to explore group dynamics. I experiment with compositional approaches that are most effective in showcasing performers' idiosyncrasies. This culminates in a work for a large ensemble piece which utilises twenty-five musicians from the community in one setting.

This research project came out of my background and experience as a composer-improviser. John Zorn said about his game pieces, particularly *Cobra*, that his systems give players a way to ‘harness their output without hindering what they do, which is improvise’ (in Bailey, 1992: 75), and I think of my own work in a similar light. In a similar way to how Anthony Braxton’s *Language Musics* System can be accessible to performers from a variety of backgrounds and experience with improvising, I have searched for a parallel way of operating. Braxton often called his music “trans-idiomatic”, referring to music which is not written with a specific idiom in mind so, theoretically, these are compositions that can be approached by musicians from any background. (in Levy, 2020; in St Doek, 30’23”)

Despite an increase of scholarly works within the area of creative improvisation, such as publications by the composer George Lewis (2002), there is still a significant amount of research needed in the field. The research project will contribute to the repertoire of music written for improvisers. This will further open up the possibilities of working with musicians from disparate backgrounds and idioms, experience with improvisation, and approaches to music making. The compositions will offer solutions and ways to approach the possibilities of composing with these parameters, which may be adopted by future practitioners.

I set about composing the portfolio with the goal of developing a localised network of players from different idiomatic backgrounds. Through improvising and collaborating, I had a group of trans-idiomatic creative musicians within Birmingham that mirrored similar networks in New York, Chicago and Glasgow that served as role models (as discussed below). I was interested in localised creative music scenes, and the regional identities each area had. Despite Birmingham already having a scene, I felt I was someone that could enhance it and introduce elements and approaches that might not have previously been considered. As a composer and curator, I am drawn to players that have an idiosyncratic playing style, and those with a sense of enthusiasm. I am a composer who gravitates towards players that I believe to be compatible with how I work. This involves creative input from their end and a musical fearlessness. Through inviting performers that I felt matched these qualities, I could involve them in concerts or compositions that their playing style would be suitable for.

## Methodology

This project employs a practice-based approach. The thesis consists of a portfolio of compositions, all of which incorporate structured or guided improvisation either in part or as the nucleus of the piece, and accompanying reflective commentary. The primary practical research took place in the form of workshops and performances. I see the scores for the compositions as part of the work, as opposed to the embodiment of the composition itself. Curation of performers and how they engage with the work is often what gives my works their compositional identities. My approach to curation has been to scout performers and invite them to take part in a series of gigs, projects, pieces and bands I have put together for the purposes of the research, which explored the different approaches I took. This process of recruiting performers varied and involved meeting musicians at other gigs, students based at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (particularly those who had an interest in contemporary new music), personal recommendations, and very occasionally open calls. I would often reach out to musicians after watching them perform or after bonding with them over shared influences. Having established some key working relationships, I set about composing a series of preparatory pieces, which led towards a substantial final work. The commentary is a contextualisation of the portfolio outlining where I place my compositions within the creative music field. By attending live performances, watching streamed concerts and sessions online, engaging in conversations with fellow practitioners, and active score and piece studying, I have identified the boundaries of the field I operate in and what my approach is.

My approach comes as a reflective practitioner. Throughout the six years of research I have been composing, curating and collaborating in a search to acquire long-term partnerships with a diverse group of performers. With these musicians, I have been experimenting with compositional approaches and exploring the most effective ways to create compositions from tools including graphic scores, text scores, traditional notation, oral directions, curatorial free-playing and splicing. With all the works, I will analyse the outcomes and highlight the success and problems within each approach.

# Chapter 1: Background and Context

## Background

This PhD is a document of my collaborators and my approach to composing for improvisers during a specific time period (2017–23). The research confirmed that this approach appealed to performers who also saw their practice as ‘trans-idiomatic’. I initially thought that the circle would contain a collection of musicians who specialise in different areas; however, what happened is that most of the collaborators I valued are musical polyglots in their own right, who have a collective background in multiple disciplines.

This research can be contextualised amongst my long-standing fascination with creative communities within music scenes, often organised off-grid, usually without support from established professional or educational institutions or commercial for-profit businesses. The idea of the hyper-local element was based around small but tight-knit scenes, which enabled the participants to have their own unique approaches. Some of the communities that defined my approach include the (now-defunct) Fife-based songwriter collective Fence, the Washington D.C. punk rock scene based around the record label Dischord, the free improvisation collective known as Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra and the New York downtown music scene, predominantly during the late 1970s and 1980s.

My introduction to creative musical communities was when I took part in the Bournemouth alternative music scene between 2007–08. It was the first time that I was offered a creative outlet that felt outside of formal music education settings. It was there for the first time that I experienced how different elements of fringe music could come together, and it was not uncommon to see musicians from hardcore punk, indie rock, live electronics, jazz, drone and free improvisation backgrounds at the same shows, with key bands and musicians from this time including the likes of True Swamp Neglect, Dutch Husband, Skitanja, and Animal Magic Tricks. Animation theatre company Paper Cinema, who were also participants, reflects on the scene:



There was [sic] bunch of people do [sic] it for themselves, promoters, sound techs, handmade flyers + visuals, home recordings + CDR's and of course the musicians, bands and bands that played within other bands when they weren't doing this they were in the audience... The sense of invention and exploration was there. (2015: 113)

During my time being based in London, through both study and performing regularly (2008–2015), I was primarily affiliated with two musical scenes. I was a participant in the emerging math-rock scene, where I attended gigs and played with my group Selectric, which was my compositional vehicle between 2012–2015. I often incorporated my polyglot influences within the compositions I wrote for the group. I also became acquainted with the community of experimental improvisers during the same time period. Many of the key players were regular performers at the night Skronk, founded by Rick Jensen in 2015 at North London venue New River Studios, and I would often perform with the likes of Massimo Magee (saxophone), Simon Gajewski (percussion), Hywell Jones (trombone), and Guido Spannocchi (saxophone). I would often notice the events that Jensen organised provided a platform for experienced players to perform, as well as a safe place where more inexperienced musicians could develop their practice. Jensen's events have included a mix of completely self-taught players, as well as those who have been formally trained at higher education level within backgrounds of jazz, classical, popular music, composition and music technology. I have collaborated with Jensen on a regular basis, including being a member of his group Apocalypse Jazz Unit.

When I moved to Birmingham in 2017, I was looking to mirror a lot of those scenes and communities. Despite scenes already existing based around jazz, improv, noise, and composition, I wanted to place more emphasis on trans-idiomatic music. Having a background in DIY practices that emerged from the scenes in London and Bournemouth that I was a participant in, the aim was to develop and be a part of a similar environment within Birmingham. When starting this PhD, I decided to engage with this approach from scratch, choosing to research and be based in a city where I had previously no experience of playing – Birmingham – whilst looking to establish, foster and strengthen the local community within the area. I had an advantage being based in an institution with access to musicians, a handful of whom would be open and flexible to my approach to music – finding them

through collaborating with them and evaluating their compatibility with my compositional style, as well as finding venues and organisations within Birmingham that were willing to offer me a platform.<sup>1</sup> With promoters and organisations such as Fizzle, Capsule, Beast and Post-Paradise giving outlets to very specific sub-tribes within the experimental music community, I noticed there were not too many opportunities for cross-collaboration, despite the willingness of most of these groups to do so.<sup>2</sup>

I invited people to perform on a variety of composition projects and to play freely improvised music with. Often the players that I thought were interested in my approaches would be invited back to work on future works. Through doing this, I eventually developed a roster of regular and semi-regular performers with whom I would regularly collaborate. This roster is constantly in flux in order to adapt to the external circumstances that happen with artistic careers, such as relocations. However, the core of this circle is solidified with around 10–15 players I have frequently worked with during my time in Birmingham. Occasionally I would augment it with musicians I had worked with from other locations, including London, The Hague and Los Angeles. However, the core is a Birmingham group that, while not as robust as I would have hoped, does contain several performers interested in creative music performance.

My approach often comes from my experience playing improvised music. I studied jazz at both undergraduate and postgraduate level; however, I would not necessarily call my approach within the jazz idiom, despite the fact I developed my improvising vocabulary through the study of it. My interests in different musical languages (most notably rock music) have augmented this approach. I also believe that with improvising there is a way for several musicians to bring their approach from their respected backgrounds and put it within a trans-idiomatic setting.

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<sup>1</sup> The most notable venues I worked with were the art galleries Centrala and Artefact, where I organised many performances including the festival I curated Thinking/Not Thinking, and performed at regularly with various projects and ensembles.

<sup>2</sup> The exception being the festival Ideas of Noise, founded by Sarah Farmer and Andrew Woodhead which gave partnerships to these organisations and included events that were based around free jazz, queer experimental performance, contemporary classical and electronic composition.

Despite being drawn in by the power and collectiveness of large improvising ensembles, I have been made aware of the difficulties of devising, composing and performing within this idiom. Anton Hunter (2019: 6) and Moss Freed (2019: 16), two musicians who also have portfolio careers in composition, improvisation and research involving large improvising ensembles, wrote about their awareness of the difficulties in composing for improvisers, including the lack of potential interactions the ensemble can have. My own desires to go in this direction have been about this idea of developing community and/or scene. The definition I will be using for the term micro-society is a collection of musicians I perform with and compose for, all of whom engage, to at least some degree, with the practice of creative improvisation. I see this group as my own personal network and is made up of musicians I know and work with, rather than those who necessarily already collaborate with each other. Therefore, this micro-society is one that is personal to me, as opposed to a fixed group. Because of this I see myself, as composer and researcher, as the centre of this network. I do this by making the role of ensemble curator part of the compositional process and curate these groups with an understanding of the musicians playing styles, backgrounds, experience with improvising, and the potential of how each musician could interact with another. The initial model for this was to keep the group contained within the city of Birmingham, due to my interest in localised music communities and regional approaches to creative music performance. Whilst several of the compositional projects during this research were faithful to this, I decided to introduce flexibility in order to bring in collaborators based in other areas. This integration of my Birmingham collaborators with those based in other areas is where I view my practice developing to.

As a musician who regularly works with jazz, rock, contemporary classical and noise musicians, I constantly found myself on the fringes of each of these scenes and never fully felt like an integral part of any of them. Therefore, in order to combat this, I had to establish my own community working with musicians who either have a playing style I admire or a compositional approach that is compatible with my own. This practice is very similar to that of Jeremiah Cymerman, whose definition of community will be one that I will be using for the purposes of this research:

What is my community? You know I don't feel comfortable in any...y'know...I've talked about it on the show before. There's, like, a Venn diagram that makes up the whole world of experimental music in New York and internationally. There's a lot of jazz influence, there's a lot of free improvisation, there's a lot of noise, there's a lot of rock, there's a lot of, y'know, metal, there's a lot of classical, there's a lot of contemporary performance practices. And I don't feel comfortable in any of those worlds. Y'know, my sense of community is the community that I define for myself. It's a smallish group of people who all participate in different worlds. And, y'know, my idea with this record label and this podcast, which is all one thing to me, was to be able to focus on that. So maybe it's a very self-referential sense of community, but that's why it's mine. (Cymerman, 2019: 4'32")

Like Cymmerman, I view my own community as a reflection of my own musical interests, bringing in musicians from different, yet compatible backgrounds to work together. Alex Ross maps out, in a very literal way, where these idioms can meet on common ground, using the analogy of jazz, rock and classical languages as continents where secret passageways can link the avant-garde ends of each of these languages to each other. The extremes of each language are viewed as the places where the musicians have 'more in common with each other than their less radical counterparts' (2010: 217-8). This musical passageway, combined with Cymerman's definition of community, is where my work fits. Because of my interest in multiple stylistic elements being combined and incorporated into a singular piece, I experimented with how different disciplines can be brought into my work. This experimentation was initially based around exploring compositional techniques with the goal of establishing a new system that has the ability to incorporate several personal voices. I composed other works during this period, however the compositions submitted as part of the thesis were the strongest examples of how these trans-idiomatic influences found their way into the foundations of the compositions.

## Context

The multi-generational, trans-idiomatic creative community is important to my research. Musicians such as John Zorn, Anthony Braxton, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Zeena Parkins, Ikue Mori, and George Lewis are crucial predecessors. In my work I incorporate elements of their compositional approaches that I can use within my own pieces. I can then see which threads are common and transferrable between composers. I consider myself as part of the lineage of creative improvisation with which both Braxton and Zorn have been associated. What drew me to those two in particular is how they both utilise improvisation within compositional frameworks whilst understanding how their performers' idiosyncratic playing styles could impact on the way compositions are played, the way they curate ensemble, and their embrace of multiple musical idioms. Both composers were lynchpins of influential creative music communities: Zorn with the New York downtown music scene, and Braxton with the Chicago-based non-profit organisation The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) (Lewis, 2008: 145). They have both given support and platforms to creative music practitioners, such as Zorn's founding of both the non-profit venue The Stone and record label Tzadik, while Braxton has a long history as a pedagogue, teaching at Mills College and Wesleyan University, often recruiting his past students to play in his ensembles. This is another area I find myself running in parallel with them, due to my work as an event curator for the festival Thinking/Not Thinking and the concert series Don't Mind Control. In addition, I have embraced my role as a teacher and mentor by getting younger musicians involved within creative music performance. Whilst other composers such as George Lewis, Barry Guy, Elliot Sharp and Butch Morris have pioneered radical concepts for creative musicians, I find myself drawn strongly to the practices of both Zorn and Braxton.

I have identified a number of doctoral research projects based around creative improvising that operate in a similar field. The two closest to my practice are by Moss Freed (2019) and Anthony Hunter (2019). Both are practice-led composers who compose for ensembles of improvisers who are interested in the democratisation of the large ensemble. Hunter asks 'to what extent is it possible to better feature the voices of improvisers within my work?' and 'how do we achieve greater collective

ownership over the material?’ (2019: ii). One outcome was acknowledging the role of composer as curator, which Hunter argues is ‘present in all composing for improvisers’ (2019: 126). I took this outcome as the foundation for my own research aims. This complements Freed, who looks at creating compositions that ‘allow improvisers to use their individual languages’, examining how these works are distinguishable from each other and applying these questions to large ensembles (2019: 8). By doing this, Freed acknowledges that his findings left him needing ‘to give more control to both composer *and* performers’ (2019: 91). Instead, with my work I put focus on composing a shared musical language for a micro-society of improvisers from different idiomatic backgrounds, how the curation of the ensemble changes the composition, and how the composition process is affected by the circumstances I create. Therefore, I am looking at the curatorial aspect of these ensembles and exploring the full potential of the trans-idiomatic practices. By doing this, I place more emphasis on myself as a composer and bandleader, as opposed to creating works where I give performers more creative control.

Andy Ingamells (2017: 4) refers to his creative practice of experimental composition being part of a lineage, describing himself as a ‘grandchild’ of experimental music’, and I propose a similar three generational lineage in trans-idiomatic creative improvisational music. I am part of a generation that is parallel to the third generation of contemporary performance practitioners highlighted by Ingamells, who states that his ‘musical inheritance is Anglo-American experimental music and Fluxus’. (2017: 4) There is a case to be made that a similar lineage has happened with trans-idiomatic creative improvising. This discipline, which has often had the merging of jazz and classical approaches at its core, has gradually incorporated several disciplines of music from other backgrounds. This includes various subgenres of Western popular music including punk rock, metal, psych, and hip-hop, in addition to interdisciplinary practices such as Fluxus, strands of electronic music practices such as sonic arts and harsh noise, and traditional music from non-Western origins. This led to my interest in micro-scenes such as No Wave which has been able to incorporate many of these disciplines. I see composer-improvisers such as Moss Freed, Chris Pitsiokos, Wendy Eisenberg, Mariam Rezaei, Tyshawn Sorey and Amirtha Kidambi as my contemporaries, not only because they

are of a similar age to myself, but because of the way that their engagement with trans-idiomatic practices is complimentary to mine.

In the book *Forces In Motion* Graham Lock and Anthony Braxton dissects the latter's philosophical overview of music, stating that Braxton divides music into three categories: traditionalism, stylism and restructuralism (Lock, 1988/2018: 162). The term restructuralist refers to 'the structural properties of the whole mentally surrounding that information undergoes a change' (quoted in Lock, 1988/2018: 162). To clarify, Braxton uses Charlie Parker and the bebop language he pioneered as an example of restructuralism. Using this system, many second and third generation composers and improvisers, including myself, could be viewed as stylists working in the style of a restructuralist.

## Key Works

The following discussion centres highlights a number of key works by John Zorn, Anthony Braxton, Fred Lonberg-Holm, Jaka Berger, Chris Pitsiokos, and Mariam Rezaei.

I will be analysing the works of fellow practitioners within the field of creative improvising. This includes composers that are considered important within the field, and those that I see as my contemporaries. All of the works in question appear to be either based around or utilise hyperlocal communities of trans-idiomatic creative musicians, where some degree of improvisational ability is required. There is a consideration to the ensemble personnel and curation of the group. I have chosen pieces that contain at least one of the following: the performance space affecting the output, the careful consideration of performer personnel, the combinations of personnel from multiple sub-scenes within the creative improvising community, work that performers from multiple backgrounds can approach or works with specific performers in mind.

## JOHN ZORN - *COBRA*

The composer-improviser John Zorn has composed for a variety of musicians from different backgrounds and stylistic interests ranging from metal, hardcore punk, jazz, contemporary classical,

klezmer, exotica, electronic, and interdisciplinary practices. Much of his creative output and several of his collaborators have been based within New York City – particularly Downtown Manhattan – where he has supported a creative community, including founding the record label Tzadik and the music venue The Stone, whilst devising pieces and bands that utilise musicians from these different approaches. One of my own aspirations with this PhD has been to mirror this approach in Birmingham.

*Cobra* is one of several improvisation games Zorn composed during the 1980s and is perhaps one of his most well-known works. It was first performed in 1984, with a commercial release in 1987 (Zorn, 1987). The musical community is at the heart of the piece, and within the very conception of his work. Zorn has mentioned the importance of Duke Ellington to him, describing himself as being in the ‘Ellington tradition’ (in Bailey, 1992: 77) where the curation of performers was seen as a vital compositional element.<sup>3</sup> This is an approach that has been with him throughout his career: “I could not do this music without these musicians. It’s about people. Music is about people for me. It’s not about sounds. It’s about people. It’s about putting people in challenging situations and for me challenges are opportunities” (quoted in Chinen et al, 2023 : 9’22”) *Cobra*’s use of interplay between the ensemble is a reflection of a musical community in action and exploits the hierarchical nature of these communities. As Zorn himself says: ‘I basically create a small society and everybody finds their own position in that society’ (quoted in Bailey, 1992: 78).

This is a piece that has been taught aurally with no official score published. While versions of the score have occasionally appeared (Brackett, 2010: 47), it is generally accepted that the work is a piece that needs to be taught by Zorn himself or an approved associate. The “score” contains a list of the meanings of each card. The cards themselves contain a variety of different approaches that can be

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<sup>3</sup> When Zorn talks about the “Ellington tradition”, I interpret this as the way that Ellington was known for composing for specific musicians to play, with the performers idiosyncrasies at the forefront of the composition. This compositional approach about the way Ellington composes for specific musicians is written about by Rattenbury (1990). This has been expanded by other composers to go beyond instrumentation, as said in Collier (2009: 80) who observes “the band carrying two bassists or two drummers, because Ellington had found someone else whose playing he liked...There is a connection here with some free groups today who use....any instrumentation, as a matter of course, recognising that the specific instruments used are of far less importance than the people playing them”.



used within the piece. These include memory, sub-groups, crossfade, trades and cartoon sounds. Performers will point to various body parts (eyes, mouth, ear, nose, head and palm) with a set of fingers (from one to four) in an attempt to gain the prompter's attention to activate a certain card. Players are also given a headband which, when worn, operates a guerrilla system where players are allowed to ignore gestures.

The outcomes of the piece often result in performances that contain theatrical elements. Watching a performance by students at New England Conservatory (Zorn, 2015), some of whom would later find success as professional collaborators of Zorn in their own right (Shteamer, 2020; Big Ears, 2023), shows how the performers navigate this theatricality. One such example is at 12'18" when the keyboard player performs a solo rendition of the theme tune to Peanuts. This then leads to the bass guitarist requesting to join in, promptly followed by the rest of the ensemble. The keyboard player cues for a gesture allowing for the ensemble to join in, which is granted by the prompter, played by regular Zorn collaborator Anthony Coleman. They then proceed to play an ensemble version of Peanuts, then Coleman cues another downbeat and the music changes direction again.

When drummer Dylan van der Schyff performed in one of Zorn's Cobra ensembles, he commented on the opportunities the piece allows to interact with performers in new ways and discover approaches they can take in their own music: 'the non-idiomatic nature of *Cobra* allows musicians from various backgrounds to meet on neutral ground, where acquired techniques and attitudes may need to be reconsidered' (Van der Schyff, 2013: 7). I take from Zorn a strong hyper-local element to what he does and how he has a pool of players that he can put into several combinations. My aim has been to parallel the downtown community of players in New York, but within Birmingham. Whilst I gradually introduced collaborations with musicians from Los Angeles, London and The Hague throughout the research, there is a nucleus of Birmingham-based musicians at the core.

Initially, when I first started this project, I was looking to create a non-linear system of improvising that could run parallel to *Cobra*, however, what ended up coming out were pieces that were heavily structured. Eventually, I realised how dependant I was on a linear progression in my

work. My practice has instead resulted in hybridised approaches, where pieces contain combinations of graphic scores, text scores, conceptual devising, Western notation practices, riffs taught aurally and free improvisation. Creating a fixed structure is often what glues these practices together, as opposed to *Cobra*'s approach of handing out playing pieces.

## ANTHONY BRAXTON – *COMPOSITION NO. 421*

Multi-reedist/composer Anthony Braxton has been an influential figure on countless musicians, having coined terms such as “trans-idiomatic” and “creative music”, as well as devising several systems for approaching improvisation within composition, such as *Language Musics*, *Kelvin*, *Ghost Trance Music* and *Echo Echo Mirror House*. Importantly, these systems are interlinked and multiple possibilities and combinations of his music can be realised. There is a strong amount of flexibility in his work. He uses the terms ‘origin identity state’ (i.e. the music written with the instrumentation Braxton intended it for), ‘secondary state’ (where instrumentation has the potential to be changed, radically) and ‘genetic option’ (where the performer can take an excerpt from one piece and insert it into another). (quoted in Archives at Yale, n.d: 35’42”)

I have used the Braxton concept *Sonic Genome* as a significant reference point for my composition *Don’t Exist Inside Your Own Head*. Within the *Sonic Genome*, Braxton creates a space where his past approaches to composition can be incorporated into a marathon performance, with space and curation an integral part of the performance. It contains a large ensemble of players (between 40–80) and has the ability to incorporate every past opus and system within this composition. He has likened the idea of the piece to a theme park (in Smith, 2021).

The performance takes place within a large building and lasts for an extended length of time (between 6–8 hours). *Composition 421* refers to a performance in Berlin, in the art gallery Gropius Bau (Braxton, 2019). In this performance musicians occupy all areas of the building and work in an installation-type environment. The ensemble is split into various sub-groups (often 6 players in each), each of which has a group leader. These leaders are musicians who regularly collaborate with

Braxton, including Alexander Hawkins, Anne Rhodes, Jessica Pavone, Sara Shoenbeck, Adam Matlock, Ingrid Laubrock and Kyoko Kitamura, with the remainder of the ensemble being local musicians.

Indeed, the press release from Braxton's booking agent states this:

The entire body of over 60 musicians can be deemed the “country”, which can be broken into 15-to-20 person “state” sized ensembles, then to three-to-five person “city” groups. But of course, each individual is welcome to travel about the larger country, making new artistic alliances and musical connections.... Braxton enlists 12 band members of his Tri-Centric Ensemble as his musical lieutenants in the endeavor [sic], with each given the responsibility of leading sub ensembles of the larger group. The rest of the performers are drawn from the surrounding community, ranging from local professionals well-versed in creative music to open-minded college and conservatory students. (Akamu, 2019: online)

During the performance, the leaders (or lieutenants) decided to communicate with each other via group chat in the text messaging service WhatsApp (Hawkins, 2020: personal communication). The leaders could use this group chat to discuss and decide the musical direction of the piece. Examples could range from, but were not limited to, what material was to be played by each sub-group, where in the space it was going to be performed, or the possibilities of temporarily placing musicians in other sub-groups. This means that line-ups have some degree of flexibility within the sub-groups.

What is also notable is how many elements are allowed to be pre-planned before the performance, and do not necessarily have to be spontaneous decisions. Unlike *Cobra*, performers playing Braxton's works or systems have the ability to compartmentalise different parts of a musical language. Whilst Zorn does this to some extent (particularly with the instruction “Cartoon Sounds”), the decision-making in *Cobra* is reactionary and utilises whatever language and approach the performers often bring. Braxton's language music systems have evolved from “descriptions of broad

musical parameters” (Wooley, n.d), such as trills, intervallic formations and angular attacks and can be interpreted as starting points that can be developed further.

## FRED LONBERG-HOLM - *LIGHTBOX*

Fred Lonberg-Holm is another composer-improviser who has developed a way of incorporating improvising through a compositional identity. His work *Lightbox* is based around a coloured light that each musician is given (Lonberg-Holm, 2020: personal communication). When the performer’s light is turned on, they are “invited” to perform and are “invited” to stop playing when turned off. Lonberg-Holm places an importance on the word “invited” which allows some leeway for phrases to end organically as opposed to abruptly. Occasionally, he is known to augment this with a random number generator, which operates on the same principle (i.e. each performer is given a number and are invited to play when their number is drawn) – the key difference being that an element of aleatoric decision making is utilised as opposed to relying solely on Lonberg-Holm’s creative decisions.

Composers such as John Zorn and Anthony Braxton have used composition systems with fixed rules. This also applies to the improvising conductor, cornetist and improviser Butch Morris and his *Conduction*<sup>TM</sup> system, where performers interpret improvised gestures that, whilst given spontaneously in the performance, have been explained ahead of time. What Lonberg-Holm does is to use a sketchpad to write directions for performers. The key difference is that Lonberg-Holm usually has very few advance preparations and will spontaneously write directions as the performance is progressing. This can include classical music terminology, graphic scores, techniques, concepts, sound worlds, abstract directions etc.

During the many iterations of the piece Lonberg-Holm has shown that it can be adapted to a variety of musicians from different scenarios and instrumentation – these include a performance by the alternative rock band Joan of Arc (2011), an all-drummer nonet (Lonberg-Holm, 2014), free jazz ensemble Peter Brötzmann Chicago Tentet (2002), dry ice performer Michael Colligan (Lonberg-Holm, 2011) and cellist Tomeika Reid (Lonberg-Holm, 2020) – which has led to both hyper-local

performances concentrating on working with Chicago musicians, and touring versions, performing throughout American and Europe.

*Lightbox* is a piece that is relatively easy to set up and perform with whichever musicians are available. When speaking to him, Lonberg-Holm accepted the idea that all interpretations are valid and recognised the value in the interpretations of the performers. Even the text instructions can be creatively interpreted. Despite this, there appears to still be an element of curation and an awareness of individual playing style, even if sometimes it is discovered during the performance, as opposed to beforehand (and has worked with a mixture of regular collaborators and new players). This curation element is perhaps one of the key components that gives *Lightbox* its compositional identity.

## JAKA BERGER – *AUDIABLE LIFE STREAM*

I contacted Slovenian composer-improviser Jaka Berger when I first came across *Audiable Life Streams* (2016), as I felt that his background and approach to composition was similar to my own. He describes his background as being a punk musician before expanding his practice to incorporate free jazz, interdisciplinary methods and modular synthesizers (Berger, 2020; personal communication). His use of incorporating text scores, a pre-written theme and a theatrical element, whilst having improvisation at its core is what appealed to me about *Audiable Life Stream*. There was a strong compositional identity to it, yet the improvisational abilities of the musicians were a predominant focal point.

Despite many works by Braxton, Zorn, Lewis, Cardew and Wolff using open instrumentation, there is some consideration to instrumental choices. In this case, Berger's piece is based around two of each instrument. Each performer is placed opposite their counterpart and the layout of performers

on the stage resembles a mirror reflection, with a cymbal at the centre of the setup (see Fig. 1). There is a degree of flexibility to this as the mirrors aren't completely accurate.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1: Soundcheck of a performance of *Audiable Life Stream* (Berger, n.d). Photo credit: Špela Škulj.

In the first act, Berger gives very few directions to the ensemble. While Berger is instructed to start the piece with a drone on bowed cymbal, mostly the musicians follow when to join the piece, often just telling them to play free and in a conversational way. He gives the two double bassists drones, and the keyboard and viola instructions to leave lots of space (the keyboard player specifically to interact with the viola). He also gives dynamics and a timeline, which is strictly followed with a stopwatch. The ensemble transition into performing a motif, written in the score as ‘theme’, which the ensemble plays in unison before players “collapse at end” – the way each player breaks away from the theme is shown by a graphic arrow to direct how the performer does so.

<sup>4</sup> Whilst two drummers and two double bassists mirror, the instrumental pairings don't quite match – with electric guitar/bass guitar, tenor saxophone/alto saxophone, and – with not being in the same instrumental family – viola and electric keyboard. The second performance replaces the bass guitar with a second guitarist and the keyboard with hurdy gurdy.



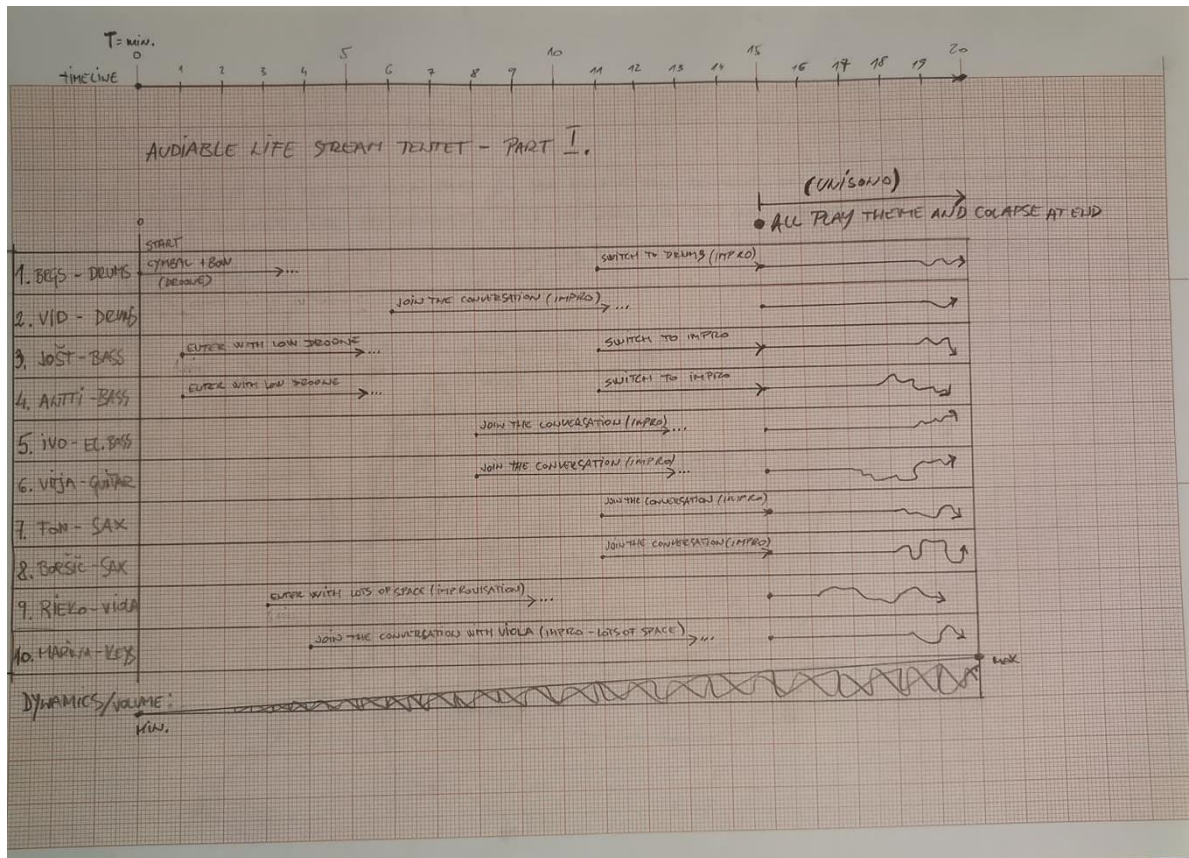


Figure 2: Act One from the score of *Audible Life Stream* (Berger, 2016)

Acts 2 and 3 bring in a more theatrical element with stage directions. The piece transitions into Act 2 during the theme, where the musicians walk off one by one, each carrying a tape recorder with them, and are instructed to record themselves improvising offstage. The acoustic musicians take their instruments with them, while the electric ones take auxiliary percussion. Act 3 sees the musicians returning to the stage, plugging their recorders into the PA and listening back to their offstage improvising, often with the recorders overlapping. The performance I watched online, whilst it featured musicians from Serbia, Finland and Japan in the ensemble, served predominantly as a showcase of the improvised and creative music sphere within Slovenia. This is more apparent in the second performance of the work, with an altered lineup containing all Slovenian musicians (Berger, n.d). The ensemble includes musicians Berger knows from both the jazz and rock scenes who developed an interest in creative improvised music.

## CHRIS PITSIOKOS – *NUCLEOTIDALLY ENCODED*

### *REVELATIONS*

I approached composer-saxophonist Chris Pitsiokos to discuss a system he has developed within several of his compositions which he calls *Combination Locks*. A system born out of an aspiration to reduce gestures and theatrical elements within pieces that revolve around improvisation, Pitsiokos thinks of Combination Locks as akin to a chess game (Pitsiokos, 2020: 54) and places an emphasis on creating strategies before performances. Performers are given musical material upon which to base their improvisations (throughout various *Combination Locks* pieces, he uses melody, drones, silence, glissandi, and impulse) which performers can then develop. Whenever a performer hears the rest of the ensemble playing certain techniques, for example, in the piece *Combination Locks #1*, if the cello, when playing movement one, hears the ensemble playing drone (D), drone (D) and impulse (I), they can then proceed to movement two. There is a lot of creative freedom for performers; as stated in the score, performers only have to play the music accurately only once. Pitsiokos has used a variation on the combination locks system in a number of pieces. In *Nucleotidally Encoded Revelations*, he displays the possibilities of how this approach can be used as a key element in a wider piece. The work is written for a septet formed of his regular collaborators, including members of his working band CP Unit. The ensemble is divided into two subgroups (group 1 being viola, cello, double bass and acoustic guitar whilst group 2 is saxophone, electric guitar and drums). Group 1 performs a combination locks system, this time each performer has to hear both combinations in section one of movement one before moving onto section two, while Group 2 are instructed to play freely, with the idea being to interact with both Group 1's performance and their immediate surroundings.

Like Jaka Berger, Pitsiokos uses a pre-composed theme that the musicians play simultaneously. Berger's theme is notably simpler to play, repetitive, learned by ear and performed from memory with musicians reharmonising and deconstructing it spontaneously. Pitsiokos' theme, which takes place at the end of movement two, utilises complexity, employing micro-tonality, metric modulation (including triplets, quintuplets and septuplets), and no repetition before concluding with a drum solo. This leads to a sense of tension in Pitsiokos' performance whilst the players are mentally



preparing to perform the theme. Indeed, Pitsiokos mentioned that much of the rehearsal time was spent on the written passage (Pitsiokos, 2020: personal communication), which comprised one minute of an hour-long piece.<sup>5</sup> I thought this element was a way to incorporate the *Combination Locks* system within a compositional framework, bringing a linear shape to the work. It showed that there was potential for the combination locks system to be incorporated within notated passages, free improvisation, and potentially within other compositional approaches.

	GUITAR		VIOLA		CELLO		CONTRA	
I	1	Sssd Ssgd	Ssss Ssig	Sssg Ssdd	Ssid Ssgg			
	2	sggg iggd	igdd ggdd	sggd igdm	sgdd sddd			
	3	gddd	dddd	gggd	gggg			
II	1	Sssm iigm	ggdm iidm	gddm iimm	dddm iggm			
	2	sdmm dmmm	igmm ssmm	idmm gmmm	ggmm immm			
	3	mmmm	mmmm	mmmm	mmmm			
III	1	Sssi	Sssi	Sssi	Sssi			
	2	Ssii Siim	Ssim iigg	Siig iigd	Siid iidd			
	3	iiim	iiid	iiig	Siid			
	4	iiii	iiii	iiii	iiii			

Figure 3: An excerpt of the score for *Nucleotidally Enclosed Revelations* which shows the structure of a *Combination Locks* system (Pitsiokos, 2020)

## MARIAM REZAEI – *NOISESTRA*

Composer-turntablist Mariam Rezaei has a multi-disciplinary background, coming to turntable performance through hip-hop Djing and a formal background in composition (TUSK TV, 2’50”, 24’15”). She has become a key member of the Newcastle DIY underground music scene, with collaborators in noise, free improvisation, and contemporary classical music backgrounds. She was previously the artistic director of arts space TOPH and, as of 2022, is the creative director of Tusk Festival. The project NOISESTRA was commissioned in 2012 where Rezaei worked with 8 young

<sup>5</sup> Pitsiokos also noted that in the preceding minute there was an apprehension to the notated material. It is worth noting in the video of the performance (2020: 51’00”) you can see the musicians focusing less on the processes and more on the mental preparation of playing the notated part.

people, many of whom had no prior experience in music or DJing, and over a series of workshops helped them to develop a musical language on turntables. This culminated in a performance between the young musicians and the ensemble Apartment House. Through this a working relationship between Rezaei and the young musicians was formed. These two groups performed a series of pieces using graphic and text instructions:

Bearing in mind the group needed to perform with live instruments, I developed a short series of skretch exercises, written with partly music and partly turntable technique as criteria. Put into practice, these exercises look at basic musicianship, to build group musicianship, basic hand control, crossfader technique and to encourage improvisation and interpretation whilst maintaining accuracy and clarity. (Rezaei, 2017: 29)

Within the project, sub-groups of instrumental ensemble and turntable ensemble are largely fixed, with slight variations within the programme.<sup>6</sup>

The six pieces are predominantly built around interpretations of graphic video scores. The instrumental ensemble (a mixture of acoustic and amplified instrumentation) and turntable ensemble often work as separate sub-units, often with separate fixed roles. The piece *NOISEstra* uses fixed roles for the ensemble, where the turntable ensemble pre-select a series of records that get passed through the turntablists on direction, while Apartment House interpret a video score with the idea being to musically protest.

The project enabled two groups of musicians from different backgrounds and experience levels to work together on an equal footing. Through improvising it showed how each of these groups can have a featured role within a performance. Through improvisation and creative interpretation of fixed graphic scores it was possible to develop a language from contemporary classical, creative improvisation, hip-hop and noise music. One of the outcomes was that the turntablists have become professional contacts of Rezaei (2017: 45). This has shown that through a communal development of

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<sup>6</sup> The variations on the two subgroups being: *FUMP* for solo cello and turntable ensemble, *TRAX* based around a harp and turntable improvising duo whilst both ensembles perform two separate graphic score backings, and *NOISEstra* built around separate instructions.

improvisation and treatment with experienced professional musicians on a level playing field, that sustainable working relationships can be maintained. Having a group of musicians not only from different backgrounds, but different relationships and experiences with creative improvisation was important to me. This type of practice was an aspiration of mine when conducting my research aims. Through my work as a pedagogue and mentor, I was trying to give access and awareness to creative improvising from people outside that background. The difference between my work and what Rezaei was doing in *Noisestra*, was through the way in which we divided ensembles.

## The relevance to my work?

Analysing a selection of works by multi-generational composer-improvisers shows how each musician views improvisation and curation within their works. Each of these composers values idiosyncratic improvisational practices within their works, bringing together musicians from different backgrounds. Rezaei incorporates a group of young people whom she was mentoring with a fixed contemporary music ensemble, Berger augments his pool of local musicians with a selection of international ones in a piece that combines free improvisation with interdisciplinary practices, Lonberg-Holm adapts his piece for whatever circumstance he happens to be in, Zorn views curation as an integral aspect to the composition itself, Braxton gives sub-leader status to musicians he has a close relationship with who can guide players who are less experienced with his approaches, while Pitsiokos explores new ways in which improvising musicians can react to each other. I have found myself adopting many of these elements with how I curate pieces. This includes my interest in being a guide in creative improvisation for less experienced players, making my pool of local musicians the focal point of my work, the curation of these groups, how I can adapt my work depending on which performers' playing styles are present and how to effectively utilise sub-groups within the ensembles.

## Chapter 2: Supporting Works

When I first moved to Birmingham it was a city that I had never performed in and I had very few contacts there. I therefore spent the first year of the research reaching out to performers. As I was based at a music institution, I had access to student musicians based at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire who showed willingness to be involved in collaborations. I was also interested in using musicians based outside the institution and was hoping, within time, to be less dependent on the conservatoire resources. I would often workshop and perform pieces with a variety of people to see which combinations fit and which potential working relationships would stick. This process is an ongoing one and still exists at the time of submission, yet it was most prominent in the first year. I found the musicians most likely to take part were current students, due to many of them being easy to contact, and the fact that they had comparatively fewer commitments, compared to those working outside the institution. Whilst none of the pieces I wrote in my first year are included in the portfolio, I spent that time experimenting with (mostly graphic) approaches to score making, and ended up with a number of working relationships – several of which still exist at the time of writing.

Each piece had a different focus. While rooted in improvisation, pieces would have different elements that were emphasised. A piece like *Throwing Shade (No Fuck You)* demonstrates interests in physicality and movements, in contrast to *Edgeless*, which used traditional notation as its lynchpin. Pieces like *Tlazolteotl* and *Lemons* used improvising to fill in the colour of a pre-determined structure; the latter blended this with notation, whilst a structure was created for *Everything Sucks* after editing recordings of improvisers. *Don't Exist Inside Your Own Head* was an attempt to bring as many of these elements together within a large-scale communal performance as possible. Despite none of the pieces having free playing as part of the centre (with only *Don't Exist Inside Your Own Head* having it in its structure), I developed working relationships between several of my collaborators through playing free improvisation with them. It was not uncommon for pieces to develop out of that.

The supporting works in this chapter highlight my experiments with compositional technique and ensemble personnel. The relationship between the curation and composition varies from each piece. For example with *You Are A Man Who Eats Lemons* and *Edgeless*, I composed the piece for

fixed ensembles and curated the piece with my choice of performers when revising at a later date, and with *Everything Sucks*, I composed the piece whilst curating it. With *Tlazolteotl*, I decided on personnel whilst composing, and *Throwing Shade (No, Fuck You)*, a degree of flexibility in curation would be required for each performance. I reflected on each work, and the extent to which it met my research aims, and these reflections then fed into the next piece I composed. A selection of these pieces were revised or rerecorded after their première, and I discuss and compare the two versions below. Despite composing other works during this time period, the pieces selected for the portfolio are the best examples of compositions that have the research question at the forefront of the composition process.

## You Are A Man Who Eats Lemons/Edgeless

You Are A Man Who Eats Lemons:

- Amplified chamber ensemble piece. Text and notation. Composed 2019.

- First performed at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, April 2019 by Decibel.

Personnel: Mira Benjamin (violin), Michelle Holloway (recorders), Jack McNeil (clarinet), Neil McGovern (saxophone), Martyn Sanderson (trombone), Paul Norman (guitar), Eliza McCarthy (piano), Sebastiano Dessanay (double bass), Jose Martinez (drums).

- **Submitted Documentation:** Recorded, mixed and mastered at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, January 2023 by Nina McKendrick and Dylan Purser.

Personnel: James McIlwrath (viola), Meg Diamond (flutes), Maisy Neale (clarinet), Max Thomas (saxophone), Hannah Dilkes (trombone), Alex Townsend Bate (guitar), Vato Klemara (piano), Si Paton (bass guitar), Tymek Jozwiak (drums).

Edgeless:

- Chamber ensemble piece. Notation and graphics. Composed 2020.

- First performed at Eastside Jazz Club, Birmingham, March 2020.

Personnel: Conducted by Yannick Mayaud and performed by Meg Diamond (flutes), Maisy Neale (clarinets), Arianne Bennett (trombone), Sehyogue Aulakh (percussion), Katie Sherratt (harp), Matthew Phillips (cello), Richard English (double bass).

- Workshopped by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, February 2021 at CBSO Centre, Birmingham to composers via Zoom. Personnel Unknown.

- **Submitted Documentation:** Recorded, mixed and mastered at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, January 2023 by Nina McKendrick and Dylan Purser.

Personnel: Conducted by Yannick Mayaud and performed by Meg Diamond (flutes), Maisy Neale (clarinets), Hannah Dilkes (trombone), Kai-Shin Chang (percussion), Katie Sherratt (harp), Matthew Phillips (cello), Amy Coates (double bass).

*You Are A Man Who Eats Lemons* and *Edgeless* are two compositions that were initially intended to explore how my compositional approaches could be interpreted by musicians outside of my network of collaborators. I was interested in seeing if my methods would be transferrable to a wider pool of musicians, so I took part in two workshops writing for professional contemporary music ensembles: Decibel and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. I was curious to see how my compositional approaches, including text directions, graphics and flexible notation, could be interpreted by a wider group of performers. The concept of both pieces was to explore improvisation within the parameters

of a strict compositional framework. I wanted to see if the techniques that I have been exploring with my network of peers and collaborators could be applied to established contemporary music ensembles.

Please watch the video of *You Are A Man Who Eats Lemons* before proceeding with the following text.

*You are a Man Who Eats Lemons* (hereafter *Y.A.A.M.W.E.L*) was originally written for amplified contemporary music ensemble Decibel and performed at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire in April 2019. With several of the performers having previous experience in improvisation, I decided that this would be a group who would be flexible and sympathetic enough to workshop these approaches. The overall aim was for this to be a piece that could act as a transitional work that both experienced and less experienced improvisers could approach. Originally envisioned as a text score, I altered it to resemble a more conventional-looking framework. It consisted of a hybrid approach to score making with a mixture of text and standard notation. These hybridised scores would come to define my creative approach during this period of practice-led research. I found myself constantly returning to composing these hybrid scores, albeit with different formations and ways of presenting them. For this approach, I split the score into eight sections and asked each performer to bring a stopwatch. Each section was timed and the parts would contain notated sections to be played alongside passages that revolved around improvisation. I chose this as I was avoiding having fixed roles for performers (i.e. I did not want some performers to be the improvisers and some performers to just be reading notation). One of the ways I made notation and improvisation interact with each other was during Section 2. I notated a guitar riff with a snare drum accompaniment. I then instructed each of the other performers, chosen and cued by the violinist to ‘musically disrupt the guitar and drums.’

I explored ways to produce subtle transitions within rigid frameworks. In other works I have previously composed, I often incorporated jump-cut transitions that changed after every section. What I did for *Y.A.A.M.W.E.L* was to keep musical themes going throughout two or more sections, whilst other performers changed material around this. Examples of this happening include the aforementioned guitar riff, which spends Section 1 duetting with a snare drum accompaniment. It

develops in Section 2 with the duo battling the rest of the ensemble's disruptions before gradually fading out in Section 3, where a new riff played by the saxophone takes over as the focal point of the piece. This new riff is joined by the clarinet in Section 4 in parallel flat 9ths and crescendos in Section 5 before, once again, deteriorating in Section 6. This approach also happens with the text-based instructions when the violin in Sections 4–6 is instructed to play 'continuous harsh noise stabs using excessive pressure on D and A strings. Occasionally include a rising gliss [sic]. All downbow. Dig in at the heel of the bow. Out of time with the rest of the ensemble.' This then gets developed to include a crescendo in dynamics as well as new elements to be taken into consideration such as 'Let them ring' and 'Constant tremolo throughout' in Sections 5 and 6 respectively.

5	3'30"-4'45"
Violin	Repeatedly play open D and A strings. Occasionally include a rising gliss. All downbows. Dig in at the heel of the bow. Out of time with the rest of the ensemble. Let them ring. Add scratch tones frequently. <i>mf</i>
Tenor Recorder	Improvise short flowing melodies around these tones: <i>mp</i>
B♭ Clarinet	<i>f</i> <i>♩ = 110</i> Repeat riff in time with saxophone.
Alto Saxophone	<i>f</i> <i>♩ = 110</i> Repeat riff in time with clarinet.
Trombone	High pitched wailing. Play in the gaps of the clarinet and saxophone parts. Upper two octaves. <i>f</i>
Piano	Play these major triads in succession of each other: C, G, C, G, Eb, A, Db - Repeat cycle. Choose tempo. Play with bass. <i>p</i>
Electric Guitar	Piercing high-pitched shrieks, tremolo. Irregular intervals. <i>f</i>
Double Bass	Play these root notes in succession of each other: C, G, C, G, Eb, A, Db - Repeat cycle. Pizz. Chose tempo. Play with piano. <i>p</i>
Drum Kit	Constant fills throughout. Make excessive use of cymbals. <i>mp</i>

Figure 4: An excerpt from section 5 in the *Y. A.A.M.W.E.L* score

Writing the piece confirmed my suspicions that I should not dictate style and instead let the musicians incorporate their own personalised language onto the piece. In section 8 I envisioned a drum style reminiscent of hardcore punk, which – due to the relative unfamiliarity of the genre from the performer – I decided to rewrite during the workshop. We came up with an alternative which satisfied the characteristic of the section. Whilst promoting knowledge transfer between different



musical approaches is an important part of my creative practice, I nevertheless aspire to compose music in a way that can support individual voices. This way of working creates space for performers to input their own personal language into the work whilst still remaining faithful to the compositions. I found putting a pre-established style onto a musical direction can potentially limit that.

The piece showed that it was possible for a contemporary music ensemble to approach the work providing they were flexible enough and already were comfortable with improvisation. What I took away from the experience was that a hybrid approach to score making, including flexible notation and specific text instructions which I based this piece around, would be an effective way to keep musicians engaged and creatively stimulated.

Please listen to the recording of *Edgeless* before proceeding with the following text.

When the opportunity came to write for a Birmingham Contemporary Music Group workshop, I decided the best use of this time would be to find a way to incorporate improvisation into a piece for performers who specialise in Western classical music. The piece is based around a series of short movements that possess an unfinished quality. I used other full works that contain a series of short ideas as a frame of reference, including *Chamber Concerto* (2007) by Howard Skempton and the album *Double Nickels on the Dime* (1984) by Minutemen. The approach I ended up using was to alternate between fully composed movements and graphic score “interludes”. Each interlude would last for 21 seconds and contained a series of images that, despite a fixed order being pre-determined, had the capacity to be interchangeable in future performances. In a similar manner to *Burdocks* by Christian Wolff, I was interested in having each movement use a completely different compositional method (ranging from text, graphics and notation). The piece developed so that graphic and traditional notation were performed in alternation with each other.

Despite the ensemble’s specialisation in contemporary music, I was not entirely sure to what extent their compatibility with creative improvisation was. Therefore, I decided that a gradual way in would be most appropriate. The majority of the piece would be fully notated, playing to the ensemble’s strengths, with the graphic interludes serving as a small part of the piece that could glue

the pre-written movements together. Since it was not an overwhelming part of the work, I went in with the hopes that the performers would not feel too exposed. I shifted my usual approach of considering individual musicians' idiosyncratic playing styles when composing and curating, to one that was centred around instrumental timbres. Because I did not personally know any of the performers, even though I knew they had experience playing pieces that used improvisation, I was not completely sure to what extent this would be. Therefore, I focused on techniques that professional-level trained classical performers could reasonably be expected to play.

Because I wanted a public performance of the piece, in March 2020 – the week before lockdown was announced – I arranged a performance played by a student ensemble. I thought this would be a good opportunity to compare the two versions. The performers were either people I have worked with previously, or were recommended to me due to the fact that they embrace contemporary new music within their practice. While most of the performers had some experience in creative improvisation, it was not seen as their primary practice. There was a willingness to engage with the material, even if the graphic scores were treated as secondary. Overall, this resulted in a very spirited performance, which resulted in a positive outcome, and a handful of the performers ended up becoming regular collaborators within my network.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the BCMG workshop took place nearly a year later in February 2021 over the video conferencing app Zoom. The ensemble were placed in a bubble, to comply with lockdown restriction laws around social distancing at this time, in the CBSO centre, whilst the composers in the workshop would listen remotely. Each composer was given a 40-minute time slot, which left no time to establish a working relationship. This was made more impractical by the blurriness of the screen, meaning that there was an anonymity to the performers. With no introductions to the players, limited rehearsal time and this sense of impersonality, guiding BCMG through the piece proved extremely challenging. Because I had not gained trust with the performers ahead of time, many aspects of the performance were rushed. This led to an unsatisfactory result which did not feel compatible with my compositional approach. Through taking part in the workshop, I realised that close working relationships with a pool of performers is crucial to my practice. This is

because of how I consciously incorporate the performers individual playing styles into both my compositions and performances. Without the ability to work with the performers beforehand, this made it difficult for the ensemble to understand my compositional aims.

My tactic of introducing a small amount of graphic material to stimulate improvisations was unsuccessful in this instance. In a similar manner to the student ensemble, the graphic sections were treated as secondary and the only chance the ensemble had to look at them was during the run-through. I was left feeling disappointed that this was treated as an afterthought, as I was hoping the ensemble would have been more willing to explore the soundworld that the graphic sections were built around. It resulted in a performance that felt more like an aleatoric approach, rather than something that could inspire creative performances. This outcome left me temporarily dissatisfied with graphic scores as a medium. It left me feeling concerned that creative performances were regularly treated as secondary to the score itself, and this is an approach I have no interest in. While I am fond of the fully notated movements of the composition, I view the sheer fact that they exist in this piece as part of the experiment, as opposed to anything that happens within the movements themselves. I am more interested in when performers are instructed to play fully notated sections and when they are instructed to play sections that depend on creative improvising as opposed to the quality of the fully notated parts of the composition. In that aspect, I see those movements as aleatoric. I have not composed a piece since where the traditional notation and creative improvisation elements are so separated; rather, I have been aiming to make them more intertwined, due to my interest in multiple notational approaches happening simultaneously. This aim has been more successful in other pieces included in the portfolio.

## Revision

I decided to re-record both pieces in January 2023. This time, I asked several musicians with whom I had built up working relationships to perform them. The players included several of the musicians that performed on *Edgeless* first time round, augmented by other players I trusted, including a trombonist

based in London – breaking the hyper-local parameters I created for myself in the process. I wanted a good quality audio performance and recording that could be released commercially, and I felt these musicians, bolstered by other players I trusted, would be able to achieve this. I was interested in seeing how musicians that I have worked with would be able to interpret these pieces and how the dynamic would change.

Despite the fact that when composing these pieces I focused on instrumental timbres, for the recording I decided that the ensemble curation should be prioritised, particularly given the fact that a handful of musicians had a substantial background in improvisation. Due to the results acquired from the ensemble curation I had used in subsequent pieces in my portfolio, I felt that selecting musicians I knew and exploring combinations of performers that would work together would make for more compelling recordings. This extended to tweaking the instrumentation for *Y.A.A.M.W.E.L* where I switched the recorder, violin and double bass for flute, viola and bass guitar – the last because I wanted to play in the ensemble. The other switches were so that I could work with two musicians I had been performing with regularly in both free and pre-composed contexts. As I had worked with the trombonist on several occasions outside of my research I decided that, despite being London based, she would sound complementary to the other performers in both ensembles.

Following some productive phone conversations with the conductor when making preparations for *Edgeless*, we decided it would be beneficial to record the piece in a different order. We recorded a selection of movements, often doing it between three and five takes, followed by two or three takes of each graphic score interlude. We then recorded more of the notated movements, followed by another take of each graphic score piece, finishing with movement 5. This was done as we believed it was more productive to keep the performers working within a musical system (be that notation or graphics), as opposed to constantly switching between the two. The graphic score interludes kept were from a single take, while the notated movements usually required splicing two takes together.

The recording process of *Y.A.A.M.W.E.L*, in contrast, favoured spontaneity over attention to detail. We took three takes and I only needed to give minimal suggestions to the performers. I even

decided in section 6, when the drummer mistook the instruction of playing the floor tom once to be an instruction for free playing with emphasis on the floor tom, not to correct him as I felt his contribution made the piece stronger. The only instances where I suggested performance changes were to enhance and exaggerate what the players were already doing. I used a mixture of performers that also played on *Edgeless*, due to the similar instrumentation, and other musicians with whom I regularly collaborated.

The results of these pieces, and the two experiences I had, ultimately confirmed that my curatorial abilities are crucial to the success of a project. This was an instance where ensemble personnel was decided four and three years respectively after the music was composed and had their premières. By deciding out of my network of performers who would be most appropriate for this, I felt I could play to my strengths in curating ensembles. Working with performers I have developed musical relationships with meant that the trust was already earned. It showed how these approaches could be suitable for an established chamber ensemble, however it left me knowing that working with these types of ensembles is not necessary for my practice.

# Throwing Shade (No Fuck You)

Co-composed with Jessica Schwartz.

Text, graphic and notation. Composed June 2019, Revised December 2022.

**Submitted Documentation:** Recorded at Millennium Point Studios: Dec 2022.

Recorded, mixed and mastered by Ross Waller.

Personnel: Si Paton (bass), Jessica Schwartz (guitar), James Gardener (trumpet), Lorenzo Prati (saxophone), Emily Doyle (violin), James McIlwrath (viola), Holly Gowland (electronics), Kaila Whyte (electronics).

Additional performances:

Royal Birmingham Conservatoire: June, 2019

Personnel: Si Paton (bass), Jessica Schwartz (guitar), Charlie Kedge (trumpet), Alex Collett-Sinfield (saxophone), Karenna Cannan (mandolin), Emily Abdy (violin), Richard Stenton (electronics), Tom Campbell (electronics).

Remote performance, Sonic Arts Research Centre, March 2021.

Personnel: Si Paton (bass), Jessica Schwartz (guitar).

*Throwing Shade (No, Fuck You)* (hereafter *T.S.(N.F.Y)*) is a composition made in collaboration with Los Angeles based composer, guitarist and musicologist Jessica A. Schwartz. Having met at various conferences, we agreed to create a trans-Atlantic collaboration when we presented papers at Keep It Simple Make It Fast at the University of Porto in 2018. Calling the duo Phame, we centred the project around our interest in no wave music, free improvisation and what Schwartz describes as ‘imperial violence’, based off her research of Marshallese musical responses towards US nuclear testing (2021). We proceeded to perform a series of improvised gigs in the UK during December 2018, both as a duo and on one occasion with local Birmingham musicians. We then agreed to arrange a performance during June 2019, when our next set of UK shows were booked, where we put both of our practices within a compositional framework.

We co-composed *T.S.(N.F.Y)*, written for a flexible ensemble and performed with an octet. We each brought elements that can be used within the piece, such as graphic scores, flexible notation, and text directions and made a structural arrangement out of them. During lockdown, a remote version of our practice, advertised as *Throwing Shade (No X You)* was broadcast for Sonic Arts Research Centre in Belfast. As part of this, a section of the performance was a series of graphic scores called *Remote*

*Connection* that Schwartz wrote for me to perform. In this, I was given a series of multiple-choice questions based on my wellbeing during lockdown, and was given a different score to play depending on the answers I gave.



Figure 5: A photo of the debut performance of *T.S(N.F.Y)*. Photo credit: Paul Norman

Please watch the video to *T.S(N.F.Y)* before proceeding with the following text.

We agreed that when Schwartz was next in Birmingham, we could rerecord *T.S(N.F.Y)*, as we believed there was a strong core to the piece, yet some tweaks and refinements could be made. This revision and recording took place in December 2022. I made the decision to incorporate some of Schwartz's *Remote Connection* scores within this new revision. For both the performance and the recording, the piece was broken down into three sections. During section one, each member acts as an individual and enters gradually. Each performer is given two sets of three-word instructions: one musical instruction written by me and one physical instruction written by Jessica. As opposed to being taken literally, Jessica expected each performer to imagine how they might perform their instrument with these limitations. Each musician is given a slider, which shows the ratio of how faithful we expect them to be to the instructions (for example, if the performer is given 40% for the musical instruction, we expect them to incorporate the musical gestures into their performance but have a lot

of freedom to use music outside of those gestures). The bar is inverted, so that would mean they would expect to be more faithful to Jessica's instruction (60%).

Section two was compiled from graphic scores I created for the first performance, and a selection of Schwartz's *Remote Control* scores. I gave each duo, based on instrumental compatibility (i.e. guitar and bass guitar; two electronic setups, trumpet and saxophone, violin and viola/mandolin) a graphic score that I had composed. With the composed scores the duos could conduct a number to each other of which section to play, allowing them to pick the order and repetition. I then took some of the scores Jessica composed and, instead of using the quiz, gave them scores I felt were appropriate. Each duo would come in gradually, and the idea was that each duo worked as a unit as opposed to individuals. We considered using the quiz, but time constraints made this impossible. During the recording, this transition proved difficult to navigate, with two duos confessing after the performance that they skipped the section entirely, having not realised it was taking place. Jessica and I have agreed for future iterations of the piece that a clear gesture will be needed to indicate the change.

During section three I wrote a group of voicings. These were written in diamond clef and could be played by any instrument in any transposition, a compositional approach that was often used by Anthony Braxton. I would conduct the ensemble by holding up a number with my fingers, indicating which voicing I wanted the ensemble to play, and make a downbeat gesture. This meant that there was a flexibility and unpredictability and spontaneity in the performance. For members of the group who did not read music, I gave them some leeway for creative interpretation. This would be as an immediate transition as opposed to a gradual one. My idea for the section was to show the octet operating as a single unit. This meant each section the performer would have a different relationship with the ensemble (soloist, duo and octet).

We asked the ensemble to wear sunglasses, and during the most recent recording, facemasks. This was to add an additional obstruction, with the sunglasses impacting on the ability to read the score, made more difficult by facemasks blowing steam into the glasses. After realising that wearing facemasks would cause problems for those playing aerophone instruments, and due to the fact that



others forgot to bring them, we agreed that certain members of the ensemble did not have to wear them. With the additional hurdle of a malfunctioning monitor when recording, the group were unable to hear certain instruments (including the electronics). Having the electronic performers wear headphones, but not allowing any other players to, whilst allowing certain musicians to not have to wear facemasks added to the differences in obstruction for each performer. We incorporated all of these obstructions into the concept, where the lack of equality was factored into the performance (i.e. some performers could not see clearly whilst others could, some performers were not able to hear all the instruments whilst others could, one player has a limited amount of obstruction, whilst a second may experience a large deal in terms of both sight and sound). This frustration of not being able to hear properly led me to spontaneously disrupting the performance in other ways such as slamming music stands towards the end in a desperate attempt to gain some intensity from the performance that I was not able to hear due to the lack of audio. Similar moments of chaotic disruption have been caused by me during performances of this work. This approach might seem forced as my attempt to artificially recreate something that I accomplished so organically before.

Future plans include arranging a performance in Los Angeles, to see the differences between the interpretations of LA musicians in comparison to those from Birmingham. This was something we were hoping to do during the period of the research, however, due to travel restrictions imposed by COVID, this did not come to pass. We see this as an ever-evolving composition where things are constantly augmented and mutated.

# Everything Sucks

-Fixed media. Composed March-December 2020.

Composed, directed, edited, arranged and mixed by Simon Paton.

Mastered by Lewis Burn.

**Submitted Documentation:** Featuring edited recordings of improvisations by: Kaethe Uken (clarinet), Matthew Phillips (cello), James McIlwrath (viola, objects, harmonica), Helena Bowen (harp), Kaila Whyte (guitar), Joe Rhodes (french horn), Karensa Cannan (synths, electronics), Charlie Kedge (trumpet), Marcus Perks (drums), Alex Collett-Sinfield (tenor saxophone), Meg Diamond (flute), Anna Olsson (violin), Zygmund de Somogyi (keyboard, ocarina), and spoken word contributions by: Roxanne Korda, Robert Nettleship, Robin Jax, Emily Doyle, May Chi Wong and Riadh Lastname.

A key project I was planning to produce during the third and fourth year of my doctorate was a large ensemble piece that involved conduction and flash cards. With the restrictions of the COVID-19 global pandemic meaning that I could not carry out the core elements of my research, I decided to take a break from it when I realised fundamental parts of it would not work as an online project. To archive some of the musical components I intended to use within the piece, I asked a few musicians I intended to have in the project to record some of these elements, including text instructions that dictated mood, notation, graphic scores, and motifs to be learned aurally. After my supervision team suggested I compose a piece using remote collaborations, I experimented with splicing these recordings together.

Despite my productivity during this period being extremely minimal due to the national lockdown impacting my mental health and the severe difficulty of adapting my work to a remote context, I nevertheless organised improvising sessions via the platforms Skype and Zoom. Other improvisation collectives, most notably Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (McDonald et al, 2021: online) engaged in similar activities. While their reports showed how improvisers could incorporate the latency into their own performances, I decided to use a different approach, as I felt it very difficult to communicate with performers through this medium. The piece was also designed to be a reaction

against remote pieces that used split screen performances. I was very unsatisfied with the homogeneity of many of them and the lack of musical interactions available through the medium. Instead, the work ended up being about playing around with illusions of togetherness.

Please listen to the recording of *Everything Sucks* before proceeding with the following text.

I started by making a piece out of the recordings given, strongly influenced by the techniques used in the Henry Hills film *Money* (1984). The idea was to see if the approach of documenting New York creative musicians could be applied to several that I have worked with in Birmingham. I was fascinated by the way the film utilised a documentation of creative improvisers with the literary movement L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. Because of this, I was interested in a piece that combined improvisation with spoken word elements. Rather than come up with an original text, I decided to use a selection of texts I found “off-kilter” in some way. These included a promo by professional wrestler Scott Steiner (IMPACT Wrestling, 2019: 6’00”) and a speech by comedian Jo Firestone in the character Goldie Goldberg (The Special Without Brett Davis, 2017: 4’43”). I then proceeded to ask several more musicians to send me recordings based on the aforementioned text, graphic and notation elements, whilst asking six performers to record various spoken word extracts.



Figure 6: One of two scores of notated voicings I gave a selection of players to record.

My approach was to work on seven different movements, each of them centred around a different text. While none of the texts directly related to each other, they were all chosen as together they would create a disjointed feeling. The first movement, based around the opening monologue of the song *Blue* by the electronic band Eiffel65, had each instrumental sample being exactly one second in length with no layering. Based on suggestions from my supervisors and the performers I sent it to, in further movements, I decided to vary lengths and introduce more layering. I likened my role to that of a Svengali who was constantly creating illusions of musicians performing together, to remind listeners that the musicians were in isolation. Knowing I wanted to create a longform piece, in order to find a way to interlink all seven movements, I decided to splice them together. To create a sense of a non-linear approach, I divided the piece into 93 parts and used a random number generator to create a new order. This was a way to integrate all the movements together, keep a constant sense of unpredictability and mask the way the piece developed. I view this as a process of two halves. The first half was completed by my creative decisions, looking for moments that would work in the piece, combining them, using trial and error and an awareness of a linear narrative. The second half took all of that out of my hands, deliberately ruining the work I had done to make it make sense in a linear way, in order to have the piece exist as a whole work as opposed to a series of movements that often felt underdeveloped.



Figure 7: One of three graphic scores I gave a selection of performers to record.

The piece developed while people were giving me more material to work with. My usual working method is to create a base that other musicians can put their idiosyncratic playing styles over the top. In this case, the base was created out of their playing styles and unique approaches. This had its drawbacks, as I was not able to progress until the musicians sent me parts meaning that the piece stalled for many months.

Because of how fragmented the creative process was, I remain unconvinced that the project brought together different strands of the creative music community as I had hoped. As such, I decided to survey a pool of musicians that took part about whether they felt the piece achieved that and the results were diverse. Several musicians were grateful for the opportunity to be creative and to have links to the community during a time where face to face work was prohibited, no matter how fleeting. Others were less convinced they had a link with the society, with one performer noting they 'didn't have any direct dialogue with anyone'. Every interaction that took place when composing was myself to each performer, as opposed to creating a scenario where performers could interact with each other. Because I asked people to send recordings at different times throughout 2020, and did not keep a lot of the performers' piece updates after they sent me these recordings, this meant that many of the musicians were unaware who was performing until the final piece was released. My efforts at creating a community came from choosing musicians who mostly were based in Birmingham; however, this is largely a documentation of musicians I was working with, as opposed to something truly collaborative between them.

While the Covid-19 pandemic caused a lot of my plans to be halted or delayed which meant that foundational aspects of my practice couldn't be carried out, the process introduced the concept of how to utilise my creative practice in this new environment and how creative improvising could be included effectively in remote working. It allowed me to use creative improvising as a tool to create a composition that did not have to function as a live music piece. It also highlighted how I could create a work out of my collaborators' improvisational practice rather than just have improvisation sit on top of my pieces.

# Tlazōlteōtl

Text score. Composed September-November 2021.

**Submitted Documentation:** Recorded November 2021 at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire Recording Studios by Kris McGurran and Elice Ramsay-Slavic.

Personnel: Simon Paton (bass guitar), India Harding (voice), Joe Rhodes (guitar), Helena Bowen (harp), Holly Gowland (double bass), Karensa Cannan (electronics), Marcus Perks (drums).

Additional Performances:

May 2022 at Artefact, Birmingham. Personnel: Simon Paton (bass guitar), Joe Rhodes (guitar), Karensa Cannan (electronics), Simon Gajewski (drums).

June 2022 at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. Personnel: Simon Paton (bass guitar), Joe Rhodes (guitar), Holly Gowland (double bass/electronics), Tymek Jozwiak (drums).

*Tlazōlteōtl* is a text score that consists of written instructions for an ensemble of improvisers. I was interested in pieces that used a timeline to dictate a structure for improvisation-based performances, such as Act One of Jaka Berger's *Audible Life Stream* (2016) (as discussed in Chapter 1). While Berger's composition has a map of when the musicians play and some basic stimuli, I experimented with giving more information using this same format.

I started composing the piece by deciding on a potential instrumentation and considering which personnel would be most suitable. In this instance I decided I wanted a classically trained singer to blend in with a dense texture consisting of rhythm section instruments in order to shift the listener's focus from where it would traditionally be. Having a vocalist from this background was due to my growing interest in getting musicians with little to no experience in improvising to develop a practice within that field. I did this with the hope that a potential outcome might be that they joined and contributed towards the micro-society, in an effort to expand its musical diversity. I set about making a piece that used a singer with whom I had not worked with before, alongside a group of musicians whose practices I was more familiar with.

Whilst the piece is based around the performers' improvisational language, I wrote specific instructions for them including specifying timbres, range, techniques, dynamics, moods and textural colours. I thought of this composition as a place where they could use their improvisational skills whilst still following a strict compositional framework. I created a linear structure, which is how I feel most comfortable when composing.

Apart from myself on bass guitar, the choice of personnel was based on players who had these qualities:

- Double bass – A classically based improviser who was confident using a bow, performing extended techniques and playing largely drone-based passages
- Harp – A performer who had experience with extended techniques, twentieth-century modernism and an awareness of jazz harp traditions
- Electric guitar – A performer who had experience in metal and no wave performance.
- Drums – A performer with a rock background (preferably metal or hardcore punk) that was also comfortable playing in a free and beatless setting
- Electronics – A performer who can both interact with other performers as a texture as well as having the ability to create soundscapes
- Vocals – Someone from a classical background that could also sing without vibrato

The vocalist was the only musician I had not collaborated with before and who had had the least amount of improvising experience. This was deliberate as I wanted to see how that would affect the dynamic. There were some instrumentalists that I had worked with more frequently and was hoping to use this piece to develop relationships between all seven performers.

**Please listen to the recording of *Tlazōlteōtl* before proceeding with the following text.**

The piece itself used a timeline that provided a guide for structure. I decided that timings are approximate instead of fixed. This enabled the ensemble to extend and cut sections spontaneously if we felt compelled to do so. Around the time of recording, I had started doing solo performances which, while completely improvised, consciously made an effort to incorporate structure and pacing

into the proceedings. I approached *Tlazōlteōtl* with this same sense of how I would develop an improvisation performance. During the national lockdowns, I was experiencing severe anxiety attacks and decided to make the piece a reflection of those experiences, choosing to make the piece based on the intense feeling of going through an anxiety attack. As such I decided there would be two clear parts of the piece. Part one is concerned with an additional process, starting with electronics, whilst one instrument at a time gradually adds to the texture. I instructed the music to start diatonically and gradually get more angular and chaotic as the piece develops. The music halts halfway through, and I am the last performer to come in. I proceed to play an unaccompanied solo that marks the transition between parts one and two. This solo signals how the mood of the piece changes to that of a dense structure. The rest of the ensemble enter with a conversationalist approach to performance, until I cue long held notes around the 13 minute mark. This builds up until I cue another long held note that ends the piece. The notes ring out until guitar feedback is left. The recording itself was done in two takes. The take used is from Take 2, with some post-production editing. The intro was also shorted due to technical problems. I asked the engineer to splice Take 1's feedback as I felt that had a stronger ending. I also asked the engineer to keep the vocalists voice buried in the mix, due to my interest in burying vocal melodies behind a wall of sound. I liked the contrasting playing styles of the two bass players. The classical-based drones contrast with my playing, which was chaotic, atonal and utilised the distortion pedal (such as my bass solo at 7'56", which is my first entry in the piece).

The gap between the vocalist's prior experience with improvisation and that of the rest of the group is notable in the recording. The singer's style was largely diatonic and centred around traditional classical singing techniques. Whilst I would have liked to spend more time in the pre-planning stages of this composition helping her develop her improvisational vocabulary, conflicting schedules prevented this. I also found this extended to the rest of the group too who, while they were all players I had handpicked, had not had opportunities to develop a working relationship with each other beforehand, which is another common thread throughout the PhD research.





Figure 8: A photo of the debut live performance of *Tlazōlteōtl*.

Photo credit: Peter Bell.

During the recording session I told the ensemble about my aspirations to turn the recording session into a working band, later giving it the name Wow! Look! Nothing! Due to the members' different schedules, it proved difficult to make this a reality. Two live performances of *Tlazōlteōtl* have taken place, in May and June 2022. Both shows were for a condensed ensemble of a quartet line-ups, with different personnel on each gig, aside from the guitarist. In addition, both gigs were instrumental, which broke away from the original concept of the piece. Whilst still being based around the original structure and score using the same framework, many elements had to be re-adapted. To make the piece a full length for a set, the runtime was extended from 14 minutes to 22, and certain sections were stretched out to accommodate this. To make up for the missing parts, I performed an adaptation of the double bass (missing from the first gig) and the harp (missing from both gigs), while the double bassist at the second gig doubled on electronics. The drummers (on each separate gig) were both depts who I had played with in other contexts who came from improvising backgrounds. Because of all of these changes, this forced the performances to be radically different to the recording – however I felt both of them still contained the basic characteristics of the piece. I felt we benefitted from having the small group as this allowed us to develop more interplay between the

band. Listening back to the original recording after the performances, it left me feeling the rigidity was a hindrance.

What I found important about the piece that was not apparent when we did the recording, was that the moods within the piece were what gave the piece its compositional identity. The primary aim was establishing each sound world. These are:

- The sense of quiet calm at the beginning (0'00" on the recording)
- The introduction of uncertainty and textural building up (starting at 2'43" when the harp and electronics gradually break away from diatonic playing)
- The chaotic bass guitar solo firmly establishing this change in character (7'56")
- The new direction of the instrumental characteristics, where they re-enter playing more aggressive and visceral than before (8'38")
- Held chords showing a sense of intensity (10'25")
- Fast-paced section closing in on the claustrophobia (11'35")
- Feedback ending bringing things back to a new sparseness (14'28")

Each section could be stretched out for as long as needed; however, what usually happened live was that sections 1 and 2 were often rushed through and we would spend more time on sections 4, 5 and 6 deciding to stay in those sound worlds for longer.

The results from this composition and ensemble made it clear that the micro-society was formed by me asking performers from different backgrounds to play in my pieces, and often these musical connections would not develop past that point. I was intending for this piece to be a vehicle for large group improvising, however I believed the small band performances were more successful iterations as they allowed for more interplay.

## Chapter 3: Don't Exist Inside Your Own Head

Notation, graphics, text, and curated free improvisation. Composed January 2020-June 2022.

**Submitted Documentation:** Performed at Moseley Road Baths, 10 June 2022.

Recorded by Louis Briggs and Graham Harvey.

Personnel: [Green] Si Paton [TL] – bass guitar, Joe Rhodes – French horn, Alex Townend Bate – electric guitar, Maisy Neale – clarinet, Emily Abdy – violin, [Purple] Bruce Coates [TL] – soprano saxophone, Armand Malik – alto saxophone, Andrew Woodhead – harmonium, Kaila Whyte – synthesizers, Matthew Phillips – cello, [Blue] Steve Tromans [TL] – melodica, Tymek Jozwiak – drums, Robin Jax – electric guitar, Joshua Rochelle-Bates – bass guitar, Dani Blanco Albert – trumpet, [Red] Meg Diamond [TL] – flute, Roxanne Korda – voice, Lorenzo Prati – tenor saxophone, Max Thomas – baritone saxophone, James Gardner – trumpet, [Yellow] Leon Trimble [TL] – synthesizers, Lewis Burn – synthesizers, Peter Bell – bouzouki, Vato Klemmera – melodica, Wilf Rake – alto saxophone.

Debut iteration workshopped at CODA Fest June 2021.

Personnel: Si Paton (bass guitar/piano), James McIlwrath (viola/melodica/objects), Roxanne Korda (voice/flute/recorder), Dani Blanco Albert (trumpet/piccolo trumpet), Helena Bowen (harp).

The initial aim of the doctoral project was to create a large ensemble composition. This would incorporate as many performers as possible from the micro-society that I had worked with throughout the research period into one setting. The first attempt at this was during Sept 2019–March 2020, when I started a large ensemble piece that utilised directions on flashcards. I ran several trial workshops and was devising a system based on these cards. Despite this initial work, the piece ended up being halted and eventually abandoned altogether, due to the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. During lockdown, the large ensemble piece went through different iterations. I then proceeded to compose a new large ensemble piece where I would write an indefinite number of graphic scores, each personalised for an individual player. The idea was that when restrictions were lifted a performance could be realised where these scores could be combined and were interchangeable. I would then proceed to place each player in an installation-type environment so they could work within different spaces in the same area.



Figures 9 and 10: Two examples of graphic scores I composed for specific players during the initial trial workshop of *Don't Exist Inside Your Own Head* (hereafter known as *D.E.I.Y.O.H*)

I conducted a workshop with four musicians who were part of an education bubble I was in, set up in line with government law to maintain social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, to explore a prototype of this system. The intention was to conduct more workshops with other musicians from the micro-society, however several factors including COVID restrictions and

performers' schedules made this difficult. In this trial version, performers are given different graphic scores, which contain a series of images they order themselves, options to play external sheet music, and options to create duos, trios or quartets to perform free music. I found this version had issues with synchronisation. There were moments where, for example, a player would want to perform a duet with another musician. The second player would only be permitted to do so if they were at the same point in the cycle as the first performer. Because of this, I decided to completely revise the piece in order to maintain synchronicity.

## Don't Mind Control

As part of my professional practice, I started to organise a new concert series called Don't Mind Control in August 2020. This was during a period where lockdown rules were relaxed and performances (firstly outdoors, later indoors) were temporarily permitted. In line with government guidelines and risk assessments, two concerts were organised during that month at Centrala, an art gallery in the Birmingham district of Digbeth. I organised these events predominantly to help my own wellbeing, as during the first lockdown, my own mental health significantly deteriorated.

I focused on improvised music for these nights. This was because I felt the performances could work within a socially distanced environment without deterring too much from the experience, as well as the ability to keep performers within a social distancing bubble of 5 or 6 musicians. This was enough to create an evening of performances, and still be able to adhere to social distancing rules. The concept of the nights was to pair improvisers into duos (and occasionally solo sets) depending on whose playing styles I thought would complement whom, which would lead to a group performance to conclude the night.

These two events were vital in keeping the community active and I credit the concert series with refining my curatorial abilities. This led to recommencing the concert series in May 2021, when government guidelines allowed live performances again, enabling me to curate another 7 events that year. This was largely planned to support local improvisers, including many people with whom I had

collaborated regularly. The series gave a platform to musicians whilst their performance opportunities were limited.

The curation of these events would directly contribute to the piece. Having a regular performance platform for improvisers and creative performers allowed for pre-existing working relationships to be solidified and new ones to commence. The direct result was that the majority of performers were invited to take part in the large ensemble performance, and around half of them were able to commit. This idea of curation would play a major part in the infrastructure of the large ensemble piece, where I would explore performer curation throughout the work.



Figure 11: A photo of one of the performers – Kaila Whyte – at a Don't Mind Control event. Photo: John Convery.

## The Final Iteration and Performance

Please watch 0'00"-3'00", 5'00"-7'00", 9'00"-13'00", 20'30"-23'30", 30'30"-32'00", 35'00-40'00", 46'00"-49'00", and 52'00" from the video of *D.E.I.Y.O.H* before proceeding with the text.

In this final work, I decided it was most pragmatic to create a fixed structure, as this felt easier to navigate than making spontaneous decisions around which approaches to use. This technique has

often been applied to performances of Anthony Braxton's works, including pieces from his *Ghost Trance Music* and *Sonic Genome* series. The main difference was that in Braxton's music performers are invited to organise the structure themselves, whilst I chose to fix one that would be identical if future performances were to happen. By doing this, it allowed me to be in control of compositional pacing, keep using creative improvisation within linear frameworks, and the combinations of musical elements and personnel. The focus of *D.E.I.Y.O.H* ended up being an exploration of the spectrum of determinacy within an improvisatory context. Within this spectrum, four points within the scale were found that were the basis of the final piece.

- Free playing (the only parameters being who the performers play with and when)
- Graphic score (some compositional identity yet still working within abstract contexts)
- Text score (more direct instructional playing, yet without any specific note choices)
- Loose notation (based around fixed notation with a few elements being left for players' choice, in this case it was note lengths)

In the score, the ensemble is split into five sub-groups. The concept of dividing mid- to-large improvised ensembles into sub-groups is taken from pieces such as *Artificial Life 2007* by George Lewis, *Noisestra* by Mariam Razaeei, as well as Anthony Braxton's *Sonic Genome* and *Ghost Trance Music* systems, where the interactions with small ensemble improvising can exist within a larger framework. Each sub-group is assigned a team leader, who is in charge of the musical direction for their sub-group as well as a degree of creative decision making within sections. Each team leader is given a stopwatch in order to follow directions and to cue the rest of their ensemble. In order to avoid the sub-groups remaining static, I added sections on the score for musical interactions with the rest of the ensemble. This includes instructions to duet with a player from a different sub-group, as well as a section where the team leaders are engaged in a quintet performance.

As a musician who gravitates towards theatrical elements within improvised music contexts, as well as my interest in creating a strong visual aesthetic, creating an environment which could enable these approaches was a conscious decision. The first thing I did was to introduce a dress code. Having used costume embellishments during improvised performances before, such as using

sunglasses in the Phame composition *Throwing Shade (No Fuck You)*, as discussed in the previous chapter, this time I looked at colour as a possible way to do this. Therefore, for the performance, I asked each sub-group to wear a different colour: green, purple, red, blue or yellow. This was done in order to create a visual identity for the performance, as well as an indicator as to which musicians were in which sub-groups. The choice of venue played a part in the visual identity of the piece. We performed it at Moseley Baths – a listed Victorian swimming pool that was under renovation. The visual of performing in the space provided an environment that was complimentary to the characteristics of the composition itself.

I employ a mixture of external material and instructions within the score. For example, the text scores are often single words or a sentence that could be fitted into the score, whilst the graphic scores and notational aspects are both external pieces of music. The team leader instructs the subgroup to play a particular passage (e.g. they hold up four fingers to indicate to the ensemble play section four). The order and amount of times each passage played is decided by the team leader. Each subgroup is given a different graphic score, showing traces of the original idea of customisation, however the notation is the same for each group. The latter is to introduce a theme that could go along the piece and be seen as a motivic identity, no matter the instrumentation, personnel or location. The ending is a text score that the whole ensemble play, directing “unfinished phrases”. Within this, players are instructed to leave the stage in a specific order, determined by drawing numbers. This gradually thins the texture until the piece disintegrated away.

A few of the instructions on the score were designed with specific players in mind. For example, at twenty minutes, there is an instruction for the team leader of the blue group to perform an unaccompanied solo. I wrote this with a specific player in mind: Steve Tromans, who was playing melodica in the performance. Because of his decades of experience playing jazz and improvised music, I was certain that he would perform a really compelling solo. Indeed, many audience members and performers came up to me afterwards talking about how much they loved his solo.

The piece incorporates a mixture of my experience as an event curator, as well as the use of aleatoric methods. I curated the sub-groups in order to devise the best combination of backgrounds,



contrasts and playing styles. With duos I paired one group using my curation experience (red and green), with the other chosen at random (purple and blue). The final sequence uses chance methods. Everyone in the ensemble picks a number drawn out of a hat. This told them in which order to leave the stage. It is up to the player who drew #25 to conclude the performance.



Figure 12: A photo of the debut live performance of *D.E.I.Y.O.H.* Photo credit: Lewis Burn (one of the performers who took this after his turn to exit the stage).

The performance starts off with duos between blue and purple groups. These were decided via chance. Each pairing enters one after the other. At 5'30", the music cuts to the green group, where I as team leader conduct the group with notational voicings. I allowed a large amount of potential creative interpretation with the voicings; for example, I used tremolo on my bass guitar to create the illusion of sustained notes. At 6'43" the red group used "disrupt" as an instruction – disruption being a common trait in my work. One performer in the group was Roxanne Korda, a contemporary opera singer who I wanted in the ensemble due to her theatrical presence. Her decision was to interpret that instruction a literally. In this case Korda directly walked up to each sub-group and sabotaged their performances, including taking other performers' sheet music away, stopping timers, wrapping other performers in masking tape, making changes to the pre-sets on the modular synth units and stomping loudly on a bench. This caused the other members of the red group to start engaging with the space including walking around, despite not engaging with the level of chaotic disruption that Korda utilised. I really liked her performance, and it was well received, due to the theatricality that it added. This made me realise that I do not need to write theatrical instructions, but to use people willing to take their improvisations in that direction. One of the underlying threads of my portfolio is that each piece has a form of musical disruption happening within the piece. I have achieved this by either writing an instruction in the score, implying it within the musical ideas, or it is added in by the performers themselves (including myself).

I asked the red and green groups to do free duets with each other at 12'38", although one of the performers mistimed and did the action early at 10'13". These pairings were chosen by me, mirroring the idea of the pairings at the Don't Mind Control nights. As it required players to move, it enabled more theatrical elements. This happens while the purple group start playing graphic scores, being directed by their team leader. Before they started playing, there was a visible discussion onstage where the sub-group are deciding what to do. This is halted by the team leader solo played by Steve Tromans at 20'38" and the rest of the blue group came in at 23'05". When the rest of the sub-group enter, Tromans stops playing to allow them to musically respond to his solo, before rejoining the ensemble. Gradually the other sub-groups added to the soundworld, with the purple group preparing to include flexible notation at 30'42", green getting ready to perform their graphic score at 31'50" and

yellow getting ready to perform a text score too. Due to many members in the yellow group being interested in electronic music, I put the text score “thuddy low register”, as I felt it was a gesture that electronic instruments could thrive with.

I had intended for there to be a free improvisation for the team leaders at approximately 35’. We start playing as a quintet at 37’01” and in the video you can see me trying to get the attention of the other team leaders. Due to them not picking up the cue, the distance between us and the reverb in the room, this made improvising with them difficult to pull off. At 39’37” the rest of the yellow and red groups perform guide tone backings from the flexible notation to add density to the texture. This gradually disintegrates while the yellow, blue and red team leaders drop out of the free playing – the latter two move onto graphic scores at 44’52”. Shortly after, the green and yellow groups attempt to perform a 10-piece improvisation, however, just as with the quintet team leaders’ improvisation, it proved difficult to attempt to interact with musicians on the other side of the stage.

The final section was based on the instruction “unfinished phrases”. The performers start this part at different places, with the purple and blue sub-groups starting it at 46’27” and the remaining three sub-groups joining in at 48’47”. I was looking for a way the piece could resolve with all the sub-groups coming together performing the same instruction as one unit. In order that I could keep the texture constantly shifting, I decided to have each performer leave the stage one by one. Before the performance, each musician drew a number determining the order in which each player leaves. This process starts at 52’41” when I cue the person who drew #1, keyboardist Andrew Woodhead, to leave the stage. I then tried to get the person who drew #2, trumpeter James Gardener, to do the same when I noticed that he did not see Woodhead leave. Initially I said to the performers that when it was their turn to leave, they could choose when to go, however during the performance, the anxiety of making the section run smoothly took over and I instead started instructing people when to leave. I noticed that some of the musicians who had portable instruments would leave still playing, carrying the sound with them while it decayed. My own number was #13 and I left the stage with a notebook that had the order of people leaving written in it. From the back of the room, behind the audience, I spent the rest of the performance cueing when the rest of the ensemble left the stage. The piece concluded at 59’53”

with another captivating solo performance by violinist Emily Abdy, who drew #25. This created a very effective way for the composition to end.

One of the key moments I would have changed would have been how I organised the ending. In Fred Lonberg-Holm's piece *Lightbox* (discussed in chapter 1) he explained that when performers are instructed to stop playing, which is done by each performer being given a light which is turned off, they are "invited" to stop playing as opposed to being instructed to stop immediately. He does this in order to let performers resolve musical phrases first. (Lonberg-Holm, 2020: personal communication). When each performer was instructed to leave the stage for *D.E.I.Y.O.H*, they would end each phrase abruptly. This abruptness is appropriate to the score, where the text instruction I gave the ensemble at that point was "phrases that feel unfinished". For future performances, I will alter the score so that I can allow for the resolution of musical phrases, and I will emphasise to the ensemble in advance that when performers are instructed to leave the stage, this will be in their own time and not abruptly. Despite the fact that other players that I had intended to be part of the performance dropped out during preparation, with a selection of performers agreeing to take part at short notice, I do see this version of the ensemble as synonymous with the project. I have found myself being so attached to the performance that I find it interchangeable with the composition itself. If another ensemble or different personnel of collaborators were to perform this, I remain unconvinced that the outcome would be the same. This is partly because that specific performance naturally gave way to a three-act structure with a specific performer being the focal presence for each act (act one belonging to Korda, act two belonging to Tromans, and act three belonging to Abdy). The circumstances that I created for this performance is ultimately how I see the composition itself.

The choice of venue, the way the ensemble interact with the venue, ensemble personnel, and the interactions each of them have with the rest of the group (such as sub-group formations and interactions with other sub-groups) gave the piece its compositional identity, rather than anything that was pre-composed. What the score was able to do was to enable, or to give permission to the musical events that took place. It allowed team leaders to act as guides to those with less experience in creative music performance. It allowed certain performers to produce impactful moments, such as

Korda's literal interpretation of disruption, Tromans' captivating melodica solo or Abdy's dramatic ending. The choice of venue impacted on the performance. Taking place in a drained Victorian swimming bath, a significant amount of reverb was apparent during the performance. Several performers stated how difficult it was to hear anything. My duo partner in the red team said to me afterwards how difficult it was to hear me play so they had to make educated guesses on what I was doing based on my physical movements. The way the ensemble had to interact with the space has ended up as a crucial part of the piece, even though the choice of venue was not included in the score. Despite this, I could have perhaps chosen more moments, like with Tromans' melodica solo, where smaller portions of the ensemble were playing in order to balance the density. I do think the ensemble would have had an easier time performing the instructions in an acoustically drier space; nevertheless the intensity that came out of performing in this space is, I consider, synonymous with the piece.

Because a large number of these musicians were people I worked with previously, I had a strong idea musically of the elements that they were going to bring to the piece and how each musical personality would work. I did notice that many friendship groups were not necessarily expanded on and cliques between the different idioms still existed. With performers from different stylistic backgrounds, generations, musical approaches and experience with improvising, the piece was a reflection of my personal interest in these different ways of composing and performing. I realised that I approach composing for improvisers with some degree of a linear narrative, which has been apparent throughout the compositions in this portfolio. Through improvising I know which soundworlds I want to create and the idiosyncratic playing styles of each of the performers helped me to achieve that. I do not necessarily get the players to create the structure and the rules of this micro-society. Instead of this, the rules are laid out and individual interpretation of the performers is how the pieces achieve their identity. I create works using my vocabulary of approaches (including graphic scores, traditional notation, aural transmission, text and devising instructions, conduction, and free playing) which can be utilised whenever needed. This piece confirmed that I do not need to create my own improvisation system to be able to achieve that.

## Conclusion

Through the projects undertaken over the past six years, I have developed a localised micro-community with diverse creative practices that engage with improvisation to some degree. I have gained a group of collaborators that are willing to work on creative music projects with me. I curated each of these of these ensembles in different ways and presented different compositional aspects for each of them. Being a part of the third generation of creative music, by looking at peers such as Chris Pitsiokos, Mariam Rezaei and Moss Freed, I have recognised where I position myself in the field currently. My contribution to knowledge explores how the ensemble and personnel curation can be an integral part of the composition process. I expand on Hunter's outcome of ensemble curation (2019: 62), and I explore it's use as a foundation for this research. The hybridised notational system that I have explored in this project is one that I will continue to work with after my doctorate. With the exception of *Tlazōlteōtl*, which only uses text instructions, each piece has a combination of two or more elements: free playing, text instructions, traditional notation and graphic notation, with *D.E.I.Y.O.H* utilising all four of these. This gave me the results I was happiest with, as I was able to put these elements within a linear compositional framework. The curatorial aspect I implemented in the compositions was most successful when I selected musicians early on in the compositional process, such as with some of the performers in *Tlazōlteōtl*. By the time I did the revisions or re-recordings for *T.S.(N.F.Y)*, *Edgeless* or *Y.A.A.M.W.E.L*, I developed my understanding of who, out of my selection of collaborators, would have a playing style or musical approach that would complement both the composition and the ensemble. Another aspect I will take away into future projects is to not prioritise the pre-planned compositional elements over the creative improvisation, which is what happened in the ending of *D.E.I.Y.O.H*, where following the instructions strictly, and making each performer end abruptly, diminished the impact of the performance. Conversely, during the live performances of *Tlazōlteōtl*, in comparison to the studio recording, by giving ourselves the ability to extend sections and approach each instruction less rigidly than on the recording, gave way for a pair of compelling performances.

The fact that none of these projects were funded meant that I was reliant on the goodwill of the musicians, and their commitment and reliability was constantly in flux. The micro-society was looser than I would ideally have liked. Many factors, including performers relocating to other areas, commitments with work, family and study, and a hesitation for some performers to get heavily involved, which on reflection was partially to do with my approaches being too far removed from their current practice, impacted on its success. The advantage of having a roster made up of loose affiliates meant that I could experiment with multiple combinations of performers and my work could be performed, even if the first choice of performers were unavailable. I could also adapt many of my compositions so that I was not reliant on people with specialist skills such as specific instruments, techniques or expertise with idioms. It meant that on the occasions when people were unable to commit to a project or pulled out at short notice, I was able to contact people that I felt would be complementary relatively quickly. With the projects I have undertaken that have been funded, such as the third year of my festival Thinking/Not Thinking that I curated and produced in 2019, I notice how much more committed the performers are, and hope the experiences of both types of projects will make a compelling argument for more funding opportunities in the future.

A common thread throughout my work is the concept of musical disruption, which I am defining as the act of having a musical idea being interrupted or attempted to be interrupted by either another musician or a compositional element. Every piece in the portfolio either instructs or implies it in some way. This includes direct text instructions (such as in *Y.A.A.M.W.E.L.*, and *D.E.I.Y.O.H.*), through post-production (*Everything Sucks*), within the performance itself (in *Tlazōlteōtl* the group is cut off after my bass solo, whilst in *T.S(N.F.Y)* this is done spontaneously and with through the musical development I have undertaken with co-composer Jessica Schwartz), or implied within the notation (*Edgeless*). This concept is a factor that gives my work its compositional identity.

Often the trans-idiomatic nature of the work was a theoretical possibility, rather than one that was actually achieved. Having direct access to a pool of music students meant that they were often the first people I reached out to before practising musicians based in the West Midlands. This meant that the balance between musicians that studied at or were alumni of the institution was significantly



higher than those who were not. Despite this, there were still several opportunities for knowledge transfer between players of different disciplines, with a selection of them becoming collaborators with each other, which likely would not have happened had it not been for me asking them to be involved in my work.



Figure 13: A photo of me with a selection of collaborators. Photo: Brian Homer

Noticing that the core group was perhaps not as stable as I envisioned, with many people relocating or in some cases stopping playing music altogether, meant there were remarkably few people that I play with at the moment that I was playing with when starting the PhD. I have accepted that this is a collective that will always be in a constant state of flux, with people coming and going when it is convenient for them. The results of this project have also left me to decide to focus for the time being on solo improvised performances and to commit to regular touring. Due to the previously mentioned difficulties with having a loose assembly of collaborators as opposed to a stable one, I believe this is the most productive use of my creative endeavours at this time. Whilst I do have plans already in place for future large-scale creative ensemble works, being a solo performer is the primary outlet I plan to focus my attention on. One of the more remarkable results was that two of my closest



collaborators formed during the research are based in Los Angeles and The Hague, breaking away from the hyper-local research aim I had. Indeed, looking at collectives such as the record label LUME, founded by improvisers Cath Roberts and Dee Byrne, their collaborators are national rather than hyper-local, with their bands and compositional projects featuring improvisers from London, Hastings, Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester and Newcastle, as well as occasionally using mainland European musicians. The outcome of making my practice less location specific means that I will be able to apply the research and compositional practices in other contexts, for other communities, and establish a micro-society consisting of trans-idiomatic performers, both nationally and internationally. This, in turn, will create more performances of musicians that would not have had the opportunity to collaborate and perform together previously. By composing work that is accessible to both self-taught performers as well as those with less experience in creative improvisation, including those from formally trained backgrounds, the work can also be applied in a variety of educational contexts. I found the most successful components were when visual or theatrical elements were utilised, for example during the endings of *D.E.I.Y.O.H* or *Y.A.A.M.W.E.L* and this is something I would wish to develop in future works.

My curation of ensembles led to finding musicians of different stylistic backgrounds to work together. By looking at trans-idiomatic creative improvising, it enabled space for multiple disciplines. In pieces such as *Everything Sucks*, the illusion of this micro-society was more prevalent than a physical robust one, whilst with *Edgeless* and *Y.A.A.M.W.E.L*, the pieces served to explore whether these methods could be applied to fixed contemporary music ensembles, despite choosing my collaborators for the final versions of the pieces. The curation of each ensemble required an understanding of each performer's skill set and musical approaches. This is something that comes out in the performance rather than the score. To be pragmatic with performers' commitments flexibility was needed, despite having specific people in mind for many of the compositions. Curating is part of my composition process, but rarely was it worked into the score itself. The exception is *Everything Sucks*, which was created out of recordings of improvisers as opposed to pre-planning the structure beforehand. With each piece, I have an idea of where each musician will fit into the soundworld. This

informs which circumstances I will put in place when composing. In *D.E.I.Y.O.H*, this included which musicians would form which sub-groups, and creating scenarios, both by design and through aleatoric methods, which could feature specific players and inspire compelling performances.

The shared-musical language was developed through utilising these hybridised approaches, which allowed performers from different backgrounds to engage with the material. This micro-society that performed my compositions were a group that were created through musical bonds I had with each performer, as opposed to writing for an already established collective. I view curating and assembling the combinations of performers as an integral part of the composition process due to how the musicians individual playing styles will interact and contrast with each other. I conclude that this aspect is most successful when decided at an early stage of this process. As well as personnel, the circumstances were created through choice of performance space, a dress code within the composition, as in *T.S(N.F.Y)* and *D.E.I.Y.O.H*, and the musical material provided. In many of my compositions, I would create a structure that would determine when events would happen where performers would use creative improvisation to interpret the material. Through working in all these different projects, I have established a group of people from different idioms I collaborate well with and compositional approaches that I have found to be effective. My portfolio is about the use of possibilities and the opportunity for inviting inclusivity and diversity. The way I compose shows there is a space for several different musical approaches. My work as a curator has shown the possibilities of performer combinations. The contrast between this performer curation mixed with the space for multiple approaches to creative improvising gives my music its identity.

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## Appendix

### Results from *Everything Sucks* survey

Below are anonymised responses from 10 of the 19 performers who took part in the *Everything Sucks* project.

Q1. Did you feel that what you were doing was contributing towards a shared musical language between different approaches?

1. Yes
2. Yes it was a different approach to normal perhaps
3. Only because I had some experience with punkestra + knew about what you were trying to do
4. Yeah sure! But the different approaches still load into one piece of music.
5. Yes!
6. Yes, the resultant piece felt deeply communicative, one could hear the different musical languages, and one could also hear how they formed a shared etymology.
7. Yes
8. kind of, but it was only something i fully realised after listening to the complete piece, as that was when i realised what other instruments were used/ how the recordings were intended to be assembled
9. Yeah, I think so... I like the idea of there being an infinite number of ways of developing unique musical languages, be it individually or within its own musical society/ecosystem, officially or unofficially.
10. I feel that all participants fully "understood" the performance, even if the language involved was slightly different for some than others.

Q2. Did you think that the piece brought together different branches of the Birmingham experimental community?

1. Yes
2. Definitely had my music out next to people I wouldn't have met other wise
3. To an extent yes, but due to the nature of how it was put together I didn't feel as connected with other facets of the community through the process itself
4. Yes, but i didn't have any direct dialogue with anyone.
5. Absolutely. It was amazing how many people in the chat I didn't know. I can't wait to hopefully meet everyone in person eventually

6.	It's hard to define what would be authentically 'birmingham' but I'd say the inclusion of players in the area and capturing a certain Brummy pessimism contributed to the effect.
7.	Yes
8.	definitely, there were a lot of different ~experimental~ performers involved in this project and you can hear tinges of them in the work
9.	I think there were lots of different areas of musical backgrounds brought into it, so yes.
10.	Yes - as a relative outsider to this community, I felt that the piece brought people together from disparate musical practices in a very interesting way.

Q3. Being in a fragmented state for a while longer, is this a practical solution to working for the time being?

1.	Yes
2.	Yes it is one peep has not the best but one of the easier ones
3.	It has to be - but I'd also involve performers more with each other as well as with yourself
4.	It is nice to make stuff and have it used but there is no way two way relationship with this music for me.
5.	I found it really efficient. The recordings themselves didn't take long at all and it was a very efficient process!
6.	I feel like there is a lot of untapped possibilities in this way of working, I would like to see it formalised and worked with further.
7.	Yes
8.	depends on the kind of music you make really
9.	For the while, I think so, although I would also be happy to continue exploring this solution indefinitely as it offers its own unique advantages and disadvantages by ways of considering and responding to either other people's work or a brief that is given.
10.	I have had previous experience of working in fragments from long distance collaborations, so am aware that working in this manner can be practical. For now, it's a useful go between, although I wouldn't want it to be a default for future work, unless under very specific circumstances.

Q4. Should I leave the piece as a document of this time period or should I keep it going as an evolving project (such as a video or live performance)?

1.	Be interesting to see it keep evolving
2.	Keep it going cause it's cool
3.	I'd say leave it as a document - but use it as reference for future projects
4.	Do you want to? I don't think it is relevant what I think.
5.	Definitely see no harm in allowing the project to evolve into further things!



6.	I think it could work as both, part of the living legend/aural tradition. A documentation that is reiterated. Recollection becoming myth becoming legend.
7.	Keep going
8.	i remember you said you wanted to put an end to the project after having thought about/ worked on it for so long. it would be nice to have it serve as a documentation of this time period. but also visuals are helpful for audiences to further understand the work (and releasing it on youtube etc would bump streams hahah)
9.	I think there's a lot to be said for it existing as piece of its time, reflecting the current nature of collaboration. I would certainly be intrigued to see how it evolves as well though.
10.	The piece could be evolved into a live performance or sound installation. Definitely would be interesting to hear in 360° sound.

Q5. What new ways do you think improvisers and experimental musicians will have to work with for the foreseeable future?

1.	Collaborating digitally, remote performance,
2.	Probably like this or online maybe even vr chat rooms etc
3.	Zoom collaborations are happening, but can be developed further. (look at Dani Blanco's 'Autohoodening' for an example that's more rooted in opera)
4.	Nothing new, just adapting the old.
5.	Multimedia and technology is going to be a big one I think. Living in a very virtual, but also visual world will have to play a part in some way. Adding video, lighting etc.
6.	I think strengthening communities and exploring the limits of solitude/solidarity.
7.	This way makes sense. Everyone improvising and responding to material set by a "director". Or building a piece player by player and responding to each other's recordings.
8.	probably not a new thing but the first that comes to mind is the open score project paul is making the mmus composers do
9.	I think the deprivation of live performance where immediate responses/playing off one other in the moment can provide a more considered approach for each individual instead... Perhaps it could be thought of as a different branch of improvisation if you like, where a piece would ultimately sound different than it would if performers were given the same brief to work on in person. Or perhaps it wouldn't sound too different, except the need for arranging segments of recorded improvisation might be more necessary in this medium as it hasn't always felt as organic to me improvising over a webcam type session than in person, therefore perhaps being more effective with someone piecing it all together afterwards. This could certainly give a new way of working with previously devised material once we can perform live again, responding to pre-recorded material as well as live music in the moment.
10.	Socially distanced collaboration remains in place for the short-term. Mixed media projects could offer new working methods for future performance pieces.

Q6. Can you envision doing collaborative projects in the future with some of the musicians involved of who's work you're not yet familiar with?

1. Always looking for new collaborations!
2. Hell yeah
3. Definitely!
4. Yes.
5. Yes, definitely
6. Yes, I enjoy working with people who do not know me, or I them.
7. Yes. That would be great.
8. perhaps
9. Yes, I think so. Personally I'm willing to give any collaborations a try, regardless of my familiarity with the individual's style... I quite enjoy the surprise of adapting to someone else's style I'm unfamiliar with, as I would become more familiar with them as a result. Maybe it would be fun to continue working with people who's work I'm unfamiliar with for that reason.
10. Yes!