Roger Mills: Sound Artist

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Roger Mills is a sound artist whose creative practice and research focuses on electro-acoustic and networked music performance, improvisation and experimental radio[1]. His work includes large-scale international network collaborations, composition and sound design, studio albums and radio production. Credits include sound design for multiscreen cinema film *Hindsight* - Ignition Films (UK), the sound score for BAFTA award winning dance theatre performance *At Swim Two Boys* by Earthfall (UK), and a Golden Eye award for his multi-stream contrapuntal radio performance *Idea of South*. His sound works have been exhibited at the Prague Quadrennial and the V&A, London (2012) as well as ViViD Sydney[2]. His background is in Western and free improvisatory music with an emphasis on experimental and avant-garde contexts drawing on influences from musicians such as John Cage, Miles Davis and Jon Hassell. He is a classically trained trumpet player whose exploration of extended playing techniques has led him into novel sonic territory in free musical improvisation. From the late 1990s, he started to work collaboratively, first with Furtherfield, a London based Net art collective, a path that led him to found the intercultural network music ensemble, Ethernet Orchestra.

Roger improvises sound with musicians across the Internet, first listening, reflecting on what is heard and responding and often when each player finds they meet one another's musical challenge, a state of flow is experienced. They have reached a point when they no longer consciously look for things and enter a deep shared experience. Whilst collaborative musical improvisatory performance is at the heart of his creative practice, research based in that practice also plays pivotal role. Through his PhD and subsequent writings[3], he has developed an understanding of how to generate new knowledge by channelling and interpreting existing information through appropriate theoretical frameworks. The contributions he has made to new knowledge include ways in which "qualities of sound can evoke cultural representation in the mind of a musician" as well as in collaborating musicians and lessons about methods for performing music with traditional instruments. The research also elucidates the crucially important role of digital technologies in a field where collaborative performances across different locations and different cultural contexts are "intrinsically networked". This innovative "inter-cultural tele-improvisation made possible by pervasive global internet structures enables its participants to experience and absorb cultural differences through creative performance practices[4].

In the interview that follows, he describes his state of awareness during improvisatory playing across the Internet when there is no room for immediate reflection in the moment.

Q: Could you say something about your current creative work?

R: The creative work I do has most recently focused on telematic improvisatory music making. Improvisatory music performed through the Internet. It involves conceptualising what it is to play with other people in different locations and cultures, and the methodological and creative and cognitive components of doing that. Creating new work as improvisations spontaneously, with people in dispersed parts of the world. It is collaborative networked music performance but not necessarily to an audience. While my group 'Ethernet Orchestra' have performed twice in the last two months to located audiences, we initially formed by just meeting and improvising online with just us musicians as audience. Our last album, Diaspora was produced from edits of these types of sessions as well as live venue performances where there may be a few of us in one place performing with another two or three of online streamed into the performance space. Ethernet Orchestra performances emphasise intercultural interaction and what we

can learn from each other. For instance, we have a Mongolian throat singer and horse fiddle player, and when I spoke to him about what we had been doing, he articulated how he viewed our improvisations in a way that directly related to his own culture. He talked about his musical responses to a particular passage that was quite slow and unmetered and how he drew on Mongolian Long Songs to respond. In particular how some of the harmonic progressions and note durations were reminiscent of feelings generated by Long Songs, which can relate to geography or folkloric mythology. I find it interesting that some of the feelings generated by these accidental musical confluences somehow act on all of the musicians despite them being unaware of the cultural significance of a musical response. For example, the guitarist commented on how this particular passage reminded him of the grass plains of the Mongolian Steppes5.

When referring to the ways in which musicians in my ensemble and/or research view their experiences of tele-improvisatory interaction, I have found that it is often filtered through their own cultural lens.   In other words, the way that musicians perceive and act upon (interact in) a musical passage is anchored in their individual social or cultural experiences, which may be unknown to the other musicians. In the above example, the Mongolian musician perceived a section in the improvisation as reminiscent of patterns of sound in a Mongolian Long Song, even though the musician/s playing it would be unaware of what a Long Song was. He then responded with playing something that was inspired by a Long Song, which included similar melodic and harmonic fragments found in a Long Song.

I think the creative process is the outcome with improvisation. The artifact or recording is a copy of that process that doesn't necessarily contain everything in the original outcome.

…in improvisation, its often thought that what you capture as an artefact, as a recording in other words, is not what actually happened at the time. It's thought that you can't ever really capture what happens in a musical or sonic moment. You can only ever capture a recording of it so there is always this distinction between listening back to a recording, say for instance the last recording I did we released an album at the end of last year with a sax player I met online and then we, in person in Germany performed a concert the next evening which was purely improvised. It was a recording of an audience focused concert event that in retrospect and listening back brought up things for me that weren't there at the time or I don't' remember at the time. I am quite interested in that perspective as a musician because I often listen back to recordings, particular those to an audience, and I think "Oh I don't remember playing that." Sometimes I think, "I didn't know I could do that!" so in a way playing to an audience in terms of the *process p*rovides an avenue or framework for you to extend yourself in a way that you don't if you are playing a solo by yourself or in a studio environment with other musicians…although there's gradations there…

Once you're in an improvisation with other musicians, I often find that you get into what Cziksentmihalyi describes as a flow state where temporality becomes distorted and you get lost in the music essentially. He describes it in a way that it's the moment when your skill level meets the challenge at hand. With those other musicians once you get to that point of completely locking into that point of skill level meets the challenge of those other musicians in terms of the improvisation, that's when you start to lose track of that. So that becomes part of the process as well so listening back to the 'product' or the artefact in the recording, that's what I mean, you can hear things in it, sense things in it that you don't remember being there. It's because of that temporal distortion because you've actually gone into some sort of ethereal state.

Q: Does the word reflection have a particular meaning for you?

R: For me reflection could be best described in a spatial and temporal way. There might be a momentary reflection on what you have just heard or what you have played, which might become a reflection on the formulation of future responses. Maybe a way to describe it would be when you are reflecting on something somebody else just played, that is you have just perceived what they have done or what you have done and you process that in a conscious way to formulate a response or an understanding about what it is that you have just done or will now do. That's what can happen in the moment. That is different from reflecting over a longer period of time when you might listen back as with previous recordings, reflecting on what you have just played and thinking 'How could I do that again because I really liked what I did there?' "I liked that texture, I wonder what other scenarios that could be used in."

In improvisation, the reflection is about what other people are giving you, as it were, through sound. I am not only responding to what other people do but how they are responding to me. I see it as having a reciprocal nature. As I also play notated music, I would say that it happens with composed music as well. There is the initial sight reading that takes a focused mind but once familiarity with the musical patterns sets in, a synchrony of sound and pattern recognition takes over. Once you become very familiar with a piece your eyes start to just float over the notes guided by sound. There is something about the embodied nature of sound, whether it's guiding you over the musical structure or the experience of the sound you can quite easily find yourself in a semi -meditative state. This is what is often described as a flow state, i.e. once the musician's skill level is matched in the difficulty of enacting the written music, e.g. and the musician's ability to comprehend and replicate what they have on the score is met, then it is quite easy to experience that flow state.

Q: In the improvised situation, isn't that different insofar as you are doing active invention of sound in the moment in response to other sounds?

R: Yes, someone has to fill that space initially with a sound so other people can respond and that in itself can necessitate invention on the spot. Now whether that is qualitatively more creative than interpreting notes on a score, I am not the one to answer that. I love improvising because on a personal level it provides me with more challenges.

The main thing with reflecting on practice is that it is on-going and that is not a static thing. It constantly brings up surprises that you don't expect. That's what I find the most exciting and the most challenging because sometimes it can highlight things I find difficult, but sometimes it can also provide possibilities for the future work in terms of how I can use the reflection I do in my research. My practice is a number of different things and you reflect in a different way in each of those scenarios. That is probably the most important thing to me; reflections are different in different scenarios. Reflecting on listening to a recording of an improvisation I can find myself listening back to sounds that are more complex than I imagined I could create and that is both exciting and unexpected.

Q: How do you judge in detail what is more complex?

R: Probably in two ways: one is on the purely technical level: for instance, it might be how fast I play a particular set of notes. That's where I think' I didn't know I could play like that. That sounds really good. It is just that element of surprise- I can play that but I didn't know I could. I love that! It's a confidence booster. I feel fairly able and confident in what I do but those moments of stretching yourself just that little bit further, for any musician there will always be moments of surprise. I would say that's got a lot to do with the audience being there.

Q: Apart from the technical judgment you make what other kinds are there?

R: On a purely sonic level there have been moments when I have thought I have heard harmonics, which are basically composites of frequencies in a sound, that I didn't know the trumpet could actually make, or that I could make. And while that does not necessarily require a lot of technical skill, it might be the mixture of breath and timbre in a sound that you think, when you hear them together, 'Oh that's interesting I haven't heard that in my playing before'. There is also the engagement I feel with an improvisation and that is shared between the musicians and audience if there is one. This is more difficult to define but there is a kind of sensorial feedback loop either between musicians themselves or if an audience is present this will include them as well. I think about it as sharing the experience of a journey with peaks, troughs and diversions. There is a metaphor that describes this as a musical landscape in which you move through, or it moves independently from you. Think about it when you next listen to a piece of music, which one you feel it is that you are experiencing.

Q: If improvisation gives you more challenge, does it also give you more surprises?

R: Yes, it does. One thing that I really love about it, particularly in a collaborative context, is that when you get into that flow state it is dialogical. You really feel like you are having a good conversation and sharing an experience of depth.

Q: You say that sometimes listening to a recording of an improvised performance you hear things that you don't remember doing. Can you say a little more about that?

R: I am trying to think of an example. A good one is a recent performance I did with a saxophonist in a duo I have called Nada. It was a live performance in Germany and when I listened to what I was doing after the performance, there were parts I played that I felt I might not have been able to do previously. That's where the surprise comes. There are moments of technique that I haven't heard myself do before and moments of complexity where I think 'I didn't know I could do that'.

Doing a PhD gave me an understanding of the importance of a theoretical perspective in which to interpret information, and how you can construct knowledge from looking at information through a particular framework. Previously I did not have a basis on which to interpret what I was doing myself or hearing from my fellow musicians. I would say that new practitioner knowledge that has emerged from my practice-led research is in understanding. I would categorise these as follows:

1. Knowledge – This is what I learnt from analysing and evaluating the case study performances in my thesis. An example of this is what emerged with the Mongolian musician, e.g. the ways in which qualities of sound can evoke cultural representation in the mind of a musician. And how these same qualities produce analogous feelings in the collaborating musicians despite them being unaware any specific cultural representation they may have triggered. This occurred repeatedly with reference to other musicians' culture specific representations, the resulting interactions, and their verbalized reflections on those interactions.

2. Methodology - thinking about how my practice as a musician (when I compose or improvise) develops new knowledge, and I immediately go back to the sense of this being methodological e.g. approaches to playing particular passages such as manipulating breathiness in the production of a tone, or designing soundscapes by different recording methods, placement of microphones, setting up a mood through harmony or dissonance. This practice-based knowledge is achieved through a process, and purpose of, developing a work, which can be a performance, recording, sound design, installation etc. It is often trial and error in that it focuses on achieving a desired outcome for the work at hand. The evaluation of which changes each time and is dependent on the context in which the work is being developed.

Q. Do you see yourself as expert in your field?

R: I think that having gone through a PhD I feel the level of knowledge that I have gained about the particular topic of understanding the way musicians improvise through the Internet.etc.is an expertise that I have that is unique to what I have been able to achieve in my practice and my research. So I have reached a level of expertise in there that I can now apply to other contexts and I feel confident about that. In terms of my musical expertise I see that as an evolutionary thing and that will continue growing. I'd be less happy to say I am a musical expert.

Q: Any final thoughts?

I have enjoyed it… the main thing with reflecting on practice is that it is ongoing and that is not a static thing. It constantly brings up surprises that you don't expect. That's what I find the most exciting and the most challenging. Because sometimes it can bring up things I find difficult but sometimes it can also be very exciting as well in terms of thinking about possibilities for the future in terms of how I can use the reflection I do in my research. My practice is a number of different things and you reflect in a different way in each of those scenarios. That is probably the most important thing I would want to say- that reflections are different in different scenarios.

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1 Website: http://www.eartrumpet.org

2 Recent work includes the sound score for flow#1-3#fließen an immersive multiscreen animation by the tranSTURM collective exhibited at the Galeries, Sydney, for VIVID2016, and the acclaimed studio album Mirror Image by his duo Nada 2015.Other performances, exhibitions and presentations include Memory Flows (2010) Sydney Olympic Park, Sydney.

3 Mills, R. (2014). The Metaphorical Basis of Perception in Intercultural Networked Improvisation, in A. Abrahams & H.V Jamieson (Eds.), Cyposium: The Book, (pp.103-116). Brescia, Italy, Link Editions.

Mills, R. & Beilharz, K. (2014). The Networked Unveiled. Evaluating Tele-Musical Interaction. In L. Candy & S. Ferguson (Eds.), Interactive Experience in the Digital Age: Evaluating New Art Practice (pp. 109-122). London, Springer.

4 Mills, R. (2019). Tele-improvisation: Intercultural Interaction in the Online Global Music Jam Session, Springer Cultural Computing series, Springer-Verlag London Ltd. This research monograph explores the rapidly expanding field of networked music making and the ways in which musicians of different cultures improvise together online. It draws on extensive research to uncover the creative and cognitive approaches that geographically dispersed musicians develop to interact in displaced tele-improvisatory collaboration.

5 Mills, R. & Beilharz, K.A. (2012). 'Listening Through the Firewall: Semiotics of Sound in Networked Improvisation' in Organised Sound: An International Journal of Music and Technology, Vol.17 No.1 Special Issue 'Networked Electroacoustic Music', Cambridge University Press