

The Aural Diversity Concerts: multimodal performance to an aurally diverse audience.

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*(This presentation isn't fully scripted but this is the outline of what I plan to talk about.... the first parts I will probably read as they are from the book chapter I wrote and set the context but I will do the rest as a mixture of playing audio files and speaking following the outline below... hope that is ok ? I have put some other comments in bracketed italics)*

The first concert

On a beautiful Saturday In the summer of 2019 groups of people made their way up Kelston Roundhill between Bristol and Bath to Kelston Barn. The doors to the building were wide open with a long table set up outside for food later and straw bales placed on the hill for people to sit and listen. The audience for the two performances were free to move between the inside and outside, they could listen on wireless headphones, they could lie on a specially made vibrating floor and feel the sound through their bones, they could even listen to the performance whilst swinging on giant swing strung in the trees outside. As the performance unfolded we were presented with a sequence of old and new music that moved from the folksongs of Matthew Spring via the jazz clarinet of Ruth Mallalieu to the physical experience of vibration in Sam Sturtivants vibrating floor installation and the detailed and strange sounds of Andrew Hugill's "Diplacosis Piano".

Rarely is it possible to experience such a wide range of musics in the course of one event and rarely (possibly uniquely) does it happen (outside of therapeutic situations) that the music we were listening to was created specifically for those with a wide range of hearing and importantly for the Aural Diversity project BY a group of composers and performers who were themselves aurally diverse. After the 2:30 performance there was time to meet, eat and talk with the performers and share our experiences of what we had just listened to.

Towards the second concert

Some questions

1. What was missing ?
2. How do we create an environment for listening that is truly inclusive of those with diverse hearing ?

3. How could I engage with a wider range of creators of work and what were the appropriate collaborative strategies for this to work?
4. How to create an event that celebrates diversity in listening and content yet still feels like "one" thing rather than a "pick and mix" type "relaxed" concert that I know wouldn't work well for the demographic of the audience, composers and performers.
5. Presentation ? how should the next concert be presented. How long should each section be and what modes of listening could be used ?
6. What parts of the Kelston concert are "portable" and can be carried forward to Leicester in November ?

The second Aural Diversity Concert took place as part of the conference at Leicester University in November (30th November 2019) at the Attenborough Arts Centre. The Attenborough Arts Centre is on the campus of Leicester University and is specifically focussed on working with disabled artists and communities. There are a number of spaces including a gallery, artists studios and a performance space, it also had the advantage of being just over the road from the building where the conference was to be held.

Drawing on the programme of the first concert I decided to include many of the pieces that had been specially created for that event and add new pieces made with a group of local people with diverse hearing.

Leicester in November is very different to Kelston in July. It wasn't going to be possible to have the wonderful mixture of inside and outside listening that characterised the first concert so a different strategy was needed. What the Attenborough Arts Centre does have are a variety of spaces including a cafe, gallery and art workshop so the plan for the second concert used several of these.

One of the things that I felt was missing from the first concert was engagement with more people as creators of work. Previous experience working with widely different groups of participants on music and sound-art projects led me to want to explore the notions of Aural Diversity with a wider range of people.

So, to this end, I decided to include in the concert work created through collaboration. After a number of dead ends I made contact with two distinct groups of potential participants a small group of adults and a group of young people at the Hearing Support Centre at Beauchamp College in Leicester. The adults were people who had had profound changes to their hearing and were people who were artists and musicians. It was interesting to learn how their change in hearing had influenced the music and art that they make. The young people all had cochlea implants.

## Starting off

I often start projects by exploring peoples personal relationship with sound, place and memory.

Participatory music work with young people often starts with things other than sounds. In traditional music education in the UK sound / listening has been almost ignored with practice focussing on measurable knowledge. This assumes that people mean the same thing when they use the word "music". What I have learnt over many years of working with a wide range of people in many countries is that when people use the word "music" they don't necessarily mean the same thing.

## Starting with sound.

### Starting questions for this project

1. What is your favourite sound in the world that isn't a piece of music or "musical instrument" ?
2. Are there any sounds that you particularly identify with as belonging to where you live?
3. Are there any sounds that you are keen on that you don't think other people like?
4. Are there any sounds you miss as your hearing has changed ?
5. Are there any sounds you would want others to hear that they might not have come across ?

### 1: Favourite sounds.

SOUND CLIP #1 "My favourite sound is the sea"

*(I will talk a bit about this, key points are...)*

Most of the sounds are ones that people don't have agency in  
Many of the sounds are from nature... weather, animals, water  
Favourite sounds are often very personal.... "my dog" etc

### 2: Sound and place

#### Two examples

SOUND CLIP#2 SIREN TEST

The sound of the emergency sirens being tested at the oil refineries near

Immingham in North East Lincolnshire. All the people I spoke to on a project about sound and place there talked about what they heard at 8am on a Thursday.

### SOUND CLIP#3 RHUBARB

The sound of rhubarb growing in the dark in a forcing shed in West Yorkshire. The only place in the world that this happens. A secret sound that only a few people know about.

3: Individual taste

### SOUND CLIP #4

This is from the group at Beauchamp college

4: Sounds you miss ?

From the piece, talking about getting new hearing aids

*(I will read this)*

.... one of the things that made me realise that I was losing my hearing was one time I was in a meadow and my wife mentioned just how noisy the grasshoppers were and I couldn't hear them, so it's great to hear them I can't always hear the whole range I think but I can hear some and that's something that was missing that is back again.

5: Sounds to share with others. From the piece

*(I will read this bit)*

I don't know, this might be extinct already when I was a kid we used to .....when we bought chewing gum there were sort of playing cards attached with pictures from favourite television programmes or sportsmen or that, we used to swap them and I don't know who's idea it was or whether it was just a fad that was going round but someone got the idea of getting a clothes peg and you'd peg one of these cards to your bike frame so that the card flapped on the spokes of your wheel ... so it sounded like a motorbike and the faster you peddled the higher the pitch of the drone.

A piece made by collaboration.

About the layers

- 1: Voices
- 2: Ambiances of Leicester .....the soundworld of the city and how it sounds to you
- 3: Stretched sounds ... frozen time bells etc
- 4: Sounds from pitch/rhythms of the spoken words

#### SOUND CLIP#5

##### Voices to rhythms example

A sample of voice that is processed to generate a pattern from the pitch and rhythm.

"Like fresh snow, bells and leaves"

#### SOUND CLIP#6

*(I will play the piece, it is about 12 minutes long..here are the texts spoken in the piece, I won't read these out but here they are for the person doing BSL)*

#### **Teenagers voices (which will come in this order... fading in and out)**

The leaves crisping like when you walk on them  
all we could hear was dad snoring so we recorded it  
children shouting and cars starting up  
Nature sounds or deep inside the ocean ..... sounds  
I like.... a Lambo engine  
aaah rustling noise of money  
the sound of fresh snow  
chopping sounds  
yeah I can't hear my cat purring  
with the dogs claws scattering on the floor  
my cat purring  
It's annoying and it sometimes distracts me  
It's a mixture of humming and singing  
relaxing  
birds singing  
if I like stroke him I can feel him  
annoying my mum with saying "relax dude" and annoying my dad with making a  
loud whooooo noise  
Making splashing noises  
The kettle heating up  
listening to a car engine  
my dad snoring

I like scraping my nails on the back of my phone case..... and my dad hates it  
Total silence .... when I take my hearing off

## Adults

Erm at the moment, and I have been for a while, i've been a big fan of RAIN.. the sound of rain because there is something just inherently peaceful about it and I think there is a white noise element yeah definitely.... rain ..... in a quietish environment .. it's also something that a lot of people don't appreciate I think...but I like it particularly outside my house when i'm in bed because the river outside , and i can hear it going in the river ... erm yeah peaceful white noise

Yeah I think that has got to be the sound of the wind in the leaves in the woodlands when it's been gusting around, it's kind of like the sea but edgier , I can't see any trees with leaves on around here but I can nearly do it I can really shake some.. but er .. that's got to be it really when it's really when it's really windy and squally so it's like super surround sound and er you're in the middle of it and er that's the sound I sort of missed I think missed most before I got my hearing aids which was the really top end sounds, the rustling of leaves and it's er good to hear it again and I just never tire of it.

How much of what I perceive as "nice sounds" compared to what I used to think is hard to tell the difference between what's changed because of my hearing and what's changed because of my degree (laugh) and my education.

I know that i can't trust my hearing because the hearing aid they've got some built in circuitry that can /.....it can kind of vary things .....then again it took me a long time to get the experts to switch those circuits off but then i'm left with quite a bit of feedback some times so it's all so much more ... volatile I suppose I can't really rely on what i'm hearing but have to take a chance and have to sort of let go of being precious about getting sounds right.

I don't know, this might be extinct already when I was a kid we used to .....when we bought chewing gum there were sort of playing cards attached with pictures from favourite television programmes or sportsmen or that, we used to swap them and I don't know who's idea it was or whether it was just a fad that was going round but someone got the idea of getting a clothes peg and you'd peg one of these cards to your bike frame so that the card flapped on the spokes of your wheel ... so it sounded like a motorbike and the faster you peddled the higher the pitch of the drone.

Erm yeah, so there's the bells of Leicester cathedral and when I first moved to Leicester I was on the 6th floor of a block of flats and you could hear them from quite far away and they tended to "warbledness" of just what you could vaguely recognise as bells but that happened every Thursday and I could always hear it and it was a big part of the new soundscape of where I lived when I first moved here so yeah the bells of Leicester.

Yeah it's the sound of leaves especially in the autumn when you are walking through them kind of like this and er the sound of babbling streams that depends on the weather you know ... they aren't always around in these parts but those sorts of sounds, the sounds of nature ..... I can't always hear them properly but one of the things that made me realise that I was losing my hearing was one time I was in a meadow and my wife mentioned just how noisy the grasshoppers were and I couldn't hear them, so it's great to hear them I can't always hear the whole range I think but I can hear some and that's something that was missing that is back again.

*(PIECE ENDS)*

## **Online and "Blended" performance**

The Aural Diversity concert was a perfect example of a "blended" performance. You could listen

In the hall through speakers / acoustic instruments  
In the hall with wireless headphones  
In the cafe through wireless headphones  
On the vibrating floor created by Luke Woodbury

*(I might add some things about the advantages of these methods... controlling individual volumes etc)*

Going forwards... *(depending on time I might elaborate on some of this)*

The Covid pandemic in 2020 brought conventional concerts and performances to a sudden stop. Suddenly there were empty concert halls, theatres and gig venues. Organisations realised that they would have to try and find new ways to continue and there was a huge surge of activity where the likes of symphony orchestras and opera companies talked in the media about "taking their work online".

For some of us working at the "edges" of music and performance there was more than a bit of Deja Vu about this.

Telematic performance has been a feature of experimental musicking for some years but has until recently not been something that is considered as an option by mainstream cultural organisations.

For many disabled musicians the start of the Covid lockdown was a bit of a "welcome to my world" moment. Many disabled artists have had to develop their work in isolation anyway and have become experts at managing the technologies necessary for this to be successful.

Adrian Lee, composer musician and guitarist who is blind commented

“As a working musician I found the 2020 pandemic afforded an opportunity to focus on how low-cost remote network technology might afford a solution to a lack of live musical and social contact. The pandemic has produced a situation where many disabled people, including disabled musicians, might observe that the general restrictions on employment and personal mobility have presented a situation which is already familiar to them. Virtually the entire population is now in the same boat as disabled friends and colleagues in the sense of being denied access to a wide range of professional and social musical activities. A disabled person might be tempted to observe, with a touch of irony, ‘welcome to my world’ but to take the matter a little more seriously, perhaps this represents an opportunity for society at large to learn from the ingenuity and resilience which disabled people bring to their daily life and work.

When I go to my music studio to play, it now means that through its connection I can now rehearse record and play live concerts with anyone in the world who I might connect with. With one simple levelling action we have overcome one fundamental barrier to participation both professionally and socially."

There can be considerable advantages to remote collaboration. For people who have hearing loss, tinnitus, diplacusis or hyperacusis this can mean that

- 1: Volume can be controlled to suit as can the balance between the ears
- 2: EQ can be adjusted to suit specific hearing needs
- 3: No chance of startling disturbance from other audience members (no sudden clapping or noise that might startle)

#### AUDIO CLIP #7 Comb Filter live streamed performance

This is an example of the trio "Comb Filter" which started during the Covid pandemic. Adrian Lee (Guitar) is in London, Simon Limbrick (percussion and electronics) is in Norfolk and Duncan Chapman (flugelhorn / electronics) is in Lincolnshire.

Using free online cross platform software to connect and embracing the inevitable glitchiness that this entails...

*(Concluding thoughts, this is from the book chapter so I will probably simply read it or summarise depending on the time available)*

## **Hybrid futures ?**

By creating concerts that are specifically designed to embrace and welcome those with diverse hearing the Aural Diversity project has started on a journey of making music and sonic art that reflects the diversity of hearing as something with tremendous creative potential.

For many of the people who came to the Aural Diversity concerts a "normal" concert is inaccessible. This is not because music is something that they can't enjoy, but because the context of the conventional performance can be stressful and unpredictable. Giving the choice to listen simultaneously in multiple ways and to change the mode of listening to suit the situation gives audience the control to have an experience that is tailored to their specific needs. Changing the context of the listening environment changes who can be in the room.

Traditionally many technologies have been developed as tools for access. Captioning, audio description, sign language interpretation on screen and hearing loops in venues are a few examples. These are important and vital tools but there are also creative possibilities that embracing different ways of listening can bring to all audiences and creators. Shifting the focus from the interpretation of existing works to the creation of the work itself brings a whole world of possibilities and (as with the experience of the composers and performers in these concerts) facilitates the continuing artistic careers of those who would otherwise have to abandon music completely as their hearing changed.

"Mainstream" musical organisations have much to learn from the experience of these concerts. At a time when many are exploring hybrid ways of working post pandemic many are wanting to continue to include things like live streaming as part of their "normal" activities.

Some possibilities

- Using the technology of live streaming to allow streams that users can control in terms of volume, eq, balance and compression. This doesn't only apply to remote listeners as many of these things can be done with portable devices.
- Following on from the model of the Aural Diversity concerts having

performances that include the options for listening in and out of the hall. This does happen in some "relaxed" events but, as mentioned earlier these are hardly ideal for the audiences that came to our concerts. It is quite normal these days to have surtitles, audio description or BSL interpretation, it could be equally possible to allow for different modes of listening.

- Commissioning work that is specifically designed to embrace diverse hearing profiles.
- Giving information in publicity and programmes that allows potential audiences to be able to make informed choices about what might be suitable for them to attend.
- Thinking about the flow of concert programmes and the balance between periods of sound and breaks to allow people to move about if necessary.

Duncan Chapman January 2023