Intercultural Collaboration through Networked Performance

Add a short video of Ty playing Vong Co (excerpt before the video with The Six Tones)

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Abstract
As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to affect individual musicians, ensembles and concert institutions, streaming technology has become a central vehicle through which musicians and audiences can meet. But this forced move to digital presence also suggests new possibilities, beyond the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. This paper discusses how networked performance, a format which has engaged artists for decades as an artform in its own right, may also contribute to the sustaining of cultural heritage among migrant/minority communities as well as to the development of innovative intercultural artistic practices. Building on the experience of our group, The Six Tones, as well as on research carried out by Roger Mills (2019) and Ximena Alarcón Diaz, we wish to develop a more robust understanding of the possibilities, and the limitations, that networked technology affords. The central source of our own work is drawn from Musical Transformations, an ongoing project which studies the intersection between traditional and experimental music in globalized society. We address the role of social interaction in the practice for intercultural collaboration, developed by The Six Tones since 2006, and discuss how such interactions are made difficult when collaborating through mediation of digital technology. In this context we believe that it is possible to also study what the limitations that the technologies impose and what the nature of these limitations amount to. Such a study may be useful also in other areas of digital interaction. Qualitative analysis of video documentation from rehearsals and performances constitute the foundation for the study. In the presentations we further discuss the projected creation of a scene for intercultural exchange at Manzi Art Space in Hanoi, with reference to the first networked performance carried out live on a scene in Hanoi on July 12, 2020, curated by The Six Tones at Manzi. This project situates the discussion even more immediately in the current developments of music culture at the
time of the pandemic. The presentation, by the four authors, is supplemented with video from networked performances, as well as interviews with the group and guest performers documented on video.

Link to video
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1l-iHavkGP5qBDL-K9WQjfv4QZriPXpnt/view?usp=sharing

1. Introduction

Stefan: Remote interaction has been an important possibility in musical practice since the invention of musical notation. Already in the early days of western art music, societal infrastructure would serve rather well for delivering scores and parts for the purpose of artistic collaboration outside of the now of musical performance. Loss of information was of course always a possibility in the postal system, but the entire chain of production and delivery equally holds a risk of loss, as illustrated rather drastically when Carl Nielsen was biking to the office of his copyist, and lost the original manuscript to his first string quartet. The entire score had to be reconstructed through memory. When packages of data are lost in the transmission, they are seldom the entire content, but data loss still remains a constant challenge in the digital age.

This paper discusses the possibilities in intercultural musical collaboration through remote interaction using present day technologies. We understand Networked Performance as the real-time interaction between musicians that are geographically dis-located, and may or may not involve both aural and visual communication, which today tends to be mediated over the internet.

We will first listen to remote interaction across continents in a recording made this summer by our group The Six Tones and Phạm Công Tỵ as part of the research project Musical Transformations.

[2] Thuy (play video): You are listening to an experimental version of a song from the south of Vietnam, called Vong Co. Musical Transformations researches how this music has changed over time. In this video, recorded some week before the performance at Manzi, I was again able to play with Phạm Công Tỵ, one of the masters of this tradition. Due to technical limitations, related to Covid 19, it was not possible to set up a real time interaction with him, and we instead played with a video we had recorded earlier on, of
him playing the piece. We will return later to the possibilities for musicians in exile to reconnect through the use of technology with musicians from their country of origin. But we will start out with an outline of the artistic research practices developed within The Six Tones, a Vietnamese/Swedish group of which we are members since we formed it in 2006. (Thuy on video) A fundamental building block was the notion of mutual learning, which we thought of as a prerequisite for an encounter on equal grounds, across cultural boundaries.

[3] The sharing of musical practices has also led to many hours of practicing, and learning to listen differently when disciplining our bodies to perform a different music. In section three we will hear Ty reflect on the processes of mutual learning in the framework of Musical Transformations.

Since the creation of the group, The Six Tones have been part of several artistic research projects, looking at artistic processes through the interaction between the musicians in the group, as well as between musician, musical instruments and scores. The central research methods have been qualitative analysis looking at video documentation of artistic processes, and of musician’s gesture in performance.

Henrik: Between 2009 and 2011, we led (re)thinking Improvisation [4], an international research project looking at improvisation from cross-cultural perspectives. Here we would both study improvisation in traditional Vietnamese music as well as the role of improvisation in the encounter with experimental artistic practices. As part of the method development within the project, we sought out ways in which qualitative analysis of video can be enhanced by the method of stimulated recall [5]. This allowed us to address the specific oscillation between insider and outsider roles, that characterize the interactions within the group. In (re)thinking Improvisation, the role of listening became a central analytical focus, as a way of understanding the interaction [6]between us. Through repeated stimulated recall sessions, we developed a shared understanding of different attitudes of performing, characterized as different modes of listening. The most recent analysis, carried out in 2019, revealed more clearly how the coding and annotations made in 2009 reflected a mutual struggle of finding a shared voice in the group. The opposed strategies of blending and creating difference, both fundamental to improvised performance, can be observed in the interaction.


The Six Tones, together with David Hebert, are currently involved in a new research project, titled Musical Transformations. The first part is set in the Mekong delta and in the metropolitan city of Saigon. The second part will be looking at musicians who have
migrated to Sweden interacting with the members of The Six Tones through the creation of a new film by Trịnh Minh-hà.

**DAVID:** As a musicologist in a team of artistic researchers (the one scholar in the project who is not directly involved in creating music), my role has been to document and interpret the significance of the project activities. This is quite an interesting responsibility since the project is innovative in many ways, serving rather different purposes. On the one hand, it is ethnomusicological in the sense that we are seeking to record the traditional music performances and life stories of leading musicians in a unique style of Vietnamese music that may be understood as comprising both folk music and popular music. Like blues, the Vọng Co has certain formulaic structures and performance techniques that are distinctive and unifying characteristics of the genre, and through this study we have been making high quality studio recordings of some of its finest performers while also learning about their experiences from the time they first became interested in music. The genre is also westernized to some extent, featuring the **Vietnamese guitar** [8], which you saw Stefan play earlier in this session. It has a deep scalloped fretboard, enabling extreme forms of tremolo and pitch bending (unlike guitar-playing most anywhere else in the world), and is often played with electronic amplification. Unlike traditional ethnomusicology, most of our data collection does not involve extended fieldwork, but rather entails brief periods (often about one-week in length) of sessions in **recording studios** [9]. Musicians are interviewed while they take breaks from making studio recordings that are in both solo and ensemble formats. From the interviews, we have been learning much about how Vietnamese music and society have changed across several decades of tumultuous development. This highly focused approach to the research has been made possible partly because the research team includes master performers of Vietnamese traditional instruments, and there has already been ample collection of relevant documents and recordings prior to this particular project, so intercultural collaboration is foundational to the research team.

**Stefan:** We selected a limited number of performers to join the recording of a double CD, together with The Six Tones. The recording sessions took place in Saigon in October 2019. In the extended preparations towards these recordings, we explore the challenges to this tradition that emerge in the artistic process, carried out through **stimulated recall sessions** [10] with all participating musicians. Already through the five days we worked it was possible to identify, with reference to the stimulated recall sessions we carried out each morning, a development from initial doubt to the creation of a form which all performers were confident to work with in the performance. In the very first session, all musicians listened back to what we played on our first working day. Phạm Công Ty, whom you heard play in the opening performance, said he found the first track we heard sounded “wonky, muffled like music from a creased cassette tape”, and then everybody laughed. He continued to say he wasn’t sure if the music was to be listened to as Vọng Cô or not.
Thuy on video: Similarly, Phạm Văn Môn thought that this music would confuse a Vietnamese listener, that they would lack the aesthetic reference points that constitute the identity of this tradition. Huỳnh Tuấn similarly expressed that also for himself, “it would be good to have something to keep the time, in order to know where we are”.

In the stimulated recall session in the morning of Nov 1, the atmosphere is different, all musicians are relaxed and smiling during the playback, and at the end of one of the takes, Phạm Công Tỵ says “This is good. This is different”. Huỳnh Tuấn fills in that it has “a different atmosphere, different colour”. Hence, rather than discussing difference as a threat to a listener’s understanding, here they embrace the new elements in the music, and discuss difference as a positive quality.

(voice over and video documentation) We believe that the concert performance at the Hanoi New Music Festival in December 2018, and the next round of sessions that followed in Saigon further deepened the relation between us. After the last sessions around the European new year, we did not meet until the recording sessions for the double album, in Saigon in October 2019. On the second to last day of the recordings, Ty expressed in an interview how a mutual understanding has emerged in the group:

On the last working day in the studio, we set up a longer conversation with all musicians to summarize our experience. Mon, the guitarist, mentioned the experiment they had made the day before, on Ty’s initiative. His idea was that the three of them should play Vong Co according to every rule, but to play in three different keys. Mon compared this experience to how his listening also had changed when playing with the musicians of The Six Tones, using a Vietnamese phrase that could be translated as listening with an “inversed ear”:

<Mon on video>

4. Telematic performance in intercultural contexts [12]

Henrik:

While networked performance has a history that goes back several decades, intercultural collaboration through network technology has been sparse. The negotiation of cultural resistance is a key factor. Certainly, for musicians like Ty, Mon and Tuan, to
perform without an audience in the same physical space is a great constraint, since they are part of a musical culture which is very deeply embedded in social interaction [13] with audience members. A typical performance of Vong Co stretches over many hours. It can be seen to erase much of the distinction between performer and audience, since typically many in the audience take part at some point by performing a song or playing an instrument for a bit.

Stefan:

We have recently taken the initiative to what we hope will become a regular scene for networked performance, with Manzi Art Space [14 as the base in Hanoi. In July we played the first performance there, with the Canadian composer and improviser John Oliver joining us from Vancouver, and with Ngo Tra My, the dan bau player of our group on stage in Hanoi. She was joined by a long-term friend and collaborator of The Six Tones, the DJ and improviser Tri Minh, a well known performer in Hanoi and abroad. The rest of the group were in different locations in Sweden. Hence, while some of us were in our home studios or living room, Ngo Tra My and Tri Minh, were facing a live audience at Manzi. Hereby, our experience of the performance, but also of time was fundamentally different. This was very apparent in the moments when the technology was failing. When struggling to get all lines connected from a remote site, solving tech issues remained essential, for the two performers in the concert venue, making the show go on was the only focus.

Furthermore, none of the Vietnamese performers had ever met John Oliver, connected from Canada, while Henrik and I knew him since 2010. It is obvious that the level of trust within the group was of a different order than had we all met in the same room. Under these circumstances the particularities, and possibilities, of networked performance makes it into a distinct format for concert performance. And still the communication between all the participants was strong, which can be seen in the following clip.

Concert video from Manzi [15]

5. Discussion (stop share)

Thuy:
I have seen in the work of The Six Tones how building trust has been fundamental in every new collaboration. And I believe that the social interaction with Mon, Ty and Tuan, was important during the first year of our work. But we have also seen the importance of creating a space for co-existence, without a demand for transparency. Therefore I wonder, is networked performance a possible method for emphasizing each musician’s right to opacity? Might the physical distance, and the limited social interaction, be a possible window for giving this space for independence to the participating musicians?

(Stop share)

**Stefan:** And further, given the challenges to a musician’s listening in intercultural collaboration, such as expressed by Mon when he speaks of listening through an inversed ear, and considering the perceptual challenges posed by the networked performance situation, might we also expect networked performance to evoke or even demand new forms of listening? Indeed, networked performance tends to be characterized by being both alone, and together. Alone, if we consider performers situated in different locations, monitoring their own playing and the performance of others over headphones. To Jean-Luc Nancy, listening is characterized by resonance, by a physical sharing of soundwaves in a given space: “Resonance is at once that of a body that is sonorous for itself and resonance of sonority in a listening body that, itself, resounds as it listens (Nancy, 2007, p. 40). This other listening, mediated by the prosthesis of audio technology and the global network, excludes the embodied interaction between performer and audience, but arguably, also opens a window for an encounter which is not governed by traditional social conventions of concert venues, or even of the society in which you might yourself live. Certainly, the circumstances may be similar to those of performing in a recording studio, evoking the particular loneliness, but also the possibility of introspective focus, afforded by such settings. What we are interested in is how a further use of technology might instead create a distributed connectedness, a virtual presence of the other.

**Henrik:**

But in networked performance the mediating framework can be daunting: in advanced communication technology a whole range of things can go wrong and the internet was not originally built to handle high bandwidth data streaming in real time. Yet, in principle, these technologies are not more complex than other systems for performance, such as
an opera house or a recording studio. Whereas the latter have developed during many years to promote one specific genre or artform, the former is a multi purpose network with a number of different uses. But, just as these traditional structures have contributed to framing the aesthetics and politics of the musical styles that they foster, we should allow a specific aesthetics to develop through the particular context of networked performance. This is one reason why it may be necessary to consider the structural, political and aesthetical limitations/possibilities that also networked performance institutes, especially in the context that is discussed here: In what ways does the technology limit or allow the potentialities in intercultural interaction? In what ways is it possible to expand beyond the limitations of the framework?

David:

Since 2010, as we have seen, the Six Tones have directly explored technologically-mediated performance practices in the sphere of intercultural experimental music, with provocative projects that test the meanings of virtuality for “traditional musical experience”. Recently Stefan Östersjö describes the ensemble’s vision as based on an “ecological and postcolonial understanding of a musician’s listening” (Östersjö, 2020, p.157) and in terms of virtuality he argues that “immersive technologies may permit the creation of (...) transmodal experiences” (p.160).

We find that projects like those of the Six Tones produce a depth of embodied understanding (simultaneously cognitive, aesthetic, and kinesthetic) that is qualitatively different from standard academic knowledge. Networked performance may indeed have the potential to facilitate profound improvements to higher education music programs, since it engenders new forms of both creative experimentation and intercultural collaboration. Such developments could enable music institutions to significantly broaden their offerings, extending to additional genres via international partnerships through activities enabled by streaming technologies.

REFERENCES?

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