

Directing Selfness – A Step Back from Digital Collaboration on Stage

Luis Arandas¹, José Alberto Gomes², and Rui Penha³

¹ Faculdade de Engenharia e Universidade do Porto – INESC-TEC, Porto, Portugal
luis.arandas@inesctec.pt

² Universidade Católica Portuguesa – CITAR, Porto, Portugal
jagomes@porto.ucp.pt

³ Escola Superior de Música e Artes do Espectáculo – INESC-TEC, Porto, Portugal
ruipenha@esmae.ipp.pt

Abstract. Collaborative networked performance has been at the forefront of recent proposals in computer music and digital performance research. A feature of its stage effectiveness derives from the composition being often drawn from the instrument or the system. Also, these digital environments are programmed with both the inherent characteristics of human interaction and the properties of networks in mind. The performance *Directing Selfness* takes a step back from networked interaction using an interface made specifically for performative collaboration through an audio-visual solo. It is made in order to promote a stage-based exploration of a tool not only designed for other performative purposes, but also to promote a unique adaptation of the artist using it.

Keywords: Artistic Performance; Collaborative Computer Music; Interface-based Interaction; Network Music Performance; Audio-Visual Interaction.

Introduction

Performative collaboration using post-internet technologies allows artists to become deeply involved in various ways. This involvement, which is also fostered by the speed that optical fibre and wi-fi allow, is dependent on distinct factors. Such as the concept of networked agency, the way interaction takes place and especially the mediation characteristics of the environment. With respect to Shannon's well-known message communication diagram (1984) and the way in which intermedial and interactive network spaces can modify meanings in the artistic gesture (Tanzi 2005) designers and users sometimes tend to break and write software to match their needs. Something that is very common in the development of new live-coding languages and network structures.

When on stage, and in order to get to know the tool you're using better, artists are sometimes forced not only to know the high-level structure of the software but also how the back-end operates. Occasionally understand how communication happens or what kind of architecture facilitates the connection between instances. This is intrinsically linked to the artist's control and position of what is done in the performative space. It helps to define both the greater notion of causality and the very trajectory and physiology of the artistic gesture. That gesture, is here defined adapting Iazzotta's definition (2000) as a movement or change in some original state that is marked with meaning by an agent. Described in a broad way and with regard to the whole intermodal problem of the gesture in electronics, this is something that can be found in various fields of artistic performance. There are many different performative explorations that can serve as an example for this topic which is the case in Santana's work (2014) on networked dance performance, distributed live-coding by Kirkbride et al. (2018) and both machine learning and signal processing (Bernardo et al. 2019).

All these topics and their traits, especially from a phenomenological point of view, have been present almost always across the artistic practice. And a fair number of them aren't formalized here for the first time. The inherent characteristics of networked musical performance often mirror aspects that have always happened in chamber music. And these analogies, accompanied by aesthetic nuances, help to relate practices and even model new ones. We

would like to mention the long distance concerts by telephone (Hopkins 1891) as a clear reference to musical practice in digital networks. Although they were experiences that do not exploit collaboration as delicately as some more recent examples, they are an excellent early exploration of the use of networks as an extension of the mentioned gesture. These are experiences that are able to show the musician a mirror of himself (something clearly present in audio recording) and help shape the position of each member of the acting group. Also from a learning point of view, many personal artistic conclusions and experiences might be born from group interaction during performance.

Interface-based Mediation

Networked collaborative performance needs some underlying structure in order to happen. The digital environment where this happens, inherits a performative space that offers something different than the conventional use of acoustic/analog instruments in a *network* of artists with corporeal communication. It offers a new space, codified in a specific way¹ that can provide attributes such as actions, acoustic properties and modes of existence. The way to interact with that space is through an interface², a system or a device through which non-related entities can interact (Sá 2016). This can be done by writing code, in a graphical environment (being the most common) or through pieces of hardware that is not the focus of this article but can be mentioned through the work of Nicholas Collins (e.g. *The Royal Touch*).

Several times, the network mediates the artistic gesture. Not only for its practical limits conditioning the freedom of the user, but also by the fact that it is a vehicle for the flow of information. A vehicle that can be optimized, hacked and specifically programmed for any purpose. When it comes to networked musical performance, actions are very flexible. Whether from various artists in different places, from an artist with various devices, or even with the public as participant or lead. However, even though there is a vast set of virtual performative possibilities, the embodied communication on stage is almost null. Also, when there is no projection of each performer's code, instrument or even video streaming it is difficult to have a full causal notion of the events. This is something that is present all over across laptop performance and should be understood and embraced as a transformational attribute (Fernandes 2015) capable of providing experiences other than pre-digital performance. The characteristics of the material change the performance as well as its external perception. This is important to take into account when thinking about perception and interaction through digital interfaces.

Of course the limits of a network or interface for networked performance are not very different from the limits of a classical musical instrument. It has pre-defined boundaries that are adapted for a subjective purpose. This is a characteristic that leads not only to their remodelling, but also to the development of new methodological structures in their construction. Movements like telematic hacking (Landy 2017) can be related to this shift, a kind of *digital circuit bending*, and the most varied types of appropriations of both musical and visual tools are often presented as live-interfaces³. Software allows this, with all its representative features, something that is not possible in analog media with such freedom.

When collaboration comes in, the context becomes more complex. As mentioned in the previous section, and largely due to the drastic change that exists when an artwork is done in group (compared to the absence of), all the paradigms raised here are transposed into a different field. It is necessary to study the mediation offered by the interfaces that are purpose-built for collaboration in a completely different way from singular ones. Both in terms of development, experimentation, performance and composition. My gesture may not work or even be possible to make when I am alone in a collaborative environment. As well as issues of autonomy, choice and convenience have to be carefully designed so that the interface used is robust enough to provide an acceptable level of decision.

¹ Sometimes simulating the world as much as possible, as well as creating new virtual paradigms.

² For a deeper exploration of the term embraced in this text is recommended the work of Cristina Sá (2017) considering the interface and time, space, plasticity, speed and intelligibility. The word *entities* with an abstract connotation.

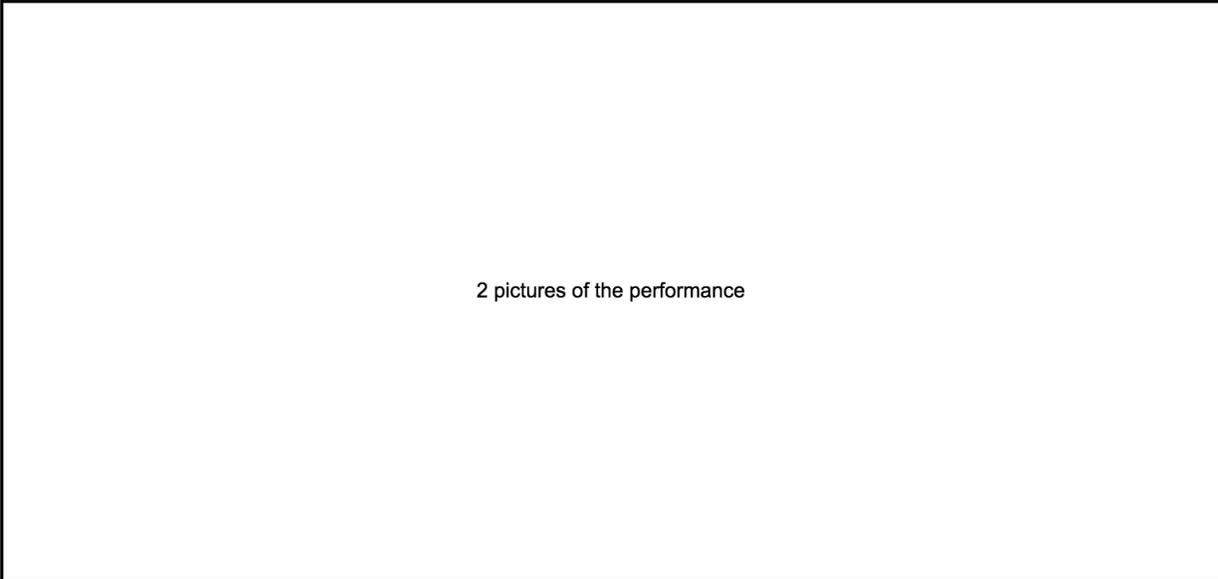
³ For an example of mixing analog media with web audio see the recently presented *gravity|density* performance by Marasco and Allison (2019).

Directing Selfness

Building in all the text provided, the whole point of interpersonal collaboration is to produce some kind of content in a plural and shared way. All members present in interaction become responsible parties to the whole, and this is often more than the sum of the parts⁴.

The fundamental difference in the presented performance for a usual audio-visual solo has to do with the objective and inherent characteristics of the medium used. This will be done using a web environment whose architecture was proposed in Arandas et al. (2019) in order to conglomerate various devices by allocating them in different interaction modes. Properties that (considered by the performer) are aesthetically relevant will be explored on stage, and until the day of the presentation the software will be remodelled to better match procedural needs. This remodelling is completely coherent with Magnusson's definition (2018) on musical technologies as "cybernetic devices that exist in the interstice between our inner self and outer motor movements, constantly attuned and calibrated in real-time practice" mentioned as a deep and emerging phenomenological relationship.

The technical changes start by eliminating everything that makes the software a networked environment. All the contents of the server as an event manager will be deleted, also removing it from the cloud to serve it locally. No one else will be able to connect to the performance, even from the audience's mobile phones. The graphical interface is also deleted (sliders, knobs and buttons). The mapping done previously on the laptop keyboard will be adapted, and the (web)midi will be hardcoded to an Evolution controller (UC-33 model). The content presented will be made from the mentioned environment, without reading external files and mixing with other instruments. The performance will take 10:00 minutes and will be in itself an exploration, made in one of the best places for that to happen, on stage. The act of removing all interaction between other instances helps to increase awareness of the environment used. It is designed to allow the user to do something they can't do on their own so it promotes a personalized optimization. Also, automating processes (e.g. dynamic behaviour of oscillators and filters) is somewhat analogous to what Galanter calls "rules as recipes for autonomous processes" (Carvalhais 2016).



2 pictures of the performance

⁴ Linked to the emergence phenomenon in physics, for future reading Sawyer's (2000) work in collaborative emergence and improvisation is recommended.

Conclusion

Shifting the purpose of the tool used, and as referenced by Tomás (2016) something that is scripted with ideologies (Chicau and Bell 2018), the main objective of this piece is to explore singularly an interface designed for a plural and distributed use of agents. *Directing Selfness* is presented as a conventional solo laptop performative expedition on stage, using the mentioned networked environment. There will be no external connection either from the cloud or from those present in the concert. Promotes an adaptation of the artist to a tool that was developed for a different purpose through a user-centered design process. It is used without having the necessary characteristics for its complete operation, and maintains the fundamental role of the computer as a musical instrument.

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