



Galerie de la Reine 28
1000 Brussels - Belgium
www.simm-platform.eu

SIMM-seminar 9: MusikFabrik, Cologne 9-11 May 2025 (on: research on the role of composers and composition in participatory music projects)

1. Introduction

The 9th SIMM Research Seminar brought together an international group of composers, artistic researchers, practitioners-researchers, and academics to investigate how the role of the composer transforms when working within participatory music projects. The gathering offered a vibrant space for critical reflection on artistic authorship, co-creation, improvisation, research ethics, and the evolving professional identity of composers who engage in socially responsive music-making.

The seminar unfolded through a series of presentations, group discussions, mapping exercises, and collaborative writing activities, producing a rich body of insights about the intersection between compositional practice and participatory engagement.

2. The Composer in Transition

Participants came from diverse professional backgrounds – some entered participatory work after formal composition training, while others arrived from music education, facilitation, or community arts. This diversity reflected a non-linear ecology of practices, challenging conventional distinctions between composer, teacher, and facilitator.

At the heart of the discussions was the tension between the traditional figure of the “solitary genius composer” and the realities of collaborative artistic creation. Many composers expressed the difficulty of reconciling their formal training with the collective ethos of participatory work. Emotional vulnerability emerged as a recurring theme,

whether in opening to group processes or in defending one's collaborative work in institutional or public contexts.

3. Participatory Composition: Sources, Forms, and Ethics

The seminar highlighted the multiplicity of sources that feed participatory composition, including lived experiences, texts (spoken, written, poetic), visual art, symbolic objects, diverse musical traditions, and community spaces. This diversity invites composers to consider not only aesthetic but also relational and ethical responsibilities.

Several participants warned against instrumentalizing participatory projects to satisfy funders' diversity or inclusion checklists. The term "SIMM-washing" was coined by Geoffrey Baker to describe superficial engagement with social themes without deep collaboration. Designing transparent and mutually respectful projects from the start was emphasized.

4. Improvisation and Shared Leadership

Improvisation emerged as both a musical methodology and an ethical disposition. It builds trust, presence, and responsiveness, and allows for a fluid distribution of leadership. Improvisation was seen as essential to navigating uncertainty and fostering attentive, embodied collaboration, challenging traditional notions of structure, authority, and artistic product.

5. Co-Writing and the Question of Ownership

Collaborative creation – through co-writing, co-composing, and co-curating – raises complex questions about ownership and responsibility. Participants explored assemblage models of composition, recognizing non-linear, plural authorship. Institutional formats such as concert programs and commissioning bodies were seen as shaping how co-authorship is presented and understood.

6. Emotional and Artistic Impact on Composers

Participatory contexts affect composers both personally and artistically. Many reported being re-energized and inspired through collective work, while others found it emotionally demanding. Aesthetic shifts, such as embracing tonality or simplicity, were often driven by the needs and inputs of participants. Letting go of personal ideas was often seen as an expansion of creative potential.

7. Skills and Capacities for Participatory Composers

Composers working in participatory settings require skills beyond traditional training: deep listening, humility, trauma-awareness, language sensitivity, reflexivity, modular thinking, and the ability to design inclusive and clear project invitations. Safe, culturally sensitive, and transparent engagement was seen as essential.

8. Participatory Research and Methodologies

Many composers act as both practitioners and researchers. The seminar explored a variety of methodologies such as practice-based research, autoethnography, co-research, and walking interviews. Participants emphasized the validity of embodied, process-based, and relational forms of knowledge, and advocated for interdisciplinary and inclusive research practices.

9. Audiences, Community, and Quality

Discussions addressed how audiences can move from passive to active participants, and how artistic quality should be understood in collaborative contexts. Participants emphasized shared ownership and redefined notions of value in music-making, urging a shift away from conventional performance expectations.

10. Institutional and Structural Conditions

The seminar also reflected on the influence of funding systems, education, and institutional language. Composers expressed the need for greater inclusion of participatory training in conservatories, and for funding schemes that support depth over compliance.

Conclusion

This SIMM seminar reaffirmed that participatory music-making is not a diluted form of artistic creation, but a distinct and powerful practice in its own right. It asks composers to reimagine themselves as facilitators, listeners, co-authors, and ethical collaborators. The work is often demanding, but transformative – artistically, socially, and personally.

report by Lukas Pairon
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participants:

BELMONTE Jaime (Spain / Finland) - Sibelius Academy
FAZIO VARGAS Daniela & ZARATE Felipe (Colombia) -
Manchester University & Durham University
HOLT James (UK) - University of Salford
Kawecki Michal (Poland / UK) - Guildhall School
MACINNES Charles (Germany) - Elbphilharmonie Hamburg /
independent scholar
PEREIRA Marco (Portugal) - Curso de Música Silva Monteiro
and the Superior School of Performing Arts, Porto
ROLLE Christian & KAMPSCHULTE Ronja (Germany) - University
of Cologne
STEINBERG Maia (Netherlands) - RESEO & Fontys University
VOIT Johannes (Germany) - Bielefeld University
WILLIAMS Alan (UK) - University of Salford

facilitators:

Cathy Milliken (composer)
Winnie Huang (performer)
Lukas Pairon (SIMM & Chair Jonet)