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SIMM-seminar 7: London 2024 (research on music composition in participatory music projects)

This SIMM research seminar was organised in collaboration with the Chair Jonet (University of Ghent), and with and at Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, 15-17 April 2024

This report emerges from the collaborative reflections, open discussions, and collective inquiries explored during this seminar. It investigates the complex, shifting, and deeply relational role of composers within participatory and community-oriented music practices. Without attributing individual authorship, the text synthesises the breadth of thought, doubt, and provocation that surfaced over the days of exchange.

Rethinking composition and authorship

In participatory music practices, the boundaries of composition as traditionally understood – rooted in singular authorship and the primacy of the written score – are persistently challenged. Composition is no longer merely the act of crafting music, but becomes a porous, relational process shaped through the voices, inputs, and experiences of those participating. A pressing question underlies this shift: whose voice is being heard, and at what stage of the creative process? Recognising that power resides in the capacity to define and shape a work, it becomes essential to attend to ethical considerations: how decisions are made, whose contributions are visible or erased, and how authority is distributed.

Authorship in participatory contexts often becomes co-authorship, or perhaps even a dissolution of authorship altogether. Yet, this does not necessarily resolve tensions – it might introduce new ones: the facilitator who edits and assembles the final piece may still wield significant power. The notion of the 'transcriber' – the one who gives form to the shared creation – raises critical concerns of translation, ownership, and potential dispossession.

Aesthetics, creativity, and the composer's new vocabulary

Language matters. The vocabulary we use to describe our work is never neutral. When composition is no longer the central concept, what takes its place? Some prefer to speak of creativity – a more open, less codified term that can accommodate diverse contributions, including those without formal musical training. This semantic shift opens space for alternative understandings of what music-making entails and who gets to participate in it.

But if we move away from composition as a central term, how do we navigate aesthetic choices? Facilitators inevitably shape aesthetic outcomes through their preferences, training, and habits. This influence is unavoidable, but must be made visible and open to reflection. At the same time, co-creating an aesthetic with participants – particularly those from diverse or non-notated musical backgrounds – requires both openness and strong support structures.

Skills and dispositions for participatory composers

Participatory practice demands a broad and flexible set of skills from composers. Beyond musical expertise, they must navigate complex group dynamics, facilitate communication, listen deeply, and adapt responsively. Key capacities include:

- the ability to work with open or unfinished scores
- pedagogical and intercultural sensitivity
- charisma, presence, and ego management
- comfort with minimal or improvised material
- flexibility in aesthetic outcomes
- negotiation and trust-building within groups
- willingness to unlearn and deconstruct one's own assumptions

Composers must also be aware of different notational systems and able to teach technique in accessible ways. They may act as translators across musical languages, but must avoid becoming gatekeepers. Above all, the role demands humility and a genuine willingness to share authorship.

Power, participation, and the politics of facilitation

Participatory composition is never free from power dynamics. Even the most well-intentioned facilitator can unconsciously impose their aesthetic, values, or methods. A central provocation raised during the seminar was whether composers in these settings are truly participants, or whether they continue to occupy a privileged space. Drawing on the spirit of critical pedagogy, especially the legacy of Paulo Freire, participants explored how composers might learn alongside others, rather than instructing them.

To decentralise decision-making requires conscious strategies: creating open frameworks, inviting co-leadership, and being transparent about constraints and choices. Still, the line between composer and facilitator is not always clear – and perhaps it should not be. Rather, one might consider how these roles can remain in productive tension, each informing the other.

Beyond classical models: Activism, expression, and social imagination

Participatory music often takes place outside traditional classical music contexts. This raises the question: how can we include individuals with no classical training in meaningful ways? How can we make space for diverse cultural practices and musical expressions, especially those that challenge dominant (often Eurocentric) models of musical value?

There is an urgent political dimension here. Participatory composition can act as a form of activism – a reimagining of social structures through sound and collective creation. The composer-facilitator is then not just enabling expression, but potentially enacting an alternative vision of community, equity, and belonging. However, this role must be approached carefully: it is not about re-educating participants into a given musical norm, but about co-constructing meaningful artistic experiences grounded in mutual respect.

The role of scholars and research in participatory music practice

Amid these evolving practices, scholars play a crucial role in observing, interpreting, and contextualising participatory music-making. Research can help articulate the often intangible dynamics of co-creation, power, and transformation.

However, scholars must proceed with care: their presence can both illuminate and distort. The same questions of authorship, voice, and power that apply to composers also apply to researchers.

Research in this field demands methodologies that are reflexive, participatory, and ethically grounded. It should resist extractive tendencies and instead aim to be in dialogue with practitioners and participants alike. Scholars are called to be listeners as much as analysts, to make space for the complexity of lived experience rather than reducing it to simplified narratives or metrics. Their work can help legitimise these practices in academic and policy contexts—but only if grounded in genuine collaboration and respect.

The scholar, like the composer in participatory settings, must question their position: are they facilitating understanding or imposing frames? Are they amplifying unheard voices or speaking over them? By embracing relational and situated approaches, scholarship in this domain can become part of the broader project of social transformation that participatory music aspires to enact.

Conclusion: A relational practice

This research seminar reaffirmed that participatory composition is fundamentally relational. It asks composers to be not only musicians but educators, co-learners, translators, and community members. It demands ethical clarity, aesthetic flexibility, and deep interpersonal awareness.

While no single model can capture its multiplicity, what emerges clearly is a collective commitment to rethinking the composer's role – not as the singular genius behind a work, but as one voice among many in a shared creative process. This shift holds transformative potential – not only for music-making, but for how we imagine social life, together.

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