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Misha Myers

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Now Everybody Sing

The voicing of dissensus in new choral performance

MISHA MYERS

Emergent and proliferating forms of participatory choral works in contemporary performance provide opportunities for heterogeneous and discordant voices to come together through structures of collaboration, self-organisation and social interaction. What mechanisms for voicing dissensus and critique do these works propose? Rather than the production of a homogenised voice situated on 'common ground', these works of 'atonal collaboration' invite participants to self-organise into an 'orchestral assemblage, able to confer its heterogeneous harmonies' through what Patricia Reed refers to as an 'attractor' (Goldenberg and Reed 2008: unpaginated). Perhaps they push Roland Barthes's 'grain of the voice' to its limit (Barthes 1996), to redraw the professional/amateur distinction away from the singularity of virtuosity and to attune our ears to the uniqueness of each voice going through the participatory efforts of communicating, to the 'experience of community as communication'

or to the sounds of 'a community consciously undergoing the experience of its sharing' (Nancy 2006: 68). The lines of the songs or sounds sung in the works discussed in this essay take up Nancy's challenge to trace a different line of community's formation through a focus on incompleteness, indetermination, interruption and fragmentation, instead of production and completion. These works suggest a communitarianism constituted not through socially bonded, bound and common being in communion, supplementary mediation and immanence (59-60), but by writing and re-writing the exposure of the 'singular outline of our being-in-common' (66-7). This outline or horizon of selfhood in such an approach is permeable to and comes into being in relation to a plurality of other vibrational influences. It depends upon tonal and vibrational differentiation, relation and synchronization. Indeed as Bertolino suggests, 'All voices are unique insofar as they spring from different



• Feral Choir.
Photo: Bryony McIntyre



• Complaints Choir of St. Petersburg, 2006
Photo: Yuriy Rumiantsev

throats' (2008: 131). The works discussed here create structures and processes for the uncommon to be voiced collectively.

The conceptual choir *The17* (2003) is a project that relies on such a process of participation to propose new modes of collective music-making. *The17* was initiated in 2003 by Bill Drummond, and he is committed to continuing his involvement and development of *The17* until 2013 when he will turn 60 and at which point he says the choir will 'be old enough to look after itself' (Drummond 2009: unpaginated). It began with a fantasy choir and then the *Notice*:

The17 is a choir. / Their music has no history,
/ Follows no traditions, / Recognises no
contemporaries, / *The17* has many voices. / They use
no libretto, lyrics or words; / No time signatures,
rhythms or beats; / And have no knowledge of
melody, / Counterpoint or harmony. / *The17* struggle
with the dark / And respond to the light.

(Drummond 2008: 30)

The work then developed as a series of evolving and mutable text-based scores 'to be performed by would-be members of *The17* anywhere' and mostly only for the performers themselves (2008: 33). As Drummond reflects on both his personal relationship with music, including his former life as a record executive and manager of Echo and the Bunnymen, and his proposed 'theory' of

a new music and music-making that 'celebrates time, place, occasion' (5) and the death of the age of recorded music, the internal relations of the scores change and evolve through his enquiry. The instructions are shifting; with each score participants are invited to take part in new contexts, structural configurations, groupings and processes of music-making. Participants with no prior musical training are invited to follow the written instructions of the varying scores, which are not recorded (or, if they are, are played back for the participants only and then deleted). Indeed, the source for this research is not from being a participant in the work itself but from Drummond's autobiography of the same name, which documents the work and its evolution. Only the participant of *The17* knows what this music sounds like, and this is significant to Drummond's conceptualization of the work as a provocation to recorded forms of music created to appeal to a mass public. This work is made by and for the performers themselves and perhaps establishes a kind of non-public or forms its own kinds of micro-constituencies. For instance, participants may belong to selected social groupings, such as school children for *Score 7: Collaborate* and *Score 317*. Repeat involved one hundred different definable groups of seventeen, 'so maybe 17 taxi drivers, 17 fish-n-chip shop owners, 17 street

sweepers, 17 punk rockers, 17 bell ringers, 17 mothers' (Drummond 2009).

One score entitled *Score 17* invited participants to compose their own score to be performed by The17 (2008: 48). The first response Drummond received was a critique of the work itself, which alluded to smugness and narcissism in Drummond's work. In response, Drummond unashamedly accepts that the work is all about him (49). However, the work is incomplete and invites and depends upon the participant as performer and collaborator with the artist. This 'work in movement' (Eco 1989: 12) is so much in flux that it is difficult to define, but it is comprised of identifiable structures and processes that can be recognized, repeated and taken up by someone other than its original author. This can be seen in Elizabeth Masterton's composition of a score to be performed by The17, *Score 354: Receive/Transmit*, performed in 2009 as part of 'Happidrome', an experimental artist-led project platform located at a disused World War 2 radar base on Goonhilly Downs, Cornwall, UK. In Masterton's score there is a repeatable order of seventeen participants gathered together, in this case not in proximity, but in shared time, to record a sound and then destroy it. Drummond is a conductor who

conducts a process of synchronization, of timekeeping or ordering that allows for offsets, such as this to emerge – those forms that move away, but keep some formal and regularized relation to the original. It is significant that the conductor of this work slips into the background and disappears in order for variance and collaboration to emerge and for these structures to truly reveal their potential.

Unlike The17, Phil Minton's Feral Choir (2006) is not intentionally conceived to self-replicate itself without Minton as conductor. However, the structural composition of the choral works of this choir encourages unique differences of voices to emerge and come together not in anything resembling harmonization or homogenization, but through ordered structures of cacophony, dissonance and polyphony. Minton explores a non-verbal and spontaneous 'vocal technique' to create these choral works around the world with non-professionals that is propounded to be without cultural influences or references. The process of forming a Feral Choir consists of a short one- to three-day workshop followed immediately by a performance. In the workshop Minton encourages participants to explore vocal possibilities through exercises and improvisations, which then lead to a



• Complaints Choir of Hamburg-Wilhelmsburg, 2006. Photo: Frank Lüsing

concert. He writes of the process, ‘the workshops normally begin with laughter, a non-verbal “vocal technique” which uses the voice in spontaneous, inventive and sometimes very extreme way’ (Minton 2011: unpaginated). Watching Minton at work conducting a Feral Choir at ‘Extraordinary Voices’ at Tate Britain, UK in 2009, it was not readily apparent what was agreed and pre-arranged in the score performed. However, it was clear that the group responded to Minton’s physical and vocal cues as conductor with non-verbal sounds that aggregated and synchronized around some recognizable and collectively understood material categories of sound, such as whistles, hums and cries, and temporal orders, such as call and response, repetition, acceleration and deceleration. Where there was melodic material, it was improvised and individualized or offered by a participant and then picked up by other members of the group, or it coexisted alongside multiple melodic fragments that defied homogenization.

In another choral work, *Complaints Choir* (2006), self-replication and -organization are central to the artists’ intentions and conceptualization of the work. This principle is carefully built into the structure of the work and is at the forefront, while the artists step aside. Originally conceived by Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, the choir now looks after itself and has spread worldwide as self-initiated choirs and events. With the worldwide demand for complaints choirs that followed on from the success of the first event organized at Springhill Institute in Birmingham, UK, in 2006, the originators released the concept and encouraged anyone to organize their own complaints choir by following nine do-it-yourself steps (Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen 2006a: unpaginated) to create what they have referred to as a ‘community in time’ (Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen 2006b: 11). These steps propose a method for finding a local musician, collectively writing and composing complaints into lyrics and then performing and documenting the event. The collective writing involves processes

of categorisation of complaints and then application of barometers of enthusiasm and expertise to produce the final lyrics for the group to sing. Participants write their complaints, which are then grouped into categories and then limited to those that attract the most excitement (no guidance is indicated about how excitement is measured). ‘Expert teams’ then focus on their favoured categories and edit, combine and reformulate them. The musician then works with a few volunteers from the choir to put the ideas selected by the expert teams together into a song. As the piece is rehearsed, the instructions encourage continued openness in the process with the suggestion to continually use new ideas.

Kalleinen suggests that finding the balance between collectiveness and individualism is at stake in the work. ‘We have to think about the common good as well as take responsibility for our own boundaries’ (2006b: 6). Kochta-Kalleinen refers to this as different from the imposed hierarchies of uniform collectivism he encountered with organizations like the Free German Youth growing up in East Germany (7). Kalleinen’s and Kochta-Kalleinen’s response, he suggests, ‘was to embrace and exaggerate our individuality, to invent and stage idiosyncrasies (10). But those individualities are held within a common space and time. Returning to Nancy, the work is not about common bond but being-in-common. Whereas the complaint is a common expression of petit-bourgeois resentment, with the *Complaints Choir* the more self-centred individualism of this mode of dissent is transformed not only in the amplification that results from the collective force of the complaint expressed through song, but also in the negotiation of dissensus, or of potentially conflicting and co-existing complaints, through a relational process of composition.

The *Paid not Played Choir* brought together cultural workers to create and perform a song at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 2010 that would protest the practice of free labour within the arts sector. While the choir claimed lineage as permutation of

the Complaints Choir, there is a problematic relationship to this original work. While the instructions offered by Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen do not begin the process with a particular complaint, just with the more general notion of complaint as the attractor, this piece began with a particular political issue and message and the objective to create a 'piece of protest music'. The ambiguity around the measurement of that attraction is significant, as is the ambiguity of the trigger. Is it the suggestive and the indeterminate attractor, then, that allows for the exposure of the grains of communication, for tonalities of the sharing to become consciously audible? In his definition of the principle of ambiguity, Eco refers to the term 'perceptive ambiguities' used in psychology and phenomenology to refer to 'the availability of new cognitive positions ... that allow the observer to conceive the world in fresh dynamics of potentiality before the fixative process of habit and familiarity comes into play' (Eco 1989: 16). Interestingly, the first response to the call for participants for *Paid not Played* sent out via email to the Live Art Network was a complaint that the participants were not being paid. Perhaps the delimited and prescribed singularity of focus of this variant of the choir and its complaint opened itself then to negation, contradiction and exhaustion.

The structures of synchronization in the works discussed here are finely tuned or attuned to the atonal voice and emergence of offsets. However, this last work raises the question: at what point do those variants move so far off and away from the architectural and architemporal logics of the attractor that the uniqueness of voice becomes inaudible or its harmonies homogenized?

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