

NATHAN RIKI THOMSON

Resonance. (Re)forming an artistic identity through intercultural dialogue and collaboration

Lectio Praecursoria

Public examination of the artistic doctoral degree on 1 October 2021. Title of the doctoral project: RESONANCE – (Re)forming an Artistic Identity through Intercultural Dialogue and Collaboration. Examiners of the artistic components: PhD Risto Blomster, DMus Anna-Kaisa Liedes, DMus Aija Puurtinen, PhD Päivi Takala, and DMus Timo Väänänen (chair of the Artistic Committee). Examiners of the thesis: PhD, Assoc. Professor Vanessa Tomlinson, D.A. Päivi Takala. Chair: DMus, Professor Kristiina Ilmonen

As I speak today, the world continues to face an unprecedented challenge in the form of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This has been unsettling for communities worldwide, with people in many countries forced to self-isolate and avoid contact with others. As we all know very well, in the arts world, this has also meant widespread cancellations of performances and events. Despite this unsettling and difficult time, it could be said that a noticeable positive effect has begun to surface in terms of the pace of life slowing down, and a reassessment of values and priorities, at least momentarily.

In his book *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity* (2013), sociologist Hartmut Rosa speaks of the dilemma and contradiction of acceleration, particularly in Western societies, pointing out that, although there have been enormous gains in time by means of technology, 'the tempo of life has increased, bringing with it stress, hecticness and lack of time' (p. 35).

As a central aim of his book, Rosa proceeds by discussing the paradox of the modern world not having enough time, even though we have in many ways gained far more than we needed before. Rosa's later book builds on this discussion, stating as the central thesis, 'If acceleration is the problem, then resonance may well be the solution' (2019, p. 1). Rosa alludes to the multiple ways we might seek out resonance with the world around us, ranging, for example, from art, sports, or spiritual beliefs, to work, culturally specific world views, or family.

Viewed through this lens, the concept of *resonance* is relevant here as a way to understand the importance of making connections with the world around us, and the

interrelated effects of this on identity formation. In my research, I view resonance from sonic and physical angles, as well as an approach to thinking about identity formation and the ways in which we connect with others and the world around us.

Although today marks the end of a six-year period of artistic research and development, this process has taught me the value of lifelong learning, and it is my hope that the findings I present today will continue to unfold in new and unexpected ways into the future.

On reflection, this journey stretches much further back to seminal moments when I first realized the value and importance of intercultural dialogue and collaboration, as an emerging young musician. 27 years ago, I found myself sitting under a large tree that frames the front of Tanzanian musician Hukwe Zawose's house in Bagamoyo, Tanzania. The shade of this tree provided a meeting point for community and was an ideal place to begin to understand other ways of seeing and being in the world.

It was also under this tree that I studied the Wagogo ilimba, or thumb piano, and the Wagogo overtone flute, which had been made for me by Zawose from a local piece of bamboo. Zawose's house was full of pieces of hollowed out bamboo and metal pipes standing in each corner of his room waiting to be played. Zawose would often pick up a piece randomly and entice beautiful melodies from the pipe, as if pulling the music out of thin air.

The mosquito-eating lizard, called the gecko, liked to rest inside the standing pipes, and one of my initial lessons with Zawose involved learning how to blow the gecko out of the pipe before playing, as he animatedly recounted the day when a gecko ran into his mouth! The technique was a bit like this... (Nathan Thomson plays the flute live as an example). That's one way to wake up a gecko!

As a young musician, fresh out of my undergraduate studies in Western classical and jazz music in Australia, this was one of my first seminal encounters with non-Western musical aesthetics and different ways of thinking about sound, music, and the world around us.

Surrounded by an ever-shifting soundscape of children, goats, birds, insects, chickens, and Zawose's extended family, he taught me to think about sound, culture, and environment in new ways. Moreover, he taught me the value of tacit knowledge, which may be thought of as being 'caught', rather than 'taught', and to question the pre-conceived ideas I had about music, myself, and my own emerging identity.

Through these early encounters, I caught a glimpse of the ways in which intercultural dialogue might open up new, *liminal* spaces, creating fertile ground to learn from our differences, and perhaps make new musical and personal discoveries.

In the words of Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah:

A recognition and celebration of the fact that our fellow world citizens, in their different places, with their different languages, cultures, and traditions, merit not

just our moral concern but also our interest and curiosity. Interactions with foreigners, precisely because they are different, can open us up to new possibilities, as we can open up new possibilities to them. In understanding the metaphor of global citizenship, both the concern for strangers and the curiosity about them matter. (2019, p. 3)

During the past 27 years since living in Tanzania, and travelling in other regions of Africa, I have been fortunate to continually engage in dialogue and collaboration with musicians and other artists from many different musical and cultural backgrounds, which ultimately led to embarking on this artistic doctoral project.

This doctoral project began in September 2015 out of the desire to gain greater understanding and insight into the effects of intercultural immersion, dialogue, collaboration, and co-creation on the formation of a personal artistic identity. It was my hope that by embarking on this exploration, I might begin to understand more about the crucial contributing factors in the formation of an artistic identity, why identity matters, and the ways in which engaging in meaningful interaction with others and the world around us might be an important part of this process.

Through music making, it was my further hope that by recognising, valuing, and appreciating cultural differences, having conversations across boundaries, and creating a space for dialogue, some of the core qualities needed for intercultural collaboration might be revealed and have wider relevance beyond music itself.

My collaborators in this doctoral project include musicians, dancers, and visual artists from Brazil, Colombia, Estonia, Finland, France, Madagascar, Mexico, Poland, Sápmi, Tanzania, the UK, and Zambia. A commonality shared by these artists is, although they might identify in some form with certain geographical reference points, they are not bound by binary notions of culture or identity.

My collaborators entered into this project with extensive experience of working in intercultural contexts as performers, composers, and collaborators. I saw this prior experience as important because it allowed us to focus directly on exploring the transcultural, liminal territories in our music-making and artistic collaborations.

The concept of *liminal space* is framed by scholar Homi Bhabha as a third space, which, in Bhabha's words, is 'in between the designations of identity'. As Bhabha states, this emerging space 'opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' (as cited in Rutherford, 1990, p. 4).

Intercultural musical collaboration creates fertile ground for the emergence of liminal, third spaces, in turn generating new musical discoveries. However, there are more layers at play than the actual music itself, which are often hidden below the surface in this process. I argue that, although music is the vehicle here, intercultural collaboration becomes a catalyst for developing listening, empathy, compassion, global citizenship, and understanding different ways of being in and listening to the world.

Live music:

1. *Ode to Nana*: Nathan Riki Thomson with Adriano Adewale, berimbau
2. *Roots of the Baobab Tree*: Nathan Riki Thomson with Maija Kauhanen, prepared kantele

I will turn my attention now to focus briefly on one of the central concepts investigated in this research, which is the phenomenon of resonance. Resonance is viewed from both physical and metaphorical angles, reflecting on the effects of sound felt in the body, as well as the concept of resonance as an approach to thinking about the ways in which we connect with others and the world around us, as mentioned earlier.

Sound itself is something we are able to access through hearing, feeling, or even being able to physically see sound waves. This became a personal fascination for me during the project, and I'd like to show you a snapshot of the experiments we carried out, based on the early *cymatics* experiments of Ernst Chladni in the 1780's, and later, Dr Hans Jenny in the 1960's. (Nathan Thomson shows a live demonstration of the cymatics visuals)

These experiments create a sense of wonderment about the nature of sound itself, and the multiple ways it impacts our world. However, being able to *hear* or *see* sound is not something that can be taken for granted and is certainly not accessible to all across humanity. The physicality of sound is something most, perhaps all of us are able to access in some way though, and during this project I realised the great power of the physicality of sound.

This has been meaningful for me personally, as well as being able to share the experience of the physicality of sound collectively. In my doctoral concerts, resonating seating structures were created that enabled audience members to feel the sound through their bodies, resulting in a shared embodied experience, which seemed to connect the people in the room, both performers and audience, in another way.

So, how do we connect with others and the world around us? Are there certain qualities or skills that can be developed and practiced in order to increase the possibility for connection? As mentioned earlier, some of the findings of this research point to qualities that are perhaps an important part of this process; qualities that are simultaneously simple and incredibly complex, such as, *listening, openness, empathy, dialogue, and collaboration*.

An important factor in creating connection or resonance with others is acknowledging the plurality of identity, and the value of difference. Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses the role of identity in global citizenship, or what he also calls 'cosmopolitanism'. Appiah states:

Cosmopolitanism ... sees human beings as shaping their lives within nesting memberships: a family, a neighborhood, a plurality of overlapping identity groups,

spiraling out to encompass all humanity. It asks us to be many things, because we are many things. (Appiah, 2019, p. 2)

Appiah's thinking on cosmopolitanism is relevant here in two ways: first, in relation to the (re)formation of an artistic identity informed by the cosmopolitan ideals, and second, in terms of the qualities needed to engage in transcultural musical dialogues. In Appiah's words, 'People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences' (2007, p. xv).

In this research, I explore the current state of my personal artistic identity and document some of the more recent experiences that have helped it to unfold. In doing so, I also question the very nature and relevance of an identity and why it may be important. This is relevant not only for me, but for other artists, researchers, audiences, teachers, and learners because it helps us understand, on the one hand, how uniquely different we are and, on the other hand, the interconnected nature of our existence and the ways in which we connect with each other and the world around us.

Fluidity is acknowledged as a key element in this process, as alluded to in numerous other studies (Appiah, 2018; Hargreaves et al., 2002; Green, 2011; Turino, 2008), whereby a musician's identity may be in constant flux with the world around them. My own experience has reflected this phenomenon and provided a reference point in order to compare and contrast with the experiences of others.

While some aspects of my artistic identity may be traceable in relation to direct experiences, musical approaches, or sonic aesthetics, there are other aspects that cannot be completely pinpointed or understood in terms of their origins or manifestations.

These elements appear to emerge in tacit ways and elude categorisation in terms of cultural reference points, perhaps best described as manifestations of complex webs of interconnected experiences, both personally and musically. This includes inspiration from the natural world around us, such as this beautiful Finnish landscape, or the rich sonic environment of the Australian ecosystem I grew up in, with daily doses of a great diversity of bird song, insects, and the ever-shifting sounds of the south Pacific Ocean. I consider this aspect of my identity as being a form of personal authenticity that exists deep below the surface, taking form like the natural, unforced expression of a native language.

Whether or not this doctoral project has resulted in the formation or consolidation of my own distinctive sonic identity is perhaps best answered by others. However, I can observe noticeable sonic elements and approaches that have become part of my chosen forms of expression as a double bass player, from my exploration of buzz aesthetics, custom-made attachments, and extended techniques inspired by time living in Tanzania and Zambia, to percussive playing on the body of the bass and behind the bridge embodied through collaborations with Brazilian percussionist, Adriano Adewale, Finnish instrument maker, Juhana Nyrhinen, and Sámi singer Hildá Länsman, for example.

Ultimately, identity formation can be seen as an essential part of being in and contributing to the world around us, including being allowed to be who we are and embracing difference and diversity in all its forms. Furthermore, by acknowledging, celebrating, and giving equal space to the unique identities of each person, we are inherently stating that each person matters, is valued, and is important. Racism is called to attention here as we fight to eradicate the systemic racism that has undervalued and pushed aside the identities of black people, indigenous people, and people of colour.

I'd like to offer some final reflections here on the possible implications of interculturalism in music education, as well as the wider implications for the future of our world. Decolonising music education is a crucial factor in this discussion, which is a topic that is thankfully beginning to gain momentum in arts institutions globally.

This shift requires ongoing activism, however, and it is my hope that this research might make a contribution to the discussion. In the future, I imagine safe educational spaces, where pluralistic approaches sit side by side equally, constantly engaging in dialogue and collaboration. As alluded to in my research, this calls for ongoing discussions and constant action in order to decolonise and globalise music education, as well as dismantle systemic racism (Bartleet et al., 2020; Brown, 2020; Hess, 2018; Kallio, 2019; Schippers, 2010).

Reflecting on other possible impacts of this research through a wide-angle lens, I envision *further* research projects that reimagine the future professionalism of musicians, who actively work from a place of being in constant dialogue and negotiation with sound, sonic material, people, and place. What will future intercultural artistic practices look like when approached from this perspective, rather than from defined ideas about sound connected to fixed notions of culture? This approach has further potential implications for breaking down binary notions of culture, nation, gender, and our connection as human beings, as well as the wider implications for (re)forming artistic identities.

As my final reflection today, I can observe that my identity has noticeably changed in form and shape during the course of this doctoral project and is now distinctively different to how it was when I began. The world around me has also changed in countless, unexpected ways, not least with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020.

The world remains in constant flux, with impermanence, reformation, renewal, and reshaping remaining as the only constants. This has of course always been the case, but perhaps the simple acknowledgement of this fact sheds light on one of the connections shared across humanity. The experience of impermanence and a world in constant flux is something most, perhaps all, of us relate to, and have a shared understanding and experience of. This same fluidity and impermanence may be observed in the inherent nature of culture itself, and indeed in the (re)formation of an artistic identity.

By acknowledging this phenomenon as common ground, we may be able to enter into dialogue not from the starting point of fixed perceptions of identity, culture, or the world, but rather as unique individuals seeking to understand more about ourselves, each other, and the world around us.

In doing so, we may turn our attention to focus on the qualities so crucial to this process, such as, empathy, compassion, kindness, openness, humility, listening, dialogue, and collaboration; qualities that may indeed be more and more crucial for building a peaceful future for our world.

Concluding live music:

Cycles: Nathan Riki Thomson, solo prepared double bass, Otso Lähdeoja, live electronics, Ville Tantt, live visuals

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