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Restructuring Hierarchy Within and Between Jazz and Classical Orchestras

Preamble

From 2017 to 2021, I dedicated my time and energy to an artistic research project on the development of a jazz symphonic orchestra. To verbalize my complex and intricate journey, I wrote this article, which will guide the reader through the development of four years of work. This article discusses and reflects on the paths I travelled through the research, and their contribution towards the transformation of my views on the subject and on my own music. The backbone of this article is the discussion of the practical process conducted with different large ensembles, and where hypotheses and ideas were put into practice.

I recommend the reader to first watch a short video

ESvideo1:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= Y4vaUUcqHE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4vaUUcqHE)

ESVideo1 shows short excerpts of the performance in Graz in 2021 of my composition 'We have a Dream' performed by Jazz Symphonic Orchestra (JSO). The development of this work and achievement of these results involved a four-year process of intertwining artistic exploration and social research. Now, I will guide you through some phases of my work, with a focus on my methods, challenges, and findings.

Introduction

In 2012, after studying in Brazil, I moved to Graz to write music for big bands. My curiosity and love for large ensembles really blossomed, and in 2015, I had the honor of conducting a jazz symphonic orchestra including both jazz and classical musicians.

While on stage rehearsing and performing, I felt deeply fulfilled, however, I was irritated by an 'invisible wall' that I felt between the jazz and classical musicians. It was as if separations were created and reinforced by the music itself and by our creative process. I was annoyed by its hierarchical organization and the resulting lack of interaction and collaboration. Using this irritation as motivation, I began to think about how I could break down this invisible wall.

The backbone of this article will be the discussion of the practical process necessitated with different large ensembles, where my own hypotheses and ideas were put into practice. Besides the artistic practice itself, ethnography and qualitative research supported the methodology and through analyses of the artistic results and collected data, I aimed to answer the question: how can we establish communication between so-called jazz and classical musicians, empowering them to engage in collaboration, specifically in large ensemble contexts, such as jazz symphonic orchestras?

To answer this question, I focused my artistic research on the creation of music for JSO, questioning the established hierarchies and frictions between jazz, classically trained musicians, conductor, composer and notated music.

This question is relevant artistically and socially because it implores if our traditional models and approaches to making music with large ensembles are appropriate to our time, or if they need revising.

Although the debate about leadership and relational processes has been very present recently, I would argue that the structures themselves have changed very little and in the field of large jazz ensembles, we can say that orchestras and big bands still make use of the

hierarchical organizational models inherited from the Romantic classical orchestra and military band traditions respectively, where leadership is built on a vertical, top-down model and are rarely questioned.

Methodology

Artistic research projects tend to be mostly interdisciplinary, combining methodologies from different fields. In this research, it involved two distinct parts: “preliminary and main research”, and both of which have distinct characteristics and functions in research.

The preliminary phase, which will not be included in this article, included archival research at the ‘Metropole Orkest’ and the ‘Orquestra Jazz Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo’ creating an ethnographic work focusing on my experiences with both orchestras.

The main research is the focus of this article. It involved three intensive artistic experience, which are documented, reported and reflected in detail in my dissertation:

1. Case Study One – jazz nonet and string orchestra
2. Case Study Two – jazz nonet plus harp, oboe, french horn and classical percussion
3. Artistic Result – jazz symphonic orchestra

Aside from my work as a composer, during the last four years I was acting as a researcher, an instrumentalist, an arranger, a conductor and even a manager!

The musicians’ perspective was fundamental to my reflections during the research; and in addition to audio and video documentation of rehearsals and recordings, I performed qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews with selected musicians.

This artistic research led to the following results:

- A contribution at the Sixth Rhythm Changes Conference, ‘Jazz Journeys’ leading to the publication in ‘Jazzforschung / Jazz Research 50/51’. Title: “Artistic Research in Jazz: A Case Study in Jazz Composition for Large Ensemble” – 2021;
- The composition of a program for Jazz Symphonic Orchestra;
- The production of an album with excerpts of my composition work;
- Eight compositions for large ensemble, which can be heard here at the link:

<https://emilianosampaio.bandcamp.com/album/music-for-large-ensembles-vol-ii-2020>

Case Study One – jazz nonet and string orchestra

In my first practical case study, I worked with a jazz nonet and string orchestra. The string orchestra traditionally has the concertmaster as the ‘boss’ who leads the string section and takes care of artistic, interpretative decisions.

Involving improvisation in my compositions introduced a basic distinction: When the String orchestra performs improvised music, either as a collective or individually, different string players assume different functions simultaneously.

How should the scores and individual parts be notated in this scenario? How can collective improvisation be coordinated with so many string players? I found the solution by dividing the score of the string orchestra in two staves: the soloist and the section.

(Image ES1Two_Staves):

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet and Trombones (T). The title is "Collective improv - C lidian (concert pitch)". The score is in 4/4 time. The parts are: olin I (Violin I), olin II (Violin II), Viola, and Cello. The Trombone part (T) is also present. The string parts feature a mix of arco and pizzicato textures. The Viola and Cello parts include a "fade out" instruction at the end of the section. The score spans measures 156 to 161, with a double bar line at measure 160 labeled "Open".

This kind of notation helped me to imagine and plan different improvisation settings in advance. The results are shown in video 2 (*ESvideo2*)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3e86qvJOpNO>

The additional part and the strings' autonomy during the rehearsals gave the players the chance to decide the section's structure as they saw fit. As a result, atypical hierarchies emerged, as compared to traditional string sections. Not only was the soloist chosen collectively, but they also collaborated within the role of leader, which is a very rare occurrence in the classical environment.

Involving the string orchestra in improvisational settings was essential to question the hierarchy, and to explore the potential of strings in a JSO context. In an interview, one violin player commented:

*"Some of the things that were actually in the music were overlooked or discarded, maybe almost from the start. I found that strange [...] I felt that neither the concertmaster nor anybody else really took the lead for the strings. Several players were speaking up for certain passages and such...but interaction in the group regarding the sound of the strings didn't really come up because the concertmaster didn't really speak up for the strings"*¹

This is interesting because although the violinist pointed out "the concertmaster didn't speak for the strings", this could also be seen in a positive light: it is possible that the composition and rehearsal strategies allowed for new possibilities in terms of the social interactions and power relations in the string section; the statement "there were several players speaking up for certain passages" clearly implies that the individual players were actively thinking for themselves and offering input on the music. As we saw, different players took on the role of concertmaster in various moments, signifying the increased autonomy that is essential to shared leadership.

¹ Violinist in an interview in 2017

Case Study Two – jazz nonet & harp, oboe, french horn and classical percussion

In 2018, I started composing new pieces as a reflective continuation of case study one, with a concrete objective: look for a notation method to make the musical score more accessible to the musicians, thus sharing information generally held only by the conductor. The main goal of notation was to adapt the traditional scoring for large scale jazz compositions to increase autonomy in performers' individual parts.

The quantity of predetermined elements in musical notation can vary drastically depending on music context, tradition, etc. Using notation to give autonomy to the musicians in a large ensemble is a complex undertaking. I took particular inspiration from small jazz ensemble practice to find alternatives. In general, small ensembles in jazz work from a lead sheet or without notated music. In this case, my goal was to incorporate the “lead sheet” as a concept and adapt it to the large ensemble. For example, here we see two individual parts of experiences: (*Image ES2Leadsheets*):

The image displays two pages of musical notation. The left page is titled "Naked Tree" by Emiliano Sampaio, with a tempo of 70 bpm and a "Ballad" feel. It includes parts for Percussion 2, Harp Intro, and Oboe. The Oboe part is highlighted with a red box and includes instructions: "1. choose an instrument to play" and "2. play only some of the pitches". The Harp part is also highlighted with a red box and includes a "Harp guide". The right page is titled "Jetlag" by Emiliano Sampaio, with a tempo of 150 bpm and a "Light Swing" feel. It includes parts for Harp and Trumpet in B. The Harp part is highlighted with a red box and includes chord symbols: Dm7(add3), E13(#9#11), Am7(13), Bb13, Em6(9), E7(#9#11b13), and Em7. The Trumpet in B part is highlighted with a red box and includes the instruction "play practice voicings".

To share the knowledge of the score with the musicians, each individual part showed harmonic reductions in the form of chord symbols and melodic passages played by other instruments. Although cue notes are common in classical orchestral parts, they are usually supplied for the purpose of orientation, which was not the intention here. In addition to better orientation, a horn player commented that the harmonic information gave him a better understanding of his lines in relation to harmony, positively affecting intonation.

Although macro-cosmic structures of the pieces remained as composed, a high degree of unpredictability and improvisation was present in every performance. A good example of this notation's direct result is the introduction of the piece "Naked Tree". (*ESvideo3*)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_7e5N1xYbw

The notation by itself has no direct impact on the process of making music because musicians, both jazz and classically trained, play what is notated in their parts and follow the instructions of a conductor. To explore the potential of the notation system described, the rehearsals had to incorporate novel strategies.

To support the engagement of the musicians in collaborating with each other, it seemed necessary to explain how the notation should be interpreted. At the beginning of the first rehearsal, I told the musicians about the compositions and told them:

“You are free to offer suggestions for the music. If you feel you should play something that is not written, play it. If you feel you should leave something out, simply do it. You are free to change your parts and don’t have to ask me. These rehearsals are a chance for us to experiment and see what works and what doesn’t.”

The behavior of both jazz and classical musicians is not likely to change automatically simply by using more open notation and saying “you have more freedom.” My experience in this case study showed it had to be explicitly said and re-emphasized at every rehearsal. In addition, I had to support this through my actions as conductor, which included:

- 1) only conducting when necessary;
- 2) not standing in front of the band the whole time; and most important;
- 3) trusting the musicians’ instincts before giving them feedback.

After two case studies, it became clear that less vertical hierarchical relations in large jazz ensembles are possible, and can be achieved through some modifications in the process of making music: alternative notation methods, sharing the information in the scores, trust-based rehearsal methods which give more autonomy to the musicians, and alternative physical set-up in addition to the application of technology, to create optimal acoustic arrangements (a subject that I will not discuss in this article). The rigorous analysis of interviews of thirteen participants within both case studies revealed that the changes in these areas stimulated qualitative interaction and collaboration in the large ensemble experience.

Results – Jazz Symphonic Orchestra (JSO)

After three years of preparation through artistic and qualitative scientific work, archive work and ethnographic work, I began the composition of ‘We Have a Dream’ for the JSO. I presented the results of this artistic research in the form of two performances by a 40-piece orchestra, documented in October 2022 at the theater of the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz.

Conceptually, each composition is linked to important world events of 2020, specifically concerning race. As Coronavirus spread exponentially, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other black Americans in the USA triggered a series of protests against racism all around the world. As a Brazilian, I have witnessed the structural social problems of racism and poverty close-up – problems that would become more evident than ever before when the COVID pandemic struck Brazil, where 56% of the population is black. Historically, the poorest population, black Brazilians have readily struggled to access education and healthcare. As a result, black communities were affected most seriously by COVID-19.

As a white man from a middle-class family, I have always held a privileged position, and at this point in my life I felt compelled to acknowledge my historical responsibility by calling attention to a subject that is still so apparent in the world, even in Austria. These thoughts inspired me to dedicate this large work to the fight against racism and poverty, interconnected problems that still seem far from solved.

Practically, this orchestra piece addresses the problem of poverty objectively. As composer, I acknowledge the importance of the performers to the artistic results as co-composers. In this sense, I shared the copyrights related to these recordings with the musicians. Artists should reflect on this question, especially when involving the performers in collaborative creative processes where the lines between composer, performer and improviser become blurred.

Musically speaking, this work synthesizes the discourse on hierarchy in large jazz ensembles by exploring improvisation and collaborative processes. As Christopher Small points out, “the relationships created during a musical performance (...) are more the ideal, as imagined by the participants, than the present reality”.²

But only through imagination might we create the possibility for real change. Therefore, I created a space of musical and social collaboration, aimed ultimately towards stimulating the musicians and me to rethink our relationships with the world. To achieve this, one must recognize one’s own mistakes and injustices in the history into which we are inserted, which can be the first step in changing the reality.

The conductor’s role

The search for ‘a different relationship’ was the core of this artistic research and the conductor’s role comes into discussion at this point because it was only in this last phase that I assumed the exclusive role of conductor.

The conductor’s task is basically to guide the musicians. This task has been accomplished in very different ways throughout history. The 19th century Romanticism gave birth to the profession of conducting. The cult of the ‘great conductor’ was consolidated in the 20th century, supported by radio broadcasts, recordings, music critics and writers.

As Niina Koivunen points out, “conductors may be among the most undemocratic leaders in the world”.³ They have the power to make interpretation decisions about all aspects of performance – and are rarely questioned. Christopher Small also points out that the role of the conductor is not only to coordinate the orchestra, but it also reinforces the idea of the “powerful autocrats” who “impose their personalities at the orchestra”.⁴

I would argue that this description of the conductor’s work is antiquated, but it still carries a contemporary weight in both jazz and classical cultures.

During this research, the notation methods aimed to share the information on the scores with the performers; the rehearsal strategies aimed to give more autonomy and following

² Small, *Musicking*, 49

³ Koivunen, *Leadership in Symphony Orchestras*, 67

⁴ Small, *Musicking*, 84

the same line of reasoning, the conducting approach incorporated the idea of shared leadership. Shared leadership emphasizes empowerment and teamwork.⁵

As studies point out, it can “influence team affective responses such as commitment, satisfaction, cohesiveness, as well as team behavioral responses such as effort, communication, and citizenship behaviors”.⁶ Leadership, in this context, is viewed as a sequence of multi-directional, reciprocal influence processes among many individuals in different positions, resulting in knowledge created through the relational process.

My artistic work throughout this project was focused on enabling shared leadership in the jazz symphonic context. To do so, it was necessary to reframe the relationship between a conductor and performing musicians. I suggest that the creation of music best takes place in a trusting, open relationship, where the conductor has a strong but humble conviction about the music, is responsive to the orchestra, and nurtures musicality without imposing personal views on the musicians.⁷

I do not mean to claim that a conductor can exercise their function without any coercive authority. However, the conductor, as a leader – has several important roles in the shared leadership process. The conductor should listen more and talk less, ask more questions and provide fewer answers, and encourage individual and team problem-solving and decision-making. They should strive to replace conformity and dependence with initiative, creativity and independence, and “engage in the facilitating roles of selecting team members, developing team member skills, filling in for lacking skills, managing boundaries, and empowering team members”.⁸

It is apparent that the conductor’s function in a shared leadership context is extremely complex and presents many challenges, posing concrete questions about its implementation in practical situations. During the analyses of case studies one and two, I detailed some of the approaches used to promote shared leadership. Some global elements are yet to be addressed, however, as they require an awareness from the conductor’s perspective and a set of working conditions.

Figuroa-Dreher points out that contexts which involve improvisation depend on an open attitude of the participants.⁹ This same open attitude is required for success in shared leadership, and I suggest that this is connected to certain circumstances of the workflow. The rehearsal strategies developed at the beginning of the research were adapted almost by instinct; only through the analyses of interviews and rehearsal videos was I able to realize the importance of workflow aspects.

A proper atmosphere, peace, and serenity were pointed out by the interviewed musicians as ingredients for the success of the rehearsals and the development of collective work.

⁵ Koivunen, *Leadership in Symphony Orchestras*, 143

⁶ Houghton, Neck and Manz, *Self-Leadership and SuperLeadership*’ 125

⁷ Koivunen, *Leadership in Symphony Orchestras*, 141

⁸ Houghton, Neck and Manz, *Self-Leadership and SuperLeadership*’ 133, 134

⁹ Figuroa-Dreher, *Improvisieren*, 268, 269

I suggest some practical approaches that conductors can take to promote the maintenance of this 'open attitude':

1. If possible, rehearse all pieces of the planned program in every rehearsal. Between rehearsals, the musicians have time – consciously or not – to reflect on what had been played, and also have the opportunity to internalize the music and come up with new input for upcoming rehearsals. Besides the benefits to the learning process, performing the whole program in every rehearsal also supports a general sense of accomplishment.

2. A more meaningful experience for the musicians seem to be dependent on the conclusion of the work that is being currently done. To wholly understand this concept, one might consider the rehearsal process. When the performance of a piece begins, a different energy is introduced, and the collective objective 'in' the moment is to make music together. Ideally, this performance is rehearsed in full, from beginning to end. Playing the whole piece as often as possible is essential for musicians to achieve a comprehensive understanding of any pieces being practiced, to encourage a sense of accomplishment and to make apparent any progress being made.

3. To avoid interruptions during the performance of the pieces during the rehearsals, I suggest the conductor should communicate with the musicians during the performance. We can see this in video 3. (*ESvideo4*):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGOLZR47Qmw>

4. After the first reading of a piece, before making corrections, ask the ensemble if there are questions about the piece, give the musicians a chance to remember what has just happened and to verbalize doubts. Adjustments in balance, intonation and phrasing tend to happen by performing in a cooperative process involving verbal and non-verbal communication. This can be incredibly difficult for both composers and conductors; the steep time investment into a piece can feel cheapened when a first reading is far from the imagined outcome. Despite this, it is an important factor in the promotion of an open attitude and must be practiced.

Conclusions

This work began by asking: 'How can we establish better communication between jazz and classical musicians?' This main question led me to examine and explore the hierarchical organization that is present in large jazz ensembles through my work. As Christopher Small points out, relationships and traditions in making music are a "matter of choices and there is nothing inevitable about the arrangements we make, it is not ordained innately but is a social arrangement".¹⁰ My research began in 2017 with the curation of a discussion around the establishment of the JSO tradition in its historical context, using the two most active JSOs in the world as examples to better understand these social arrangements.

In my artistic practice, I focused my exploration on two main strategies: creating mechanisms to change the social dynamic and exploring the incorporation of improvisation in a large ensemble context.

Shared leadership has proved to play a fundamental role in this process and has depended on a chain of requirements which have been pointed out and discussed.

1) An environment that supports a calm atmosphere, which requires delicacy and efficiency from the conductor.

¹⁰ Small, *Musicking*, 36.

2) Besides a proper atmosphere, trust is an important component in shared leadership:

“Trust enables and facilitates interaction, collaboration, risk taking, experimentation, and all kinds of phenomena that are frequently associated with ‘great’ performance.”¹¹

3) Shared leadership further requires effective communication, which was supported by the application of technology and through a readjustment of the traditional stage setting.

Involving both jazz and classically trained musicians in this research contributed not only to comprehending the extent to which musicians with diverse backgrounds and traditions can cooperate in large ensembles; it also showed that the timeworn institutional division between the disciplines no longer seems to reflect what the musicians of today seek in their musical lives, and that we should rethink how music is taught at universities and conservatories.

A new model for musicking in a large jazz ensemble seems to demand a new curriculum that takes our reality of today into account; this research signals the need for institutions to think about their priorities and objectives for the future. How can a course in conducting, composition or instrument be improved? What are the requirements for the new generation of conductors or jazz composers? This article suggests a possible direction.

By adopting a different approach to working with large jazz orchestras, we can create a context which acknowledges the work of the individuals and results in other aesthetic ideals. The value of this work leads me to believe that there should be more JSO projects in the future, and that more energy should be invested in the creation of ensembles fusing contrasting cultures. An orchestra playing should be an inspiring example of people working together.

Musicking in large ensemble contexts deals intimately with hierarchy and power relations, and is a powerful tool to question the ways we relate to each other and organize our world. As I have shown in this presentation, it can result in new aesthetic experiences and change the way we relate to one another, creating relationships based on trust, collaboration and serenity.
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¹¹ Gritten, *Developing trust in others*, 259

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