From Isolation to Collaboration: An Autoethnographic Account

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Abstract

In this paper I explore my personal experiences with collaborative music performance projects. Collaborations between different groups of musicians can be a transformative moment in the lives of students and music educators. The process of collaboration provides opportunities that cannot always be achieved when an ensemble performs alone. Many of these projects were undertaken in my role as a music educator responsible for school music ensembles but in one case, as a conductor of a community band. This idiographic auto-ethnographical study is based on my own reflective journal, which was analysed using Autoethnography and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The themes identified include: Isolation versus Collaboration, Social Interaction, and Music on a Grand Scale. The findings support the idea that there are considerable advantages for engaging in collaborative performance projects, which cannot only be musically enriching but provide unexpected social and cognitive benefits.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Collaboration, Music Performance, Community

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In this paper I explore my personal experiences with collaborative music performance projects. Collaborations between different groups of musicians can be a transformative moment in the lives of students and music educators. The process of collaboration provides opportunities that cannot always be achieved when an ensemble performs alone. Many of these projects were undertaken in my role as a music educator responsible for school music ensembles but in one case, as a conductor of a community band. This idiographic auto-ethnographical study is based on my own reflective journal, which was analysed using Autoethnography and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The themes identified include: Isolation versus Collaboration, Social Interaction, and Music on a Grand Scale. The findings support the idea that there are considerable advantages for engaging in collaborative performance projects, which cannot only be musically enriching but provide unexpected social and cognitive benefits. Keywords: Autoethnography, Collaboration, Music Performance, Community.

One of the defining characteristics of my career as a secondary Music teacher has been my persistence with collaboration; gathering groups of musicians together to create special musical events. I have always enjoyed these projects and have believed they have been positive for my students but hadn't considered scrutiny of the reasons why I am obsessed with pursuing them until now. The more I thought about it, the more I realised that this desire for collaboration came from the social setting of childhood. The literature on collaboration in music tends to focus on formal partnerships and composition using technology. There is very little research available on collaborative performance projects in the way that I have encountered them. The purpose of this study is to examine what has driven me to continue pursuing collaborative performance projects. By understanding my own position, it is hoped that I can then explore how these performance projects impact students, teachers and school communities. Therefore, this paper attempts to answer the question; what events in my life have led me to the conviction that collaborative performance projects are beneficial? Music teachers could consider collaborative performance projects for their students so that they may experience the same benefits that I enjoyed. Music teachers who experience a sense of isolation in their musical lives may look to the events that I have experienced as a potential way of overcoming such feelings. In addition, this study may benefit music educators and ensemble directors through understanding aspects of collaborative performance projects not covered in the literature.

The Researcher

I am a doctoral candidate in Music Education and lecturer in Music and Music Education at a university in Western Australia. I completed my undergraduate degree in Music Education, choosing not to take the performance stream and spent several years teaching in the classroom and conducting school music ensembles. After four years of teaching Music in the classroom I spent a year as a professional singer. I realised during this year of performing how much I missed teaching and that my original career path was as much vocational as it was practical.

This study explores the pivotal moments in my life that has led to my interest in collaborative performance projects. It is important to understand the reason I am drawn to this process of collaboration in order to examine the impact that it has on those who are drawn into them.

Why Auto-Ethnography?

In considering methodology, the choice of auto-ethnography was made so that I could examine my own cultural context. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) explain that, "Autoethnography combines characteristics of *auto*biography and *ethno*graphy" (p. 2). The autobiography allows the writer to reference pivotal moments or critical incidents in their own lives that are selected in hindsight. These incidents are usually chosen for being transformative in some way. Ethnography focuses on the study of social and relational practices within a group of people so that emic and etic (insider and outsider) understanding of that culture can be enhanced. Therefore, this idiographic methodology requires the researcher to reference pivotal personal moments as an insider and then analyse the meaning of the narrative as an outsider. This approach requires the ability to recall events in a personal way and write about them using the first person narrative. Ellis and Bochner (2002) discuss that, "Autoethnography represents a significant expansion in both ethnographic form and relationship potential. In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing" (p. 15).

By utilizing the autoethnography process, I hope to understand my own preferences about using the collaborative process. For so long, it has provided me with moments of inspiration and I have been using it as a model with which to inspire others. This may not mean that my reasons for collaboration will be generalisable or transferable to any context. Lincoln and Guba (1986) in their seminal and ground breaking work explain, "The axiom concerned with the nature of *truth* statements demands that inquirers abandon the assumption that enduring, context-free truth statements – generalizations – can and should be sought" (p. 75). Despite this, as a firm believer in bringing musical communities together, I hope that by better understanding my own journey, this process of understanding will be useful for those considering collaboration is as a tool to motivate and inspire others. Bochner and Ellis (2002) explain; "Autoethnographies can encourage acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extend beyond the self of the author and thereby contribute to sociological understanding in ways that, among others, are self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, and self-luminous" (p. 222).

Musical Collaboration

The notion of "collaboration" has been explored extensively in the research into Music education. However, the emphasis of the literature seems to be concerned with applications with the curriculum, particularly composition and the use of technology. In the particular area of musical performance collaboration, there is a noticeable gap and in much of what is written, the concept of "collaboration" has a variety of meanings. This autoethnography explores musical collaboration in terms of a group of musicians from one organisation performing with a group of musicians from another organisation. Beckman and Graves (1997) state that "Collaborative music-making can…be an enriching experience, as the exchange of musical ideas with a partner may both broaden as well as deepen one's musical skills" (p. 20).

Collaboration can make possible what was in isolation, impossible. The combined pool of resources, both human and otherwise can enable sophisticated or large-scale events to take place. The benefits of creating such events in turn provide increased opportunity for inspiration.

Bartleet (2012) explains that such "exchanges can result in a pooling of resources, an enriching musical experience for the participants, and a significant community building exercise for all involved" (p. 58).

Such meaningful, musical experiences don't simply happen by mistake. They are often achieved by multiple moments of negotiation and compromise that are not always easy or pleasant. John-Steiner (2000) observed, "Collaboration thrives on diversity of perspectives and on constructive dialogues between individuals negotiating their differences while creating their shared voice and vision" (p. 6). Despite the difficulties that may arise, the benefits are often worth the effort.

Research Approach and Methodology

This article employs an autoethnographical methodology. Autoethnography is an idiographic, qualitative research method, which gives the subject a unique voice to their personal, lived experiences. Its use is growing in popularity and has been successfully used in the sphere of Music Education by many researchers (Dhokai, 2012; Fung, 2014; Harrison, 2012; Nethsinghe, 2012). The use of autoethnography allows the researcher to create an understanding of his or her own position in order to understand any further research that may follow. An understanding of the self is critical in understanding the position taken when analysing others. In this way, the reasons for decisions made throughout the research process are made clear and any notion of bias is understood and placed up front. Ellis and Bochner (2002) explain that, "the autobiographical project disputes the normally held divisions of self/other, inner/outer, public/private, individual/society, and immediacy/memory" (p. 216). By understanding the inner (the self), a clearer understanding can be gained when trying to stand the outer (others).

The use of auto-ethnography is particularly suitable for studies involving cultural contexts. The use of an ethnographic wide-angle lens on the broader scope of cultural practice is combined with a constant reflection and inward look at the vulnerable self. Hamilton, Smith and Worthington (2008) state that, "In auto-ethnography, it is the cultural I shaped by cultural contexts and complexities that takes the foreground" (p. 25). This practice of self-reflection is also not unfamiliar to the world of the teacher.

The vignettes were written from my own recollections. When considering which collaborative experiences to include, the choices were influenced by two factors. The first factor was memories that stood out as being pivotal, usually that involved experiences that were overwhelmingly inspirational but not always. The second factor was a desire for a cross section of musical settings. I wanted to avoid all of the stories being about the same type of ensemble. Once the vignettes were written, a process of reading and re-reading them took place. Repeated words and phrases were identified and noted in a column at the right hand side of the page. These words and phrases were then examined to identify common threads so that strong themes emerged. Eatough and Smith (2006) note that, "With each reading, the researcher should expect to feel more *wrapped up* in the data, becoming more responsive to what is being said" (p. 487). This process attempts to achieve a high degree of dependability by ensuring that if the vignettes were analysed again, similar results would be achieved. Shenton (2003) posits, "Such in-depth coverage also allows the reader to assess the extent to which proper research practices have been followed" (p. 71).

After completing the autobiographical narrative, and coding the text for important, recurrent themes, three themes emerged as being significant: isolation versus collaboration, social interaction, and music on a grand scale. At times, these themes overlap and become difficult to distinguish within a particular vignette.

Writing About Myself

Writing about myself has been a challenging process. I constantly struggled with the idea of including aspects of my life, which seemed mundane and uninteresting into a format that was somehow both rigorous and worthy of reading. I constantly found myself resisting including any detail about how I felt about situations, wanting to provide a dry, detached narrative that simply informed the reader of what happened. It required repetitive reference to the essence of auto-ethnography and qualitative research generally to give in to the need to tell my story in a personal way. Bouchner, Smyth, and Tenni (2003) discuss that, "It is with the physical and emotional in particular, that we often get the first clue that something is happening and may be worthy of exploration" (p. 1).

The events discussed in this paper did not illicit negative or uncomfortable feelings, but rather moments of exhilaration. The projects represent a cross section of collaborative musical performances through the course of my career. They are not exhaustive; there were many more, but they do represent several different combinations of groups. The chosen collaborations include school-aged students with school-aged students, school-aged students with university students, school-aged students with adults and adults with adults. The collaborations also include various combinations of students, amateur enthusiasts and professionals. Significantly, these performances were chosen as they represent pivotal moments in my journey, shaping my understanding of the characteristics of collaborative performances.

My Background

I began my music education when attending boarding school at the age of 11. Musical opportunities available in a small town in the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia with a population of around 50 were virtually non-existent and so this waited until I moved to the city. Prior to school, my musical life consisted of sitting at an out-of-tune, upright piano, attempting to recreate familiar melodies "by ear" and desperately looking forward to 6:00 p.m. each Sunday for the popular music show, *Countdown,* to appear on the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) which was the only television channel available at the time. It was a 15-minute drive to the nearest neighbour and so social and musical isolation was a significant feature of my childhood. There was no church choir, nor did the Primary School have the ability to offer Music as part of the curriculum. The only person in the community who could play in instrument was my father who enjoyed playing Country and Western tunes on his guitar but was far too busy on the farm to show me. Therefore, until I left for the boarding school, I thought that this rather simple style that I could not connect with at all was all that music had to offer.

Once in the city, I encountered a school with an enthusiastic community of student musicians. I soon joined every school music ensemble I could with only the most rudimentary piano skills and found myself singing in the choir and playing percussion in the various bands. My enthusiasm for Music was undoubtedly at times bordering on embarrassing. At various points throughout my school music experience, the choir or band would join forces with a choir or band from outside of the school. For me, there was a huge thrill in being part of a collective that could produce a sound that felt and sounded epic. It didn't really matter whether it was a combined choir or a combined concert band or a mix of ensembles such as a concert band / brass band combination. The notion of the collective and the anticipation of the power of the music was what excited me. The audience's thoughts about the music was really secondary, it was all about how electrified I felt about being part of something epic.

I clearly remember going to my first performance given by a Symphony Orchestra and being enraptured by the sheer number of musicians that were gradually gathering together on

the stage, warming up, and building the variety of sounds up until it was thrilling. When they actually started playing the music together, I could barely contain my excitement. I don't remember what music they played or who I was with when I went. I remember being in the large concert hall with its red seats and large pipe organ above the stage, surrounded by other audience members and simply being transfixed as the number and variety of instruments were gradually brought on to the stage.

Following school, I began my undergraduate Music degree as a tenor. The first two performances I was involved in took place within the first few weeks of first semester. A friend told me to knock on the door of the choral director the week before classes began and to introduce myself as a tenor. I later realised that my voice type was a commodity that was highly desirable due to its short supply. I was quickly recruited and given music to learn for the first rehearsal that evening. The first experience involved a performance with a Symphony Orchestra and Chorus with the university choir of Francis Poulenc's *Gloria*. Suddenly the joy of witnessing the awesome power of such an ensemble was no longer something I just witnessed but was engaging with.

The second performance at university was coincidently another collaboration with our orchestra combining with a local youth orchestra and the university choir. We performed Borodin's *Polovitsian Dances* followed by Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* in one of the main cellblocks at the decommissioned Fremantle Prison. The prison is a stark, dehumanising building first built in the mid 19th century and remained in operation until it was closed in 1991. The orchestra was seated on the ground floor and the chorus was situated above on two galleries with the audience fanning out on three levels in a kind-of "L" shape. The building had only been closed for three years and the prison cell I was standing in front of could not be entered because the murder that had taken place inside was still being investigated. Some of the text of the Gorecki work, which had been written on a Gestapo cell wall by a Jewish mother to her child, had a profound impact on me in this incredibly evocative setting. These two concerts left me wanting more. It would be several years before I had the chance to create my own collaborations in an attempt to recreate the feelings I had enjoyed so much and to share those experiences with others.

The First Collaboration

After graduating, my first appointment as a secondary school teacher was at a Government Senior High School, which closed at the end of my first year of teaching due to economic rationalism. I arrived at the school to discover that there had never been a choir and as someone who had a background in singing in and conducting choirs, I saw it as my mission to establish one. Apart from the physical, musical and educational benefits of singing, it is an inexpensive way to engage a large number of students in music quickly across all year groups and I knew that I could make the activity fun. I also knew how important choral music had been in my school experience and I wanted to make sure that my students had the same opportunities. I set about teaching them Antonio Vivaldi's *Gloria* RV 589, which was a piece I had previous experience performing; as a student at school singing treble in the school choir and as a conductor of a small church choir during my university years. As the choir was fairly inexperienced and given that they had never performed anywhere yet and were still learning how to sing in four different parts at the same time, I thought it would be wise to join forces with another school choir that was similar in terms of size and having mixed girls and broken boys voices. I contacted a friend of mine who conducted the choir at a Catholic college several suburbs away and we agreed to teach our choirs the piece during our regular, scheduled rehearsals. I wasn't concerned about the two schools being from different systems (e.g., Government and Catholic), I was really just concerned with having enough singers to make the

piece work. My friend felt that her choir would also benefit in the same way because it was a similar size to mine and suffered from a small number of tenors and basses and in retrospect, this shared sense of purpose may have been a factor in the success of the collaboration.

I booked a 300 seat venue at a nearby school because our school had no such facilities, asked some friends of mine to play the orchestral parts and created a simple poster to advertise the event at the two schools. We held a dress rehearsal in the venue a couple of days before the concert, which took place on a Sunday afternoon in July 2008. The audience consisted of around 150 parents, staff and friends from both schools who seemed to view the concert as an *event*; certainly nothing choral or collaborative had previously taken place at the school at which I was teaching. On the day, I was strangely delighted at how nervous my students were about the performance because it indicated that they cared – this was important to them. The two choirs stood on the stage in a very integrated formation and although some of them sang their hearts out, it was pretty clear that some of them were rather unsure of exactly what they were doing. I didn't care. I was more interested in how they felt about being a part of it than creating the best possible performance of this frequently performed piece of music.

The response from the students following the performance was unexpected. Some of them told me about being nervous (e.g., there were so many people in the audience), some of them remarked that the concert was "a big deal" (e.g., several adult musicians had given up their time to play), and some of them discussed the quality of what we managed to achieve musically after around four months of rehearsal. The unexpected outcome for me was the number of friendships, which developed very quickly between students from the two schools. I hadn't thought to provide the students with an opportunity to socialise but had seen the collaboration more as a musical "safety net" in terms of having enough singers to make the piece "work." Watching the social interaction of the students reminded me of the sense of community I had experienced in my early days as a music student, bonding with like-minded people with a shared interest and common purpose. For me, I was very happy with the musical result given the lack of singing experience that my students had but mostly I was encouraged with the spirit with which the students approached the event. It was clear by the looks on their faces that the performance mattered to them and it was clear that the response from the audience was more than a perfunctory applause.

Brass Bands

The following year, my second school appointment was in a small city in the South West region of Western Australia. After living in the community for a few months, I was approached by a member of a local community brass band from a neighbouring city that was looking for a new conductor. I had experience as a teenager playing percussion in a community brass band and took the position, which I found musically and socially rewarding. Concurrently, I was a playing member of my local community brass band (e.g., first cornet and later, tenor horn) that was conducted by my teaching colleague at the school I was working at. Being involved in both bands was not an issue because they rehearsed on different nights. However, a problem arose with the competition known as the "Queen's Cup" which was established by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II in 1954 for Brass Bands in the South-West region of Western Australia. It was deemed by various people that I would have a "conflict of interest" when both bands competed for the coveted prize. I personally didn't feel a conflict of interest and found myself surprised at the idea. I was only thinking about both ensembles playing as well as they could and saw my role in the community as being involved in helping in whatever way I could. This situation highlighted for me the paradigm that existed between these two ensembles that essentially viewed the other as a competitor, even though they were really part of the same community of musicians.

An opportunity arose with a relatively well-known, international cornet player who was coming to perform with the brass band I was conducting. The committee flagged an idea for a suitable concert and I suggested that we invite the other community brass band to participate in a combined performance. The committee enthusiastically embraced this suggestion and I was pleased when I learned that the other band had accepted the invitation. Each band would provide the music for one half of the concert which would include several pieces that featured our guest musician and the performance would conclude with both bands playing two pieces of music together (around 60 musicians). One of these pieces was a transcription of Wagner's *Procession into the Minster* from Act II of *Lohengrin*, chosen for the venue of the concert, which was the Anglican Cathedral in one of the cities.

The combined bands created a full and rich sound for this music, which is known for needing players to sustain long phrases in a single breath. The "safety in numbers" aspect of the combined forces and the generous acoustics of the building provided a satisfying musical experience for the musicians. What transpired from this collaboration was richer still. As a result of this process, further collaborative processes took place and the two bands travelled to a mining town in the Goldfields of Western Australia, which also has a long-established community brass band and performed a programme involving all three ensembles. Suddenly, the memory of rehearsing the band when there was only one trombone player seemed a distant memory when there were around 10 in the section. I don't think I had ever seen three flugalhorns in one place and seeing three soprano cornets discuss who was going to sit where made me giddy with excitement for the sound we were going to make. The concert took place in an abandoned gold mine. This venue sounded romantic initially but in reality ended up being a large, tin shed; however that didn't alter the excitement of the event. After this combined success, several members decided to play in both bands and these musicians started socialising (i.e., drinks after rehearsals formed an integral part of the community ensemble experience) and to see themselves as colleagues and friends of people with similar interests rather than a member of a competing rival opponents.

Two School Choirs

In 2009, I was in my third year of teaching at a school in Perth, Western Australia and I took the secondary school choir on a tour of Germany and Austria. The trip itself generated considerable enthusiasm amongst the students and the number of students in the choir grew from around 25 to 40 members. The major focus for the tour was a Choral Festival that took place in Leipzig. The Festival was not a competition, but provided performance opportunities at the famous *Thomaskirche* and the similarly renowned *Gewandhaus* at the beginning and end of the event respectively. At the *Gewandhaus*, we performed on our own and also sang excerpts from Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with all of the participating choirs (appropriately chosen as it was composed within walking distance of the stage). A guest conductor from the United Kingdom conducted these collaboratively performed pieces.

What took place in between these performances was a series of "Friendship Concerts" where the festival organizers paired two choirs together and arranged for them to present a programme in which each choir performed half. My school choir was paired with a choir from a comprehensive school in Liverpool, England. I had a chance to talk with the conductor of this choir because we were all staying at the same hotel, and we arranged to perform the *Sanctus* from Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem,* which we discovered was mutually well-known piece of both groups. The students had already begun socialising with one another over breakfast and it was clear that both mixed-sex choirs were looking forward to spending as much time together as possible.

The performance was enjoyable and very low pressure for all involved and the students intermingled very happily. Because by now, collaborative projects with students was something I had arranged with some frequency, it came as little surprise that they were quickly exchanging email addresses and Facebook invitations. This collaboration was especially sweet given the serendipitous nature of it. When we arrived in Germany, we had no idea that this exchange would happen and the chance that both choirs knew and were ready to perform the same piece of music together made it surprising and special.

The following year, our school's Chapel Choir toured to the United Kingdom. This provided an opportunity for us to include in our schedule a visit to Liverpool and our new friends at the school. There was a flurry of excited greetings and hugs from those who had been in Germany when the two choirs reunited and our two choirs once again performed together. By now, I was becoming fully aware of the extent to which musicians enjoy meeting like-minded people and the way this shared identity helps reduce the sense of alienation that musicians in larger communities can experience. As a Music teacher, I was watching my students deriving real pleasure from being involved in music making with other people. I hoped that more than any other outcome this sense of pleasure would sustain and keep them wanting to remain involved in performing beyond school.

German Partnership

The same year as the initial collaboration with the school from Liverpool in Leipzig, my secondary choir travelled to a city in the Baden-Württemberg region of Germany. Our school had an existing partnership with the university in this town whereby education students would spend a term gaining experience being in a school in an English speaking country. As there were friendships between our institutions, a suggestion had been made that a concert could be arranged with our choir and their university big band (e.g., a 25 piece Jazz Band).

The concert took place in a nearby church. This seemed to be an odd venue choice for Jazz, especially with the resonant acoustic which made it very loud, but it was free and the German colleagues arranged everything and so we just needed to turn up and perform. The church was however, full to capacity and our choir was able to perform our full programme to an appreciative audience. The concert also gave me an opportunity to practice my conversational German on an audience that uniformly stepped in to help me with words I was clearly stumbling over. I had learned German at high school and this was the first time I had tried to use it in a formal context and I was terrified. The choir was standing on stage listening to my linguistic attempts and had no idea that I was going to be doing this. They were shocked and following the performance, peppered me with questions and relished the opportunity to learn as many words as they could for themselves. I found this moment of enthusiastic enquiry delightful and it was certainly unexpected.

At the conclusion of our tour of the United Kingdom the following year, four boys who had formed a barbershop quartet and several staff returned to the university and performed once again in the nearby church to an equally large audience who seemed fascinated by these Australian teenage boys who clearly loved singing. Once again, I practiced my German on the audience and stated enthusiastically and publically that it was their turn to visit us.

Upon returning to Perth, the vice-chancellor of the German university and the big band director emailed me to express how much the concert meant to them and the community. They also let me know that plans were under way for arranging for the big band to visit us in Perth. The following year, around 30 Jazz and Contemporary musicians spent around 10 days performing at our school and with our own school Jazz Band at the inaugural Perth International Jazz Festival (the timing was a complete coincidence). Although there were surprising organisational issues that existed with the visiting university students who had no

idea how they were going to get around the city and who had made no arrangements for any other performances or activities during their stay, our Music Department were able to put things in place and the tour was ultimately successful from all accounts. All of this felt particularly stressful as events were in many ways out of our control. It was unsettling to rely on someone from so far away who I knew almost nothing about.

The unexpected outcomes from this collaboration included several of my students attempting to learn German and being generally fascinated in languages and friendships between staff and students from both countries resulting in visits and further exchanges. As a Music teacher, I experienced the way music provides such tangible links to other rewarding disciplines and now I was seeing my students understand that link. The impact for the German university big band was considerable and merits further research.

A Child of Our Time

The head of Classical Music at one of the local universities approached me to collaborate on a performance of Michael Tippett's *A Child of Our Time.* This is an English oratorio composed around the time of the outbreak of World War II. It is just over an hour in length and is scored for four soloists, mixed choir, and orchestra. The performance would take place in a nearby cathedral with the university orchestra and combined choirs from the university and my school. This was a challenging work which, I approached with some trepidation but realised that because of: their continued presence in rehearsals, their interesting questions and their focus when attempting musical detail, that the students were relishing the opportunity to learn such a difficult piece. I tried to disguise my constant terror that I had finally chosen a project that was too difficult and which I feared would fail miserably.

The performance was very successful and achieved critical acclaim in the West Australian newspaper later that week. The project differed in two distinct ways from previous collaborations. The first was that the conductor had an awkward nature when it came to working with teenage musicians, which was complicated by an unclear conducting style. Although the performance went well despite this, the rehearsal process was difficult and at times not enjoyable. Rehearsals felt long and frustrating with choristers sometimes unsure of what the conductor's instructions meant in practical terms. The music would sometimes grind to a halt in rehearsal as the choir and orchestra couldn't follow the beat and gestures given by the conductor.

The second way in which this collaboration differed was in terms of organisation and administration. The details about where the choir would be situated in the building were not thought through. A discussion took place at the university prior to the dress rehearsal in which a decision to have the choir standing throughout the performance with no levels to provide staggered height which is important for sight lines between singers and conductor to keep the music together. Once I discovered this, I arranged for choir risers to be brought in from the school, which solved the problem but created another one. The Cathedral was unhappy about these being placed on the polished marble floor without some sort of protection and this needed to be resolved. Ultimately, the issues were attended to but not until just prior to the performance which meant that those involved in the project were distressed and distracted immediately before the music began.

This collaboration allowed me to see how important formal communication was throughout the planning process of a collaborative project. Spending time discussing aspects that might seem trivial not only help for a better finished product but allow for a smoother process which allows for the benefits of collaboration to be best realised. I had mixed emotions about this project. Mainly, I was thrilled with the opportunity that my students had just had but there was a considerable degree of frustration that has stayed with me when reflecting on this

project. On reflection, the success of the performance reinforced my belief that students will always rise to the occasion. I was incredibly proud of them.

Beckman and Graves (1997) discuss the role that frustration plays in the collaborative process, noting "Opposing musical interpretations are not uncommon, and diverse backgrounds with respect to training, expectations and routines may negatively affect student performance" (p. 20). Managing expectations and considering perspectives are discussed as important factors in dealing with such frustrations.

Carmina Burana

When a highly respected orchestra was planning a performance of the popular work, *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff, I took the opportunity to offer my choral forces to sing the necessary children's chorus parts (known as the *regazzi).* This would be an opportunity to sing in the premiere venue in Perth with an international conductor and would be a memorable musical experience for my students. They would join forces with the existing chorus, which sang regularly with the orchestra. I hoped that by having such an exhilarating musical experience, students might be encouraged to join such a choir after leaving their school choir at the end of Year 12. It wanted them to enjoy the same transformative experiences I had when I was their age. This in turn would be a welcomed development for the adult chorus which would benefit from having a younger demographic among the ranks. One of the most desirable outcomes of a school music programme, in my opinion is to produce graduating students who pursue a lifelong engagement in music. I hoped that by being involved in this project, my students would see a natural path from school choir to being in an adult chorus.

Although this collaboration is by far the highest profile of all of the projects I have instigated, it fell short of delivering any of the benefits I was hoping to achieve. The international conductor was wonderful and worked extremely well with the students and adult musicians, the performance was oversubscribed and an additional third performance was arranged which everyone was happy to do, the concert received critical acclaim in the newspaper once again which was gratifying for my school community, and the parents of the students were able to see their children making music at the highest level.

The difficulty with the process of this project was with the conductor of the chorus. This person trained the chorus and then the international conductor took over once the chorus and orchestra were ready to rehearse together just prior to the first performance. There were several meetings involving the chorus conductor and myself including a visit to the school to hear the choir perform. I explained that in addition to the *regazzi*, we could also provide secondary students (i.e., including mixed male and female voices) as well as staff (i.e., including some professional singers). These additional singers would help provide a bolstered choral presence in a work that requires a large and vocally heroic chorus. Despite the lists of names with their vocal parts being discussed in the meetings, when the students and I turned up for the first combined choir rehearsal, the conductor looked shocked to see us and seemed very confused about why we were there given that the *regazzi* were not yet required. The singers from my choir which included the School Principal, were asked to sit up the back, out of the way and whenever a semi-chorus was required for certain sections, it would consist of everyone who wasn't from my choir. The process of division and alienation between the groups of singers was alarming. This was exacerbated by the choice of words and tone of voice used in rehearsals to belittle the singers from my choir. There were even moments when it was clear that the conductor thought that by sitting near my singers, the other singers might be at a disadvantage. For the staff involved in my choir, this was shocking and outrageous. Several of my choristers became a little disenchanted with the process and I had difficulty in persuading them not to drop out. Fortunately the enjoyment and success of the performances including the

enthusiasm and personality of the international conductor allowed the project to leave a positive memory for the singers but the process left me feeling helpless which had never happened before in a collaborative performance project. I was ultimately crestfallen and frankly angry, knowing that the students would be highly unlikely to want to sing in this adult chorus after leaving Year 12. My faith in the collaborative process had been shaken a little.

Results

Three themes emerged as being significant: isolation versus collaboration, social interaction, and music on a grand scale. I will address these themes in turn, based on the sequence in which they occurred in the narrative.

Isolation versus Collaboration

Growing up in such an isolated community meant that social interaction was limited to attendance at school and whatever gatherings the adults chose to create which may or may not have involved children my age. Admittedly, there was Music offered in primary school, but this was limited to singing songs out of the ABC songbook once the teacher had pressed *play* on the tape recorder. What I didn't know at the time was how being exposed to a community of musicians would allow me to express myself. The stark contrast between the life of a small boy, isolated and without music and a teenaged boy surrounded by like-minded people with a common purpose provided an insight into my development that I had not considered until now.

Being an Australian, growing up in a town situated at great distance from where any meaningful musical connections could be made is part of the tyranny of distance that lies at the heart of the Australian experience. Mine was not the only such experience. Other musicians[1] went on to having fulfilling musical careers after a childhood characterised by similar experiences of isolation.

Social Interaction

The social element of musical collaborations was a strong theme. However, not all of the projects in the narrative discussed this. The collaborations where social interaction was strongest was unsurprisingly when the ensembles mixed like for like (in terms of age). This is not to suggest that when adults and teenagers collaborated that there were not moments of social interaction, or that different demographics didn't produce other meaningful outcomes. The mix of geographical backgrounds certainly didn't hinder agreeable social intercourse, and in the case of the brass band vignette, an old relationship based on rivalry and competition was to some extent, transformed into a more cohesive community.

In the vignette about the first collaboration, the word *friend* appears three times. Each time, the context of the word *friend* changes. Initially, the collaboration took place between myself and one of my friends. The performance project took shape with the addition of more friends to play in the orchestra. Finally, the concert produced friendships between students from both schools. Friendships and social interaction is identified as pivotal to the first collaboration. That people seek friendships or depend on them for help is not unique to the world of music-making but the significance of its recurrence in recounting this first collaboration juxtaposes my socially isolated childhood with a way of working in my adult life.

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[1] Peter Allen, songwriter and singer – Tenterfield, NSW; James Morrison – Boorowa, a rural farming community in NSW; Don Walker, songwriter for rock band, Cold Chisel – Ayr, North Queensland; Lee Kernaghan, Country & Western songwriter – Corryong, Victoria; Florence Broadhurst, classical singer – Mount Perry, Queensland; John Williamson – Kerang, Victoria; and Ella Hooper from rock band, Killing Heidi – Violet Town, Victoria.

That social interaction was a strong theme to emerge from my observations of my students and adult band members creates an interesting link to my lack of social interaction as a child. That I not only observed the socialising but also recall it in my narrative highlights the resonance it has for me. It also makes clear the notion of bias that is an inevitable feature of the auto-ethnographical methodology. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) point out that, "Autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (p. 2).

Music on a Grand Scale

The third emergent theme explored the notion of ensemble size and the capacity of an enlarged ensemble to create big and exciting sounds. This is a musical experience that is capable of ecstatic moments for audience and performers due to the huge force of sound. Although it is much easier to produce loud sounds via electronically amplified means, the language makes clear connections between the number of individuals involved and the powerful music that is created.

The comparison of the quiet, sonic isolation of my youth and the urge to create big sounds in my professional life is clear. The Wheatbelt with its sparse population, quiet countryside, lack of noise pollution, and musical isolation provided little in the way of sound stimulation. A yearning to fill my adult world with grand-scale sounds can almost be seen as trying to make up for lost time.

The intimidating sparseness of the West Australian landscape has inspired many artists, poets and composers such as; Tim Winton (*Dirt Music*, 2002), Iain Grandage (*Wheatbelt*, 2007), and Dominik Karski (*Streams of Consciousness*, 2000). In a discussion of Australian-inspired art, Richards (2007) notes that "David Tacey has written of the oppositional attitudes towards the landscape as being either demonic or paradisal" (p. 8). Tacey's thoughts on the desolation of the Australian outback resonate with me. While the relative peace and quiet seems captivating, this was an environment unsuited to a young person wanting to explore the world of music and I seem to have focused on activities that counter my childhood experiences.

Conclusion

The narrative of these vignettes provides a positive recollection of a variety of collaborative performance projects. I am the common thread in these moments and this subjectivity is likely to have contributed to the positive tone. The auto-ethnographic process allows this sense of bias to form a critical part of the research process. Despite the overwhelmingly positive tone of the vignettes, the tension noted in the *Carmina Burana* narrative indicates that things do not always go according to plan. There is an increase in risk when collaborating, especially when venturing into working relationships with people and having to produce something so suddenly with so many people involved. If it goes wrong, it can go spectacularly wrong.

Despite the anxiety of relinquishing control to relatively unknown people, the fear of overly ambitious projects, the difficulties of logistics and administration of collaborative projects, the opportunity for creating pivotal moments in time is evidenced by my recollections. Farrell (2001) posits that, "the figure of the lone genius is not always accurate. Instead, he recognizes that extraordinary creativity if often the result of successful collaboration among peers who develop an intense friendship and work together on similar projects for an extended period of time." Although difficulties may arise, collaboration allows the meeting of creative minds, which has its own motivational effect. That the large ensemble creates considerable

power for a performance is to be expected. It is the anticipation of this power however, the moments before it is realised that creates excitement and adrenaline. The risks taken in creating an ensemble that is untested is outweighed by the feelings of heightened emotion before the event takes place. These feelings are always preferable to the possibility of a performance being so safe and lacking in risk that the execution of it becomes perfunctory.

In a case study of three Australian school and community partnerships, Bartleet (2012) notes that, "such joint ventures provide deeply enriching musical, social, cultural and pedagogical experiences for their participants, and oftentimes present practical solutions to the resourcing and infrastructure challenges facing many school and community music programmes" (p. 49). This indeed supports my thoughts about the many collaborations I have instigated over the years. It was interesting to note that Bartleet also observed "that many Australian schools and community music activities exist in relative isolation from one another" (p. 49). I hope that in my sphere of influence the potential for vibrant school-community music collaborations is being realised.

Epilogue

Understanding what influenced my journey through these collaborations allows a deeper understanding of how I understand other people's perceptions of them. It seems so important that if I am to involve so many people in my quest to collaborate, that I have a deep understanding of why I am driven to do it and why others should participate. The journey of socially isolated child, deprived of meaningful musical experiences, to enthusiastic student desperate to be a part of a purposeful community of like-minded people, to teacher with an insatiable need for his students to experience the joy of massed music making on a grand scale now seems obvious. My childhood isolation created a desire for an opposing experience both in terms of a thirst for cultural saturation and for large-scale human interaction. It took the auto-ethnographical process for me to construct the narrative, which in turn allowed me to understand the connection. For those music teachers who did not experience such an isolated childhood, perhaps the need for collaboration is not pursued as fervently. For these teachers, the understanding of the importance of collaborative experiences needs to be considered more consciously.

I set out to understand my constant pursuit of collaborative performance situations so that other music teachers may benefit from the insight I have gained. If large-scale musical collaborations could inspire me and my students to pursue active participation in Music, I hope that other musical leaders may share this positive experience with those in their sphere of influence.

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