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Music, Sounds, the Stradivarius and the Computer: A Dialogue between the Music-Maker And the Music-Listener

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Foreword

In what might be described as an 'ecological' spirit, here I recycle an ancient form, the dialogue. I find the dialogue form particularly appealing for its potential to encapsulate ideas both as content and form. This dialogue, between the music-maker and music-listener, is intended as an allegory that uses accessible language in a contemporary, conversational style. From an epistemological perspective, the split maker-listener may be viewed as a fabrication that subsumes numerous conflicts at personal, group and societal levels. The text is about creativity, freedom and ownership, about concept, percept and practice within multidisciplinary and multicultural contexts. It can be reconstructed in different ways when the music-maker and the music-listener are personified under a multitude of guises within multiple contexts.

I have added a bibliographic list following the dialogue that includes some examples of the background reading that has helped to shape the thinking underlying the text. In particular, I have been deeply influenced by Gregory Bateson's writings, especially his 'metalogues', a collection of humorous, deceptively light dialogues that do not specify theatrical elements. I feel this lack of obvious affective content in the text allows readers to construe their own views of *how* the negotiation of discourses may take place, regardless of what I may have imagined or thought to have implied – or not – using a few italicised words.

The Dialogue

When the music-maker is tired, the music-maker listens to the music-listener. When the music-listener is tired, the music-listener talks and, sometimes, thinks. Below is a conversation I imagine might take place when both are tired. On the other hand, perhaps, the maker will just go on doggedly making, and the listener will just go on wearily listening. Who is to know for sure?

Music-Maker: I wish I had some time to complete some unfinished work ... Oh, better yet, perhaps a period without any other commitments spent *somewhere else* that would allow me to work on some new ideas and create something *different*. Perhaps I could get back to basics ... avoid using technology altogether.

Music-Listener: Oh, you sound *tired*, maker. I'm sorry about that. I'm quite tired myself, but would you mind if we looked into what you've just said? It all seems so complicated to me... No technology... Do you mean you'd like to simply use paper and pencil?

MM: This and some *real* instruments, perhaps I could compose at the piano, even for the piano, or, perhaps, the violin. *Again*.

ML: *Sometimes* I like it when you actually do that. I suppose I tire a little too easily, perhaps. But aren't the piano and the violin pieces of technology, I mean, aren't they *artefacts* that took quite a while to become what they are today?

MM: I've never thought of the piano as technology, I *guess*. Technology, as far as I'm concerned, is something that either gets in the way of my work or corrupts it, makes it unrecognisable.

ML: So you're telling me that the Steinway or the Stradivarius are not *technology* in the same way that, let's say, the sampler is. Is that it?

MM: More or less. The sampler is a great instrument, though. It allows me to do things that would take a lot of effort, time and resources to be done with *real* instruments and instrumentalists. It's true, though, I still fear that I won't be invited to jam or record with others as often as I used to be... Still, I think that the piano is not technology in the same way as a tape or DAT recorder is.

ML: But why *not*? You've called the sampler an 'instrument', so why not call the others 'instruments' too? You've been using the tape recorder for more than half a century now, and lately you've been using the ultimate processing technology, the computer.

MM: Yes, apparently there are no limits to what I can do using the computer. But have I *really* made music with these gizmos?

ML: What do *you* think?

MM: Sometimes I think I have, sometimes I'm not so sure. I've been told that most of the stuff I've done with tape-recorders and computers is *not* music. 'Sonic Art', 'Art of Sounds' and even 'Art of Noise', that's what I've been told, at best. 'Non-music', that's the latest I've heard. This is not to mention the contemptuous *silence* I've experienced time and time again.

ML: *Mea culpa*? Well, apparently, there *are* limits to what you can do with a computer. But why should you care about what your stuff is called? I thought your business had to do with invention, wherever that leads you, regardless of names.

MM: Yes, *theoretically*, but, you know, I am limited by a number of things. After all, I do need to make a living!

ML: Sure, we all need to, but haven't you been making a living out of both music *and* non-music?

MM: Erm ...

ML: Hang on a minute. I think we're in a muddle here. Let's get back to what we were discussing. That really interests me, even if only because I can *sympathise* with your feeling tired. You said that technology somehow gets in the way of your work or makes it unrecognisable, but you didn't explain what you meant by 'work'. Are you talking about music-making as a trade, or are you talking about the music you make?

MM: I'm inclined to say both my work as a music-maker and the music I make, but I'm not sure how technology can get in the way of the music itself.

ML: When, for example, as a listener, all I can do is *look* rather than *listen*, although there's always an element of seeing to my listening. On second thoughts, is there a difference between getting in the way of your everyday dealings and getting in the way of the end-result of these dealings? Are these two separate things? When you improvise it's all there, mixed up in one complex process. Still, your music-making doesn't necessarily correlate directly with the experience – mine, yours and everyone else's – of the music you've made, I don't think.

MM: Why not? Music is also about communication, if about anything else.

ML: That's a nice little conundrum, maker. Do you expect me to perceive all the intricacies you embed in your music, or, perhaps, do you expect me and everyone else to perceive those things in the *same* way? There are a number of things you've done and *told* me you've done, and I respect you for having done them, but I have never been able to perceive them with my tools: *my bare ears*. A number of those things I've had no interest in whatsoever, I'm afraid. Other things I've tried, you know, a little bit to do with peer pressure; others I've even gone on to *like*. But communication has to do with being understood, doesn't it, and many times I'm not entirely sure about *what* is it that I like or don't like. Or *why*. I also have my limitations.

MM: Now that you mention it, yes, there's a distance between what I think and make and what you think about what I've made. What I find plain annoying is to spend all that time trying to get something done just to be misinterpreted and, so often, dismissed!

ML: Well, I wonder *how* I could go about misinterpreting you. It's true that, every time we talk, we seem to go from conundrum to conundrum, from paradox to paradox. But as far as your work is concerned, how could I misinterpret *you*?

MM: I wasn't talking about myself, personally, but about the *music* I make!

ML: But aren't the two related, you and the music you make?

MM: Surely, but what makes you think you can assume things about me just by listening to my music?

ML: I'd like not to, to be honest, but I also feel that music has something to do with communication. I don't know if it is *about* communication, though, even if only partially... Perhaps music is about making a living or, simply, living. Perhaps music is about nothing at all. In any case, my point is that, although I'm not sure about this communication business, I really don't see how I can separate your music from you and from everything that surrounds both you and me.

MM: You're mixing things up, listener. Communication of musical *ideas*, that's what I'm talking about.

ML: Musical ideas? Even so, if the musical ideas spring to *your* mind, they say something about *you*, don't they?

MM: Erm, that may be, if the things they say about myself are musical. Let's say that my musical ideas say something about my *musical self*.

ML: Oh, now we've got in a real muddle, maker. What is a musical idea? What is 'musical self'? Do I have one too? Surely, you don't mean to tell me that this 'musical self' – whatever that is – is unrelated to everything else that you are, albeit for a brief period of your *being*, for instance, when you're walking in the park?

MM: No, I guess it's all related, somehow. I do have musical ideas when I'm not making music. Yes, strolling in the park is as good an occasion as any. I also have musical ideas when not making music.

ML: Fine. Can I assume we've now agreed that things are related? OK, I'll assume that for the sake of argument. Could we try to figure out *how* things are related?

MM: I've told you, things are related that are musical!

ML: So, relatedness comes out of being *musical*. Is that it? What is the difference between being musical and non-musical, then? If some things are musical, then others are non-musical. Are you saying that things are musical when they are not non-musical?

MM: Erm ... Yes?

ML: Well, here we go in another circle, maker. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've just said that things that are not non-musical are related and somehow reveal your not-non-musical self. This not-non-musical self of yours has created not-non-music and non-music alike.

MM: That's a mess, all right! I have to confess that I don't know what musical and non-musical are, and, frankly, I don't see what it all has to do with my making music.

ML: Oh, a lot, maker, don't you see? Understanding the difference between musical and non-musical might help you understand *why* sometimes your work is referred to as music and other times as non-music. Remember, making a living...

MM: At different times and, actually, different places these labels seem to come about, I gather...

ML: Could it also be that your use of technology, technology as you're talking about, affects people's perceptions and judgements of your music?

MM: Let me think about this a minute. Yes, that may be true. But isn't this yet another problem?

ML: No, I don't think so. I think it all has to do with the difference between musical and non-musical, between the piano and the tape recorder, between the Stradivarius and the computer. This is what I'd like to understand, but we haven't reached a satisfactory explanation yet, so let me give you an example. As far as I'm concerned, the very existence of the Stradivarius gets in the way of my playing the Bach's Partitas for violin. To do that I'd have to put in a lot of effort and practice, to master the purely mechanical actions, the technique, and then I might start thinking of playing some music. Although I can follow the scores in my mind as I listen to you playing, note by note, bar by bar, in every detail that's on the paper, still I can *not* play it myself. I wish I could do it just by *thinking it*, that would be quite neat. Wouldn't it? So, as far as I'm concerned, the

Stradivarius is a piece of technology because, as you said, "technology is something that gets in the way".

MM: Now you're the one in a muddle, listener. Playing the violin has nothing to do with using a sampler or recording sounds and processing them with a computer. 'Genius' aside, after all not everyone's made up to become a virtuoso, playing a real instrument is one thing, composing music, another, and messing about with computer programs, yet another!

ML: I'm not sure about this 'genius' business, maker, or about the split composing/performing. For a long while you were not split in this way, you were called a 'musician', and that was that. Now, with tape composition there's the opportunity to do away altogether with the idea of an intermediary between the creator and the spectator. Whether this represents a re-integration of the parts into a whole or a complete capitulation to some political, socio-economical arrangement or ... Oh, pardon the jargon, maker, sometimes I can't help myself ... In any case, what I meant to say is that I'm not so sure about the differences you mention. Put very bluntly, that's how I see it. All this business has at least one thing in common: to play, compose or 'mess about', as you said, as well as listening, all involve an element of *learning*. It's just that the things that are learned are different in each case.

MM: Yes, I *guess* learning is really involved, whether I agree with you or not about anything else. As a music-maker I'm constantly learning about the possibilities and constraints of my tools, be these the usual acoustic instruments or the latest piece of sound synthesis software. I work within these constraints, on them and despite them... However, there's a difference between learning about orchestration and learning about fractals, there surely is!

ML: Indeed, as I was saying, there's learning involved, learning of different things. And together with the things come the words that people use to describe them. These are *different*, aren't they?

MM: But we're not talking about learning words, are we? The stuff of musicians is music, not words. *Unless* we're talking about song or opera!

ML: We might as well be, but that's not the point I'm making. The point I'm trying to make is this: musicians have always been involved with other people's businesses, say, physics and mathematics, or poetry if you feel more comfortable with this label, sometimes by choice, sometimes by necessity. Sometimes you show too much bitterness for having to struggle with these things. I think modern technology, particularly computer-based technology, has simply exposed this 'struggle'. Computer-based technology has made this quite obvious and, again the same little *word*, a necessity.

MM: Do you mean 'necessity' as the imperative to use something for expressive purposes?

ML: This 'expressiveness' business is very messy, not to mention quite outmoded, isn't it? I'm afraid very few people nowadays venture to use the word. I prefer to say that 'necessity' has to do with the desire or impulse to achieve a certain result or to go through a certain process, and, perhaps, provoke and suggest results and processes to me. For example, you may like to produce a certain sound or experience a certain sound producing process that seems to exist only in your head. It may have to do with your bringing to my attention your own discoveries, things you come across as you experience and experiment with sound. It's all there as idea and you get on with materialising, inventing the

means if they don't exist ready. But that invention, I think, is framed by experience.

MM: Do you mean that invention is not free?

ML: You said it yourself, maker, you're limited, essentially by your own ideas, partly by your connections with me, only apparently by the sounds and tools you have at your disposal. This is the tip of the iceberg. I too am limited in similar ways.

MM: *Why* are you talking about sounds now? We were talking about music!

ML: Well, I shifted on purpose. You said that the stuff of musicians is not words, so I thought it might not *matter*.

MM: But it does, don't you see that a lot of the criticism to my non-music has to do with my choice of *sounds*?

ML: Don't *you* see that a lot of the criticism to your non-music has to do with your choice of words?

MM: There you go in a muddle again! We always seem to be talking cross-purposes...

ML: With that I *must* agree. I think we are talking cross-purposes simply because we've never agreed on what we're talking about. I think it's that simple.

MM: Now *I* disagree. We always talk about music, about making music.

ML: Do we, now? So what is music, then?

MM: I think you *want* to get us in a muddle. That's what it looks like. No one knows what music really is. Do *you*?

ML: Well, we always seem to know what music is *not*, don't we?

MM: First you mix-up music with words, then with sounds. Next you're going to tell me that music is on the paper, in the computer memory, or perhaps in my mind or in yours.

ML: I think it depends on *which* music you're talking about. Better yet, it depends on what *aspect* of music you're talking about, when and where we're talking about it. I'm inclined to think that music is anywhere we want it to be, and, at the same time, nowhere, really.

MM: I'm not usually concerned with *placing* music somewhere as you're saying. It doesn't matter to me, really, as long as I can keep on making it.

ML: Ah, now, but aren't the two things related? I don't think the matter is so simple: there's a lot involved in continuing to make music, as you said. 'Recognition' comes to mind.

MM: Erm ... I'm just human, aren't I?

ML: Oh, I didn't mean *that*. I was thinking at a very practical level: we did mention making a living out of the whole thing, didn't we? I meant you need to be part of a certain structure to be able to do your thing, and that includes being

part of a larger community that recognises your thing as music, wherever or whatever it is, that legitimises that this 'whatever' is yours, something like that.

MM: But isn't it mine by design?

ML: Why should it be? You've been *recycling* stuff for a long time, it's just that current technology has brought the problem to a head. Again, this technology that you say gets in the way and makes things unrecognisable simply makes old problems a little more problematic, or, perhaps, just a little more obvious. You see, you've borrowed form, structure, style, all those aspects of music that music theory is concerned with. You can always borrow from Fibonacci, and that shouldn't be a problem since he's long *dead*. Now you can easily borrow much more, including whole chunks of *ready* music.

MM: But there's a difference between adopting an established and recognised form and borrowing, as you say, parts of other's work.

ML: The only difference I see is that form has been accepted as something that evolved out of some sort of collective effort. Everyone seems welcome and even encouraged to use established forms, whereas other people's work ... well, belongs to someone specifically because we seem to subscribe to some sort of 'ownership by design' principle.

MM: Isn't that enough of a difference?

ML: As I see it, no, it's circular reasoning. It's saying that "whatever you make is yours because you make it" in reply to the question "why should something you made be yours".

MM: I think you've answered that one yourself: even if I simply 'recycle', which is an unfair way to put it, I feel, it's my recycling, so the result is mine.

ML: But that still doesn't justify that the result must be *yours*, I'm afraid. Perhaps the *choice* is yours, and that may be unique, as far as *people* are possibly unique, but the universe from where to choose is always limited.

MM: But you said earlier on something about materialising sounds and processes that exist only in my head, so, surely, you're not saying that there is a limit to what can be created.

ML: No, I'm not at all saying that, I couldn't, really, as a spectator. But, in any case, I suspect that those sounds and processes must bear some resemblance to something that already exists. I think therein lies the value of an invention: in context. Perhaps uniqueness has to do with being very *subtle* about resemblance.

MM: This sounds pretty grim to me, listener. You seem to be denying originality, perhaps creativity.

ML: No, that's not what I'm saying. *Listen*, you said you'd like to find yourself a nice little cosy arrangement that would allow you to work on *new* ideas. Beyond practicalities like time spent doing things that are apparently unrelated to your musical trade, it seems that you've constructed an idea of that arrangement that is, in fact, impossible. As far as *novelty* is concerned, your mind is framed within/into a context, and that you cannot abandon. So, all things considered, yes, there's a limit to what you can do with computers, because there is a limit to your invention and to mine. The limit is the door to the unlimited and, paradoxically, the unlimited itself and the source of it all. I'm simply saying that

nothing exists in a void. Just like words, it's all pretty much a matter of convention and *context*.

MM: Words again? Void?

ML: Yes. Yes. Form, music and void are words. Form has been stuff for debate in music theory. Music has been stuff for debate in music aesthetics – and criticism, of course. Void has been stuff for debate in philosophy. All this seems to have been discussed over and over again. Now void is a funny thing, the most interesting of them all, I think. It's something we fear but paradoxically seem to advocate or hope for, because it has to do with someplace outside time and space, empty, unconnected, absolute. *Unique?*

MM: I'm not sure I follow you, listener. What do time and space have to do with words?

ML: Words, just like the things they refer to, belong to specific times, places and the people that exist there, and fit in with the thinking of these people. I feel we all live in our own little convergence of time and space, to a certain extent, and just because there is some overlap between the time/space in which each of us are right now, we can have this conversation ... or non-conversation, whatever you prefer.

MM: And what does all this have to do with music and your mixing-up of music and sound?

ML: Recycling, re-creating, creating, music, non-music, technology, freedom, originality. It's all pretty much a Humpty Dumpty business: it's your choice but it's not free, there must be an agreement between the parties, otherwise there can be no understanding.

MM: Humpty Dumpty? Agreement? What are you talking about?

ML: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." That's what Humpty Dumpty tells Alice and that's what it is all about.

MM: I still don't understand, listener. What does Humpty Dumpty have to do with our conversation about music, sounds, words? I've totally missed the point, if there *is* any.

ML: Now, *there* is an important point: this conversation doesn't really have any point unless we *make* one up. You said you'd like to get back to basics, so I was trying to understand what's the difference between music and sounds, between the Stradivarius and the computer, between musical and non-musical, a number of very difficult things. I suspect that the differences depend on the side of the wall to which Humpty Dumpty falls. I think we first have to settle just that, then we may start going about inventing as many points for it as we want. After all, we couldn't possibly put Humpty Dumpty back *together* as before, could we?

By then, the maker was long gone, unnoticed by the listener. Amidst the silence that ensued, both smiled.

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