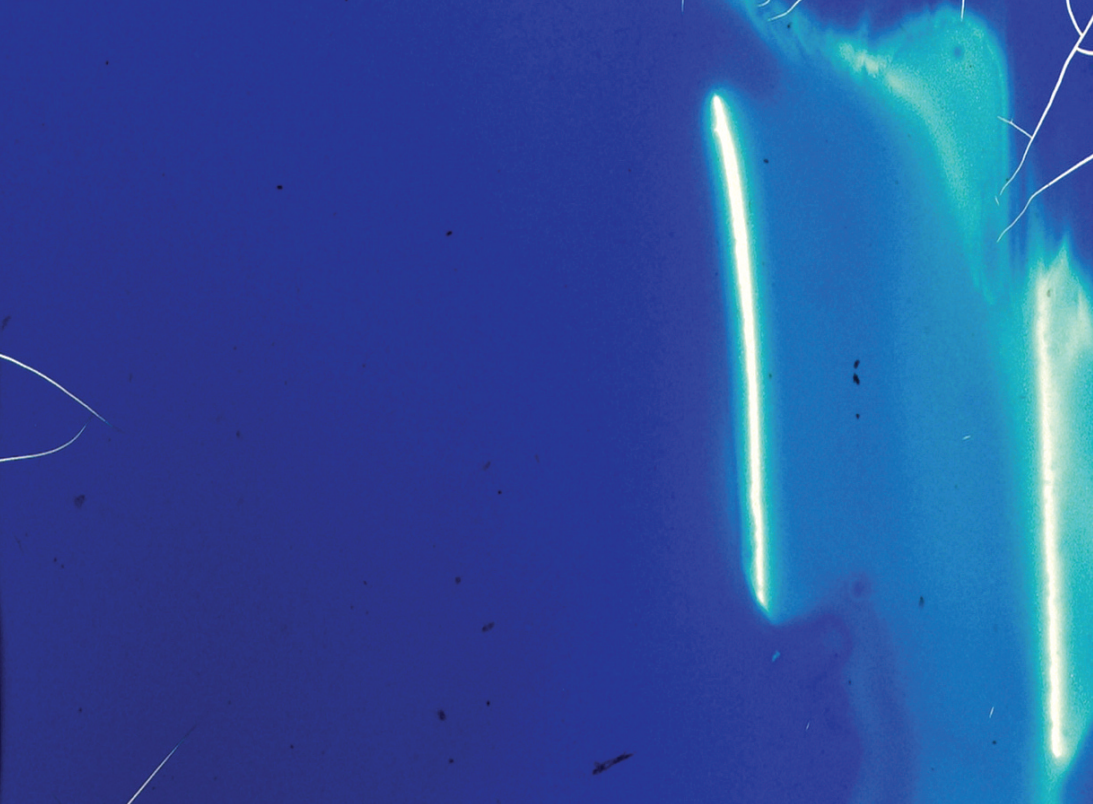


THE CURATING COMPOSER

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THE CURATING COMPOSER

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The Little Prince, Studio Will Dutta, 2016 © Studio Will Dutta

I .

THE CURATING COMPOSER ABSTRACT

This paper presents the curating composer as a new role in 21st century music making with a distinct set of practices. By transferring and constructively applying curatorial language, methods and strategies from the discipline of visual arts into the musical domain, I arrive at two general principles that mark out the curating composer's workflow: (1) the reciprocal relationship between creative and distributive processes (**mutual exchange**); (2) free movement between creative acts and the curatorial situation (**mobility**).

This role speaks to practitioners and educators alike for the contemporary contexts of the Covid-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests necessitate a radical reappraisal of who gets to make culture and mediate cultural production. Furthermore, in just 20 years rapid technological change has shattered professional infrastructure and at the same time we are now facing up to the astonishing scale of digital culture.

The methodology is a written commentary and my own practice-led research. In the commentary I look at the cultural context of the indie-classical scene, and I present the first stylistic account of non-classical music that developed within this DIY subculture in London in 2003. My case study is *bloom*: a studio album project that is many-shaped (recording, performance, interactive site, newsletter, film, workshop) and open-ended. Through aesthetic and entrepreneurial leadership, I show the potential significance of the curating composer in what has become a bewilderingly fragmented landscape.

Keywords: curator, composer, non-classical, indie-classical, entrepreneurship

Ref: Dutta, W., 2021. *The Curating Composer*. [PDF] Available at: <<http://studiowilldutta.art>>

THE CURATING COMPOSER

II. INTRODUCTION

In this exploratory paper, I will introduce the 'curating composer' as a new role in the field of music. I have structured the paper to address the following questions:

1. What are some of the curatorial strategies and processes in contemporary visual culture that might help develop the curating composer's role?
2. How have composers applied curatorial strategies in new and experimental music practices?
3. What might a construction of this original role look like?

I begin this study by setting out some of the iconoclastic developments in 20th century art production that (in)directly led to the institutional curator's profile modulating to independent exhibition maker. I then deal with more recent technological developments that have enabled contemporary visual artists to regain control over how their work is displayed and mediated.

In the second section, I reflect on experimental music practices in the late middle part of the 20th century where composers used new apparatus and ways of working to restore editorial control in the presentation of their sound and music. I go on to speak about the current tension between individual and institution using the example of the indie-classical scene because it is here that we see composers at a grassroots level developing platforms to engage hyper-local communities with their work. Furthermore, I present an overview of non-classical music that first developed within this subculture in London in 2003 because it is possible to identify the convergence of a particular set of creative and curatorial processes.

In the final section, I present my studio album project, *bloom*, as a case study for how we might construct the role of the curating composer. My way of making sees idiomatic artistic creation and curatorial processes converge in a body of work I composed (or initiated) with electronic music duo Plaid (Ed Handley and Andy Turner), computer-music designer Manuel Poletti and composer Max de Wardener.

MUTUAL EXCHANGE: the reciprocal relationship between creative and distributive processes

MOBILITY: the free movement between creative acts and the curatorial situation

I want to show in this paper how a curating composer can *make and distribute new artistic work using a mobile and networked creative and curatorial process*. Let me unpack that statement by setting out some general principles.

The role is marked out by two general principles that dovetail across the curating composer's workflow:

- **Mutual exchange:** the reciprocal relationship between creative and distributive processes
- **Mobility:** the free movement between creative acts and the curatorial situation

The curating composer might also choose to take the following position:

- **Networked:** distributed structures where creative responsibility is shared between collaborators¹

It is my contention that music creators (and recreators) should be equipped with curatorial skills if they are to successfully generate paid opportunities for themselves, sustain careers and enable the artistic ecology that goes with it to thrive. It is also clear that this playbook should be available (and embedded in education pathways) to a new generation of cultural producers to provide aesthetic, mediation and entrepreneurial direction. In my opinion, over time the outcome of this would help make the institution far more representative. What follows is my attempt to set out and substantiate curatorial principles for those working in music.

A note on language: A simple definition of curating is the selection and compilation of objects in relation to a given context (Hüttner, 2003, no page number]. For the successful exhibition of their work, and/or that of a number of artists, we should look to the artist-run models that employ innovative curatorial design and exhibition strategies to reach and engage their audience. This is due, in part but not exclusively, to the widely acknowledged decline in audience attendance at concert halls for art music and by association new music performances (Benjamin, 2009, p.7). Moreover, the practitioner, aided by social media and artist-first platforms such as Bandcamp, can create, promote and disseminate their work without third parties. The curator-as-mediator or 'middleman' (O'Neill, 2007, pp.20-30) is particularly pertinent given the abundance of creative content jostling for our attention today.

We should also consider the tension between the roles of curator and programmer. Performance artist Paul Couillard (2009, p.85) describes it as a crude but useful binary 'to recognise that they are distinct methodologies that will affect not only what performance art gets shown, but also how that work is understood'. He offers a curated programme to be 'an authored selection guided by goals of analytic inquiry... to privilege notions of coherence and interrelationship' (Ibid., p.84), whilst programming prioritises entertainment over theoretical framework; events engage audiences with a set of experiences.



The 20/19 Project Lemonade Pictures, 2019 © Lemonade Pictures

1. I take the view, which is given substance in the case study in Section V, that the curatorial function in this instance is active in bringing about a unique and temporary situation for others to respond to. However, this might not always be the case and is therefore not a principle.



Late at Tate PRS Foundation, 2015 © PRS Foundation

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III. BECOMING CURATOR: CONFRONTING THE INSTITUTION

The independent curator currently occupies a highly visible position in the discipline of visual arts. In the last decade alone there has been a regular flow of critical literature reexamining their shifting role (Obrist, 2008; Wade, 2009; O'Neill, 2012; Balzer, 2014). The influential artist, curator and writer Paul O'Neill (2012, p.32) neatly categorises this into three distinct periods: 'from demystification in the 1960s to visibility in the 1980s to supervisibility of the curator in the 1990s'. Scores of journals and symposia plus the legions of graduating students well versed in the curatorial turn help to maintain this now highly professional career path.

Our contemporary understanding of the role has its foundations in the early 20th century. In his history of the art exhibition, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist (2014, pp.26-29) identifies the innovation of the gallery as framing device as pivotal to the development of the modern curator. This process started when artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters and Piet Mondrian 'began to innovate and invent display features within this expanded format' (Ibid., p.29). They took it upon themselves to challenge what they saw as the rigid institutional framework within which works of art were formerly displayed and critiqued.

Duchamp questioned the very nature of what constitutes a work of art in his readymades, *Bottle Rack* (1914) and *Fountain* (1917). His event-based installation *Mile of String* (1942) went further still: '[it] treated the exhibition itself as the relevant carrier of meaning' (Ibid.). Kurt Schwitters' invention of 'Merz' to describe his collage and assemblage works blurred the boundary for the first time between fine art and popular culture; and both Schwitters and Piet Mondrian rejected completely the idea of exhibiting pictures in traditional gallery spaces. Schwitters' Merzbau is an example of a total environment. These artists foreshadowed the contemporary understanding of context as an idea 'to serve as the artwork by itself' (MoMA, 2014). The potentiality of this idea has since become one of the curator's most important devices in their armoury of storytelling, meaning making and analytic inquiry. In this light, they set the stage for a modulation from the autonomous curator-as-carer within the

institution (Lichty, 2008, p.164) to an independent exhibition maker working off-site. Artists Amelie Nordenfelt and Per Hüttner (2003, no page number) argue this was one of the important changes for contemporary art, 'to step out of the white cube to search for new challenges, to claim more space, new contexts and to rework ideas'.

The arrival of the first curatorial study programmes in the late 1990s reinforced the distinction between the discursive and the practical within the art institution by positioning the curator in the school of humanities and practitioner fine arts. This forking also reveals the unevenness of the two roles; the curator seems to dominate contemporary culture over and above the artist (Borelli, 2013). This has led the writer David Balzer (2014, p.26) to question whether the presence of the curator disempowers and even negates the artist. A reaction and counteraction to this is the phenomenon of the artist-curator or curartist, whose impact first gathered momentum in the 1980s (O'Neill, 2007, p.16). While still seen as a subdominant form of exhibition maker (Birchall and Mabaso, 2013, p.64), artists, curators, artist-curators or curartists and curatorial collectives are all now stakeholders in bringing about institutional reinvention. Indeed, the author Winfried Stürzl (2013, p.6) says the foundation of a large number of project spaces or off-spaces is a clear sign of intent by this now omnipresent phenomenon.

I will now mention three examples of artists innovating art production with varying applications of curatorial decision-making. The first is Eastside Projects in Birmingham (UK), co-founded in 2008 by artists Gavin Wade, Ruth Claxton, Simon and Tom Bloor, designer James Langdon and architect Celine Condorelli. They describe Eastside Projects (n.d) as 'an artist-run multiverse, commissioning, producing and presenting experimental art practices and demonstrating ways in which art may be useful as part of society'. They provide material infrastructure for local, national and international artists and present a national public art programme. Their work is politically and socially engaged and rooted in their local place in the West Midlands. In describing the evolving model of Eastside Projects, Gavin Wade says, 'we don't call ourselves a "collaborative curatorial platform" but it may apply' (Birchall and Mabaso, 2013, p.65).

The next curatorial project is 'Remote' by Vince Dziekan (2007) in which the artist expands the exhibition format into the virtual. He calls this process 'dimensioning' where the contemporary exhibition is now 'a dynamic, interconnected system of forms, spaces and relationships' (Dziekan, 2007, no page number). His primary output, an interactive PDF, establishes an essential relationship between the publication format (its distribution) and the content of his argument (production). He wants to show the impact on how communication and meaning are culturally negotiated, and how viewer participation is socially organised

and experienced through the medium of the exhibition. It is important to note this project and Dziekan's theorising around it predates the widespread adoption of social media.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that we can see dimensioning accelerating with the ubiquity of social media platforms. *Excellences and Perfections* is a performance work by artist Amalia Ulman (2015). Over three months and through an alias Instagram account, Ulman delivered a scripted online performance of curated images, videos and text that critiqued digital identity, authenticity and contemporary social relations. In turn, her followers became unwitting and unregulated participants who were implicated in the production and mediation of the work.

The artist activities above involve to a greater or lesser extent curatorial processes. We can simplify these processes to (1) creating material infrastructure, (2) mutual exchange, (3) establishing situations.

Of course, there are plenty of examples of artists curating in different ways, but I think these three are emblematic of a contemporary visual culture that is actively looking to challenge and reinvent the formal institutional gallery apparatus.

... who gets to tell CULTURAL STORIES is now firmly under the microscope

So where are we in the discipline of music? The critical literature and constructive application of the curator's role is not comparable despite old forms of creation and mediation losing their legitimacy (Malzacher, Tupajić and Zanki, 2010, p.2). The conservatoire has not seen the same separation between producer (composer and/or performer) and its discursive other (musicology aside). Moreover, the institution of art music, and here I am referring to the predominance of a particular canon of repertoire, the conservatoire training pathway and the concert hall apparatus (including its associated etiquettes, practices and ephemera), has up until now received surprisingly limited critique from its producers.

In the last seven years, there has been some movement to redress this (Andrewes, 2014, pp.103-105; Rutherford-Johnson, 2017, p.136; Hagen and Young, 2020; Farnsworth and Lovell, 2020; Farnsworth, Jakobsson and Massera, 2021). In 2020 however, it was dramatically pushed to the top of the agenda with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. BLM called out the structural inequalities of many institutions, particularly in the cultural sector. For the first time it seemed the institution of art music would have to acknowledge and address its role in permeating a one-sided western-centric canon of art music. Forums and organisations such as The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in

Music Studies Network (EDIMS) in Music Higher Education (Music HE) and Black Lives in Music (BLiM) in the UK have been established to do just this. As a consequence, who gets to tell cultural stories is now firmly under the microscope. It is fair to say therefore that in a single year the profile of the curator rapidly gained traction.

A second context we must consider is the current Covid-19 pandemic that has already radically affected cultural production (and who gets to produce it). The headline results of a recent composer survey published by Sound and Music and Ivors Academy are stark: over half of respondents earn under £10k for composing in a normal (non-pandemic) year; and the three areas where composers earn most are DIY/self-producing, concerts including commissions, and education (Sound and Music, 2021). As Chief Executives Susanna Eastburn MBE and Graham Davies say in their supporting narrative, 'the financial circumstances of the vast majority of composers are incredibly fragile' (Ibid.).

Where rapid technological development since the late 1990s (beginning with the launch of Napster in 1999, then Apple iTunes and iPod in 2001, and social media in the mid-2000s) has released a truly astonishing scale of digital creativity (Manovich, 2020), the pandemic has, if anything, accelerated this further (Haferkorn, Kavanagh and Leak, 2021). How can composer begin to compete for attention in and amongst this?



Songs for a Better Future Matel Bejenaru, 2010 © Matel Bejenaru

I V .

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Having now seen examples of creative exchange between art production and curatorial decision-making, we turn our attention to the field of music. Historical precedents reveal some collectives and communities of composers actively, or inadvertently, critiquing rigid institutional frameworks in a Duchampian mould. Early 20th century examples include Hugo Ball's 'Cabaret Voltaire' and 'Galerie Dada', Allan Kaprow and Adrian Henri's 'Happenings', and George Maciunas' 'Fluxconcerts or Aktionen' and much has already been written on these. A second avant-garde in the 1960s and 70s, which includes composers Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Pauline Oliveros, Phillip Glass and Steve Reich, confronted, dismissed or bypassed conventional apparatus altogether to present their work. The outputs of the San Francisco Tape Music Center, Yoko Ono and her Chambers Street loft in New York, and Park Place, The Gallery of Art Research, Inc., were important contributors and stakeholders.

In the UK, Reich's rigorous approach inspired the experimental music scene owing in part to his friendship with composers Michael Nyman, Gavin Bryars and Cornelius Cardew. His and Glass's composer-led groups were important models for a number of British composers who were experimenting with and re-evaluating sonic concepts and extended formats away from the art music institution (see, for example, The Michael Nyman Band and The Gavin Bryars Ensemble and later The Steve Martland Band and The Fitkin Band). Their artistic and political concerns challenged established authorities; 'traditionally passive onlookers (listeners, audience) could now be empowered participants, as performers, composers and conductors' (Gregory, 2004, p.20). This is evident in groups such as the Scratch Orchestra (founded by Cardew, Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton) and Portsmouth Sinfonia (founded by Bryars).

These examples show how new forms of creation, often resulting from a growing understanding of context, went hand in hand with alternative ways of presenting work. In the face of existing hierarchies and limitations, composers had to develop new skills to keep editorial control. It is in this expanding role that proto-curatorial actions can be glimpsed.

The arrival of the so-called classical club nights in 1998 onwards is a uniquely contemporary response to many of the same

institutional challenges I presented in Section III. Some of the series no longer exist and others have taken their place. They are the foundations of the indie-classical scene that is still active largely in London and New York. The writer Thom Andrewes (2014, pp.134-43) provides a list of notable events in London from 2004-2014. The artistic direction, production quality and size, and personal motivations vary yet common practices can be identified, including:

- ——— composer or performer-led (single or group) artistic direction
- ——— informal performance contexts (e.g., clubs, bars and offsite art spaces)
- ——— do-it-yourself ethos attracting loyal audiences
- ——— short performances and DJ sets alternate with programming covering electronic club music, experimental, modernist and core classical repertoire (i.e., pre-20th century)
- ——— an economics reliant on public funders, private trusts and foundations and commercial partnership.

The approaches of these platforms diverge, however. One pathway finds new relevance for old music, and they prioritise informality. The following examples are a representative sample:

‘[The Little Proms] mission is to make it as easy to go to a classical concert as it is to go to an indie gig’ (The Little Proms, n.d).

‘Classical music concerts can be horrible... The Night Shift is all about making classical music easy to enjoy’ (OAE, n.d).

‘[Yellow Lounge] brings classical music bang up-to-date, leaving a trail of twin-sets, pearls and grey suits in its wake... Yellow Lounge fuses the greatest international performers with cutting-edge DJ and VJ sets in urban spaces’ (Yellow Lounge, n.d).

The examples above fall under what Andrewes describes as a recontextualising or displacing of existing repertoire (2014, p.53). In my opinion, these motivations suggest a critique of the concert hall, and its etiquettes in particular, rather than positioning context at the heart of new artistic creation. Furthermore, they can be seen not as acts of curating but programming (although the promoters slip between terms) because they focus on entertainment.



Where it gets PARTICULARLY INVENTIVE (and exciting to listen to) is in the music’s shared characteristics with electronic club music. It is the very fabric of the string quartets, concertos and piano scores that I reviewed.

DJ Yoda and Heritage Orchestra, Dan Stephens, 2007 © Dan Stephens

2. I undertook an in-depth review of ‘Blank Canvas’ as part of my doctoral research (Dutta, 2018), which culminated in the 17th edition at Village Underground in 2013. It is a useful precursor to the case study in Section V.

The second pathway places greater value on new music and it is here I would argue curating practices are evident. Representative examples include ‘London Contemporary Music Festival’, ‘Kammer Klang’, ‘Nonclassical’, ‘Faster Than Sound’ and my own platform, ‘Blank Canvas’, that ran from 2007-13². More consideration is given to the relationship between site-specific location and music on the billing. Tim Rutherford-Johnson (2017, p.41) notices how performed repertoire at ‘Nonclassical’ events often gives greatest importance to ‘works with a strong rhythmic profile and a loud dynamic... as do those that do not require concentrated listening in service of a continuous musical narrative’.

A brief stylistic analysis of non-classical music

Before we move onto the case study, I want to put forward a brief analysis of nonclassical music because I feel it closely aligns with my own music making in *bloom*. The idea for a non-classical music is something I inherited from composer Gabriel Prokofiev. I have adapted the use (and spelling) to reference a particular music that has its beginnings on the Nonclassical record label.

There are a limited number of what I would describe as non-classical musical texts. The music is still far from integrated into music culture, the market and literature so it is too early to explore as a technique. Is it a new aesthetic? Andrewes (2014) suggests ‘the Nonclassical [sic] aesthetic is all about displacement... displacing one style of music into the frame or context of another’. But he does not suggest it requires a new way of listening in the way that Steve Reich describes minimalism as a gradual

process. I argued in my doctoral research that non-classical music is a new style with a focus on rhythm and texture. Where it gets particularly inventive (and exciting to listen to) is in the music's shared characteristics with electronic club music. It is the very fabric of the string quartets, concertos and piano scores that I reviewed.

We also see for the first-time **mutual exchange**: the reciprocal relationship between creative and distributive processes. Non-classical music was written for and first heard in the club context. For example, Prokofiev's *String Quartet No. 1* (2003) and *Concerto for Turntables and Orchestra* (2006/11) premiered at Cargo and Scala in London respectively.

Non-classical music lies on the continuum of musical postmodernism which has its roots in the counterculture of the 1960s and in turn on experimentalism in the UK, as we saw earlier. I would even go as far to say it continues the hardcore continuum as an example of dub's instrumental turn (Reynolds, 1998). Either way, much has been written of the free exchange of musical postmodernism (Sande, 2010; Lolavar, 2011; Rutherford-Johnson, 2013; Andrewes, 2014). Composer Soosan Lolavar (2011, p.4) attributes this to 'a largely pluralistic approach to music as part of a new era of "cultural postmodernism" which has broken down hitherto boundaries of style, genre, aesthetic value and audience appreciation'. The critic Alex Ross (2007, p.542) describes the 'great fusion' as one possible destination for 21st century music with 'intelligent pop artists and extroverted composers speaking more or less the same language'. The particular invention within non-classical music arises from its shared characteristics with electronic club music and, as I will show in the next chapter, the reciprocal relationship between this particular music making and its exhibition space. The composers are not using electronic club music as an occasional effect, such as Thomas Adès (1999) and Dai Fujikura (2006) might, or as crossover (Rutherford-Johnson, 2017, pp.75-78). It is idiomatic of their compositional language.

V .

THE CURATING COMPOSER

CASE STUDY: *bloom*

In this section I bring to life the general principles of **mutual exchange** and **mobility** to construct the curating composer in the case study, *bloom*. This should be read alongside the following materials and the album is available to listen on streaming services: <<http://bloomworks.art>>.

1. Production

bloom (SWD, 2017) is my second studio album and the primary output of doctoral research undertaken at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance between 2013-2018, supervised by Dr Dominic Murcott, Head of Composition and Music Technology at Trinity Laban and Prof Dan Fern, Professor Emeritus at Royal College of Art. The studio album project is many-shaped, open-ended and evolving. In the following section, when I speak of the distribution of *bloom*, I do so as a composite public outcome in six manifestations. The following subsections suggest the workflow, although it is inevitably entangled.

1.1 Research and planning

From the very beginning I sought to establish a web of reference points to interact with at each stage of the production and distribution of *bloom*. I also knew that I would be collaborating with others (Plaid, Manuel Poletti, Max de Wardener, Treatment Studio) and that creative responsibility would be shared (i.e., my process was **networked**). My first curatorial act was to create a new situation for them to come together.

I also used Brian Eno's (1996) idea of 'edge culture' to frame the narrative of the project and I followed the logic of this theoretical idea when composing. Edge culture works like this: where curators (and here I refer to those traditionally based at national institutions) might follow the linear art historical method of canon-forming that tends towards the *grande histoire*, Eno offers another way. He prioritises temporary connections and asks us to confer values that are negotiable, interchangeable and that avoid single narratives (Ibid., p.328). It is a postmodern position, yet it represents how an individual confronts and engages with the work.

1.2 Defining the sonic entities

I set out to develop software technologies to modify the spectral components and sonic properties of the piano. I also wanted to design a flexible system where the electronic output (e.g., the real-time processing of the piano in *Bloume* and *whiting flowre*) could change within set parameters. Early in the writing, I could foresee a way of exploiting this flexibility through the process of remixing, which would become a way of mediating the work with the public (Subsection 2.3.1). At the same time, I was also composing with a black box performance space in mind (the new work was first heard at the ICA in London).

2. Distribution

bloom is a composite public outcome in six manifestations, three of which are ancillary in function (D-F). The six manifestations are:

- A. Recording
- B. Performance
- C. Interactive Digital Space
- D. Newsletter
- E. Film
- F. Workshop

2.1 Manifestation A: Recording

I released *bloom* in limited-edition vinyl and streaming formats on 2 November 2017. Vinyl would of course fix the running order, but I could exploit the streaming format to expand the work into an open-ended curated playlist.

2.1.1 Casting the studio album for release

I worked with the stylistic features of the new works to plan the running order of the studio album. I considered the shape, flow, tonality and balance of durations of the complete listening experience. Importantly, I used the stylistic features of non-classical in choosing to record *this was written by hand* by David Lang (2003)—as an example of notated minimalism. It has a restless character and the stuttered rhythms echo the breakbeats in *A Higher Sense of Time*. The slowly thinning texture of the last eighteen bars acts as a natural outro so I positioned it at the end of the record.

2.1.2 Album as curated playlist

Usually, the public release of the studio album in these formats would complete this first manifestation. However, I have since turned my attention to exploiting streaming technology to deliver *bloom* as a curated playlist. Gavin Wade says the artist-curator applies ‘curatorial strategies as a way of presenting themselves, alongside other artists, to create composite public outcomes’ (O’Neill, 2012, p.105). I selected existing material and recorded new pieces (guided again by the research network, edge culture frame, and stylistic features of non-classical music) to extend the listening experience of the original studio album and widen the context and historicity of the works. This is an open-ended process and something I continue to add to and change today. In doing so I momentarily connect different music, hopefully illuminating my own, while knowing that audiences elsewhere will be doing something similar on their playlists.



Fig. 1-1 ‘bloom LIVE’ at the ICA. Photograph Michael Robert Williams, 2017 © Michael Robert Williams

2.2 Manifestation B: Performance

I created the audio-visual show, ‘bloom LIVE’ (Fig. 1-1), to give material shape to the edge culture narrative. I followed an iterative curating model (Paul, 2008, pp.39-40) where outcomes from other manifestations (workshops and remix competitions, for example) or previous performances-as-versions have a dynamic effect on the next performance. ‘bloom LIVE’ shifts and morphs over time. The different performance contexts provide another opportunity to foreground the historicity of the new body of work and its visual language with electronic club music, minimalism and more. The spread of music encountered in ‘bloom LIVE’ inter-relates with activities taking place in manifestations A and C. New material is gradually introduced into performance (which in turn folds back into the playlist and vice versa) and this all reinforces my narrative.

I found a rare opportunity in the pandemic to devise a new iteration, ‘bloom LIVE/STREAM’, which was broadcast in November 2020 during the second lockdown. Where in the live show visuals were generated and mixed in real time in reaction to the audio data, in ‘bloom LIVE/STREAM’, we pulled apart the original visual content and brought in live camera into the mix, so I became an important part of the visual experience (Fig. 1-2).

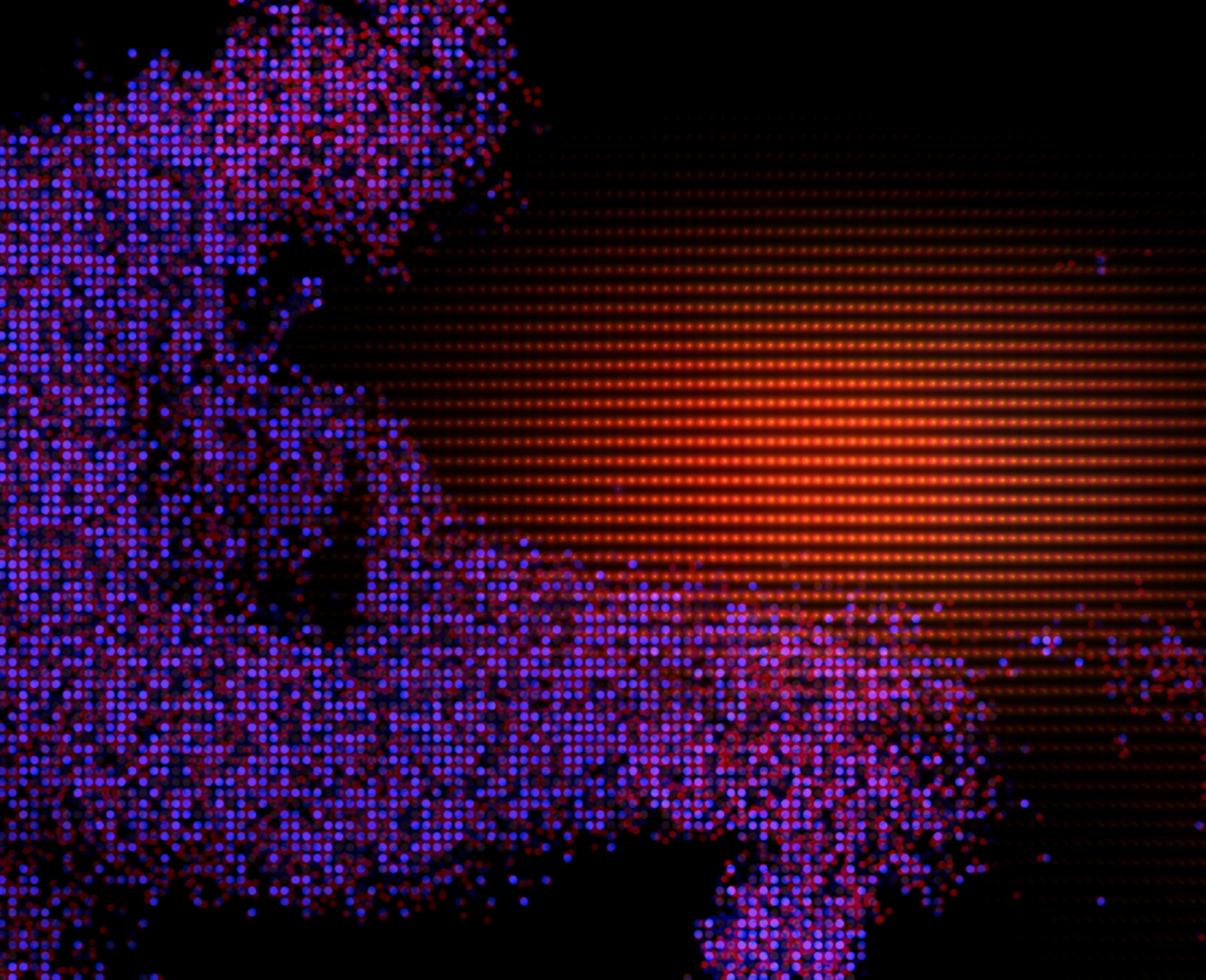


Fig. 1-2 Still taken from 'bloom LIVE/STREAM'. Treatment Studio, 2020 © Studio Will Dutta

What does the next iteration look like? I am already working on a hybrid approach to the concert experience, where in-person audiences are augmented with those watching online; each experiencing the unique performer-spectator spectator-spectator moments that mark out the quality of liveness (Auslander, 1999).

2.2.1 (Un)controlled activity

At this point I want to show how I sought to incorporate controlled and uncontrolled activity in performance. This was important to me because it is how I dramatised different tensions. In the following two diagrams (Figs. 1-3 and 1-4) I set out two axes, where the activity on the vertical axis is controlled and the horizontal uncontrolled or unregulated. In 'bloom LIVE', for example, this almost balances (Fig. 1-3). Fig. 1-4 shows examples of the controlled and uncontrolled activity in the recorded works.

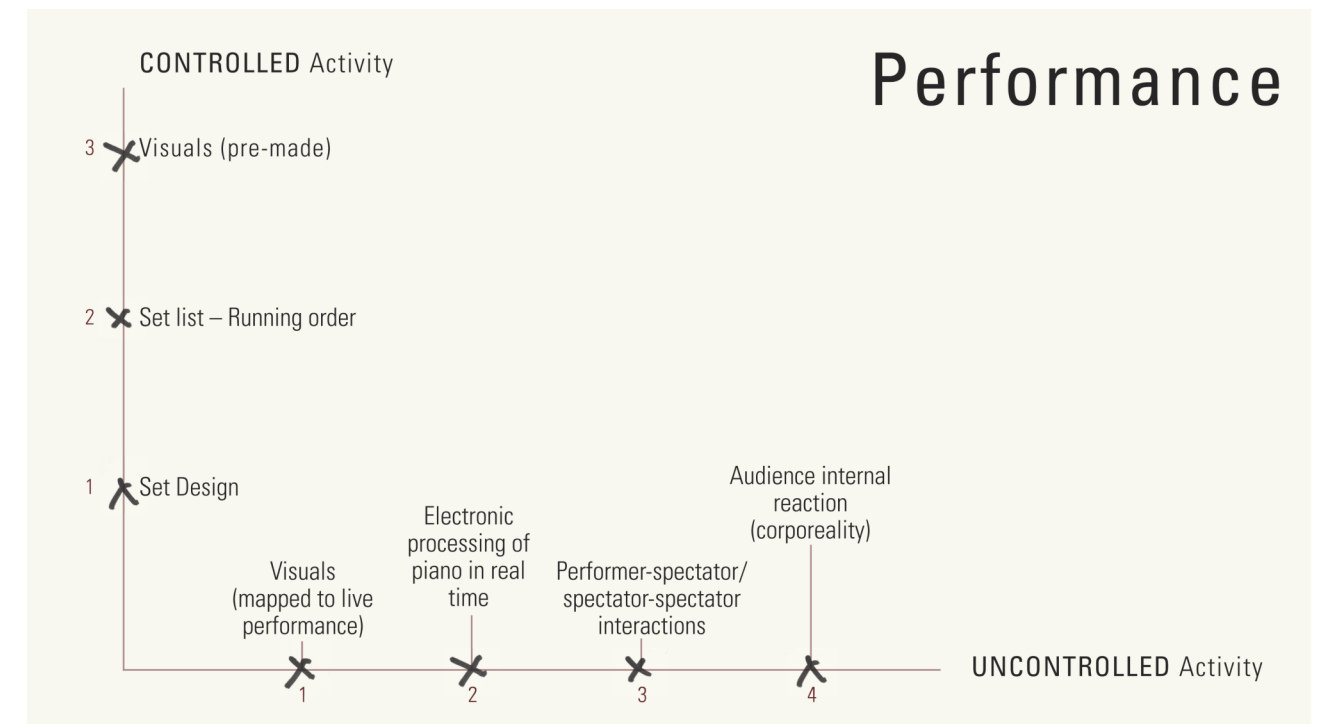


Fig. 1-3 (Un)controlled activity in 'bloom LIVE'.

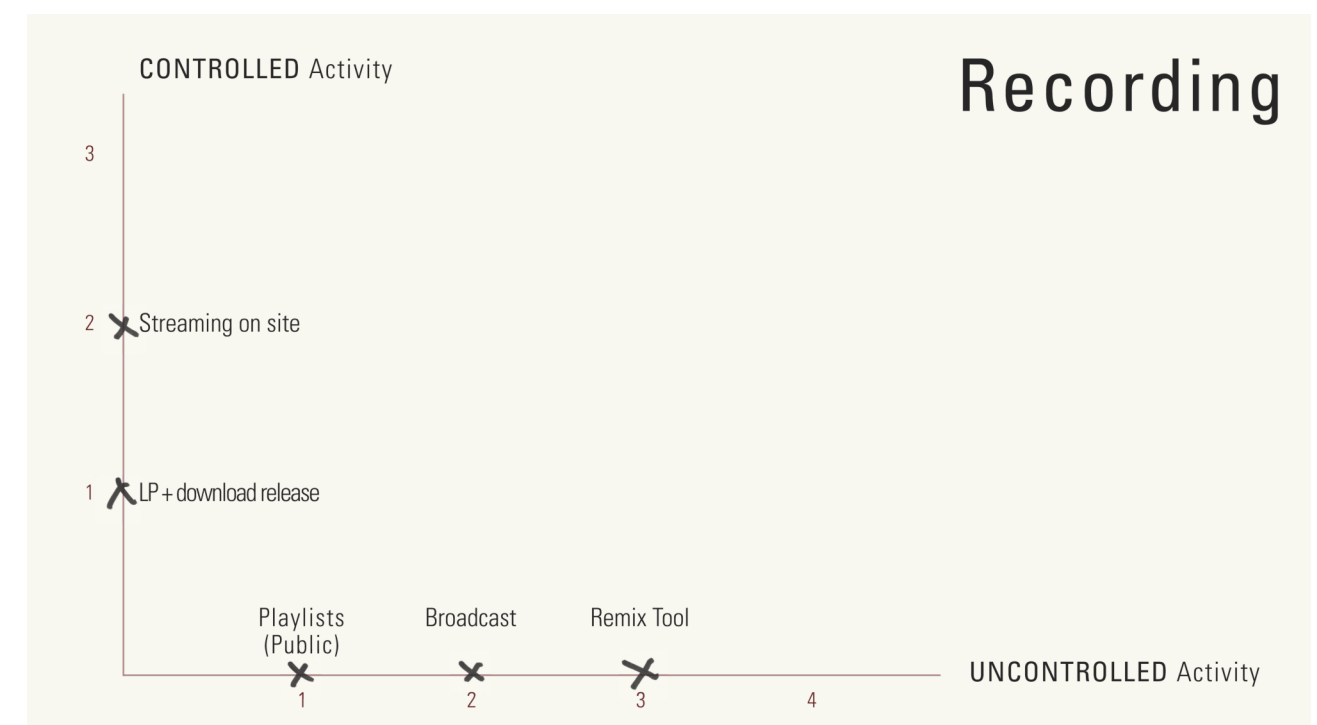


Fig. 1-4 (Un)controlled activity in the recording.

2.3 Manifestation C: Interactive Digital Space

‘bloomworks’ <<http://www.bloomworks.art>> is ‘the technologised interface between physical and virtual spaces’ (Dziekan, 2007, no page number). It is the hub of the project where all signs lead to. It has four main functions:

- Documentation (presenting materials in their optimum format)
- Research (providing critical and historical context to create meaning)
- Pedagogy (examining organising structures of the project and select works)
- Interpretation (inviting user interaction and engagement)

How is the relationship between communication and meaning and social participation curated? Audiences enter ‘bloomworks’ from a variety of routes be it some of the other manifestations or even the humble postcard. Visual artist Roberta Smith (1993) describes such ephemera as ancillary and collective artworks that prepare the receiver for the main thing.

The original is the genetic precursor and the remixes are many different forms (mutations).

2.3.1 Remixing as open-source music making

The invitation to participate and co-create is communicated through an on-going open call for remixes and I have on occasions worked with students at several universities. I mentioned in subsection 1.2 how my collaborator, Manuel Poletti, and I built a system of real-time processing that is inherently flexible. However, at the point of recording the state of the electronics becomes fixed. To navigate this, I looked to the virtual space as a suitable way of mediating the body of work: I invite users to submit their own remixes of the piece. They can either use the stems we provide (from Poletti’s software technologies) or they can create their own following a similar aesthetic approach. I believe this gets around the problem of a fixed recording because there is now a selection of versions of equal value to listen to. The original is the genetic precursor (Fern, 2015) and the remixes are many different forms (mutations). This is another example of mutual exchange, where the distributive process affects the compositional act. I see this as a small-scale open-source response to music making and there is growing discourse on remixing as an object, process and postmodernist culture (Lolavar, 2011; Andrewes, 2014; Sullivan, 2014). I select and upload remixes to the site over the lifespan of the project and in return users get their own page and revolving vinyl. Some remixes are arranged as live versions, and these are worked into ‘bloom LIVE’.

2.4 Manifestation D: Newsletter

My quarterly newsletter, ‘Edge Culture’, is a long form journal that I use to communicate ideas and context directly to my audience. Each journal is edited jointly with a featured guest. My role is to choose the guest in line with my research interests set out in subsection 1.1 and to edit the text. The activity is unregulated (it sits on the uncontrolled axis): once the topic is agreed guest editors are responsible for selecting material and writing text. In a small way, the newsletter is an example of a collaborative curatorial platform.

2.5 Manifestation E: Film

Film is another medium where I can bring to life stories that relate to the research context. I am currently working on a series of shorts that explore ‘Dub, Migrations, Pirate Radio and UK Sound System Culture’, ‘1960s New York’, and ‘Experimentalism in the UK’. I do not foreground my work in these films so in a way this distributes my work only indirectly.

2.6 Manifestation F: Workshop

The third and final ancillary manifestation is the ‘Curating Music’ workshop that I continue to deliver in conjunction with performances of ‘bloom LIVE’. I designed the workshop as an introduction to the curating composer through the prism of *bloom*. I have since invited participants to reflect on and contribute to the six manifestations: their ideas provide further instruction for the development of the project overall. This is another example of the iterative curating model being applied.

2.7 Self-producing

Behind the theoretical ideas and creative acts lie the more mundane aspects of the curator’s role. The activity in the previous section could not have happened without a fundraising strategy, the logistics of project, event and tour management, the promotional campaign. Partway through the process of ideation, I began to work on funding applications. I find them helpful in making me think about a project holistically. There is still some mystery to what makes a strong application bid. I tend to pay very close attention to the criteria, adding or removing modules from the project in line with a potential funder’s interests. Sometimes their interests positively shape the project. The modular approach also means I can resize and adapt the project as and when they are successful or not.

Once I secured my first funder, I commissioned Max de Wardener to compose two new pieces for piano and I built the team of freelancers to support the different aspects of delivery. However, funding was as usual quite tight, so their time limited. I had to juggle most of the tasks with the creative work. As I have become more experienced, I know where my strengths lie and when I am in danger of overreaching, but I was stretching myself all the time with *bloom*. Inevitably, the curating composer develops a wide set of skills, which is incredibly useful but a drawback to do this can be the tendency to think you can do it all yourself.

Abstracting general principles

In this case study, I hope I have now shown how a composer might use curatorial design to produce and distribute a new body of work. I transferred methods originally worked up in the visual arts into the musical domain and in doing so I constructed a new role that I name ‘curating composer’. I developed material and immaterial infrastructure in creating this output. I value and attend to each manifestation of *bloom* as an artistic product or work in its own right, deliberately making redundant potential hierarchies of the album over performance, for example. I have built a system of mutual exchange and I move freely between creative acts and the curatorial situation.

My role in *bloom*, sees the two principles of **mutual exchange** and **mobility** in action, showing the curating composer to be original with a distinct set of practices. I also took a networked position; that the curatorial function should be active in bringing about a unique and temporary situation for others to respond to. We see evidence for this in the significant and original contributions of Plaid, Manuel Poletti, Max de Wardener, Treatment Studio and the many remixers who have submitted music to the project so far.

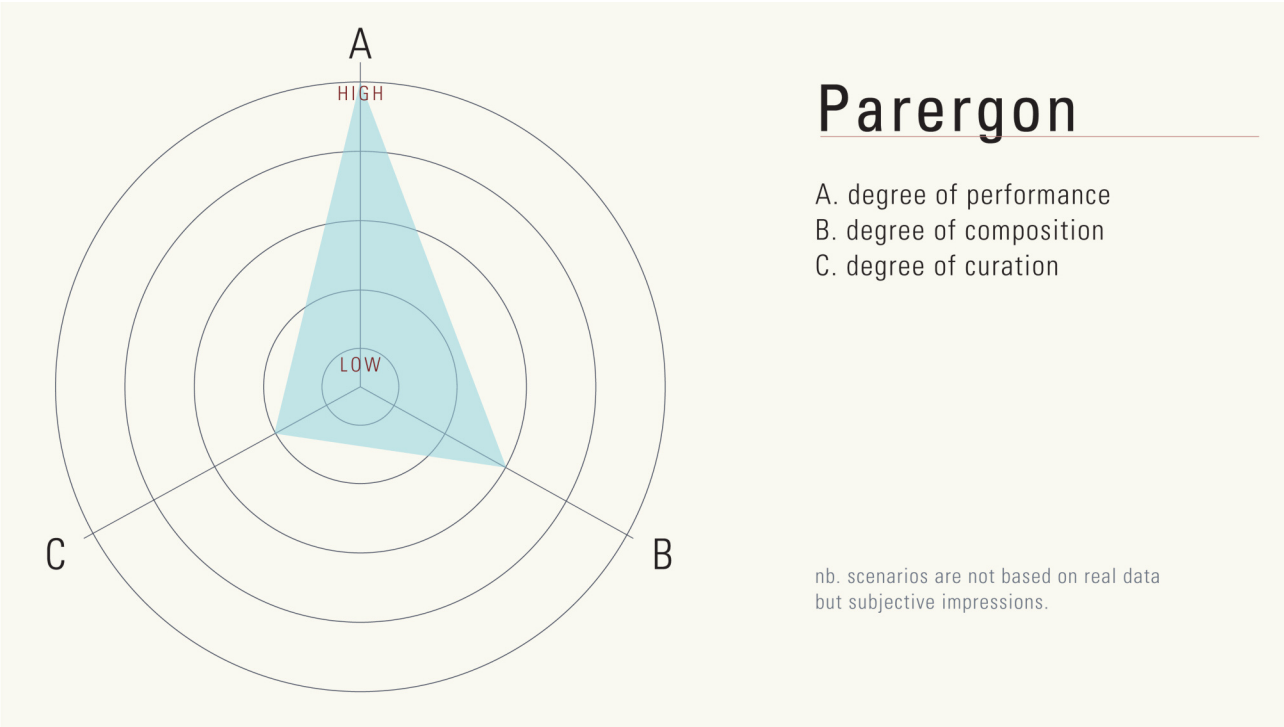


Fig. 1-5

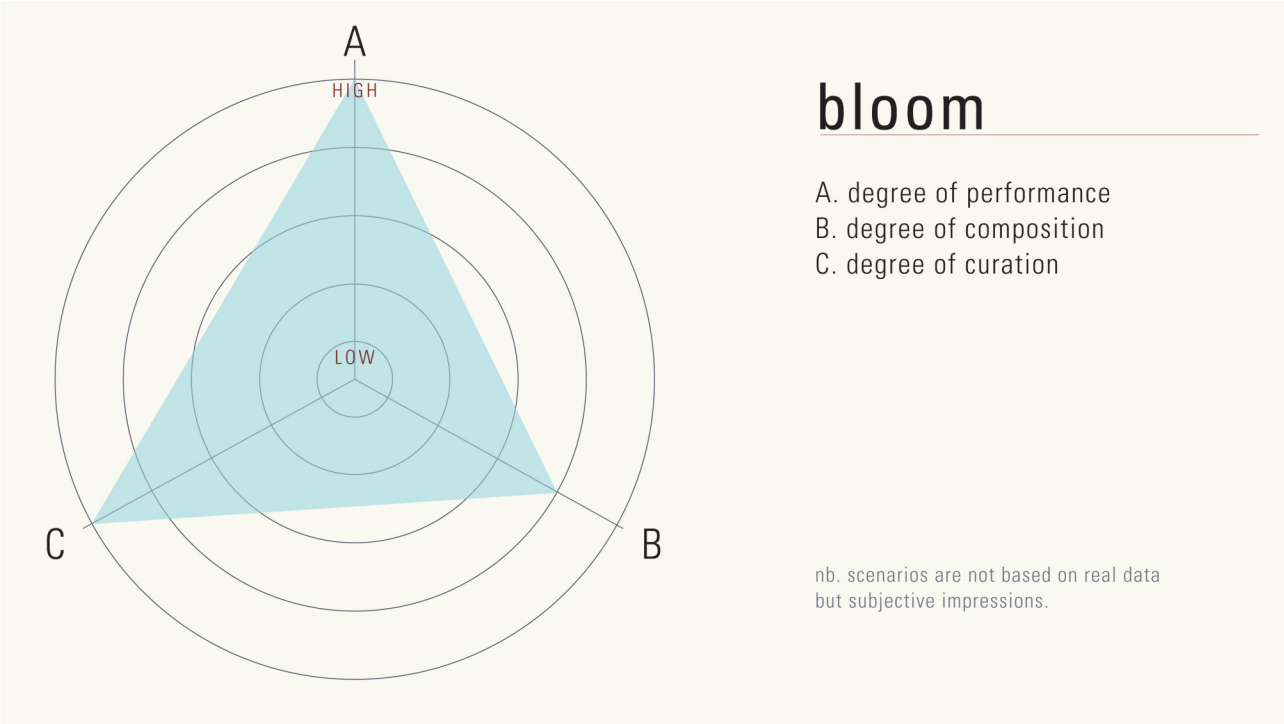


Fig. 1-6



The Little Prince, Studio Will Dutta, 2016 © Studio Will Dutta

THE CURATING COMPOSER CONCLUSION

Let us now return to the questions I posed at the beginning of the paper. *What are some of the curatorial strategies and processes in contemporary visual culture that might help develop the curating composer's role?* I investigated contemporary visual culture to uncover useful curatorial language, working methods and strategies to transfer into the discipline of music. *How have composers applied curatorial strategies in new and experimental music practices?* I looked at a selection of composers applying curatorial strategies in the presentation of their work. I showed some of the limitations in these responses so that in answering question three I could present a fully realised example of what the curating composer could look like. In the example of *bloom*, I made macro and micro curatorial decisions to affect how the material was produced and distributed. These included curating the stylistic features of the music; using iterative, modular and self-reflexive methodologies; and dimensioning the exhibition of the work across multiple manifestations. I showed music and curatorial practice converging. For me, the diagrams (Figs. 1-5 and 1-6) are a useful way of thinking about my creative process: they compare *bloom* with my first studio album, *Parergon*, released in 2012. I take this further still in the doughnut model (Fig. 1-7) to show the general principles alongside my core skills as a curating composer.

The role too has the potential to be further defined by underrepresented, underserved and marginalised voices

A secondary output of this paper is the first outline of non-classical music. In my analysis, I showed non-classical music to be a new style of art music, grounded in a context of notated minimalism and electronic club music, where rhythm and texture are the stylistic focal points and a postmodernist attitude to aesthetics and institutions prevails.

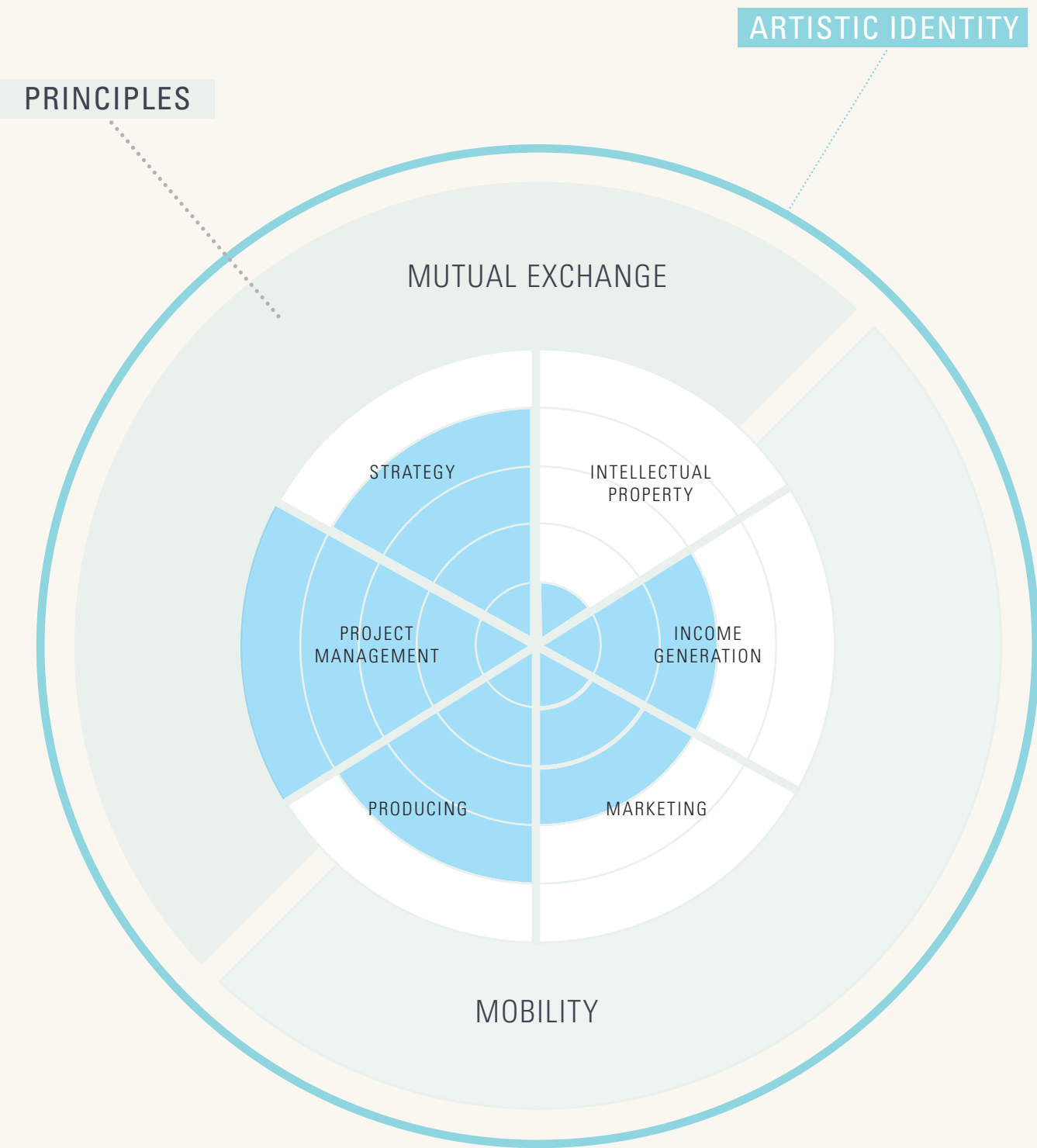


Fig. 1-7

3. I was struck how in preparing this article the indie-classical scene was broadly representative in terms of gender from the beginning (for example, Lucy Railton is the founder of Kammer Klang/London Contemporary Music Festival and Joana Seguro Faster Than Sound, both influential in the UK, and Sarah Kirkland Snider Co-Artistic Director at New Amsterdam Records in the US) and that this has accelerated as organisations have professionalised (e.g., Nonclassical signing up to Sound and Music's Fair Access Principles in 2021). But I recognise the need to do more to make the scene open and inclusive. It is incumbent on anyone in a curatorial role, no matter how small the community, to ask the question, what are the barriers to inclusion in my programme?

I want to highlight an unexpected strand of rebelliousness and subversion that is present in the study. In the iconoclastic examples, the practitioners reacted against the seemingly fixed or impenetrable institutional systems. Similarly, composer-led platforms of the indie-classical scene had to do it themselves because doors were closed to them, or they wanted to confront the institution and its associated ephemera and etiquettes. Institutional critique is at once progressive and subversive. That these artists are now part of the institution shows how change and progress can be made (i.e., be confident in your artistic position, go it alone or form a scene, revitalise the institution).

What might the curating composer look like in the future?

Already in the three years since I first devised the role, I have seen an increase in composers who are self-producing their work and others (in my role as Co-Head of Artist Development at Sound and Music). The role too has the potential to be further defined by underrepresented, underserved and marginalised voices³. We need their contributions to revitalise the institution. They will almost certainly continue to expand the dimensioning possibilities of rapidly evolving technologies, including 5G, non-fungible tokens and blockchain, mixed reality, artificial intelligence, video game engines and more besides, which offer unique and under explored opportunities.

I will finish by saying that I want to show the curating composer to be significant in historical terms and that institutions (including the training pathways such as conservatoires) ignore them at their peril. It is vital a new generation of curating composers provide aesthetic and entrepreneurial leadership in what has become a bewilderingly fragmented landscape. If this speaks to you, then go on and be a creative force in 21st century new music culture.

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Glossary

Throughout this paper I make reference to a number of concepts, some of which I have transferred from the visual arts. In doing so I have claimed yet another curatorial position. The following glossary is a list of terminology with their meanings explained in the context of this study. Together they formulate my personal construction of the curating composer.

Artist-Curator: A creative practitioner who uses the physical and intellectual experience of an exhibition to present themselves alongside other artists

Art music: Notated music that takes an established form to a lesser or greater extent to communicate artistic expression

Curate: To authoritatively select objects in relationship to a given context prioritising analytic inquiry and theoretical coherence

Curatorial design: Contemporary curating features that affect the aesthetic experience of the exhibition

Digital: Used to subsume the full range of technologies around computers and the Internet

Dimensioning: A term used by curator and academic Vince Dziekan to describe the enlarging of the exhibition platform to cover physical and virtual spaces

Edge culture: A term created by composer Brian Eno to describe an alternative approach to art history that avoids notions of absolute value

Exhibition: A temporary public platform within which an overarching curatorial framework is provided

Institution of art: The apparatus for producing and distributing art and art ideas that prevail at any given time and determine the reception of works

Institutional critique: Critical examination of the parameters and apparatus of the institution of art

Liveness: Framing device that prioritises temporal co-presence over spatial co-presence as the fundamental experience of the live between audiences and event

Mediation: Twofold meaning: it can be used to refer to education-based practices and/or the provision of ephemera ahead of and during exhibitions that include ongoing cultural dialogue between curators, artists and audiences. In the discipline of music, it is often used to mean the transmission of music from originator to listener via one form of media or another

Mediatisation: Transference from one medium to another and often associated with artistic dissemination and distribution

Mobility: the free movement between creative acts and the curatorial situation

Mutual exchange: the reciprocal relationship between creative and distributive processes

Networked: Distributed structure whereby creative responsibility is shared between teams

Non-classical music: A new style of art music, grounded in a context of notated minimalism and electronic club music, where rhythm and texture are the stylistic focal points and a postmodernist attitude to aesthetics and institutions prevails

Playback: The act of causing notation, recorded sounds or pictures to be heard or seen again

Programme: To select objects or musical works that privilege entertainment over theoretical inquiry

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Blank Canvas at Village Underground, Howard Melnyczuk, 2013 © Howard Melnyczuk



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