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The role of communication technologies between choreographer and composer during Aotearoa/New Zealand's COVID-19 response

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Abstract

This article demonstrates how rapidly creatives can amend their creative processes to account for imposed limitations, particularly in the context of COVID-19. It documents a gradual shift in the way that in-person collaboration is valued. The use of communication technologies between composer and choreographer are compared through examples of the authors' own work both

before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This allows for observations to be made as to how interpersonal, domestic and international creative processes may develop in the future global 'new normal'. Aotearoa/New Zealand's current quasi-post-pandemic status allows for predictions to be made about what this collaborative relationship may look like for the rest of the world post-COVID.

Keywords: dance; composition; communication technologies; COVID-19; pandemic

Introduction

We approach this writing from our perspectives as 'dance composers' (meaning we create the music that accompanies dance works) based in Wellington, the capital of Aotearoa/New Zealand. In doing so, we explore how we have applied communication technologies for creating dance works both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how creative processes can be amended to account for imposed limitations during the context of COVID-19. Even though we are in Aotearoa/New Zealand which has been largely untouched by COVID, the global backdrop of the pandemic meant our international collaborators were unable to collaborate with us in person. We found our own values shifting, as we started to opt for online and digital collaboration, even when face-to-face was possible.

Collaborations between those in various creative disciplines have encouraged artists to embrace digital communication technologies, whether in aiding the construction of an artistic work, or communication between parties. Digital technologies have been critical to the role of composers in contemporary dance for well over a decade, whereby a degree of distance-based collaboration has become the norm. Despite this, the lockdown and border restrictions in Aotearoa/New Zealand during 2020–21 further changed the making process for dance works from a pre-pandemic process where it was generally integral for artists to be in the same room as each other, towards a process where artists, including the choreographer or composer, may complete a whole work by distance. Aotearoa/New Zealand's government response to the pandemic, with an extensive lockdown and strict border measures, limited in-person collaboration between composer and choreographer, enabled the country to return to relative normality in mid-2020. The examination of creative production within the context of a pandemic therefore provides a unique insight into not only the creative conditions under lockdown measures, but also with regard to how interpersonal, domestic and international creative processes may develop in the future global 'new normal'.

Existing research into the role of communication technology within a dance context has focused on dance education and explored how it has adopted a blended learning format. However, this has raised concerns as to the extent to which dance education with heavy communication technology assistance could be investigated

given the assumed importance of both physical space and relationships to dance practice (Li, Zhou and Teo 2017; Heyang and Martin 2020). While the education context is beyond the scope of this article, the points raised in relation to distance-based dance choreography are pertinent. Further to this, other work has addressed the need to rethink boundaries of embodied performance in dance (Weber 2020). These articles illustrate how the pandemic is changing the way dance is taught, learnt, and in some cases consumed; however, they don't address how collaborative relationships (such as that between choreographer and composer) which are foundational to dance may change in the future as a consequence of the pandemic. Some scholarly work has explored the making of dance works during lockdown using communication technologies to facilitate the collaboration (Vaughan and Copland 2020); Vaughan and Copland's research identifies novel changes to the creative process, such as using Zoom for creating and performing a work between a composer and choreographer. We are interested in identifying and comparing the changes to the creative processes from pre-pandemic to during the pandemic.

We first consider works we have composed both prior to and during the pandemic. We then compare these works and observe how our usage of technologies has shifted, and the impacts that may make on future collaborative practice. Aotearoa/New Zealand's current quasi-post-pandemic status allows us to make predictions about what this collaborative relationship may look like for the rest of the world post-COVID. This article provides links to pre-recorded audio-video footage of the dance works, and it should be read in conjunction with these videos.

Works pre-March 2020

This section will discuss two works that were made and performed prior to the arrival of COVID-19 in Aotearoa/New Zealand. They show that our pre-pandemic creative process was one that was primarily facilitated through in-person collaboration, assisted by communication technologies. This serves to provide a pre-pandemic context to help understand the later changes in collaborative process between composer-choreographer through the use of digital communication technologies.

Jesse Austin-Stewart: *Dys-Connect* (<https://bit.ly/2MzNCZI>) was choreographed by Melbourne-based Lauren Langlois, and developed in Wellington for Footnote New Zealand Dance (a professional contemporary dance company). Various musical sketches were made for Lauren where she would listen to them in-person and give instant feedback. Other times I would upload the sketches to a Google Drive folder, and she would email feedback. While working in-person, we played the music back while working with the dancers in the dance studio to explore the relationship between sound and movement. After the development

period, up until the premiere, Lauren and I had Skype calls discussing adjustments, which I would make and upload to Google Drive for her to view. This work was created by a blend of in-person and online collaboration, relying primarily on the ability to respond to dance and musical material in real time, where communication technologies were primarily used in making additional changes.

Jason Wright: *Borderline* (<https://bit.ly/2MjgDcf>), a double-bill where I was the lead composer for both works (*Vessel* and *Area²*, where Jing Ng supported me in the composition of *Vessel*), was choreographed by Ross McCormack and Kuik Swee Boon for T.H.E. Dance Company and Muscle Mouth, two professional contemporary dance companies. We were based in Singapore when creating the work, involving multiple return trips. After this initial visit, discussions were had with Kuik and Ross over Skype and email, with material shared via Google Drive.

When I was in the studio I was full-time every day, live-operating and creating in real-time. I returned to NZ to finalize the sound material, where it was shared via Google Drive. The majority of the conceptualization of the work and creation of musical material was done in-person, with adjustments made and added with the assistance of communication technologies.

Pre-March 2020 discussion

Both of these pre-COVID examples have described how the collaborative relationship between composer and choreographer relied on in-person interaction. While some work had been facilitated and organized by distance, communication technologies only aided, not drove, the collaborative process. At the end stages of both projects, we can see the importance of file sharing and written and audio-visual communication, though the use of these communication technologies, is primarily for finalizing the project, rather than being central to the project's development.

Works post-March 2020

The following works discussed were made after the onset of COVID-19. These examples illustrate how the making process has shifted in the case of international collaboration (in contrast to the examples above), how this is facilitated by communication technologies, and how these communication technologies help to guide a changing collaborative process between composer and choreographer.

Jesse Austin-Stewart: *Still Waiting* (<https://bit.ly/2Yqzwwr>) was choreographed by Sydney-based Tyler Carney and performed in August 2020, by some students at tertiary dance training centre Ev & Bow. We decided to make the music prior to making most of the choreographic decisions, partly due to a two-week

development period with the dancers, but also due to not working in-person. Both conditions would have made quick alterations to the music difficult.

I shared musical sketches to Google Drive for Tyler to listen to, providing feedback either as a phone call or voice messages on Messenger. Once Tyler began working with the dancers and wanted to make changes, she let me know through written messages on Messenger. This online dialogue made for a much slower creative process and allowed for less attention to specificity in compositional decisions due to the turnaround time in workshopping the music with dancers, as well as providing feedback.

Jesse Austin-Stewart: *Fog, Nerves, Future, Ocean, Hello (echoes)* (<https://bit.ly/2YtC5Og>) was choreographed by New York-based Kota Yamazaki for Footnote. The making process saw Yamazaki send individual videos of the movements for each dancer to them via Google Drive. Once rehearsed, these were filmed and sent for feedback. Alongside this, I developed the music, testing it in studio with the dancers and the artistic director. Kota then heard the music through the videos or via Zoom calls made to watch the dancers.

I was able to collaborate in-person with the dancers and artistic team; however, the choreographer was restricted by international travel restrictions leading to delays in communication with most feedback being via email. This often resulted in the artistic director having to make creative decisions on behalf of the choreographer. Two days prior to the premiere, the choreographer requested a significant change to the music, which ultimately didn't go ahead due to time constraints. One is left to wonder how the work may have been different if in-person collaboration between composer and choreographer had been facilitated.

Jason Wright: *If These Walls...* (<https://bit.ly/2MDT39K>) was choreographed by Auckland-based Claire O'Neil for Footnote. We engaged in conceptual discussions over Zoom and shared sound and visual material via Google Drive. During the development, the creative team had several Zoom meetings discussing creative concepts and production. Once COVID-19 restrictions had lifted by June, and the process of meeting via Zoom was established, there were many instances where I Zoomed from home rather than travelling to the studio for ease of time. Although I still valued meeting face to face, the nature of the pandemic had lessened some of the expectations of meeting in person. Rehearsals started with Claire having limited time in Wellington, and I was not needed in the studio full-time. The rehearsal director sent video of rehearsals via Messenger. I finished developing the material, sending links via Google Drive, with feedback being sent back from the choreographer and rehearsal director via email and Messenger. For the final production week, everyone was together in the studio. The construction of the sections of the piece was quite technical and I needed to make many minute file

changes right up until the final run of the piece. The in-person nature of the collaboration allowed for quick changes, and additionally, the increase in use of communication technologies allowed me to be more efficient with my time.

Post-March 2020 discussion

In contrast to the works completed pre-March 2020, these later works relied on various communication technologies as core tools to facilitate collaboration between choreographer and composer. Comments on adjustments to the music were made using written and audio-visual communication tools, as opposed to predominantly in-person feedback. This online model increased the time of the feedback process. What occurred instantly during in-person collaboration happened over one to two days, resulting in having to commit to quite large compositional decisions without knowing what the choreographer's opinion would be. This ultimately slowed down the collaborative process and allowed less opportunity for specificity in micro-compositional decisions. This shift in reliance on communication technologies has been necessitated by the conditions of the pandemic in the first two examples; however, in *If These Walls...* we see a heavy reliance on communication technologies, like file sharing and written/audio-visual communication, in the collaborative relationship between composer and choreographer.

This change sees a de-prioritization of in-person collaboration to a hybrid between online and in-person composer-choreographer creative relationships. In the case of *If These Walls...*, this shift allows for quick changes near the end of the process (something that wasn't afforded with the work with Yamazaki) and allows composer and choreographer to continuously re-prioritize their time around what they determine important or not important to work on in-person. Interestingly, with this example, we do see a shift from prioritizing in-person collaboration from the development period (like in the works pre-March 2020) to the end-finalization period (such as *If These Walls...*). The implications of this shift are yet to be seen but may result in prioritization of being in-person for 'finishing touches' over the body of the work.

Discussion and conclusion

The pre-COVID examples illustrate the process has always required a degree of digital communication and collaboration. Our dependency on digital technologies to both make music and collaborate has meant we were well-positioned to transition to more digitally dependent collaboration. The lockdown increased the difficulty for dancers to engage in what is primarily a physical medium (cf. Vaughan

and Copland 2020); however these issues were less present for composers, whose practice was already largely digitally-based.

We may see a divergence in dance practice and collaboration based on geographic location, where Aotearoa/New Zealand's quasi-post-pandemic state allows for a continuation of in-person making and performing. An increased digital dependency, continued lockdowns elsewhere in the world, and a push towards reimagining the boundaries of embodiment in dance performance (Weber 2020) may result in more online-based dance, and in turn choreographer and composer collaborative practice (Molly W. Schenck 2020) more akin to online creative communities (Settles and Dow 2013). Digital dependency may also result in an increased digital literacy between choreographers and composers, and expanded digital engagements within dance works (Sicchio 2014).

Changes in the creative process, forced by government regulations, have seen an increased reliance on and utilization of communication technologies, even in the case of in-person collaboration. These shifts in creative process have resulted in creative works that have been affected by the increased use of communication technologies and decreased in-person composer-choreographer collaboration. As we move into a post-pandemic 'normal', our general increased use of communication technologies may lead to increasingly hybridized forms of collaboration (such as in *If These Walls...*) where in-person collaboration becomes prioritized for different parts of the creative process. Regardless, the observations made in this article from Aotearoa/New Zealand's quasi-post-pandemic point of view illustrate how two composers have shifted their creative practice in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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