



## Playing with Time to Escape Time: Mindful Online Slow Music Improvisation

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### KEYWORDS

Improvisation  
Virtual performance  
Multimedia  
Mindfulness

Zoom performance  
Music  
Synthesizers  
Taonga puoro

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### ABSTRACT

This article is an exegetical account of a series of improvisational concert/performance/co-creations that started in the lockdown of March 2020 in New Zealand. This informal series of livestream concerts has been developing since that time, with a range of collaborative performers. This article unpicks some of the creative practice and conceptual framework that inform the series, and is presented as an individual creative reflection.

The series of events was designed to provide space for shared improvisation as a tool for mindfulness in uncertain times. It was also designed to provide some collective moments of reflection through a shared remote experience. But, at the core, this series explored ideas of slow improvisation. Working in a purely online context, the project utilised the limitations of video and sound sharing technology to create specific new performative experiences. As a part of this process, the performers were placed in a situation that works between individual awareness (each performer was in a space by themselves) and collective experience (as they performed together online). This experience is very intuitive and the participants were forced to embrace the uncertainty of the environment and technology, and to recognise the spontaneity of improvisational experiences that are mediated through the experience of shifting time, and the disembodied nature of Zoom, to create music that has a sense of release and connection.

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## INTRODUCTION

Improvisation has long been at the core of my creative practice. As a composer, I have built many of my pieces upon improvisatory sketches that are then developed and refined before final realisation; the improvisation provides an open door to exploring creative possibilities. In

a performance context, my work has been primarily improvisational since 2004, working in a variety of genre settings, and with different conceptual approaches. This practice has consistently built from an initial idea of how we are going to play, and how any performance

genre characteristics might shape expectations of the music. In this, the ability to improvise is strengthened by an innate familiarity with the musical context in which one improvises.

Since 2016, a primary component of my improvisatory work has been through a multimedia ensemble, *Dr Mesmer's Private Army*. This ensemble has a core of three members: Paul Bradley (live visuals); Kent Macpherson (guitars, synths, field-recordings and effects); and Jeremy Mayall (piano, keyboards, effects). We are also regularly joined by other musicians, including: Yotam

Levy (cello), Horomona Horo (taonga puoro – traditional Māori instruments), and Eszter Le Couteur (violin). This ensemble works in long-form improvisational explorations around specific conceptual themes. Performances typically last between 1 and 2 hours and exist in a blur between soundscape, ambient music, contemporary classical music, minimalism, and electronic music. The overall effect of the creative output of this ensemble is a unique one, and is perhaps best experienced ([here](#) and [here](#)) rather than described. Mindfulness within my creative practice primarily emerges through



*Dr. Mesmer's Private Army perform Something Childish but Very Natural at the Hamilton Gardens. Photo by Mark Hamilton (used with permission).*

reflective practice and contextual discussions with my collaborators, rather than from a specific tradition or secular framework. The 'mindfulness' explored here exists within the process of being present in the creative moment, and in response to the creative offerings of those also involved. However, when examining that process within the context of this paper, it became apparent to me that the understanding of this term within my own experience and that of my collaborators draws from Buddhism, but also, and perhaps more specifically, from performance traditions shaped by musical traditions of taonga puoro. This sense of being fully present in a creative moment, and responding to the environment – both natural and human – has been influenced by my work with Māori instrumentalist, Dr. Richard Nunns, and Māori musician and composer, Horomona Horo. When examining this sense of mindfulness with an exegetical lens, it is impossible to determine a singular source for understanding, and is ultimately beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to state that, in the work described here, the relationship between the visual elements and the sonic elements are ever

evolving in a conversation with one another, collectively shaping a way forward in response to the creative offerings in real time. Because this creative process is multi-sensory, the practical engagement within the experience demands, and generates a sense of mindfulness.

When we consider the audience engagement in this type of work, the experience is differently engaging. And while it is not for me to determine the quality of mindfulness for any audience member, it has been anecdotally suggested that this type of creative performance helps to facilitate a sense of being fully present within a creative moment and able to exist within that space throughout the performance. Here one reviewer of a Dr. Mesmer's performance suggests that for the audience, 'the overall effect was an all-encompassing one, and you wanted to sit back and let it all gloriously wash over you, and submerge yourself in the depths of the sound and visuals' (Mather, 2019, web). Further exploration of this type of effect is perhaps better suited for another paper, but as the creative experience requires the performer to also react to the creative output of other

collaborators in real time, one is perhaps simultaneously audience and artist within each moment.

The process and musical output described in this article works from a place of improvisation. As such, it is relevant to consider the connection between improvisation, mindfulness, presence and the sense of agency in performance. In musical improvisation, the pace of action and number of individual actions (even in slower music) seems to negate the probability that the musician is entirely in conscious control of what occurs at every moment (Dietrich, 2004; Norgaard, 2011). This improvisational mind state calls upon its own specific combination of brain functions (Dolan et al 2018), and historically has been associated with trance states, meditation or supernormal phenomenon (Becker 1994; Sarath, 2013; Rouget, 1985).

If we consider the improvisational process as being connected to the meditative nature of the 'flow state' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), then we can explore how improvisational creativity unlocks different processes for intuitive creation. Upon reflection on my own practice, the improvisational experience

functions with most fluidity within a flow state, and as such that lived experience is as much about presence and mindfulness in each moment as it is about not getting in the way of the flow. Throughout this article the reflections presented are exegetical. They are developed in direct response to a growing body of creative practice, and are attempts to autoethnographically reflect on embodied improvisational practice in order to provide additional insights into an embodied experience of this process, rather than an extended literature review of other theoretical understandings.

This introductory outline serves to provide a brief background for my creative practice with particular reference to the musical experiences that informed the development of the performance series that is the focus of this article. The journey through improvisatory practice from genre conventions and specific contexts to more mindful explorations of sound and space shaped an awareness of how my own improvisatory, mindful creative practice could be transposed into virtual space.

## **SLOW MUSIC**

Slow music is the term I use for the type of music that emerged through this performance project. It seems to be the clearest expression of what this music is, and the conceptual ideas that inform the performance. For the purpose of these musical experiences, slow music is a purposeful and mindful stretching of the experience of time through layered repetition, and slowly evolving musical gestures. It involves playing with a sense of rhythmic feel, but with a conceptual awareness of the arrhythmic possibilities through technical limitations. Slow music is inspired by genres like minimalism, trance music, ambient music, contemporary classical music, soundscapes, musique concrete, and electronic music, and creates a hybrid that explores the tensions between musical ideas that slowly evolve over time through a conversational improvisational structure.

It is music that encourages mindful practice. It becomes an exercise in mindfulness. It both requires the ability to be fully present; connected to the moment, as is a core part of much improvisational practice; but also the ambient and textural nature of the musical

aesthetic often becomes a trigger for a flow-state, where listening to the performance of the other collaborators helps to induce a mindful state, and encourages further creative engagement with mindful awareness foremost.

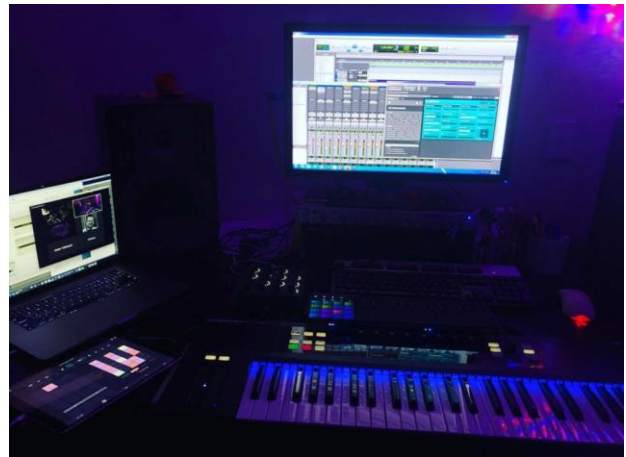
The process of performing slow music in this virtually connected, but physically separate space means that it is necessary to explore stillness within momentum, and to listen to the creative space and respond within the moment. The experience of performing slow music in these various experiments is fundamentally a 'flow' state experience. The experience is of being in a creative, flexible zone that requires curious listening and observing, and encourages each participant to respond to one another through the filter of time. It feels, as a performer, like existing both within time and beyond perceptions of time as it stays static and moves forward at the same moment. It is this state of flux that encourages a state of mindfulness, to be truly present in the flow of improvisational creativity in order to fully connect with the slow nature of it.

## VIRTUAL SPACES FOR SLOW MUSIC

While the experience of the COVID pandemic was being felt overseas, it didn't seem real in New Zealand until March 2020. At that point, the entire country (along with a lot of the world) went into lockdown. This period of uncertainty caused anxiety for many people, and, for me, turning to creative practice was a way of creating mental space to reduce stress, to encourage a meditative state, and to inspire curiosity for new creative possibilities.

Collaboration was, and is, a vital part of my own improvisational practice – the ability to be present with, and respond to the creativity of another human is a fundamental reason to work in this way. Because of this, I needed to find a way to hold a virtual space that would allow for some form of meaningful improvisational exchange. While I was aware of the telematic musical work that had been occurring in universities around the world for a number of years, I wanted to utilise technology that was more accessible, and would be available to participants with minimal setup.

Zoom as a platform seemed to be a ubiquitous option that had great visual possibilities to see one another, but the sound



*Livestream performance setup March 2020*

protocols made the sharing of quality audio at the same time essentially impossible. It also made having audiences quite difficult. Facebook Live provided a good space to share with an audience, but needed performers to be in the same physical space (see *Stillness for Saturday*).

One lo-fi workaround emerged through a combination of Zoom, Facebook Live, mobile phones and an external soundcard to loop sound back around. This was a cumbersome approach where one participant performed into a phone as a microphone, and this was sent back through FX processing through Zoom, and then onto Facebook Live. This first iteration *Test the internet* was an example of how this might work in practice. While it had some technical issues, the creative process intuitively flowed in

this environment, which provided a rationale for continued experimentation.



*Horomona Horo (left) and Jeremy Mayall (right) performing an early test of a collaborative music making system.*

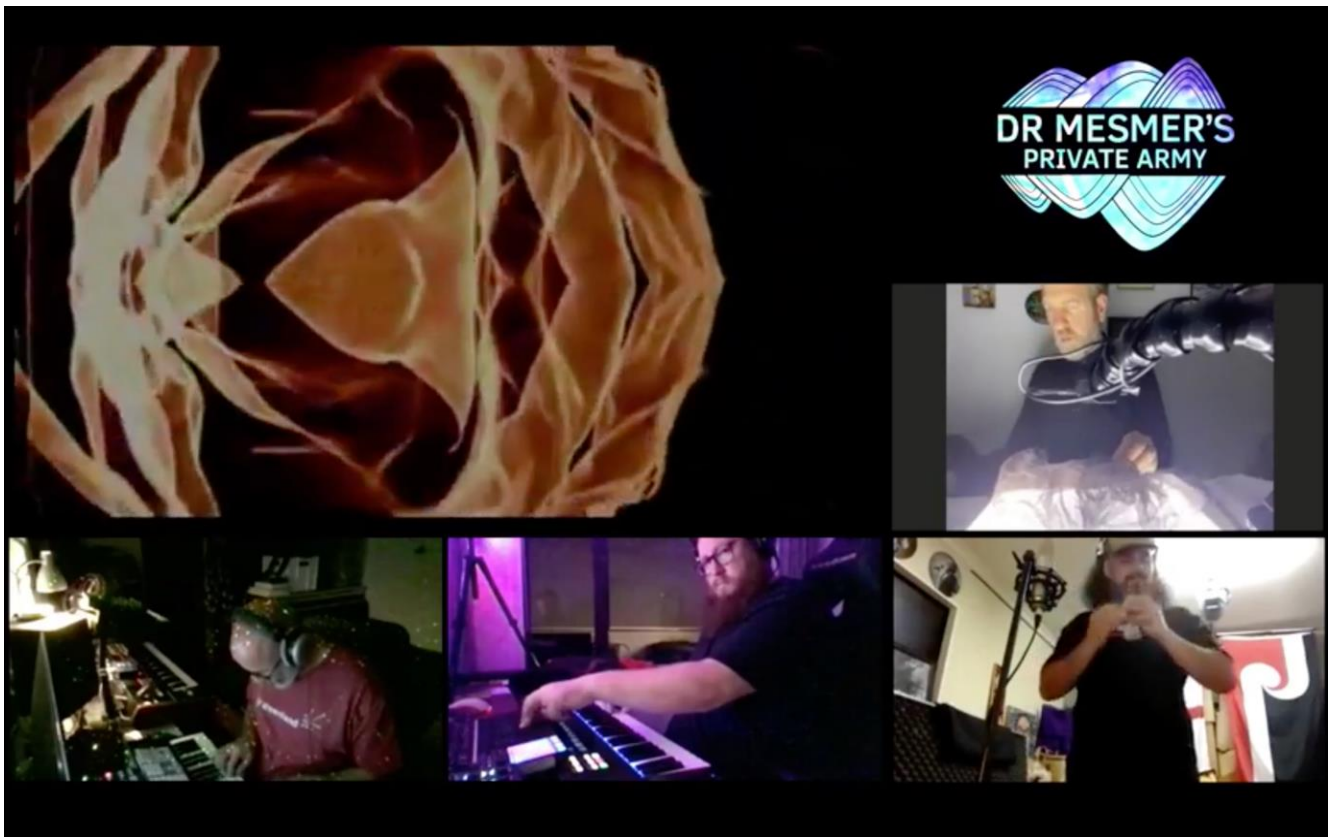
Finally, in collaboration with a local tech company, we refined the approach to bring multiple performers together through Zoom for video,<sup>1</sup> SourceConnect<sup>2</sup> for high quality audio, OBS Studio<sup>3</sup> for visual mixing, and Facebook Live<sup>4</sup> as the audience platform. In this setup, multiple creative participants could see one another, and hear one another in high-quality audio to be able to improvise together. The ability to present a creative work like *Animated Suspension* – the first virtual performance for the Dr. Mesmer’s ensemble, transformed the way we could think about collaborative creativity in this virtual world. This essentially created a new virtual performance space for us to explore. Not a replacement for real-world performance, but a new alternative that could work for remote

collaboration, and required new ways of conceptually thinking about the music.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMING FOR SLOW MUSIC

In the virtual space, one can use sound as a core compositional palette. The way sound is shaped and manipulated becomes a compositional/improvisational tool in the same way as pitch, harmony, and rhythm. In that sense, in the creation of this type of ‘slow music’ the blur between studio music and live music is intentionally shifted, and the production and mixing of sound becomes an integral part of the performance in real-time.

The performer/composer/producer is required to have an expanded artistic approach to the manipulation of sound in this context, as well as an awareness that in the digital space, the performance will also become the recording. In that realisation the performance/recording’s metaphor is ‘shifted from one of the “illusion of reality” (mimetic space) to the “reality of illusion” (a virtual world in which everything is possible)’ (Moorefield, 2010, xiii). This ‘reality of illusion’ enables the artist to create music that exists in a musical landscape beyond what is possible in



*A still from Animated Suspension – a livestream performance by Dr. Mesmer's Private Army.*

acoustic music. The studio permits the addition of effects, layering of sound, and the internal manipulation of sound to create recordings that actively demonstrate their creation outside of acoustic reality.

While this can also be true of real-world, live studio-informed music making, there are a couple of additional factors that contribute to why the 'reality of illusion' is a useful framing in this type of 'slow music'. The first is a practical/aesthetic one. Because the audio has to be sent digitally in order to be heard by other

participants, it needs to be captured, and is best placed into some kind of static (or moving) virtual space in order to give shape and resonance beyond the pure sound. This is extended through the use of virtual instruments, which already utilise this extended reality to create sonic interest. The second reason is by virtue of technical limitations and time. Even in physical space, sound travels through space over time. In virtual space, as sound is converted into digital, and back into analog, there is some latency. There is latency at the

end of the performer, then this is amplified through the sending of digital signals to and from the different participants, and then this is combined and sent out to the audience. These varying degrees of latency have different effects on the perception of the music and the experience of the performer.

In a purely practical sense, the impact of the latency between the performers on the audience is imperceptible. This is because the audio signals are combined into 'the performance' and then transmitted as a single source. While the audience experience may be mediated through different environments, and there may be other conceptual impacts, the latency in this context is an element of the creation process rather than one in reception. The latency becomes a structural restriction that shapes the interrelationship between the musical parts. In essence, this technical limitation is a component which requires the mindfulness of the performer, in that each performer needs the ability to be fully present within their experience, whilst also thinking about how that speed restriction relates to where each individual is, both physically and virtually, and how that informs the musical

decisions that are made. The biggest impact on the performance, and therefore the element most requiring the mindfulness of the performer, is the sending of audio back and forth.

Each performer sends and receives audio during the performance. They send their own sounds and hear them in their perception of real-time. They receive sounds from the other participants and these can be wildly different in terms of latency. This depends on actual physical distance between performers, quality of internet connection, bandwidth at the time, and quality of audio that is being sent. For musicians to 'play in time', as one would in a physical space, the upper limits of comfortable latency are around 30-40 milliseconds. In a virtual space, sending back and forward, it could be between 50-100 milliseconds. This changes the way we need to think about music, rhythm and playing in time. It also alters our collective understanding of the present-moment in the context of mindfulness. We each have an individual present-moment that syncs in a fractionally different point. We can remain within an individual mindful improvisational experience – but the collective experience is blurred.

The other interesting consideration here is that while all the musicians in a virtual performance are having a shared experience (making music in 'real-time' together), they are all having a uniquely individual experience. Every person is hearing the combination of sounds in slightly different timing than everyone else. Then, the way they play in time with that again alters the timing that everyone else hears. This changes the way we think about the performance and our role in it. This is part of the reason for 'slow music'. This delayed and individualised improvisatory mode of performance exists both in a physical space – with a solo creative experience within one version of the musical expression – each performer has their own mindful connection to the creative process; and then in the virtual space – as a different combined creative experience where each unique expression of time and musical space is overlapped into a single virtual output. This is an output of a slow and shifting musical experience to be experienced through the shared social network – again a mixed mode virtual community with individual physical experience. This shifts the nature of what it is to be 'present' since one is

both physically present and virtually present in the same slow instant.

## REFLECTIONS ON EXAMPLES

Over the course of five months (April to August 2020) I created fifteen different virtual improvisations with a number of collaborators. Partly to test these ideas of slow music, partly to test technology and explore with different approaches for real-time collaboration over distance, and partly to experience moments of mindfulness in amongst days of meetings and developing content. The improvisations provided space to get into a clear mindset and to create freely.

There were three different types of experiments. The first was solo work. Building up some ambient textures from hyper-time-stretched field recordings through layers of reverb, and then playing keyboard parts within that space. The primary focus in this work is in cultivating stillness through relaxation and repetitive action.

Trusting the nature of what would emerge without trying to specifically move in any direction. This was the simplest experience, and while a useful tool for mindfulness was

perhaps the least creatively rewarding, as it wasn't created in conversation with someone else. Examples of this type of performance are *Some Night Music* – shorter form moments of calm to end a day.

The second was an expansion of the *Dr. Mesmer's* model – with the inclusion of visual artists to help shape the performance. In this work, the visual artist, or artists, create in response to the musical improvisation, and in turn the musicians respond and interpret the visuals that are being created. In this way it is a cyclical system, that relies on all participants being present and engaging not only through

listening, but also through visual observation to be able to respond to that within each moment. As an improviser in this space the process becomes more than 'Deep Listening' (Oliveros, 2005) but 'Deep Observing' – remaining connected to the inner sensations of performance practice and technical requirements, whilst at the same time being receptive of the outer stimuli through the collaborative offering. Here the process is about maintaining openness, and working with an awareness of the different experiences of time, and different combinations of source material.

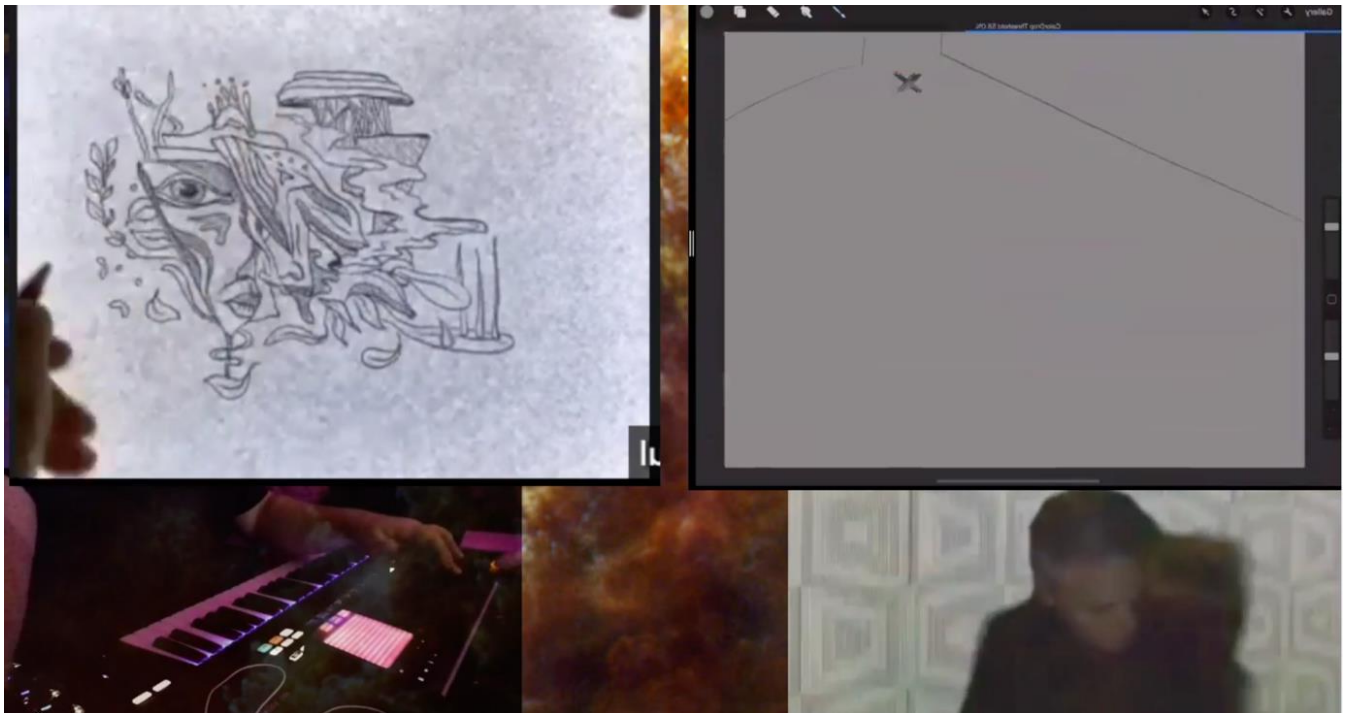


*Still from Some Night Music*

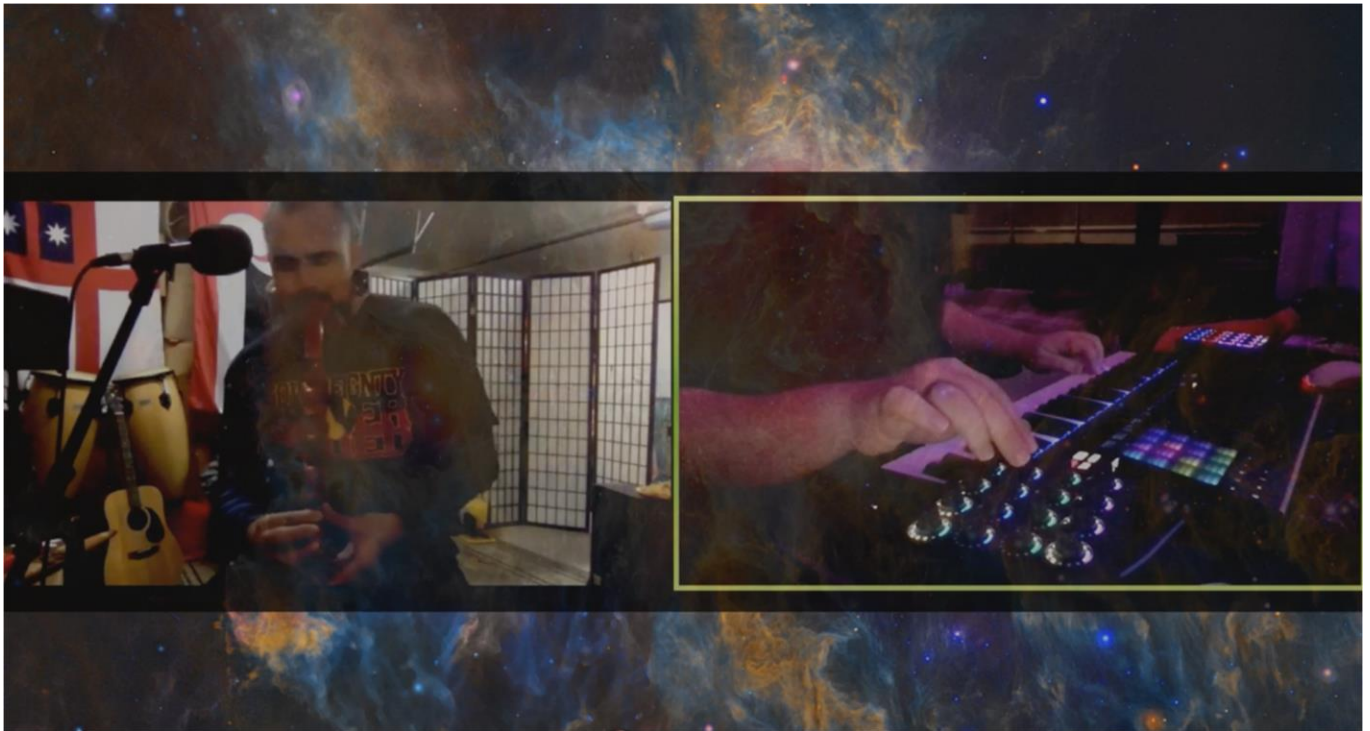
My reflection, in this instance, is the same as the audience perception, in that my technology was the source of the livestream. So, the recordings serve as an archive of a combination of components. It is interesting to reflect that each participant experienced their own cross-modal correspondences based on their technical setup and limitations of time and distance. But even through this we were able to create and collaborate through this 'slow' framework. Performances like *SonicSketch* and *Animated Suspension* provide some of the best examples of this. The final experiments are purely musical ones. The visual component

is merely a video of the act of performance, rather than a creative impetus or source for response. Here, the interest sits primarily in the space of what Pauline Oliveros called 'Deep Listening', but also listening across time limitations and exploring the possibilities. There are four substantially different experiments in this block, each one with a different collaborator, playing different instruments, and responding in different ways.

Starting first with Kent Macpherson for *Nocturnal Soundscapes*, this experiment drew from ambient music. Long synth textures, layers of found sound, and reverberant melodic



Still from *SonicSketch* (with Paul Bradley, Craig McClure, and Kirke Godfrey)



*Still from Lockdown Cure with Horomona Horo (left) and Jeremy Mayall (right)*

fragments move with and across the sonic space.

The next key component in this series was the Lockdown Cure with Horomona Horo. Here, the two musicians played different roles – Horomona Horo as ‘soloist’ (taonga puoro – traditional Māori instruments, and vocals) and Jeremy Mayall as accompanist (synths, virtual instruments, keys). In this combination the musical performance could move between concepts of ‘slow music’ and then more song form type structures.

As a duo we have been working together for approximately 11 years and the

improvisational process in our collaborative creativity is well developed, and primarily emerges from a sense of mindfulness that is specifically entered at the start of any performance. Our process begins with a clearing of the mind through karakia (a type of prayer or incantation to set the intention for an activity) and, when we are together in a shared physical space, this is also through the Māori tradition of hongi – the practice of pressing noses together and sharing a breath. These elements serve as a performance ritual that sets the clear intention for a musical journey that is responsive to time and place. Because our

collaboration is well established, it is possible to re-enter these spaces virtually and to allow space to enter this zone through a shared pre-show ritual. This connection strengthens any creative experience as it builds upon the ongoing process.

The remaining two concerts were with performers who are established improvisers, but where the collaboration in this ensemble was new. The collaboration with Sean Foran (piano/keyboard) was an interesting experiment for two reasons. First, sharing a similar instrumental basis meant that the way roles and approaches would emerge would be unlike other experiments. But also, this performance

had the furthest physical distance of over 2,660 kilometres. This meant that the latency was even more pronounced. As such, the purposeful 'slowness' of the exploration was more important. Each musical gesture is specific and emerges in response to the sounds and textures before it. It required deep listening and reflection to move forward in a sensitive way, collaborating to shape the musical journey.

The collaboration with Riki Gooch (percussion, multi-instrumentalist) was the freest of the combinations. Drawing from different instrumental approaches, different concepts of rhythm and repetition, and a freedom of sonic exploration, this experiment



*Still from Sonic Experiments – Riki Gooch (left), Jeremy Mayall (right)*

was perhaps more connected to free improvisation traditions than the others in this series, but still with a framing of repetition and 'slow music'. The creative process in this context was perhaps most rhythmically-based, but textural in realisation. The way sound was shaped in real-time through the use of layers, echoes, delays and reverbs meant that even the rhythmic elements emerged in a flourish of textures and layers becoming more gestural and intuitive than specific. In this process we aim to delve into deeper understandings of the nature of the sound world and how the layers intersect. The creative experience flourished within a sense of mindful clarity in response to the way that the textures and gestures are interconnected and respond to one another in an iterative process.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

As a composer / improviser / creative practitioner it is hard to separate out various processes and reflections. When working from a state of mindfulness, the process is fluid and ever evolving. It is about listening at all levels: to the sounds one makes oneself; the way that sound intersects with other sounds, (both in

terms of timbre and space in time); the sounds that others are making; and also reflecting on the space, time, and context of the presentation. All these elements combine to make the improvisational process a deeply mindful one, but it is also difficult to clearly elucidate the experience afterwards.

This form of performance is an uncertain exercise, one that can have multiple points of failure, but there can also be a sense of comfort in the uncomfortable. This sense is supported by a mutual connection and respect between performers – one that exists despite the physical distance. It is a willingness to rely on intuition, to open up to new possibilities, and to truly listen to the offers from other participants engaging in the musical conversation. It is in those moments of intertwined conversation through musical sound that time stands still, and perceptions of the outside world fall away into a purer state of being. It is in those moments that consciousness seems to become collective, and the musical journey moves beyond individual notes into an expressive reality that articulates that time and space for those who are present to listen.

## Notes

1. <https://zoom.us/>
2. <https://now.source-elements.com/#!/>
3. <https://obsproject.com/wiki/OBS-Studio-Overview>
4. <https://www.facebook.com/>

## Acknowledgements

It is important to acknowledge all the performers who collaborated with me as a part of these online improvisations: Paul Bradley; Sean Foran; Kirke Godfrey; Riki Gooch; Horomona Horo; Yotam Levy; Kent Macpherson; Craig McClure.

Also thanks to Aaron, Aiden and Ben from ACLX for their technical guidance.

## Appendix A. Links to all online concerts in chronological order:

*Quiet Music* (solo):

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/4328286217197697>

*Stillness for Saturday* (solo):

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/2843374645709844>

*Horo and Remy Test the Internet Again* (with Horomona Horo)

<https://www.facebook.com/onefatman/videos/10156916328137127>

*Nocturnal Soundscapes* (with Kent Macpherson):

<https://www.facebook.com/ACLXLTD/videos/25953031818270>

*Animated Suspension* (with Paul Bradley, Horomona Horo, and Kent Macpherson):

<https://www.facebook.com/ACLXLTD/videos/542240146478570>

42240146478570

*Music to Make Things To* (with Craig McClure and Kirke Godfrey):

<https://www.facebook.com/TheMeteorNZ/videos/165848204664002>

*Drawing and Synths* (with Craig McClure and Kirke Godfrey):

<https://www.facebook.com/ACLXLTD/videos/230697281695611>

*Early Morning Music* (with Yotam Levy):

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/280423932987975>

*Some Night Music* (solo):

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/533484037340419>

*Music to Make Things To 2* (with Craig McClure and Kirke Godfrey):

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/173376204037433>

*Lockdown Cure* (with Horomona Horo):

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/1357314607790885>

*Trans-tasman experiments* (with Sean Foran):

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/242005147105548>

*Drawing and Sounds* (with Paul Bradley, Craig McClure and Kirke Godfrey)

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/3085800311467367>

*SonicSketch* (with Paul Bradley, Craig McClure and Kirke Godfrey)

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/723147865130199>

*Sonic Experiments* (with Riki Gooch):

<https://www.facebook.com/jmayallcomposer/videos/460546194902346>

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Still from Dr. Mesmer's Private Army livestream performance Terraform.  
<https://www.facebook.com/DrMesmersPrivateArmy/videos/177597773625495>