

An Interview with Mercé Bosch Sanfelix about Michael Baldwin's French horn solo *Buzzed*

Mercé Sanfelix: *Buzzed* is a really interesting piece played by Samuel Stoll, how did your collaboration with him start? and how was this idea born?

Michael Baldwin: My musical background includes time spent training as a trombonist. This means that during the development of my musical practice I have gravitated towards interesting and adventurous work being done by brass instrumentalists, and have often had the opportunity to directly work with those musicians in my capacity as a composer. One thing that most fascinates me about playing brass instruments is the intensity of vibrational force in performance. And whilst I no longer practice trombone performance, a fascination with varieties of physicality and tactility continue to endure and be explored as primary materials through my musical practice.

My first contact with Samuel came after an intense ten-day period of meditation and isolation from verbal and bodily communication that renewed my appreciation of the material affectivity of sound as a vibrational force. Previously, my approach towards the compositional manipulation of physicality had taken place through the mediums of written notation and later bodily imitation. In line with my later approach in bodily imitation, I had begun to explore the use of alternative mediums to record and represent the information necessary for performance of music. As an example, my trio *This is not natural* <<https://vimeo.com/91071584>> (double bass / piano / French horn), makes use of short video recordings of an ensemble performing a short devised musical gesture/choreography which are subjected to extremely slow time-stretch editing. During performance, performers watch the manipulated video recordings of themselves and imitate as closely as possible their movements. However, the manner of imitation is qualified. They are required to maintain the same quality of physicality from their original movements. For instance, if an instrumental attack was performed with a tremendous amount of pressure during the original performance pre-time-stretch, performers are required to

extend the energy of that force across time in the time-stretched iteration. In effect, performers are 'reading' transformed versions of themselves: reading their movements via video from laptop screens, but also reading/remembering the memory of their original movements. The recordings, through compositional appropriation, became scores from which memories of physicality are indexed, transformed, given new intensity and reactivated through performance.

My renewed appreciation of sound as a vibrational material, able to affect the body, prompted me to consider the idea of appropriating audio recordings as a kind of score capable of representing forms of performed physicality not completely dissimilar to how I was thinking of video recordings. Importantly, I was drawn to the idea that I may be able simultaneously overlay multiple audio recordings (forms or memories of physicality) in a way that allowed the performer to immediately recall and perform multiple parameters of musical performance at the same time – a kind of intensive collapsing of past temporalities or identities into a present moment in performance. This was something that I had explored in my written notations and with video, but was never able to find truly satisfactory solutions to due to visual obfuscation and opacity.

With these interests in mind, and upon coming into contact with the work of Samuel through recordings of his performances on the internet, I sent Samuel a message expressing an interest in his work. There was a very palpable physicality, abandon, presence, and sensitivity to the theatrical that was instantaneously attractive in Samuel's performances. After a couple of written exchanges, Samuel asked if I would be interested in writing a new piece for him. I said that I was interested under the condition that we could develop the piece over a long period of time and in close collaboration and he agreed. We didn't start working on any music for about four months. I was preoccupied with other projects and, for no particular reason, I wanted to meet with Samuel in person before starting to work properly. In the intervening months, I began to develop a practice of reading audio recordings in my own performances and was doing more work as a vocal improviser. A few days before I met with Samuel I decided to try and work through some musical ideas I had about the project. These ideas included: wetness, intimacy, suffocation and claustrophobia, and physical

endurance. My way of working through these ideas at the time involved recording a few vocal improvisations. One of those recordings would eventually come to be the foundation from which *Buzzed* was derived <<https://soundcloud.com/michael-baldwin/buzz-3mar2015>>.

During our in-person meeting, Samuel and I agreed to focus our efforts towards exploring the idea of reading audio recordings like a kind of score, and decided that in order to facilitate long-distance collaboration (I live in Manchester, Samuel in Berlin), we would exchange packages of musical recordings and ideas with each other. I would send Samuel audio recordings of vocal improvisations, videos of text-scores with a recording of water sounds overlaid in the background, videos of my body moving in contorted ways, and written notes directing ways of listening or watching the material I was sending. Samuel would respond with his own packages of material, which also included video and audio of performances sometimes directly related to what I sent, and at other times rather tangential. We were communicating and collaborating through the exchange of musical performance(s).

Out of those exchanges I had come to know the musical temperament of Samuel and was also learning how we related to each other as musical partners. I had a sense for Samuel's physical mannerisms and the quality of energy he possessed. At the same time that we agreed on the conditions of our collaboration we also determined that it would be best to meet in person again after some exchanges to work intensively for a couple of days on developing the piece. Before meeting, I had initially wanted to find a way of taking all the material from our exchanges and find a way of intelligibly synthesising it all into a large-scale performance that would lay-bare the nature of my musical relationship with Samuel. However, it was obvious to me that the amount of material was too sprawling and diffuse to be put together at the point that I was going to meet him. So instead of trying to work with everything we had exchanged, we decided to focus on one particular strand that had emerged out of our collaboration, setting aside the other material for future collaboration, whilst also acknowledging that those exchanges had irrevocably conditioned how we understood each other as musicians.

The strand we focused on was related to the physicality of embouchures in motion. All of the material is derivative of the vocal improvisation referenced

above that I made when trying to work through ideas around this project. The improvisation focused on sounds produced by sucking air inward through my mouth's barely-apart lips. I sent my recording to Samuel along with instructions to simultaneously listen to the recording and audio record his attempt at producing with a French horn the sounds he heard. Afterwards I was sent the resultant 'reproduction recording' in return. Working from both recordings, Samuel and I met in person to find a way of making an audio-score that would be indexical of an array of physical actions and sounds to be reproduced in performance. This involved me listening to my initial vocal improvisation and limiting the sounds that I could make to seven particular vocal parameters/behaviours including: singing, buzzing, whistling, growling, vocal plosives/clicks, lip sucking and breathing. I set a limit for myself that I was supposed to attempt to reproduce the sounds I heard in the initial recording, but only with one physical parameters/behaviour at a time. This resulted in seven improvisations/reactions to the original recording. While I was performing each improvisation, Samuel was listening to the sounds I produced in a soundproofed practice room. He was unable to hear the recording I was hearing. He was able to see what I was doing though because there was a clear glass pane between the two rooms. This allowed him to focus on the same physical parameter/behaviour that I was focused on. As he heard the sounds I made, he would attempt to reproduce the same sounds using the same physical actions. The sounds Samuel produced were recorded and resulted in seven tracks. Because he was able to see my physical actions during each recording, when he listens back to his recordings he is able to make a cognitive association between the sounds heard and the physicality they index.

The final score for *Buzzed* takes these seven recordings plus the reproduction recording that Samuel made with his French horn and overlays them with one another in a digital audio workstation. After some compositional intervention and editing – removing certain bits from each track, adding volume automation, spatializing each track in a different place in the headphone mix – the eight tracks were rendered into one audio file that Samuel listens to during performance. The score only contains recordings of sounds produced by Samuel. When he listens to the score he is listening in two different ways simultaneously. When he hears sounds produced by the French horn he is supposed to

reproduce the sounds on his instrument as accurately as possible with no regard for the physicality associated with the production of those sounds. When he hears sounds that index physical actions, he is to reactivate and reconcile the multiple physicalities heard simultaneously. These two ways of listening and performing collide with each other and result in a distorted echo or resonance of the original vocal improvisation that I sent to Samuel. In some ways, it is as though we devised a process in which I became horn, or possibly the other way around where Samuel became an embodiment of my multiple sonic personalities filtered through Samuel's own performative mannerisms and idiosyncrasies.

MS: Was it your first piece for solo horn? Are there any effects or sounds that turned out to be more interesting (or unexpectedly interesting) played on the horn? (for example, slap tongue, bell percussion...)

MB: This was my first piece for solo horn. I had written for the French horn for two previous trios. For me, there were no especially interesting sounds discovered on the horn as a result of my collaboration with Samuel. The nature of our collaboration and work was more relational and conceptual than focused on developing interesting sounds or effects.

MS: When the Horn player plays this piece, the result that's coming out every time changes (maybe just a bit); is there any "rules" or leads you gave the performer to follow, or you would leave to his interpretation this changes that naturally happen while playing this piece?

MB: The issue of indeterminacies across performances of a piece is complicated in *Buzzed* in two ways.

1 – When Samuel performs the piece, he is listening to himself, and therefore is at least somewhat dealing with very clearly defined and determinant materials. However, because the materials are overlaid with each other, an ambiguity may arise where some frequencies interact with each other, some sounds become mistaken for others, or some sounds are perceived as altogether alien to the

ones thought to be initially produced. Part of my work as a composer when making the score was to minimize these aural ambiguities through the use of ambisonic spatialisation techniques that localised the sounds to specific places in the score's mix. However, the spatialization did not completely resolve these ambiguities and remains an area for further research.

2 – More problematic though is the issue of having another performer read the audio score. When I worked with video scores, I tried to use the same video score for different performers. However, the differences in body-movement and body-dimensions, as well as not having direct and personal cognitive associations with the original actions, made the reading of the score less than straight-forward. Or rather, a greater degree of interpretive interpolation on behalf of the performer was necessary. In the case of an audio score, and *Buzzed* in particular, I am unsure how readable the score would be for anyone other than Samuel. Each individual track for a physical parameter/behaviour is able to be listened to in isolation, and I suppose a performer could build up a performance with verbal information about what parameter/behaviour each individual recording corresponds to. The use of video recordings to indicate the physical actions may be necessary (or at least helpful), especially since the visual stimuli were crucial in developing Samuel's cognitive associations between sounds and physicality.

Regardless, I think it is safe to say that the ability for a performer to immediately jump into the 'full' score as it were (all eight tracks played simultaneously), would be near impossible without having the performance being rendered a complete improvisation, preventing any sense of multiple temporalities and memories of performance simultaneously coalescing and permeating each other from coming across in performance. In fact, jumping right into the multiple/simultaneous tracks of the audio score is precisely what Samuel did (was able to do) when he received the score. During rehearsals with him, I changing the amount of layers/tracks that Samuel would hear at any given moment, but this was a less than effective rehearsal strategy for Samuel. Instead, his method of learning largely consisted in attempting to comprehensively understand the verticality of each performative moment. One

thing that we did find effective though was the occasional time-stretching of the audio score. Stretching faster was useful for shifting the perspective of the normal speed score as slower than it first appears. Stretching slower made the horizontal axis expand and allowed for more detailed examinations of vertical relationships over time. Looping certain sections was also effective to solidify a particular moment.

MS: If we compare the Horn and electronics repertoire list to the ones of other instruments, ours is, with difference, Little. In your opinion, is there not enough interest to develop this field? In this case, could be that many composers are not enough aware of horn possibilities on this field, or could it also be that not many horn player are interested on learning and playing this music?

MB: I can't say. I personally see no reason, other than perhaps a simple difference in number of performers on the French horn that complement their musical development with collaborations with contemporary musical practitioners. I don't feel qualified to venture why this may be the case though.

MS: Do you think that scenography plays a role in the understanding of the piece and how the audience enjoys music? Could we speak nowadays of music as a multidisciplinary art?

MB: In general, yes; I believe that appreciation of music is multi-modal and engages several senses. Scenography is but one possible aspect of music's presentation that may be attended to in order to emphasis to varying degrees some aspects of music.

Related to *Buzzed* though, I have been somewhat conflicted by the relationship between the piece's sonic result and its visual reality in performance. The piece has been performed twice now, and in both instances, I have thought that the piece was much more interesting as a listening experience than as a performance experience. Samuel brings an incredible quality of intensity and brute force to his performance of the piece which is undoubtedly impressive in its own right. However, some part of me is led to believe that because the process of arriving at *Buzzed* occurred by working predominately in the domain of audio and sound (and particular, a digital audio workstation),

that the performance of the piece is best experienced exclusively in the aural domain of recording. I'm still thinking through this idea, and can not be sure yet if it is a matter of my knowledge of the methodology that went into the construction of the piece that is influencing this thought, if there is an actual relationship between the means of production and the means of experience, or if there is simply not enough in the way of scenographic direction to complement the sonic terrain of the piece...

I think music may now be understood as a multidisciplinary art, which is not to say that it hasn't always been that way.