

NEW EXPECTATIONS



SHIFT Cardiff – March 18th
2023

Conference Report



TY CERDD
Music Centre Wales

hyrwyddo a dathlu cerddoriaeth Cymru
promoting and celebrating the music of Wales

WEMA

Welsh Experimental Music Alliance

New Expectations Conference report

The conference was presented by Codi Off-grid (Ty Cerdd) and Welsh Experimental Music Alliance (WEMA) on Saturday 18th March 2023.

Aim

The conference was set up as an opportunity to work collaboratively, share practice, explore ideas, live issues, and have fun, through an afternoon and evening of open discussion and music, exploring the issues important to Wales based experimental and improvising music practitioners.

Structure of the day

The conference began at 1 pm and was structured with small discussion groups and live performances (performers were conference participants who had expressed an interest in playing at the event. The playing groups were randomly selected on the day). A Keynote speech was given by Rob Smith who talked about experimental music - identity, community, and networks

This was followed by discussion groups and performances.

1st discussion - Explore/ share your practice and experiences of performing / playing / playing.

Performance group 1



2nd discussion - Explore how identity impacts on your work performing / playing / recording in Wales

Performance 2



3rd discussion - Community / collaboration: what's important? Why is it important?

Performance 3



Evening session

We had planned an evening of short public performances that would conclude with a set from Gwilly Edmondez. Performers were to be allocated a 10-15 min set in which they could showcase a range of experimental, sound art and improvisation and perhaps new collaborations too. This did take place but due to logistical reasons we did not open it out to the public and due to participants' hard work during the day and travel commitments a significant number of participants were unable to stay into the evening. Gwilly and others still decided to perform for the intimate group that remained.



Notes from the discussions **(Notes taken by Chris Parfitt/ Ash Cooke/ Jon Ruddick)**

Discussion 1

Question: Explore/ share your practice and experiences of performing / playing

It was noted that the Pandemic was a significant turning point for many people socially as well as creatively and its impact should not be underestimated.

Zoom was discussed and there was a feeling that although it was great to be able to get in the room again and meet people in person, for some people who had found access to

playing opportunities an issue before the pandemic, virtual interaction had been of great benefit to them, and it was felt that it we should maintain a hybrid of zoom and room.

The groups felt that access to 'central points' of information were key to the promotion of experimental music. We need to promote the excitement of experiencing experimental music, and the unusual experience of the one off.

Providing regular well promoted performance opportunities at fixed times was considered very important. Random under promoted events don't help the audience find us.

Space to put on gigs is a problem, as is cost and location. Venues are hard to find, or maybe we aren't seeing or hearing of them There is no easy answer to this but working as a community and sharing skills and knowledge the groups felt that we could overcome some obstacles. Again, pre and post covid experiences were shared.

The Hub at Brecon was discussed as a model for other community hubs across Wales

Funding is a perennial problem but the community we are forming could collectively work together to source and distribute finance.

The Arts Council of Wales's Go and See fund was mentioned

Issues were raised regarding potential audiences not being aware of what's going on around Wales. One solution to this concerned arranging a showcase tour of 'new music' and making connections across Wales, across the whole of the UK and internationally. Experimental music is as much part of Welsh culture as it is anywhere else.

It was noted that Brecon has 'Jazz without keys' which helps to increase accessibility to experimental music. Rod Paton is a point of contact for this.

Discussion 2

Question: Explore how identity impacts on your work performing / playing / recording in Wales

We do have an identity, tribe, and traditions but this needs positively reinforcing. We are not alone and other people have done this and are doing this so we need to identify areas of best practice that can be further developed here in Wales

Creating a framework for being able to understand what experimental music is would help raise the profile of the network and make it more accessible. Noise is hard to understand if you have not experienced it, and the title can be off-putting. 'Labels' need to be thought about when promoting. We need to give points of reference to the listener / audience

Discussion 3

Question: Community / collaboration: what's important? Why is it important?

We need to work together in an interdisciplinary way where the areas of poetry, dance, visuals cross promote themselves to help experimental music reach a wider audience.

We need to identify who the audience is, where they are and how they can discover us. Then we can give audiences the opportunity to discover new musical experiences.

Funding - We are representing a significant area of Welsh culture and should be able to access funding and explore alternative venues. We need to think outside of the box.

WEMA can help to support the development of a strategy that encourages and maintains Momentum.

Conclusions

5 Actions came out of the conference

- Create regular opportunities for ideas to be shared – Conferences/network meetings
- Communicating outwards what is happening
- Giving a clear point of contact for people wanting to find out more regarding experimental music in Wales.
- Supporting experimental music where it is happening and where possible adding to this
- Building links with education establishments Higher Education / Further Education and schools

And work to Improve:

- The identity and profile of experimental music - who we are what we do
- Educate, inform, communicate, and reach out
- Find venues and places where performances can take place and that are receptive to offering unfamiliar music

We also made the following requests and commitment for immediate action:

- Everyone who has attended the conference to sign up to the Ty Cerdd artists database
- Talk to each other and keep discussion moving forward -
- A short conference report will be circulated along with a copy of Rob Smith's keynote speech

Experimental music* is the catch all term we have used for electronic/ DIY/ Free improvisation/ sound art

Appendix 1 participant list

- 1 Adam Martin
- 2 Ian Watson
- 3 Rod Paton
- 4 Glyn Roberts
- 5 Martin Lloyd Chitty
- 6 Leona Jones
- 7 Rhys Cook AKA Oberon White
- 8 Shaun Mchugh
- 9 James Kapella
- 10 Rhian Hutchings
- 11 Lyndon Owen
- 12 Laura Avram
- 13 Mihai Racoreanu
- 14 Jo Sheehy
- 15 Rob Smith
- 16 Jonathan Davies
- 17 Cathy Boyce
- 18 Richard McReynolds
- 19 Heledd C Evans
- 20 Rosey Brown
- 21 Hedd Thomas
- 22 Marcy Saude
- 23 Matt Lord
- 24 William Edmondes
- 25 Ash Cooke
- 26 Chris Parfitt
- 27 Jon Ruddick
- 28 Matthew Thistlewood

Appendix 2 Keynote talk by Rob Smith

Experimental Music and Community

What is community and what is music, and how we develop participation and engagement with sound art / experimental and improvised music in Wales?

The premise of this talk and paper is that marginalised music such as experimental music needs the support of a community to survive and flourish. That flourishing is not financial, or more accurately, the financial rewards for making experimental music are almost always meagre, if there are any at all. There are exceptions to this rule and sometimes experiment yields rewards such as in the first wave of American minimalism – but even in that case there was a large scene of experimental artists (not just musicians) providing a community of practice in 60s New York. Read the literature of the time (Reich 2002).

So, what do we, who are attending this symposium on Experimental Music, mean by the term? Does Nyman's work (2011) still stand – an experimental landscape of exploration in the fields of indeterminacy, improvisation, sound technology, interaction between performers, multi-media work, inclusivity, audience/performer relationships, sonic art, community music... you can add your own area of interest to this list, but the presiding spirit is of enquiry, questioning the conventions of commercial and high-art classical forms. There is a presiding spirit of resistance to these norms:

Can this be music?

Can performance be like this?

Is this music?

Can this be made to work in some way?

There is then, in my opening paragraph, something else that needs to be defined. Community. What do people mean when they talk about community in relation to music? What is community music? Can a musical community be bigger than the sum of its music makers and performers? Can it include audiences and non-combatants?

Christopher Small's notion of Musicking (1998) has encouraged countless people involved in music to rethink what music is and does. It locates music as a social interaction and identity. It invites participation in ways beyond production and consumption and as such articulates some of Attali's ideas about musical economies being forerunners of economic ones. But that's a debate too big for a twenty-minute speech but one it would be interesting to debate:

Are we as experimenters and improvisers in sound signalling some societal change in the future that needs to happen?

Very useful here, when considering musical communities, is Ailbhe Kenny's work on *Communities of Musical Practice* (2016). Here she looks at a jazz group, a choir, and an online folk music group. The idea of a Community of Practice is often viewed as an educational concept – and I suppose that, if applied to making music, it could be seen as a model for education through peer learning, growth, and development in the sense of playing with (in the case of improvisation) or playing to people in our community; people we trust. Of course, some composers, as well as experimental and improvising musicians work alone. They make work alone and they perform alone. But it's not many that do so without playing their work to anyone, whether that be live, recorded or online – and their listening peers may not be musicians but they may well be artists in other media who share similar aesthetic concerns, as evidenced in the aforementioned Steve Reich book where he distinguished between other artists who did and did not share his concerns with process and surface perception whether they were other composers, dancers, visual artists, film-makers or whatever.

So, what do these communities of musical practice look like? Let's look at a couple of examples.

EXAMPLE 1: Echtzeitmusik in Berlin

Echtzeitmusik means, as best I can understand, real-time music. This sounds like an improvised aesthetic but the music itself was experimental, unfixed – so maybe different today than it was yesterday – but not necessarily uncomposed.

The scene sprang up in the early 1990s after the Berlin wall came down but while there were still squats and cheap places to live in Berlin. It appears to be still going on but Berlin has become more gentrified and many of the penniless experimenters have moved on to more affordable locations. Arthurs (2015) writes that the scene in 2013 then:

...encompassed those of all ages, existed almost entirely outside of the mainstream, and sustained itself on low budgets and a considerable amount of goodwill.

(Arthurs 2015: 1)

I never went to Berlin during the nineties and noughties so my contact with the scene was via hosting Berlin-based drummer Burkhard Beins with Rhodri Davies & Mark Wastell in Chapter (as *The Sealed Knot*), by reading the book *ECHTZEITMUSIK* (Beins et al, 2011) and reading and listening to tales told by Rhodri Davies who was a frequent visitor to Berlin.

The book ECHTZEITMUSIK is written by participants in the scene and in that book's introduction they call the phenomenon a 'cultural co-ordinate system of squats, free improvisation, punk and New Music, social experimentation and sound art.' It later went on to embrace other experimental forms of music including noise, electronica, trash pop, free jazz, contemporary composed music, performance, and sound art. The overarching impression, from reading the book as a non-combatant, is of young people experimenting with sound and music (alongside other artforms such as film/video). They also were experimenting with ways of putting on events, ways of being together and supporting each other, criticizing each other: ways of being a community.

Beins, Kesen and Neumann wrote that:

Echtzeitmusik consists of the diversity of everyone who participates in it.

(Beins et al., 2011: 13)

Rhodri Davies (in Beins et al., 2011: 67-77) writes that a critical number of the Berlin musicians were forging a new aesthetic by moving away from 'free jazz and idiomatic playing' whilst a group of London musicians (including many regular travellers to Berlin) were 'questioning free improvisation's established forms. He also remembers reacting badly himself to Berlin musicians' pre-improvisational discussions which went some way to predetermining the nature and sonic world of an improvisation. This was something the London musicians with whom he regularly played, never did. It does, however, shed interesting light on the relationship between the ideas of improvisation and composition. Are they fixed opposites or are they movable points on a continuum? By carefully choosing who we want to play with, if we want to make that choice, are we not predetermining the musical outcomes to a certain extent. And if that is true, is it a bad thing? I could talk about that for a long time, some of it from experience, but it would make a more interesting discussion topic if I don't try and give my opinion here.

Just a final observation about echtzeitmusik: whilst this radical new aesthetic, also sometimes called reductionism or The New Berlin Silence, was being forged in the bohemian areas of the city, parallel scenes and aesthetics were being developed in Tokyo and Vienna. Something of this stripped-down music must have been 'in the air' internationally; or perhaps it says something the advances in communication during the years across the turn of the millennia.

EXAMPLE 2: Glasgow Improvisers' Orchestra.

GIO was formed in 2002 as a response to the London Improvisors' Orchestra being formed in 1998 – a positive endorsing response I might add – 'what a great idea, why don't we try that?' rather than 'they've got one – we can do better'. The ensemble supports education,

outreach and research activities alongside its core activities of composing, performing and recording. It also has a great international reputation and is able to host an array of visiting international artists, as you can see from their website (<https://www.glasgowimprovisersorchestra.com>).

(Interestingly we had an improvising orchestra in 2005-2007 in Cardiff initiated by Ashley John Long – but that's another story.)

The improvisation element of the orchestra is easily explained, although speaking from experience, the notion of improvising with twenty plus players isn't. But why is GIO's music experimental? I think the arts struggle with the notion of an experiment and research being the same thing – or at least with an artistic (sonic) experiment being a research methodology or part of one.

As a response to the COVID lockdowns many regularly meeting ensembles and musical communities suspended all activities for the duration. Many simply did not resume when face-to-face contact became possible again; others did resume but found they had lost ground during lockdown (in terms of ensembles playing together, communication and sense of place and purpose). Many others went online to create projects where parts were recorded separately and then assembled into a kind of virtual ensemble in someone's production and editing software. My band Wonderbrass tried this, and the experiment taught us a lot about what happens when an in-the-room strategy is tried with all players separately. I know a lot of ensembles were using some fakery in presenting the results; some faking a big online, real-time performance, others hiding the fact that sound and visuals were recorded separately (my generation used to call this miming when people on Top of the Pops did it).

GIO's motivations are around freedom, communication, invention, risk-taking and permission. Many of GIO's members construct key parts of their identity and sense of self (including their well-being) around membership of and participation in the orchestra. Because of this approach, they were able to hold online sessions on ZOOM. As improvisers they found that they were able to work with and around the latency of the conferencing platform. Also, they found that the visual representation on the platform, the stacked windows, opened up a whole visual side to their performances that had not previously been present. In the article by MacDonald et al (2021) there are many instances of direct testimony from the participants that indicate the negative effects of lockdown on people used to creating regularly, and then the subsequent benefits of being able to play together over zoom, and the enhancements of mood this brought about.

Below are some examples of comments quoted in the article exploring the main themes of the article:

Threat:

I thought it was too painful to imagine that I might not, you know, like that kind of huge orchestral sound, I might not get to do that again. So, I kind of shut down a bit. I didn't like it... plying would remind me of all the things I couldn't do, until I started doing the GIO thing.

Benefit: (they invited people from afar to participate in the online sessions – something that they couldn't do without ZOOM so represents the affordance of a new opportunity with new possibilities)

...The main thing for me was just connecting to the community, again, like ... and just having that sort of borders dissolve straightaway in seeing people from, you know from the year – United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, and just being able to say hi, and hear them and hear them play again.

Mood:

Even if I wasn't sure I was in the mood for it, I always kind of came away with a positive energy from it as well.

Just to remind you that you're not alone, you know, that you... that there are people out there that want to relate to you and you're part of a community. You know, we're an extended family really...

So GIO represent a community of trust, communication, risk-taking and free expression. Their trust in their community has helped them thrive for twenty years and helped them keep their community together through lockdown. In fact, lockdown even afforded them the opportunity to digitally extend their community.

Discussion.

We are making and supporting marginal music here. Note that I don't say we are making marginalised music, because I feel that implies that someone else has made the music marginal. I think we've chosen to explore the margins because that's what excites us. And in exploring those margins we need to support each other's efforts, experiments, and entrepreneurship. (Only one of the two main definitions of the word entrepreneur is someone who sees and seizes an opportunity – another source suggests a promoter – albeit in the entertainment industry. The term can be used beyond the idea of making money. There is such a thing as social entrepreneurship for instance.)

Communities of practice and communities of similar interests spring up all over the place. People with the same interests gravitate towards each other fairly naturally – think what you'd do if you moved to another city where you knew few or no people. The above examples have shown how this happened in response to opportunities and crises. The unification of Berlin was a great opportunity to start new things in previously inaccessible places, to bring together groups who previously had no opportunities to mingle. People moved in and seized the opportunity and out of this came a new scene. The media and methods that creative people used varied but there seemed to be a spirit of co-operation and of openness to each other's practice and aesthetics.

COVID was a crisis, but many online forums were created, and many groups and communities of like-minded artists migrated online to keep their communities and artistic practices going. There was a therapeutic aspect to this too – as many arts practitioners already knew. The article I referred to above, about GIO's Virtual Tribe was about the survival of a creative community through lockdown but it was also about communal therapeutic support – the care of the self, and therefore each other, via community of practice through the crisis and isolation.

This all sounds a bit too dramatic, however, for what what I am here aiming to discuss and celebrate. I've recently written an article on Improvised Music in Wales for a Routledge Companion to Jazz Diasporas and, researching that, I've realised that there is a lot of experimental music going on in Wales - as I suspected – but excitingly there is a lot more of it than I realised or expected. (By the way – I expanded the jazz brief with improvisation at its core to include other forms of improvisation including post-rock and people who don't think of themselves as improvisers because they work with gear or situations that don't allow them any alternative to improvising.) I know that is gathering today is not about improvisation – it is about experimental music, and we need to keep an open mind about what falls into that category.

So, what is out there in Wales?

There are a fair few local scenes. Wales is more populated at the South and the North than it is in the middle. There are pockets of experimental musicians dotted all over Wales but more where the higher density populations are.

How can we build a network to facilitate communication, creative exchange, and performance platforms between these nodes of activity?

There are also clusters of musicians and listeners around other musical expressions. Wales has a fairly well (institutionally) supported folk music network but arguments to create a similar sort of network for jazz in Wales have fallen on deaf ears. Maybe the Arts Council of Wales and Welsh Government think that Welsh jazz is looked after by the RWCMD – but if that is the case then what happens to players after they graduate? Are they all supposed to go looking for gigs in Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool, and London? In fact – is any creative

musician outside of the classical or folk milieux supposed to go and find work in England? And if so, then what would be keeping them in Wales? We are making experimental music that intersects with other forms of music in diverse ways. Are we supposed not to do that here in Wales, or at least only to a few friends? If that's ok, then we've probably already got that. But we are here to thinking about expanding our activities and build community.

And then there's the old Venn diagram thing. As experimental musicians we intersect with other informal networks such as those at the free- and post- ends of jazz (I recently saw a freely improvised gig at a venue 100 metres from here) and some members of WEPN (Welsh Electronic Producers' Network) who run regular gigs in Newport and Cardiff as far as I'm aware. Some, but not all, of the music at these gigs is experimental and/or improvised.

Non-conclusion:

So rather than conclude this version of what I wanted to say I thought I would finish with a bunch of questions to get a discussion going. Most of these I've already asked as part of the foregoing but here we go:

1. What is out there in Wales?
2. How can we build a network to facilitate communication, creative exchange and performance platforms between these nodes of activity?
3. Would this be based around CoDI OFF-Grid, or do we need something more? (I haven't got an agenda for this questioning this – we're all here because of CoDI off Grid and I'm very happy with that).
4. What networks and venues (hubs) are already out there that we can work with?

Thank you.

Rob Smith

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and member of South Wales Improvisers.

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