

Collaboration between composer and performer:

A case study on two pieces for solo guitar

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Abstract: This paper discusses composer and performer collaboration, specifically in cases whereby composers do not play the instrument for which they are composing. The article presents results of the collaboration between the author and the composer Samuel Peruzzolo-Vieira during the composition of two pieces for solo guitar written in 2015. A phenomenological approach was chosen in order to demonstrate how both composer and performer experience a collaboration process. The collaboration was designed taking into account a previous study of the descriptions of 6 non-guitarist composers and 8 guitarists interviewed between December 2014 and August 2015. All stages of the collaboration were documented in videos, which functioned both as a record of the process and as a multimedia support that helped the composer during the composition. Results compare the composer's ideas with the performer's suggestions, showing that these were essential in order to make the pieces playable and also idiomatic.

Keywords: Composer-Performer Collaboration, Non-Guitarist Composer, Guitar Performance.

1. Background

Composer and performer collaboration is a recent area of research (Domenici, 2010), which has been attracting the attention of researchers since Foss' first essay on the subject in 1963. Authors like Ivanovic (2015), Barrett *et al.* (2014), Gyger (2014), Silva (2014), Morais (2013), Ishisaki and Machado (2013), Marinho and Carvalho (2012), Domenici (2010), Östersjö (2008) and Roe (2007) have been writing about their own collaborative experiences, analysing interaction procedures, communication strategies and creative results. Although this is a recent area of research, it is not recent to the musical practice, since there are several well-known famous collaborations: Johannes Brahms – Joseph Joachim in the nineteenth century, for example. Nevertheless, during the first half of the twentieth century the situation was different, as the performer usually acted merely as a reproducer of a musical composition. This was a period where a musical composition was characterised as “some kind of intellectual property to be delivered securely from composer to listener” (Cook 2001: 6). This point of view changed, especially in the last 50 years, as this kind of collaboration has become more frequent (Domenici 2010), resulting in an adjustment of the performer's role when collaborating with composers, as pointed out by Smalley: “the composer and performer are now in the process of drawing more closely together than, perhaps, they have ever been in the history of music. I feel certain that it is in the nurturing of this relationship that the core of future developments in music will lie” (1970: 84). Smalley's statement is especially true when it comes to the guitar. The composer Hector Berlioz wrote in his instrumentation treatise that “it is almost impossible to write well for the guitar without being able to play it” (Berlioz 1948: 145). His statement prevailed during the nineteenth century (Zanon 2006). Even today it is possible to say that, “though Berlioz penned these words over a century-and-a-half ago, their relevance regrettably continues to persist today” (Godfrey 2013: vi). Remarkably, it was only during the twentieth century that non-guitarist composers began writing for the guitar. Zanon (2006) mentioned that the first works by non-guitarist composers were *Mozartiana* (1903) by Eduardo Fabini and *Variazioni* (1900-1910) by Ottorino Respighi. Recently, several authors have written about the guitar's idiomatic features with the intention of demystifying the instrument for non-guitarist composers. This bibliography can be classified into two different categories: 1) studies that discuss the characteristics of the guitar, presenting thorough explanations of its usage: Schneider (2015), Godfrey (2013), Lunn (2010), Kachian (2010), Viana (2009), Ulloa (2001),

Gilardino (2010, 1999, 1996, 1994), Bream (1957); 2) orchestration treatises that mention the guitar: Blatter (1997), Adler (2002), Berlioz (1948 [1844]).

2. Methods

All stages of this research were based on a phenomenological approach.

Phenomenology can be defined as “the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (Sokolowski 2000: 2). The choice for a phenomenological approach is justified by the importance that this research gives to the way both composer and performer experience a collaborative process.

This research started by interviewing 14 musicians – 8 guitarists and 6 non-guitarist composers – between December 2013 and August 2015. In qualitative interviews based on a phenomenological approach “questions are, generally, wide and open, in order to let subjects to abundantly express their point of view. The intention is to obtain a concrete and detailed description of their acts in the way they experienced them” (Giorgi 2008: 398). Departing from Giorgi’s description, topics addressed in the interviews included: interaction procedures; the performer’s role in the collaboration process; composing for guitar as a non-guitarist composer; describing situations in which collaboration was essential; transmitting/learning guitar features. Categorical analysis of the answers was undertaken and the data obtained was organised according to recurring terms and subjects. Meaningful categories were classified according to their frequency.

Results obtained from these categories were used to plan and organise the collaboration sessions (7) between this paper’s author and the composer Samuel Peruzzolo-Vieira. The sessions occurred between December 31st 2014 and November 8th 2015, resulting in 2 hours and 33 minutes of video recordings. Material generated from these meetings is presented by comparing the composer’s ideas with the performer’s suggestions regarding specific sections that required some level of intervention, whether to make them playable or to make them more idiomatic.

3. Results

3.1 Interviews

From the categorical analysis, a total of twelve categories with five occurrences or more were singled out. These included, ordered by frequency:

- 1) adaptation of non-idiomatic sections;
- 2) communication strategies;
- 3) performer's intervention level;
- 4) composition for guitar by non-guitarists composers;
- 5) promoting the creation of new works;
- 6) composer's receptiveness for suggestions;
- 7) transmitting/learning guitar features;
- 8) correction of unplayable sections;
- 9) later revisions;
- 10) interaction modalities;
- 11) composition/arrangement study by the performer;
- 12) differences between interacting with guitarist composers and non-guitarist composers.

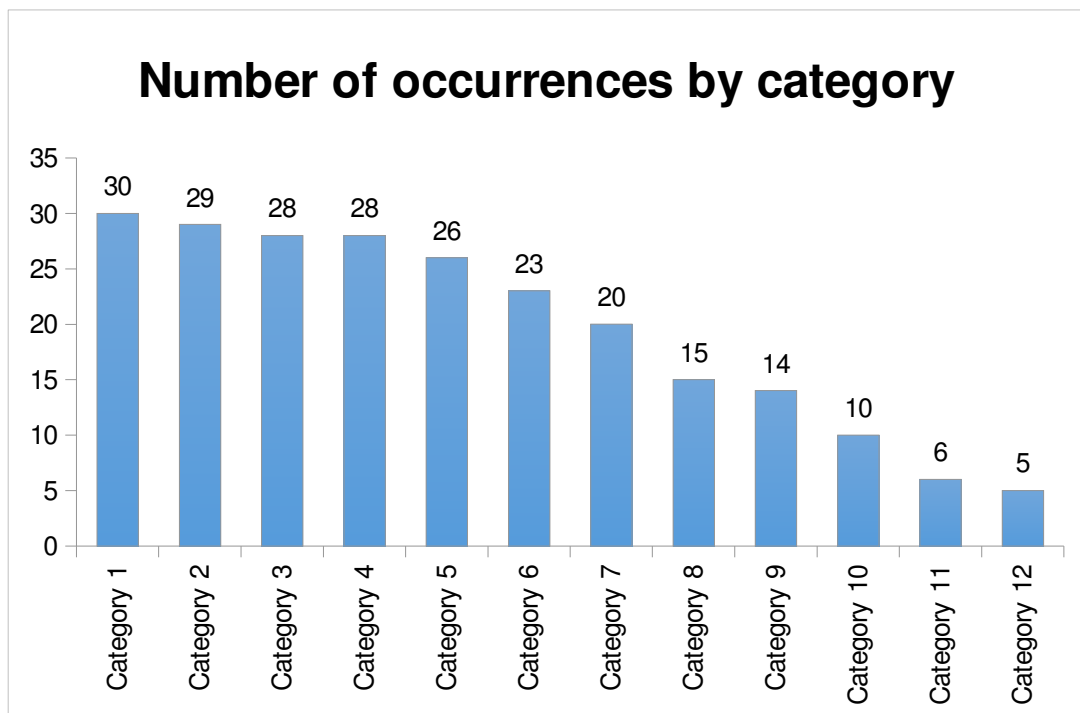


Figure I. Number of occurrences by category (ordered by frequency)

In order to define the order of categories 3 and 4, which had the same number of occurrences, the one with more interviewees commenting on it was considered more relevant. It is worth mentioning that all categories included both composers and performers. Figure II displays results separating composers from performers:

Figure II. Number of occurrences by category - composers and performers separated

As explained in Vieira (2015) - which includes a thorough explanation and analysis of each category - the differences between composers and performers could require the separation of results for these two groups in order to correctly define categories.

Nevertheless, some of the interviewed composers are also performers, and some of the interviewed performers are also composers. Moreover, the interviewed guitarists who are also composers have acted as composers in collaborations with performers who play other instruments. Therefore, although there is a difference in the categories' order when separating the interviewees, it seems correct to keep them in one single group because they are, essentially, musicians talking about collaboration.

3.2. Collaboration

The collaborative process, based on the results from the categorical analysis of the interviews, occurred between the 31st of December 2014 and the 8th of November 2015, resulting in seven collaborative sessions. During the sessions, composer and performer worked on two pieces: 1) *After Ando's Church on the Water* and 2) *54 Toys*. The first collaborative session was dedicated to a demonstration of the classical guitar possibilities and features; sessions 2 to 6 were dedicated to the collaboration during the composition process; and, finally, the 7th session was dedicated to the creation of an interpretation of both pieces, which were performed a few days after this session, on the 14th of November

2015, at a guitar festival in Vila Real – Portugal.

3.2.1. *After Ando's Church on the Water*

This piece reflects the composer's impressions on the Church on the water (1988) - located in northern Japan - by Japanese architect Tadao Ando. The musical work, approximately 4 minutes long, evokes the ethereal characteristics of a church, such as delicacy, weightlessness and purity. The harmony is unstable with frequent usage of harmonics and bends, which are used to simulate a specific feature of Ando's Church: the pool in front of it, which gives the impression that the church is not over the ground, but floating over the water.

Regarding the collaboration, the piece had some chords which were possible to play, but the left-hand position was uncomfortable or the sonority was unconvincing on the guitar. The first example presents one chord in which there was a sonority imbalance on the harmonic appoggiatura and its real note. To execute it the note B had to be played on the 2nd string and the note B flat had to be played on the 4th string:

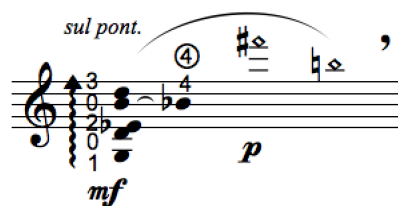


Figure III. Sonority imbalance because of the resolution of the harmonic appoggiatura

The solution presented to the composer was to cut the low D - since this note was doubled - making the chord easier to play and allowing the harmonic appoggiatura to be played on the same string of its real note:

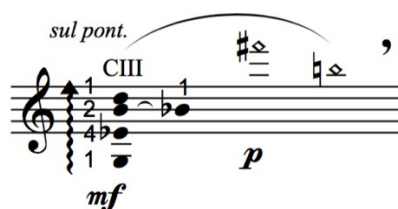


Figure IV. Possible solution: cutting the low note D

When it comes to uncomfortable chords, the next example shows a chord that was possible to play, but required the first finger to play a bar covering two frets in a very

extended position:

A musical score snippet in treble clef. The first measure is marked *mf* and *sul pont.*. The second measure is marked *p* and contains a chord with a red box around it. The chord consists of notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. The interval between G4 and A4 is a minor second. The notes are fingered: G (1), A (2), B (1), C (4). The dynamic is *f*. The third measure is marked *p* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5, labeled *tambora*. The fourth measure is marked *pp* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5, labeled *ord.*. The fifth measure is marked *p* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5, labeled *bend*. The sixth measure is marked *tambora* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5.

Figure V. Uncomfortable chord

After trying to play this chord for a couple of days, it became clear that this chord would not be possible to be executed in this context: in isolation the chord is hard, but possible to play, but when performing it in context, it is clear that the chord is not feasible.

Therefore, two different alternatives were presented to the composer. The first was to transpose the note A one octave below:

A musical score snippet in treble clef. The first measure is marked *mf* and *sul pont.*. The second measure is marked *p* and contains a chord with a red box around it. The chord consists of notes G4, B3, B4, and C5. The interval between G4 and B3 is a minor second. The notes are fingered: G (2), B (0), B (1), C (4). The dynamic is *f*. The third measure is marked *p* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5, labeled *tambora*. The fourth measure is marked *pp* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5, labeled *ord.*. The fifth measure is marked *p* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5, labeled *bend*. The sixth measure is marked *tambora* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5.

Figure VI. First alternative: transposing the note A one octave below

This alternative, however, eliminates the interval of minor second that was a strong characteristic of this chord. In order to maintain this interval, the chord could be separated into two parts:

A musical score snippet in treble clef. The first measure is marked *mf* and *sul pont.*. The second measure is marked *p* and contains a chord with a red box around it. The chord consists of notes G4, B4, and C5. The notes are fingered: G (1), B (2), C (4). The dynamic is *f*. The third measure is marked *p* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5, labeled *tambora*. The fourth measure is marked *pp* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5, labeled *ord.*. The fifth measure is marked *p* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5, labeled *bend*. The sixth measure is marked *tambora* and contains a chord with notes G4, B4, and C5.

Figure VII. Second alternative: separating the chord into two parts

After listening to these possibilities, the composer preferred the transposition of one note. The following example shows the final collaboration results:

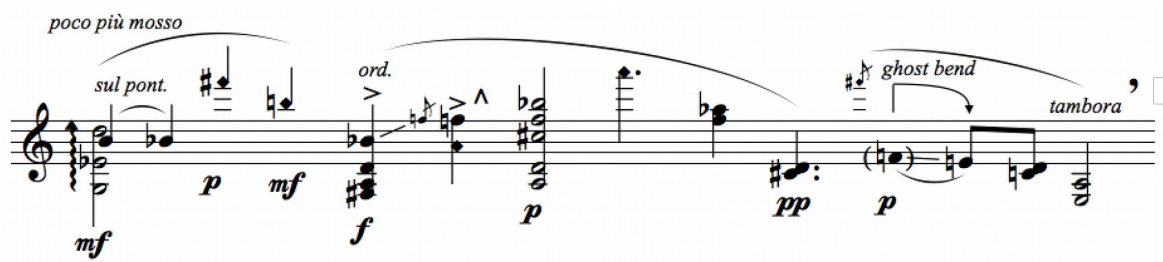


Figure VIII. Final collaboration results

3.2.2. 54 Toys

This was the second piece written by Samuel Peruzzolo-Vieira in our collaboration project, a longer work – approximately 7 minutes long. It portrays the way that the composer used to see his daughter (less than one year old at that time) interacting with her toys. 54 in roman numbers is LIV. These 3 letters are part of his daughter’s name.

54 Toys’ harmony can be defined as neotonal. A neotonal harmony, according to Kostka (1999), can be applied to tonal music in which the tonal centre is established by a non-traditional tonal concept.

This piece included some chords that were impossible to play because of long sustained notes. The following chord is a case in point:

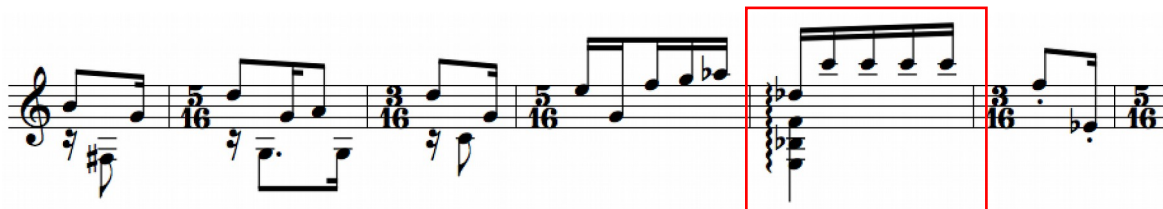


Figure IX. Example of unsustainable chord

This chord is impossible to sustain and simultaneously play the high C notes because the disposition of its notes obligates the performer to stay in first position. Thus, the high C note is just too far for the 4th finger. The only way to play this chord, which was demonstrated to the composer, is to reduce its duration to a semiquaver:



Figure X. Reducing the chord's duration

Alternatively, it is possible to transpose the B flat one octave up. Thus, the resulting chord allows the performer to play it in a different position (6th position in this case):



Figure XI. Transposing an inner note one octave up

This alternative maintains the chord as a crotchet but changes its sonority due to the inner note transposition. After listening to both alternatives, the composer decided to reduce the chord's duration to a semiquaver.

Another case in point was the following excerpt, in which it was impossible to sustain the bass while playing the other voices:



Figure XII. Impossible to sustain the bass

The only possible way to play this excerpt is by reducing the bass' duration in order to allow the position shift required to play the next chord:



Figure XIII. Reducing the bass' duration

Another solution is to eliminate one of the inner notes. After showing the composer the resulting sonority when cutting the inner note E and later cutting the inner note F sharp (first marked measure), he decided to cut the one that was doubled: F sharp in the first marked measure and G sharp in the second:



Figure XIV. Eliminating an inner note

4. Discussion

As shown, the collaboration was divided into three stages based on strategies taken from the interviews: 1) a first session dedicated to explaining and discussing the possibilities and limitations of the instrument; 2) a direct collaboration during the composition process; and 3) a final session dedicated to the interpretation of the pieces. From the first session, the bibliography for non-guitarist composers was made available to the composer. This bibliography, though, was not efficient enough, since both pieces had non-idiomatic sections as well as unplayable sections that required alterations and adaptations.

Interestingly, adaptations of non-idiomatic sections were numerous, but did not generate as much discussion as the corrections of unplayable sections. There were a few chords that were impossible to play and had to be changed, especially due to the impossibility to sustain long notes, but these generated more discussion. In all cases, alternative sections adapted from the original score were presented to the composer, allowing him to decide which sounded closer to his initial idea. Finally, results have shown that the performer's suggestions were essential to make the pieces not only playable, but also idiomatic. Moreover, the composer clearly improved his knowledge on guitar features and became more acquainted with the guitar's limitations and possibilities during the collaboration session.

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