

The *Towards Silence* Project: Multiple string quartets organize to perform a new musical form in spatially variable and distributed conditions

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Abstract

This case describes an example of a collective making process in the field of performing arts. In 2009, multiple string quartets (many considered world class) organized to perform a new musical composition by Sir John Tavener. The composition challenged four quartets at a time to perform as an integrated ensemble while sitting apart, in various configurations, and at spatial distances up to 70 feet. The process unfolded in three phases: pre-rehearsals of the first group of quartets in the United Kingdom (UK), a series of rehearsals leading to one premiere performance by the second group of quartets in New York, and a series of rehearsals integrated with additional performances in four distinct venues in the UK. Mid-way through the process, the musicians chose to integrate a simple coordinating technology into their process, to address the difficulties produced by distance. This telling of the case story describes what the musicians did to achieve these unprecedented performances, given the unusual circumstances, emphasizing how they made decisions and evaluated their work along the way. The case is based on comprehensive fieldwork, including observation, interviews, spatial measurement and diagramming, questionnaires, and analysis of videotape of the rehearsal process.

Keywords

collective creativity, collaboration, ensemble, coordination, distributed work, artful making.

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Case Study #3
Autumn 2011

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Introduction

Between February and July of 2009, two sets of musicians organized in New York City (NYC) and in and around London, England (UK) to perform a new musical composition by renowned British composer Sir John Tavener, titled *Towards Silence: A meditation on the four states of Atma*. In the introduction to the composition, Tavener calls for four string quartets to play together, in a resonant building, “sounding unseen from high galleries” when possible. He allows that the position of the quartets will vary with location, but asks that the music be meditated on by the audience as opposed to heard (and viewed) as concert music. These directions were interpreted differently by the diverse event producers at each of the five performance venues, which ranged in type from a 6-level spiral staircase to the expansive Winchester Cathedral. The musicians also expressed their own preferences for how to configure each event, at times in conflict with the producers’ plans, in the interest of doing their best work “making music” and creating for the audience an experience uniquely tailored to the qualities of each space.

The musicians were members of seven string quartets, including the Medici String Quartet, one of Britain’s leading international ensembles. The phases of the project were as follows: In February, the UK team of quartets assembled for two days of “pre-rehearsals” of the piece, with the main objective of understanding better how to make practical preparations for and rehearse this new work, in anticipation of summer performances. In April, the NYC team (which shared only three musicians from the “first” quartet in common with the UK team) gathered at the Rubin Museum of Art for five days of rehearsal culminating in one sold-out, live premiere performance. At this stage, the use of a simple coordinating technology called the “click-track,” a pre-recorded cuing track delivered via wireless earpiece to one member (typically the first violinist) of each quartet, was instigated after efforts to play in time without its aid faltered, and after a passionate debate for and against its use resolved in an agreement to “try it out.” In June and July, the UK team, implementing the click-track from the start, reassembled for four more days of rehearsals, followed by four evening performances (each preceded by 2-3 hour afternoon rehearsals in which new spatial configurations were tried) in four different locations in and around London.

Towards Silence, being a new form, necessitated an experiment that took the work of string quartet playing to the edge of a new frontier—as informants admitted, potentially beyond what would be possible for the quartets to achieve. To increase our understanding of the difficulty they had to address to pull this off, we can consider the way in which spatial proximity impacts the work of musicians. Their ability to work together depends directly on whether they are able, at a purely technical level, to hear one another in order to play in perfect time together, while the ability to listen deeply to and respond to one another’s musical choices affects their ability to, as our informants say, “make music.” Spatial proximity becomes crucial,

insofar as it impacts the musicians' ability to hear (and/or see corresponding visual cues) and to listen deeply. Enlarging the size of the work group from 4 to 16 members, as Tavener did, naturally increased the distance between each member and the farthest member from them. Stretching the groups' configuration by placing them, for instance, on the balconies of a 6-level staircase or at opposite ends of an 70-foot long ballroom, as the producers did in response to Tavener's directions in the score, increased the distance further. At a certain distance, the laws of physics make it impossible for the musicians to play in time, as their ability to hear becomes distorted by delays related to the time it takes sound waves to travel, further confounded by architectural barriers and echolation. Thus, both their ability to achieve technical proficiency – to play in time together – and their ability to “make music” – to listen deeply and respond dynamically to the collective sound, and thereby achieve their usual standards of excellence – were put at stake in this exercise.

Initiating the Project, August 2007-February 2009

In August 2007, Paul Robertson, first violinist of The Medici String Quartet, interviewed Tavener at a conference of The Scientific and Medical Network. The two had met decades before, when Tavener composed “The Hidden Treasure” for the Medici Quartet. In conversation with Robertson, Tavener shared his vision for a new work he would like to write for four quartets:

I have in mind one day, and I don't know how I'm going to do it, but to write a music which deals with the dying process. And I have the idea of four string quartets playing from the dome of some either church or very beautifully resonant building, and the sound being very distant. Them being in cross formation, therefore connecting Christianity with Hinduism, because they are actually placed in the formal symbolism of the cross. But the piece is actually dealing with the four states of Atma...There is a state which is connected to waking. There is the state which is connected to dreaming. There is the state which is connected to deep sleep. And then there is what is beyond. And I want to try and make a piece based on – I've long wanted to do this, I don't know whether I'll ever do it—but that really is a piece about, you could say, liberation, or you could say about the process of dying.¹

Despite knowing that Robertson had played his final concerts with the Medici Quartet earlier that year, Tavener asked that Robertson consider performing this new composition. Tavener's fascination with the potential relationship between the late stages of dying and the creative act captured

¹ An excerpt from this interview can be heard at http://www.musicmindspirit.org/tavener_microsite/radio.html , accessed May 4, 2011

Robertson's attention: "[Tavener] wanted to somehow describe in sound the very moment at which music comes from Silence – or may perhaps revert back into it."² Robertson instantly considered the practical challenge of gathering four string quartets willing to work together, given that "first violinists [like myself] are notoriously temperamental prima donnas who cannot or will not collaborate." His solution: invite three talented young ensembles whom Medici would mentor.

Inspired despite himself, but still undecided, Robertson returned home to discover an email from Tim McHenry, producer at The Rubin Museum of Art in New York City. McHenry was in the midst of programming the museum's new annual series, "Brainwave," featuring conversations on the mind with 50 diverse artists and scientists, and was looking to add a musical component. Over the course of a phone conversation that afternoon, Robertson "found himself" describing Tavener's proposed project to McHenry, which well suited the Brainwave theme, and they agreed to enter into a co-commission of the piece, the Museum with Robertson's organization The Music Mind Spirit Trust. The Museum would host the world premiere.

Within days of settling the commissioning agreement, Tavener took off to Greece to compose. McHenry scheduled the world premiere for spring 2008, and Robertson met enthusiastic response from producers as he proceeded to arrange a string of following concerts around the UK and Europe. However, in December 2007 Tavener had a series of heart attacks related to a genetic condition from which he suffered, and entered intensive care. While the composition was judged by Tavener's editor to be sufficiently complete to perform, Robertson himself suffered a near fatal aortic dissection soon after.³ The two men spent several months in a critical state, in and out of consciousness, and the project was postponed. By August 2008 Robertson had recovered sufficiently to revive plans for the project, his near death experience serving to intensify his interest in exploring the edge between being and non-being, both in terms of the human states of consciousness, and in terms performing music and silence. In the wake of Robertson's recovery, the other members of the Medici Quartet agreed to reform, and together identified those outstanding early-career string quartets with whom they wished to work. Having worked previously with Robertson on the development of a teaching case⁴, I was invited to follow the project.

² The Music Mind Spirit Trust website:
http://www.musicmindspirit.org/tavener_microsite/index.html , accessed May 4, 2011

³ Press Release: *Towards Silence*. The Music Mind Spirit Trust.
http://www.musicmindspirit.org/tavener_microsite/pressrelease.html

⁴ Robert D. Austin and Shannon O'Donnell. 2007. *Paul Robertson and the Medici String Quartet*. HBS No. 607-083. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Pre-rehearsals, February 2009

Pre-rehearsals take place in the barn-cum-studio at The Old Farmhouse, Paul's home, in West Sussex. The musicians arrange themselves in an open arc, or half-circle, which over the course of the day gradually morphs into a full circle, the quartets ordered by number clockwise 1-2-3-4. (See **Figure 2.**) Paul, who doesn't feel well enough to play, spends the first few hours by "default" acting as a kind of conductor for the larger group from a seated position. He cues them when to start and offers feedback from time to time to individual musicians, though he's ultimately resistant to functioning as a leader in this way. He later describes it as antithetical to the work:

The nature of the piece, the way it's composed...is such that it would be grotesque if there was only one person leading. And it would just be wrong. The music demands the initiative from [many]—and...it's not just first fiddles. There needs to be and should be and has to be leadership from every individual at different times.

For the time being, however, Paul acts the role of leader, a position not unfamiliar to him and his time career leading Medici. After the musicians play the first section of the score, Paul offers feedback on dynamics. He suggests the second violin in Q2 repeat a section she just played to demonstrate a "clearer texture" - "clearer, not better" - for Drew, the viola player in Q4. Drew listens, nods. Members of Q2 point out a marking in the score, "shimmering," and ask what it means. Paul picks up his violin and demonstrates "a good shimmer." The second violin of Q3 leans over to his first violin, commenting on the fact that the current leadership they are receiving won't be a normal condition of the work: "We're going to need to have something to latch on to; it's easy now with Paul to guide us."

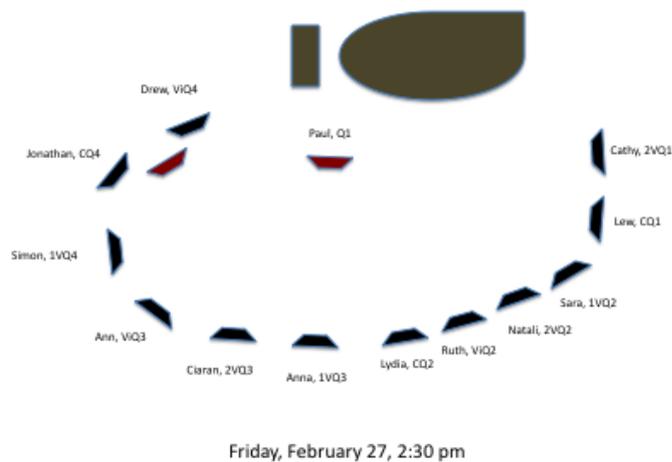


Figure 2: Seating configuration, Paul's barn, Day 1⁵

After 3:00pm, Paul, still weak from his illness, goes inside to rest. In his absence, the group attempts to work without a conductor, not without first wondering how they will be able to play in time with one another: Do we need a metronome to replace Paul? The two remaining members of the Medici Quartet, second violinist Cathy and cellist Tony, attempt to lead, but the group doesn't quiet down when Cathy speaks, as they did for Paul. Others begin to test the water, offering input, voicing opinions and suggestions on how to proceed. At 4:30pm, Paul rejoins the group, but not as a conductor - he picks up his violin to play. The eyes that were once on him begin to search out clues from other members of the group as well. Many express difficulty hearing what they need in order to play in time with the other quartets, even as they are in this optimal configuration, seated in a close circle in one room. What will it be like when they are stretched further apart, at the Cathedral for instance, they wonder.

On Day 2, the quartets gather again in a circle in the barn to work. They work today with a tiny metronome clipped to Paul's music stand, to help them coordinate. Paul says that, ideally, they could have set up rehearsal so that one quartet was in each of the two lofts in the barn, and two on the floor, to simulate the performance configuration, but they are "not ready" for that yet. They still need physical proximity to learn the piece and one another. A discussion of timing and how they will take cues when they can't see one another in the performance space is left unresolved when Paul cuts them off, saying they can't know what they will need until they are in the

⁵ They accommodate a grand piano in the room (indicated on the diagram). The red music stands indicate those working with the full, four-quartet score, rather than their own individual quartet parts.

space on the day of each performance, and will need to adapt on the fly. But the metronome for now provides support needed for them to practice the music.

Reflecting on these two days of rehearsal, in interviews after the fact, several of the musicians report that *Towards Silence* is not that much harder to play than a “regular” quartet piece; it involves the same kind of work. Often the quartets play as units, almost as if each quartet is one “voice” in a larger quartet. The challenge is being able to hear one another. Simon, first violin of Q4, comments that what happened in rehearsals was “what you kind of expect if you put four lots of people who don’t know each others’ groups into the same room and ask them to interact together. Which is slightly chaotic, slightly disorganized, but fundamentally not ineffective.” Most agree that they achieved their primary objectives for these rehearsals: to get to know the other players, to get a concept of what the piece is, to find and feel the “pulse” of the piece collectively, and to at least begin to determine what kind of leadership or other support will be needed to pull this off.

In a longer conversation with Paul in his home on the following evening, he expresses general satisfaction with the progress the quartets made, assessing that they had “got past the most uncomfortable, incoherent stage” typical, in his experience, to the development of a new work. When I ask Paul how he expects to translate the group’s work, which in rehearsals has so far been configured in a circle, to the yet untried configurations of the performance venues, he comments on his uncertainty as to whether or not they will be able to achieve the spatial distribution Tavener calls for:

The one thing I do know is that until we actually know the score well enough to be able to play it with *complete* confidence sitting in a circle, there is no way we can attenuate the connections or the lines of sight – because it’s not just visual, that’s the trouble, you actually have to hear it. At the moment, I don’t see any way that we can attenuate this shape. I think the most we might be able to achieve if we had a big enough space, a suitable space, is to sit in a cross form, with the four quartets facing inwards to each other...Sort of four clusters, like four nubs. But that’s not what [Tavener]’s asked for. I’m going to take a lot of convincing that anything beyond that is possible.

He concludes by saying that New York will be tricky, because they have already committed to performing across four levels of the spiral staircase, and he still doesn’t know if that will be possible. But Ivo, Medici’s viola player, had traveled to the Museum earlier that month, and agreed to the producer’s proposed vision. “I hope Ivo wasn’t over-eager to please—but he said to [Tim McHenry], we can do it. So they’ve sold tickets now on the basis that we can do it in that shape.” This is when I first learn of the back-up plan: “It may be that the only way that we can perform it in that space, in that shape, is for everyone to have headphones, and we play it with a click-track. Which is like, effectively like we’d be playing to a metronome, but only we

would be hearing the metronome.” Though he growls as he says it, Paul confesses he believes 99% of the audience won’t know the difference: “most people have no idea that there’s an aesthetic or difference in sensibility between listening and playing to something that’s clicking. But to me, it’s like a negation of everything I believe in.” He ends on an upbeat, putting his trust in Tavener and suggesting that it may work in a way that he can’t yet anticipate until they try it.

Rehearsals and a World Premiere, April 2009

Paul, much to his disappointment, isn’t well enough to travel to New York in April to participate in the world premiere. The Medici Quartet enlists a friend of Cathy’s, Fenella Barton, to play second violin to Cathy’s first. I’m at the Rubin Museum when the Medici Quartet arrives Sunday evening, ahead of the younger American-based quartets who are coming Monday. After a period of enthusiastic introductions, producer Tim McHenry takes us all on a quick tour of the “Spiral,” the centerpiece of the Museum’s architecture and the site of Thursday’s performance. The staircase (See **Image 1**) scales six floors, pausing at each in a sunburst-shaped platform to release travelers into the open exhibition rooms, and resolves under a massive skylight.



Image 1. The Spiral Staircase, Rubin Museum of Art

Tim informs Medici that the aim of performing across different levels of the Spiral is to “exploit the sound funnel” the staircase creates, and to experiment with “transmitting vertical sound” through the audience, who will be seated on each floor, amongst and facing the art, in the kind of meditative exercise for which Tavener asks. The Tibetan Singing Bowl, which is also in the score, will be played by a musician seated at the very top floor. Despite contrary suggestions offered by Tony, Tim insists that the four quartets be spread out over four floors (this experiment being the primary motivation for the commission), and the viola player Ivo takes the lead in suggesting the layout: Medici (Q1) will be positioned on the 5th floor, Q2 on the 4th, Q3 on the 3rd, and Q4 on the 2nd.

Tim invites the Medici musicians into the Museum café for tea and a chat, during which they troubleshoot problems they might have in achieving a coherent performance across four floors. Slight time delay due to the distance sound must travel from Q1 to Q4 is considered (disrupting aural communication), as well as the difficulty they will have seeing more than one or two other quartets at any given time (restricting physical communication). The concern: will they be able, given these circumstances, to play the music *in time* with one another, let alone play *musically* together (their true ambition as artists). Several possible solutions are proposed for solving the problem of timing, and all discarded but one: At Ivo’s suggestion, Paul had recorded a “click-track” of the entire score with which to cue the first violinists via the use of wireless ear-pieces. However, Cathy reminds the others that, according to the score, two quartets always play in relationship to one another, which might in itself provide enough aid. Perhaps, and ideally they agree, they will be able to solve the divide without any kind of artificial support. Maybe “ears will simply have to listen harder,” Tim suggests.

Medici begins rehearsal in the Museum Theatre, but their curiosity over how this will work in the performance space gets the best of them, and the musicians soon carry their instruments out into the Spiral. Tony and Fenella perch on the fifth floor platform where Medici will sit in performance. Cathy takes the role of Q2 on the fourth floor platform opposite the Spiral from Medici, while Ivo travels down to the third floor, the site for Q3, from which vantage he can see Cathy, but not Tony and Fenella as he is directly underneath them. (“Can Tony see down?” Ivo asks.) They seem concerned only to prove that they can see and hear one another “to some degree,” and determine trade-offs, like: Only the first violin needs a view of the opposite quartet, not the second violin.

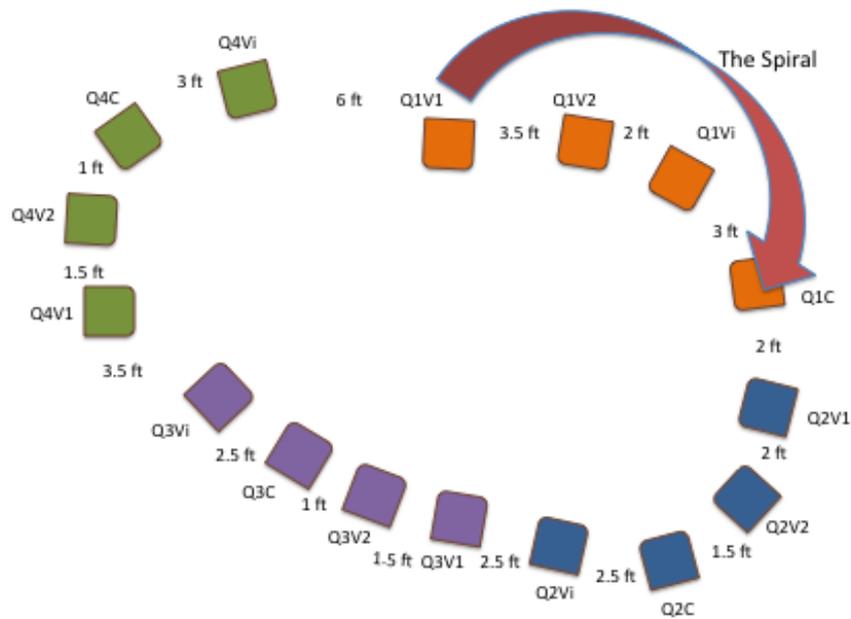
The four experiment with playing parts, each representing a quartet in the full score. Cathy exaggerates the musical beats physically while she plays, to try one method of communicating across space, and is teased for it. Ivo and Cathy figure out how to coordinate communication with Q4 for a crucial passage in which Q1 and Q4 play together—Cathy decides she can stand up from time to time at her position on floor 5, for when she stands at

the rail, she discovers, she can see Ivo who is now acting as first violin of Q4 on the second floor, and give him visual cues. While they aren't yet sure what they will or will not be able to hear across such a distance (it is 36.2 diagonal feet from the 5th floor to the 2nd floor, rail to rail), once all 16 musicians are playing, they seem encouraged by the options they're inventing. By 7:30pm, Ivo states: "I'm feeling more positive now." They report to Tim their belief that the four-floor split is possible, and their resolve that they won't need the "click-track" after all. "It won't be music" with essentially a metronome banging away in their ears, Cathy asserts. Tony states, "We can see each other."

During rehearsals the following morning, the Medici Quartet focus initially on interpretive choices relevant to their quartet alone, but eventually return to questions of coordination with the other three quartets. They discuss ways to enable communication: each "leader" or first violin will need to act as a conductor and gesture cues to the other quartets; Q2 will be able to see Medici's bow changes even if they can't hear them; Q2 can beat out a rhythm to cue Q1 and Q3; Q3 will have to coordinate with Q2 and Q4; the whole activity will be like a relay race, passing the baton. However, as they talk through these options they acknowledge that it becomes hard to be still, as the music requires, when communication objectives oblige them to be hyperactive with their bows. Tony brings up the use of the click-track solution again, *just for a section of the music*. But the click-track, it is still agreed, will isolate each quartet from the other and make it more difficult to hear. This is seen as detrimental to their art. "Listening", says Fenella, is the way musicians make "music" with one another. Cathy argues that they have to "give it a go" without the click track, but agrees to at least give the click-track a try.

Monday Evening: Full Group

The debate Medici has as a quartet Monday morning is repeated, with some variation, between the members of the larger group later that week. The American-based string quartets arrive Monday night. This group of musicians, in contrast to the British groups who rehearsed in February, appear more energetic, on task, and bubbling with conversation. They also sound more skillful and better prepared, an observation Cathy later supports with her own assessment. They begin their work as the UK team had in February, seated in the configuration that allows the closest proximity and maximum lines of sight - a circle - at the base of the Spiral. (See **Figure 3**.) They jump right into the tasks of sorting out leadership, synchronization, and interpretation collectively.



Rehearsal layout for *Towards Silence*
Monday, April 20, 2009, 7:30 pm

Figure 3: Rehearsal seating configuration, Rubin Museum

After warming up in a circle together, the quartets migrate upwards, to their platforms in the Spiral. Here all kinds of acrobatics are tried in the effort to coordinate their playing without any artificial aid. For instance: the first violin of Q2, J, takes on the role of communicating between Q1 and Q3 by exaggerating his bowing, and even conducting at moments with broad gestures. Q3 relays beats and downbeats to Q4, who can see nothing but Q3 and hear little, their faces craning upwards. In order to achieve this, Q3 delegates tasks amongst themselves: the cellist will express the pulse physically, animatedly bouncing up and down, while the first violinist will keep the downbeat, in a more subtle but perceptible way in her body.

These efforts continue the following day, short Q3, as the quartets work in the Spiral. The click-track has been proposed as an option this morning, but it is considered as Plan B. Q4, in the absence of Q3, splits its members across the second and third floor balconies to facilitate communication with Q2 on the fourth floor balcony. While this serves to make coordination easier for them to start, Q4 struggles with the perceived sound delay and inability to hear what the first two quartets are doing above. The delay makes it difficult for them to diagnose problems, such as who is out of time, and adjust. "We're in jail down here!" the cellist cries. Lina, their second violin, climbs the stairs to Q2's balcony and pleads with the others to at least try the click-track.

A debate breaks out as the musicians gather on the fourth floor balcony, instruments in hand. J argues against the click-track. His concern is that the click-track, being a fixed, pre-recorded track, can't accommodate and

adjust for the natural reverberation of sound through this space, as the musicians can. If not born of listening to the space and one another, it won't be "music" they perform. Lina counters: "If it's not together, it can't be musical anyhow." She suggests the best approach is to use the click to play in perfect time together, so that they can focus on developing the "layers" of sound the audience will perceive. To which Tony, having walked about the different floors during rehearsal to listen to the effect, says, "You can only hear [the quartet seated on] what floor you're on." This news alarms the group – the audience is meant to hear the layered sound from all four quartets – and a new string of suggestions are raised: What would happen if we all played on the ground floor, so the sound wafted up? What if we were all on the middle floor? Or split across two floors, two quartets per floor? Ivo reminds them that Tim won't agree, the point of the exercise being to stretch the sound experience vertically. Cathy cries: "But we're the musicians! We have to play the world premiere!" She implies that they know best how to make the piece work in this space.

Nonetheless, they agree to at least try the click-track, and the technicians visit each floor delivering the earpiece to each first violin. The use of the click-track brings a host of changes to the nature of rehearsal: First, every time the musicians stop mid-score, they have to wait for the technicians to re-cue the click before starting again at an agreed upon place. Second, they now work on playing in time with the click rather than with one another, and to do this the musicians in each quartet focus on their "leader," the first violin, to communicate the cues he or she is receiving through the earpiece, a new task for that leader. Almost all physicalized and visual communication between quartets has stopped. Gestures subside. Cue relay is a thing of the past. Chairs spring open, and musicians sit, circling into their own groups, where they once stood at the edges of the balconies peering up and down across the divide.

First reactions to the click: Lina, its strongest advocate, admits that it's hard to "play music" with a track in your ear. J agrees. The playing "feels military," and the musicians feel constrained by the click in terms of the range of "character" they can bring to the music. However, the advantages are also weighed: The musicians can play softly now, as the score is written, rather than playing loud to be heard. Given that they are now playing more softly, and given that they are now playing in perfect time together, they can actually *hear* one another better. The result, heard by those musicians who leave their seat and wander the staircase to listen as the others play, is more "musical." It sounds better.

Tony reminds the group: "As we get familiar with [the click] we can expand it." By which he means, as they master the click, they can begin to play less rigidly *with* it, and more *in relation to* it. Lina suggests that while "temporality is taken away" from them, they can find other ways to create changes in character. Ivo makes the point that "Tavener's music is an

absolute inner pulse with stillness around it,” and that the click actually supports the aesthetics of the piece. J, on the other hand, argues that the click-track takes away the struggle, the essence of the challenge of four quartets coming together. Cathy sympathizes with J, but also with Q4’s plight, and therefore is willing to work with the click despite her aesthetic preference. After playing through the full piece with the click-track, group opinion coalesces quickly around the decision to use it. Ivo declares the music better with the click. The music indeed now wafts through the sound funnel. “It sounds more clear,” says Cathy. A more “ethereal” effect can be pursued. The click also alleviates stress; musicians no longer have to strain to hear or be heard. Q4 is delighted with the overall effect. Q2 concedes, telling me in their interview that they do so because the decision ultimately rests with the Medici Quartet, since this is “their project.”

Reflecting Friday morning, after the performance, Fenella tells me that in her opinion, their playing became more “playful” once they got the click. Being able to hear one another gave them freedom to listen. She declares that “the whole thing came together” in performance Thursday night, and that she was persuaded “for the first time” that the composition works in different levels and can work in different configurations. Several others involved in the performance offered their own evaluation of the success of the performance by writing letters to Paul, which he posted to his blog: Producer Tim McHenry called the performance “phenomenal,” declaring that the conception of the levels worked. Q4’s violist, Melia, reported that despite the challenging configuration, “you could feel a genuine connection between all of the groups.” Matthew Gurewitsch, a regular reviewer for *The New York Times* writing for Pundcity.com⁶ said: “Though divided into four movements and punctuated by chant-like calls from the singing bowl, the composition unfolded in one shining arc...Those who attend are in for a singular experience.” And an audience member described that “in the performance the distinction between sound and space sometimes seemed to dissolve, so perfectly did the music and the museum complement one another.” Paul received, to my knowledge, one critique of the performance, which he did not post to the blog because he “doesn’t want John worried.” While mostly favorable, the writer exposed the use of the click-track and claimed the piece should have been composed for the Spiral configuration more precisely.

Performing in Multiple Venues, June-July 2009

Scheduled before the world premiere of *Towards Silence* in New York was perceived and blogged a success, the UK premiere at Winchester Cathedral in

⁶ <http://www.beyondcriticism.com/2009/04/sir-john-tavener-towards-silence>

July arises next on the agenda. Here, the musicians are promised the ultimate test of this exercise: to perform together at the extreme distance afforded by one of the most expansive cathedrals in Europe, completely out of range of one another's sight and, likely, hearing. Leading up to this performance, the UK quartets have two concerts in London, one for The Study Society at The Colet House, and one for Westminster Synagogue, which, being private concerts (even if sold out to audiences of 200), are considered by Paul to be "rehearsals" for the premiere. Following Winchester, a final performance will occur at St. Mary's Church as the opening to the Petworth Festival.

Rehearsals

To achieve performance of *Towards Silence* in four radically different spaces, and based on the perceived success of the NYC exercise, the UK quartets begin rehearsals *with* the click-track. No time is spent considering alternatives, though Cathy mourns the loss of the connections built by working without the click: "It's like rushing straight for a Caesarian section instead of trying natural birth first!" However, Ivo and Tony have returned from NYC true believers in the click, and proselytize to the others. Ivo tells the violist of Q2, that with the click "you have the rhythm, so it gives you more freedom. It feels horrible, but it's amazing." The musicians have spent the morning of the first day of rehearsals focused on the first act of their summer concerts, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, with a plan only to "play through" the second act, *Towards Silence*, once that afternoon, with the click. Tony explains: "I'm not worried about *Towards Silence*. We have the click-track."

Reconvening in Paul's barn, the four quartets organize themselves into a configuration that disrupts, as much as possible, their sight lines, so that they may begin to practice playing without the aid of visual communication. (See **Figure 4**.) They work first with the click-track played over the barn's sound system, for all to hear. By the second day of rehearsals, they use the wireless earpieces. As they rehearse, Tony reports on interpretive decisions made by the quartets in NYC. Ivo listens from outside the circle and offers input. When Cathy says that it "doesn't sound as clear as New York," Ivo supports her assessment, explaining that the change is due to the room they are in. Physically, they are "on top of one another" in this space. More distance is needed to hear properly. Ivo coaches the group to adjust dynamics to the space, feedback he will offer differently to suit each of the spaces they travel to. In the barn, dynamics need to be "on the lower edge."

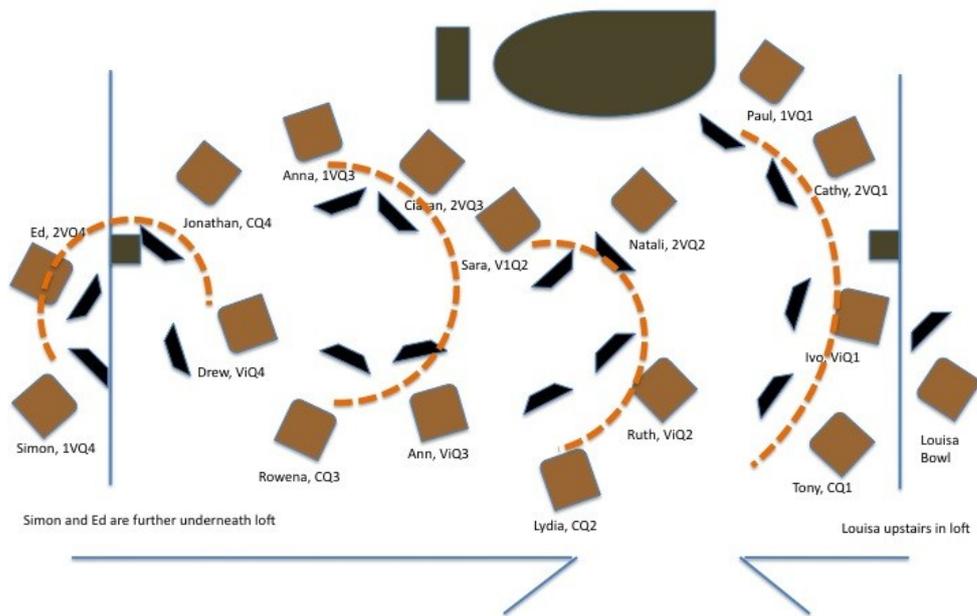


Figure 4: Rehearsal seating configuration, quartets nested, L to R: Q4, Q3, Q2, Q1. The Tibetan Singing Bowl player is positioned in the loft at the right.

The last hours of rehearsal focus primarily on “playing right with the click,” including sorting out the leadership needed from each first violin. While the musicians make some preliminary choices regarding dynamics, they will need to adjust balance to each performance space. Four days of rehearsals in the barn end in good spirits on the evening of July 3. The musicians plan to meet at The Colet House the next day, early enough in advance to rehearse *The Four Seasons*, and then work on *Towards Silence* in the performance hall an hour prior to opening the doors to the audience.

Performances

The Colet House performance goes more or less smoothly, with a technical glitch here and there (faulty earpiece, dead battery, getting out of time with the click) from which the musicians quickly recover by checking in with whichever quartet is seated closest or within sight. They perform in the configuration planned in advance by Tony and Artistic Director Jude James, who have called for four raised platforms on which the quartets sit to be situated in each corner of the 70-foot long rectangular hall. The hall is filled to the brim on this hot evening, and 200 people meditate in unison (they train in this at The Study Society) to the 35-minute piece. Jude is so affected by the performance that she attends every following event. When I ask her about her experience at the final concert, she tells me she “can’t get enough of it,” and that as a personal spiritual experience, it is “transforming” her.

The Synagogue is also experienced as a success, although (or because) nothing proceeds as planned. Tony and Events Coordinator Renee Salamon agreed in advance that all four quartets should be seated together on the ground floor, with the sound wafting up the open staircase to the audience seated on the first floor above. However, when the musicians gather at 5:00 to try this out, they discover that the space at the bottom of the staircase is too tight; they are seated “on top of” one another. They discover that there is a “too close” problem as well as “too far.” The musicians rebel against the possibility of all being on the first floor, claiming it will sound “too muddled,” and that the music won’t be audible enough to the audience on the first floor. After some debate whether to play upstairs and/or downstairs, they decide on a more radical option: to play in and around the staircase itself. (See **Figure 5.**) While all is not perfect in this configuration – Q2’s violist becomes alarmed when she realizes she won’t be able to depend on Q4 for two visual cues, Renee is alarmed by the change and requires problem solving related to fire codes – the quartets begin rehearsing this new configuration. As they finish, Paul, Ivo and Tony agree it sounds “ravishing” on the stairs. Paul says: “Didn’t get that sound in Colet!”

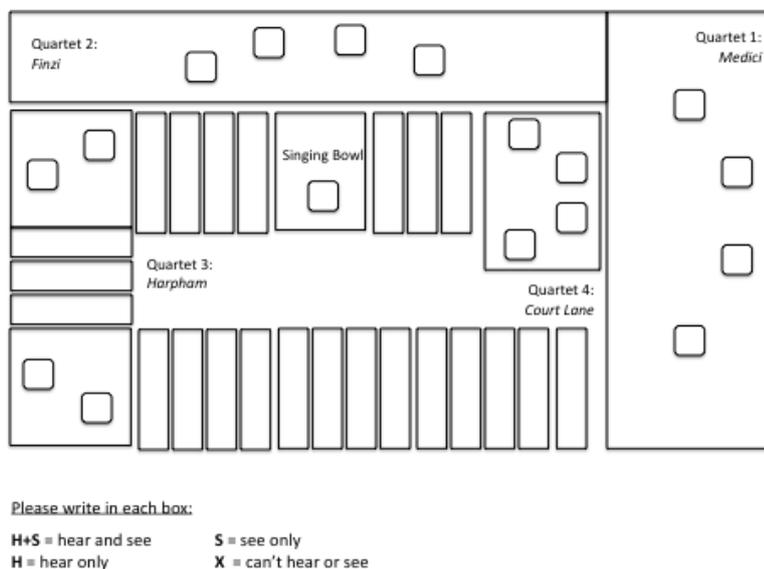


Figure 5: Seating configuration at Westminster Synagogue, in the staircase

Winchester Cathedral

From the moment I arrive at Winchester Cathedral, I notice Malcolm Cleese spreading dissent. Malcolm is not a quartet musician, but the bass player for

the Vivaldi *Seasons* and the producer of the next event at the Petworth Festival. Here is his problem: since 8:00 this morning (it is 2:00 PM now) two crews – a recording crew from the BBC and a television crew hired privately with generous funding from an unnamed patron – have been setting up extensive camera and recording equipment around what they have defined as a central “onstage” space. He is horrified by their layout, which indisputably dictates precisely where the performers are to sit, within a rather tight space in front of the Choir. He and the musicians from the young quartets believed *the whole point* of playing at Winchester was to reach a climax in the distributed design, to push the boundaries of this unique endeavor to its very spatial limits. Malcolm is organizing an uprising.

Malcolm and the more vocal of the quartet musicians exercise their arguments, which I paraphrase as follows: *Didn't we all begin this peculiar project with the vision of Winchester as the pièce de résistance of distributed quartet playing? Didn't Paul from day one take pains to describe, in detail, his vision for how Towards Silence will be impossibly performed in the four extremities of the cross-shaped Cathedral? Wasn't a performance at Winchester in fact sought after precisely because the Cathedral boasts the longest Nave and overall length of any Gothic cathedral in all of Europe?! What was the point of all that hassle with the technology? We struggled to integrate the damn click-track so that we could become capable of playing in any space, and especially this one! Winchester is finally the space in which we can achieve Tavener's vision – no stairs to contend with, no wide-open and well-lit hall. But if we proceed with this publicity-induced absurdity, we'll all be seated together, practically on top of one another! (And didn't we learn on the ground floor of the Synagogue that being too closely seated together makes it more difficult to hear the composition!) Plus, Tavener says “this is not music that should be heard as concert music [as in under hot lights, on a stage!], but rather meditated on.” We'll all be mercilessly exposed to the audience under the television lights, which is nothing at all like being enshrouded in the secret corners of darkness about a Cathedral. We will be watched instead of listened to.*

And Tavener himself is coming, today no less, and might die any moment! Shouldn't we be giving him the performance he asked for? It's disaster!

Indeed, I feel just as betrayed as Malcolm and the young musicians. The Winchester experiment was to be the culminating feat in my case study as well – the chance to push the boundaries of spatial distribution to the max. I can almost visibly perceive the Q4 musicians withdraw their artistic investment in the project. They are so totally bummed.

When Tony arrives, he and Malcolm get into it. I quickly learn that this layout was in fact prearranged by Tony and Paul, in negotiation with the BBC and television crew. When the opportunity for filming came up (i.e. funding), the trade-off was made: to sacrifice the aesthetic experiment in

favor of media benefits. Unfortunately, no one had bothered to tell the rest of the musicians about the change in plan, and priority. When Paul arrives with his familial entourage, he confirms this decision and layout. He refuses to listen to any dispute on the matter, and settles himself in his first violinist's chair to survey the crew work in progress, displaying his physical weariness as barrier to any further disputation. Malcolm retreats.

By dinner break, Q4's disappointment in the Winchester configuration (See **Image 2**) seems to have flourished into full-blown disillusionment with the project. Now that they are "practically in a circle" at Winchester, the click "feels pointless." Drew, who is usually the most animated of the group, slumps in his chair. He calls his work today "a job," by which he means to differentiate it from projects that involve "passion and love." He adds: "I feel like this is still just a professional product, at the moment."



Image 2. The quartets rehearse *Towards Silence* at Winchester Cathedral

By Q2's post-performance assessment, the Winchester experience suffered in comparison to the Synagogue, which was for them more pleasurable and more integrated. "We were almost audience members ourselves [at the Synagogue]," second violinist Natalie says, "I loved the fact that it was so informal, that it seemed really friendly." Whereas at Winchester, seated "higher up on an altar," they lacked the interaction with the audience, and Ruth, the cellist, felt for the first time as if they were separate groups rather than one whole ensemble working together. "Tonight, to be honest," continues Natalie, "we could have been sitting in a string

orchestra situation playing individual parts. Whereas [at the Synagogue], it was the effect of having four groups, that kind of surround-sound...and I thought that was what Tavener was wanting with it.”

Ivo, on the other hand, expresses a different experience. He describes the sound at the Synagogue as being “too loud almost,” so that “you couldn’t tell the detail quite so clearly.” He enjoys the effect of being in a large space, which he says allows him to hear better what’s going on, and thinks the audience at Winchester has a more complete experience of the whole piece. At least one reviewer, Andrew Clements writing for the Guardian online, criticized the layout as failing to honor Tavener’s directions, and blamed the cameras for taking “the edge from any sense of spirituality.”⁷ Tavener himself is thankful, but remarkably silent.

Conclusion

As the quartets worked, different criteria for assessing the quality of performance and meaning of the event emerged. Some, disheartened by leadership decisions, began considering it a “job,” while others aspired to make a “Really True Connection” with colleagues. Some musicians compared performances by reflecting on their own pleasurable experience in one space versus another, or their felt connection to the audience. As their experience working with the click-track altered their ability to listen, they changed their mind about the most effective way to coordinate the work. Many were disheartened by the wasted opportunity at Winchester, while Ivo considered it the most complete listening experience for the audience. None expressed concern with external assessment, beyond Tavener’s opinion. Robertson became fascinated with personal developments: he began telling a story of how Medici’s work together on this project was healing past wounds in their relationships, and on that account, the project was to him a great success.

⁷ Andrew Clements, guardian.co.uk, Thursday 9 July 2009.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2009/jul/09/towards-silence-review>

Appendix: Methods

The case I present here is the primary case of my current PhD study. While fieldwork was conducted prior to receiving the “assignment” to describe evaluation practices, the study examined the work processes and practices of the informants, and therefore fieldnotes provide relevant data. Fieldwork encompassed what was, at the start of the project, known to be the complete lifetime of the project: from February to July of 2009.⁸ With the processes and practices of the quartets in focus, I prioritized close, direct observation in the field and extensive note-taking. All rehearsals were video taped by two or three strategically placed video cameras, to enable detailed analysis of various modes of communication, leadership and rehearsal activities. In addition to observation of designated rehearsal time, fieldwork included observation and at times participation in independent quartet rehearsals, ancillary conversations, meals, social gatherings and correspondence related to the production of the events.

To clarify and augment results of observation, I conducted videotaped, informal and semi-structured interviews with informants, grounded in the context of their observed work process. I used visual media in addition to videotaping: I took photos, and made drawings of and took detailed measurements of each rehearsal and performance venue, tracking the change in seating configurations as they evolved throughout the process. Using these drawings, I designed questionnaires to capture data from musicians on whom of the other musicians they could see and hear. (See **Figure 1** as example.) These questionnaires provoked additional informal conversations about obstacles and learning associated with the project, as well as serving as another opportunity to validate observations.

⁸ Further performances at St. Martin-in-the-Fields and Salisbury Cathedral were afterwards organized in 2010, and a recording produced by Signum Classics was released in November 2010. I will attend both of the upcoming performances May 28, 2011 at the Salisbury Cathedral, produced as part of the Salisbury International Arts Festival.

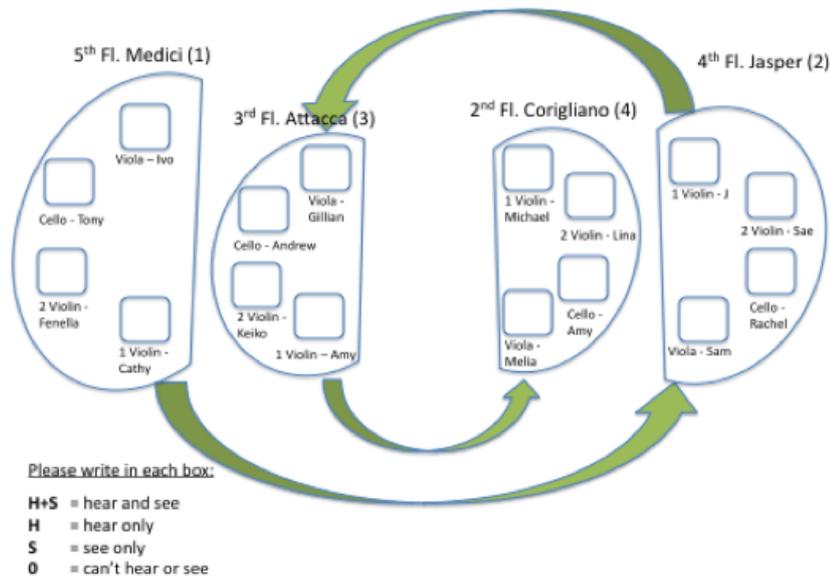


Figure 1: Questionnaire based on seating, Rubin Museum

During analysis, fieldnotes were written as ethnography, to describe and understand the social world of the makers and the context in which the work took place, as well as my role in forming interpretations, to support verification. Stories extracted from these “Tales of the Field”⁹ are used in this case. Fieldnotes are supplemented by the photos, drawings and measurements of the diverse spatial configurations. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed, and comparisons made across musicians and quartets, across performance events, and across the NYC and UK “cases.”

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⁹ John Van Maanen (1988). *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.