

CHAPTER 3 SIGHT/SITE-SPECIFIC RECORDING: EMBODIMENT AND ABSENCE

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‘You and I impact each other. Our relationship shapes the possible meanings of this performance, this writing’¹

‘My stories are ways of closing my eyes’²

1 Introduction

There is a strange dissonance in my musical praxis centred around the visual aspect of music. My introduction to music through learning the guitar was as much visual as it was aural. Reading music – the visual practice of seeing musical symbols and denoting meaning therefrom – was as informative a part of my early musical engagement as was the aural aspect. This proved to be a strength in my professional music career as I made the move from classical guitar into jazz and contemporary guitar playing. The ability to sight-read became an asset in musical theatre, background music gigs and session work where numerous and extensive rehearsals are rarely possible, affordable or desirable.

Playing rock music in my own bands in dingy Cape Town rock/metal clubs, I discovered a proclivity to intentionally deny myself sight through closing my eyes and playing by touch. In describing the process of writing without seeing, Derrida might as well be describing playing music with one’s eyes closed. He writes:³

It is as if a lidless eye had opened at the tip of the fingers, as if one eye too many had just grown right next to the nail, a single eye,

- 1 C McRae ‘Becoming a bass player: Embodiment in music performance’ in B Bartleet & C Ellis (eds) *Music autoethnographies: Making autoethnography sing/making music personal* (2009) 142.
- 2 F Kafka *Conversations with Kafka* trans G Rees (1971) 61.
- 3 J Derrida *Memoirs of the blind: The self-portrait and other ruins* trans PA Brault & M Naas (1993) 3.

the eye of a cyclops or one-eyed man. This eye guides the tracing or outline: it is a miner's lamp ... the prosthesis of a seer who is himself invisible.

Vincenze and Poggi have produced research that catalogues how 'eye closing behaviours' express and communicate. In creating a catalogue of such physical markers, they describe one such category as 'eyes closed while thinking. While concentrating we often close our eyes for a few seconds, to isolate ourselves out of the surrounding space: This is the cut off ...'.⁴ This is a productive description of my embodied experience in music making and the manifestation of this kind of self-blinding: a cut off.

This form of temporary self-blinding was not a mechanism to engage the aural through the denial of the visual, but rather to engage an immediacy of emotion. I felt myself more present with my eyes closed, the intimate act of sharing my music with an audience sheltered behind my eyelids, reconnecting with the musical moment in which I was participating. Closing my eyes, therefore, focused my mind on the present: on the sound being made by myself and fellow musicians in that exact moment. It was not an action of focusing senses, but focusing time. I found myself wishing I could do the same in my musical avenues where sight was needed, knowing full well that this was not possible because of the centrality of the visual within these musical spaces.

Sight – and/or the intentional deprivation thereof – thus has shaped my approach not only to experiencing music, but in a very real way to the creation thereof. I use the term 'blinding' intentionally: It is a term that acknowledges the agency and control I have over my sight. It is a term that – unlike *blindness* – acknowledges that my experience of sightlessness is self-inflicted and can end whenever *I* decide. It is a state of being that starts and ends when I require it, rather than a permanent fixture. This distinction is important, and echoes the delineation of black and white punks expressed by Duncombe & Tremblay:⁵

4 L Vincze & I Poggi 'Communicative functions of eye closing behaviours' in A Esposito et al (eds) *Analysis of verbal and nonverbal communication and enactment. The processing issues* (2011) 399.

5 S Duncombe & M Tremblay (eds) *White riot: Punk rock and the politics of race* (2011) 19.

Ultimately, however, a White punk can take off the leather jacket and shave off the mohawk, and ... integrate back into society's mainstream ... For White punks, like all the bohemians before them, being an outsider is a choice made by themselves, perhaps more existentially profound for being so, but nonetheless still a choice.

Thus, while a white punk could shed their otherness, for black punks the liminality of race was a fixture they could not shed.

Venter questions whether 'sound and music could help redress the continuous investment of landscape in visual epistemology'.⁶ Here, Venter is questioning whether in understanding intellectual notions of landscape, the visual should not give way to the aural. However, my embodied processes in this project ask a somewhat different question, namely, can the intentional absence of sight of the performer reflect the absence of his musical co-conspirators? Do his closed eyes reflect the distance between him and his musical interlocuters?

This chapter utilises a self-reflexive methodology to explore my embodied experiences in a virtual recording project 'The Minuet Suite: Bach reimagined'. This methodological framework has been a productive mechanism in the fields of music embodiment and artistic research to foreground the experiences of the performer in the creative act. In encountering my own experiences of this project and the unique historical context in which it occurred, the dual themes of blinding and absence emerged. This chapter therefore questions the role of sight and (un)intentional blinding within music praxis, as well as the intimacy of the relationship between musicians in an ensemble context. These questions dovetail with questions of music creativity across virtual and digital spaces, an important discourse considering the consistent evolution of music praxis towards digital spheres. This chapter documents my embodied experience of absence in the recording of 'The Minuet Suite: Bach reimagined'. This absence takes many forms: the absence of the other musicians involved in the recording; the historical moment of absence caused by COVID-19; and the absence of the visual aspects of music performance. Through

6 C Venter 'Negotiating vision: Listening with the eyes and hearing landscape critically' (2015) 34/35 *SAMUS: South African Music Studies* 387.

exploring the embodied positionality of the performer in this interesting crossroads of absence, this chapter reads the performance of the Bach Suite as a one of loss and isolation. Examining how visual cues inform jazz performance practice, and how my own preferences err towards an intentional blinding, sight becomes a central philosophical framework for considering the absence of interactions between musicians in digital performance projects. Through the embodied knowledge of my own experiences in this process, this chapter engages with the performative element of creating music under these circumstances. Further, this research engages with the notions of the visual in jazz performance, and what occurs in the performer when the visual aspect of collaborative music praxis is removed. Through self-reflexive vignettes such as the one which opens this chapter, I explore the experiences of such a collaborative project through the lens of embodiment and artistic research.

2 Background

On 23 March 2020, in light of the fast-spreading COVID-19 pandemic, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed the country, and announced a 21-day national lockdown in order to curb the spread of the virus.⁷ In a follow-up address on 1 May 2020 Ramaphosa announced the country's 'COVID-19 Risk-Adjusted Strategy', with five levels of lockdown, the highest being Alert Level 5. The banning of public gatherings under these lockdown levels highlighted the precarity of many South African musicians, for whom performance fees were integral to their economic survival. The lockdown further showed the vulnerable position of South African musicians, with little financial support from government or private enterprise (a point further belaboured by the alleged mismanagement of relief funds for musicians within the National Arts Council).⁸ The sudden eradication of public performances resulted in musicians globally seeking alternative and largely digital mechanisms for performing, engaging

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LegaUR1A0Jg&ab_channel=EyewitnessNews (accessed 28 June 2021).

8 K Masweneng 'National Arts Council hauled to court as artists continue to picket' 1 April 2021, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2021-04-01-national-arts-council-hauled-to-court-as-artists-continue-to-picket/> (accessed 29 June 2021).

supporters, disseminating their music and ultimately earning an income. In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, of course, musicians were encouraged to utilise digital platforms as alternative outlets for engagement and revenue, but the pandemic moved this from a potential fertile ground to an essential practice.

One such digital performance was curated by the collaborative and experimental performance platform Biblioteek Productions. The ‘20/20 Entertainment in Containment’ concert series presented 20 ‘Classical inter-disciplinary’ performances of 20 minutes each. Tickets for the online event were sold online, and ticket holders were provided with login details to access the content. The concert series challenged musicians to create content that – while rooted in Western art music – was interdisciplinary and fused multiple genres. As part of this series, the Hot Club of Cape Town⁹ presented a concert on 7 August 2020 entitled ‘The Minuet Suite: Bach reimagined’.¹⁰ The group performed three works by Johann Sebastian Bach, namely, Minuet II from ‘Klavier Suite in G Minor’ BWV 822; Minuet BWV Anh II 116 from Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach; and Minuet BWV, Anh II 114/Anh III 183. In keeping with the band’s musical inclinations and the call for the fusing of genres from the concert series, these three Bach minuets were re-arranged in a jazz-manouche style, the sub-genre of jazz popularised by Romany gypsies in France in the 1930s, most notably by guitarist Django Reinhardt.¹¹ In re-applying these minuets to a musical format suitable for this musical modality, reharmonisation was used, with the original keys being eschewed for the more Romany-sounding minor versions. In the ensemble were performers Daniel Zachariah Franks (violin, double bass, oud and mandolin); Elton Goslett (seven-string guitar); and myself (guitar).

Because of the social distancing requirements of the lockdown, the

- 9 This name is derived from arguably the most well-known jazz manouche band, the Quintette du Hot Club de France active from 1934 to 1948 featuring renowned violinist Stéphane Grappelli and the central figure of jazz manouche guitar playing Django Reinhardt. The Hot Club of Cape Town began playing together in 2016, with Röntsch joining the band in 2020, being made an official member shortly after ‘The Minuet Suite: Bach Reimagined’.
- 10 This digital concert is available as an unlisted YouTube video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQ0Sjeac3hM>.
- 11 M Dregni *Gypsy jazz: In search of Django Reinhardt and the soul of swing* (2008) 4.

three musicians were unable to rehearse or perform together, meaning that each individual musician recorded and filmed themselves in their own homes. Unlike other musical performances – whether in recording sessions or live concerts – this method of the creation of musical content has embedded therein a sense of absence. The physical presence of musical collaborators is denied, and the absence of this tangibility, or the sense of making music *with* other people, defines how I consider the notion of absence in this chapter.

3 Embodiment and artistic research

The act of terminologically locating ‘embodiment’ is a process of engaging across disciplinary lines. Precursory searches on platforms such as Google Scholar and YouTube show that this term is utilised within a broad range of scholarly discourses, including cognitive sciences, anthropology, sociology, politics and the arts. Beyond the limited world of academia, embodiment has found its way into TedTalks as well as having its own YouTube channel, aptly named ‘The embodiment channel’.¹²

The terminological fluidity of embodiment thus displays its malleability: It can be shaped and recontextualised to fit within a wide array of interpretations that are trans-disciplinary in nature. In light of the flexibility of the term ‘embodiment’, a productive mechanism for understanding a conceptual framework of embodiment that allows for intellectual malleability would be that of Gibbs, who writes:¹³

People’s subjective, felt experiences of their bodies in action provide part of the fundamental grounding for language and thought. Cognition is what occurs when the body engages the physical, cultural world and must be studied in terms of the dynamical interactions between people and the environment. Human language and thought emerge from recurring patterns of embodied activity that constrain ongoing intelligent behaviour. We must not assume cognition to be purely internal, symbolic, computational,

12 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfgLCTiNzVpIeL_j7Icxh8w (accessed 8 June 2021).

13 RW Gibbs *Embodiment and cognitive science* (2005) 9.

and disembodied, but seek out the gross and detailed ways that language and thought are inextricably shaped by embodied action.

Thus, in locating the discourse of embodiment into the arts, this chapter aligns notions of embodiment with the field of artistic research, using Borgdorff's notions of 'non-conceptual' or 'embodied knowledge' as an intellectual springboard.¹⁴ Borgdorff argues that these forms of knowledge are held by a practitioner, which in turn are activated in the creative moment. Klein argues that 'to have an artistic experience means to have a look from outside of a frame and simultaneously enter into it',¹⁵ and this dual position affords different knowledges. This position is also held by Cobussen,¹⁶ who considers the inherently physical act of music making as having embodied and tacit knowledge, and thus artistic practice is 'an articulation of the non-propositional forms of knowledge and experience in and through the creation of art'.¹⁷

Artistic research has become the catch-all term for disciplines and methodologies previously named practice-led, practice-informed or practice-based research. The term is intentionally broad so as to allow as wide a scope as possible for what can be considered artistic research. In this regard Kj rup (2011) argues for an approach to artistic research as pluralistic, rather than singular and narrow. This pluralistic and open understanding of artistic research allows for new forms of enquiry and knowledge to be embraced, and encourages the exploration of new paradigms of understanding.

While approaches in artistic research are encouraged to be diverse, a general understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the discourse is provided by Candy, who wrote that artistic research is 'original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly

14 H Borgdorff *The conflict of the faculties: Perspectives on artistic research and academia* (2012) 47.

15 J Klein *What is artistic research?* <https://gloriagduran.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Klein-ON-ARTISTIC-RESEARCH.pdf> (accessed 15 June 2021).

16 M Cobussen 'The Trojan horse: Epistemological explorations concerning practice-based research' (2007) 12 *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* 18.

17 Borgdorff (n 14) 122.

by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice'.¹⁸ Thus, artistic research concerns itself with practice as not only knowledge-generating, but knowledge itself, an approach to understanding art through the methodological praxis of the artist, and the non-conceptual knowledge imbedded therein.

Artistic research can thus be seen as a reaction against the historical split in institutional thought between theoretical and practical knowledge. Through artistic research, practice and theory are integrated and are dialogical, and 'unite[s] the artistic and the academic in an enterprise that impacts both domains'.¹⁹ In the discipline of music, artistic research philosophy holds that the distinction between performer and researcher, or composer and researcher, is non-existent. Stolp argues that artistic research places the performer as a 'self-reflexive entity'²⁰ and that through practice is able to reflect upon and critique their praxis in order to attain new or different understandings of music. Thus, in music studies such an approach integrates the performance and research elements which have historically been separated in music education.

This philosophical disentangling of disciplinary lines, those between practitioner and researcher, performer and musicologist, and so forth, mirrors the call for inter- and trans-disciplinarity present in the post-modernist turn in humanities study. The link between embodiment and artistic research here is quite clear: Both align the unique position and experiences of the body with unique opportunities for meaning making and knowledge production. If embodiment seeks to overturn the mind-body dualism,²¹ then artistic research seeks similar dismantling of intellect-practice binaries.

In the context of music research, Clayton & Leante argue that

18 L Candy *Practice-based research: A guide. Creativity and cognition studios report 2006-V1.0 (November)* 3, <https://www.creativityandcognition.com/resources/PBR%20Guide-1.1-2006.pdf> (accessed 10 June 2021).

19 H Borgdorff 'The production of knowledge in artistic research' in M Biggs & H Karlsson (eds) *The Routledge companion to research in the arts* (2011) 44.

20 M Stolp 'Practice-based research in music: International perspectives, South African challenges' (2012) 32 *SAMUS: South African Music Studies* 80.

21 M Clayton & L Leante 'Embodiment in music performance' in M Clayton, B Dueck & L Leante (eds) *Experience and meaning in music performance* (2013) 264.

[a]t a phenomenological level, music cognition is embodied in the primary sense that it relates to the production of sound either within bodies or through the action of bodies on external sound-producing objects, as well as through our conscious experience of being in time with others. But it is also embodied in that we make sense of music through metaphors derived from our general bodily experience of the world as well as through our specific bodily experiences of engaging with music.²²

The notion of music as an embodied experience is further discussed by McRae, who applied an autoethnographic methodology to documenting his learning the electric bass guitar. McRae argues that the physical tactile nature of music instruments ‘are connected to and with our experience of the world at an embodied level, and these connections shape the ways in which we know the world and are in the world’.²³

It is not only the musician’s relationship with their instrument that engages a form of embodiment, but it is also the connection with their environment. Wöllner states that ‘[e]xperiences of sound and music ... are genuinely multimodal by evoking vivid connections to bodily and spatial representations’,²⁴ a position mirroring Clayton & Leante who write that ‘[m]usical performance and cognition are therefore “embodied” in multiple senses ... musical experience are likely to be shaped by the structure of our bodies and by our experience of interacting with our environment’.²⁵

What is evident, therefore, is that exploring the embodied relationship between a musician and their instrument and environment leads to a rich scholarly discourse of understanding the music-making moment. This chapter expands on this discourse, seeking to access the embodied knowledge of performing beyond standard music-making environments, where the physicality of ensemble playing is disrupted through distance, and reconstructed through technology and digitality.

22 Clayton & Leante (n 21) 266.

23 McRae (n 1) 136.

24 C Wöllner ‘Introduction: Structured sounds in bodily and spatial dimensions’ in C Wöllner (ed) *Body, sound and space in music and beyond: Multimodal explorations* (2017) 2.

25 Clayton & Leante (n 21) 275.

4 Jazz ensemble playing

In understanding the unique nature of the embodied experience of creating the 'The Minuet Suite: Bach reimagined' requires contextual understanding of how musical information is communicated, both through written scores and verbal/nonverbal cues, to the musicians. Of course, there is no singular blueprint that all jazz ensembles follow in communicating musical instructions to performers, yet the methodology described below is a fairly ubiquitous approach.

A performance will start with one band member setting the tempo and count the rest of the ensemble in, and the band will then play the 'head' (the melody) once or twice through. This is followed by a series of solos from various band members, and then the head is repeated. In many jazz contexts the players work off a lead sheet. This is a single line of music with the melody written out and chords written above the relevant beat in the bar. From this, one instrument will play the melody, harmonic accompaniment provided by the chordal instruments, and the bass player will improvise a walking bassline from the chord changes.

While this practice might seem straightforward, there are a number of contextual decisions that musicians will make during a performance that vary. For example, if there are two chordal instruments in the ensemble (that is, two guitars, a guitar and a piano, and so forth) both players will listen to one another and revoice chords so as not to clash in similar registers. The bass player will also take into account the range of the chordal and melodic instruments in constructing their bass line, again so as to avoid a musical texture that is overly dense in a single register. Information centred around tempo and structure usually is also dependant on the performance and communicated during the performance.

As can be seen, much of the musical information that the performer utilises in their creating is visual, but it is not all expressed on paper. Musical gesture is an integral part of jazz performance praxis, from the tempo being set, to rhythmic *rubato*, to structural considerations around who solos and for how long. The role of gesture within the realisation of a musical performance is a key concept in the understanding of the practical make-up of a performance. Jensenius describes the nonverbal mechanisms that musicians use to communicate as 'music-related body

motion',²⁶ with Clayton & Leante stating that '[t]he movements of our bodies are not only functional in terms of sound production: gesture also frequently accompanies sound production in ways that appear analogous to speech-accompanying gesture'.²⁷

Thus, there is the emergence of two modes of communication of musical instructions to the performers: that which is inscribed in the score/lead sheet, and that which is expressed through the 'music-related body motion' of the performers. While both of these modalities rely on sight, the latter further relies on time: It requires the musicians to be producing sound at the same moment to communicate an immediate instruction.

It is the conflation of all of these forms of communication – along with a series of other factors – that make playing music with other people exhilarating. McCaleb writes that '[ensemble] music performance can be magic. Those playing share a connectedness and intimacy that surpasses many other social interactions.'²⁸ In jazz performance, improvised solos provide the player with an opportunity to express their unique musical voice, and this often is where much of the more obvious musical intimacy takes place. The quoting of well-known musical material, or the use of established licks in the solo, allows the performers to 'speak' to one another and their audience through their instrument, and this mutual exchange of social energy is a part of the 'magic' of which McCaleb speaks. It is these connections that draw so many people to engaging with music beyond listening and towards making these connections that excite people sufficiently to dedicate their lives to the performance and creation of music despite its undoubted emotional and economic challenges. It is this connection with others in the moment of unified sounding of music that has informed my own career decisions, directed my research and made it impossible for me to do what so many other musicologists in my field have done: abandon music performance.

Yet it is these precise interactions and connections that a global lockdown has denied musicians; interactions denied to myself and my two colleagues in performing 'The Minuet Suite: Bach reimaged'. While certain logistical pre-arrangements could bypass the practical issues –

26 AR Jensenius 'Exploring music-related micromotion' in Wöllner (n 24) 9.

27 Clayton & Leante (n 21) 273.

28 JM McCaleb *Embodied knowledge in ensemble performance* (2014) xvii.

tempos could be set before recording began, structures pre-arranged, endings decided on rather than improvised – the connection between the three musicians was compromised. The sense of unity that ensemble playing provides the musician replaced with loneliness: a loneliness compounded and exacerbated by the pressure of a lockdown and the fear of COVID-19. In a sense, our performance of this project was a capturing of this loneliness – a project that recorded in history one of the strangest historical moments of the twenty-first century.

5 Blinding

I cannot close my eyes while I play – I need to read the music. However, to focus before I begin, I keep them closed and feel my chest rise and deflate with air. My ground-floor flat in Kenilworth has been transformed into an ethereal space: All lights are off except for the fairy lights hanging on the wall behind me. With my eyes closed, the light reflects into my vision which now is dark maroon. I find this more soothing than the blackness of closed eyes in a completely darkened room. The maroon hue means that there is activity, there is life. After weeks of lockdown-induced disconnection, the feeling of life is reassuring.

It is the third night of filming and recording for the Bach project, and the deadline is very tight. I have been brought on last minute due to someone else dropping out, and I need to complete this recording tonight. My wife Claire acts as sound engineer/videographer/producer. Herself a musician forced into digitality due to the lockdown, she sees this as an opportunity for her to familiarise herself with the audio/visual gear she has bought to transition her career into virtual spaces. I am recording the third Minuet – arguably the most well-known, although somewhat twisted and deformed in its rearrangement into its parallel minor. However, I really like that it is in G minor, rather than the original's relative minor of E minor. Somehow this seems more transgressive, more interesting.

I let my hollow-body guitar hang on my shoulders, and dangle on my arms. The muscles around the thumb on my left-hand throb: a constant reminder of a hand injury I sustained in my undergraduate years, and one that ultimately put an end to my arguably misplaced aspirations of being a solo concert classical guitarist.

This injury of course aptly demonstrates how the playing of a musical

instrument is a bodily art: one that leaves scars, callouses, and torn and contorted muscles. Playing an instrument is an embodied experience, because it is of the body. McRae writes about his experience playing bass guitar: 'I now know differently about my body.'²⁹

I am struggling with this minuet, particularly my solo. I am losing my place in the form of the piece – a problem normally abated in live performance by visual cues. As a result I am not sure when my solo needs to stop, and the 3/4 time signature is making it somehow harder for me to find my place. I enlist Claire to add a further role to her title: conductor. When the final eight bars of my solo come, she gives me a signal, and then counts down to the final bar of my solo. It is when I play improvised solos that I mostly want to close my eyes, to choose my blinding. These are the musical moments in which I want to be the most present, as these are the ones where I wish most to express my individuality – where I want to say something unique through this hollow-body guitar.

6 On absence

Throughout this chapter I have alluded to the relationship between performers in live and recorded music contexts – how gesture and prior knowledge of praxis contribute to a unified musical performance. Yet what I have omitted is the relationship between the three performers of 'The Minuet Suite: Bach reimagined'. Zak argues that the 'social relationships' between members of a recording project 'contribute to the outcome of the recording project',³⁰ and how these social interactions are (or are not) embodied in the performance is of importance. I count Daniel and Elton as two close friends with whom I have often performed and almost exclusively with positive outcomes. The warmth of our interpersonal relationships can be seen in re-watching the recording of 'The Minuet Suite: Bach reimagined' concert. Yet this relationship is not as much seen in the performances themselves, but in the discursive sections that book-end the minuets, where the three of us discuss the music and the project. Jokes made that Bach's composition of both dance and church music made him the eighteenth century version of Skrillex and Hill Song

29 McRae (n 1) 137.

30 A Zak *The poetics of rock: Cutting tracks, making records* (2001) 163.

(dubbed by myself as ‘Skrillong’) and the entire project being sponsored by ‘coffee’ (a reference to all three of the musicians’ fondness for the beverage) display an intimacy that, sadly, is not present in the musical performances.

The fact that the video presents less musical intimacy between performers is of little surprise considering the context in which it was both conceived and created. The entire premise of site-specific performance is that the location of a work’s performance impacts and shapes the work itself.³¹ In the context of recording studios, Jude Brereton writes that ‘[i]f, as many musicians would agree, the performer, the sound of the instrument and the sound of the room are actually three symbiotic aspects of one whole, then recording inherently captures only one small part of the musical performance’.³² The process of recording music already is one of imitation of intimacy, or compensation for a lack thereof. Recording studios – be they large-scale established studios or make-shift home studios – by design are sites of isolation, intimacy, and often fear.³³ Recorded music is often accused of lacking the excitement of live performance, where inter-musician intimacy is supplanted by the need for the most accurate take. For a band to be recorded playing together requires a large enough room and extensive equipment to prevent sound bleed, so most studios recommend recording each individual musician separately, further relocating the desired outcome from communal expression to the performance precision of the individual.

This isolation is exacerbated in virtual recording projects such as ours. Taking place during South Africa’s COVID-19 lockdown meant that not only could we not record together, but all the creative decisions around form, solos, and so forth were also conducted virtually. This meant that in addition to the musical and creative acts being recreated in virtual spaces, so too were the interactive relationships.³⁴ As much as this can be

31 N Kaye *Site-specific art: Performance, place and documentation* (2000) 1.

32 J Brereton ‘Music perception and performance in virtual acoustic spaces’ in Wöllner (n 24) 219.

33 P Thompson & B Lashua ‘Getting it on record: Issues and strategies for ethnographic practice in recording studios’ (2014) 43 *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 749.

34 G Hajdu ‘Embodiment and disembodiment in networked music performance’ in Wöllner (n 24) 257.

simulated digitally, aspects of the inter-personal musical communication and intimacy were not re-created in this digital space and in revisiting the video recordings, this unfortunately is evident. This absence is embedded into the fabric of project with the creative output reflecting not only the absence of a musical interaction between band members, but an interaction with others intentionally limited during a pandemic.

The collective praxis of music making can be understood as a means through which group identity and social bonding are manifested.³⁵ Further, it is not only the practice of creation, but the spaces in which said creation occurs, that inform and shape the performance, as Taylor, Raine & Hamilton argue: '[T]he spatial attributes – the cultural and physical aspects – of other music spaces are intricately linked to the musical practices that they house'.³⁶ In this sense, 'The Minuet Suite: Bach reimagined' falls outside of both the social and spatial aspects typically associated with a recording project. The ability to 'play off' one another – utilising the tacit presence and playing of other musicians to inform your own musical decisions – was removed entirely. The intimacy of musical interlocutors being removed creates a void in the interactive nature of a project of which the music is historically and ideologically linked to the very notion of inter-musical banter. 'The Minuet Suite: Bach reimagined', therefore, is a reflection not only of the musical malleability of Bach's music to be shaped beyond its eighteenth century context, but also a reflection of a total absence: musical, social and spatial.

Beyond the above-mentioned absences, such a project can also be considered a manner of history telling. Taylor writes that '[p]erformances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity'.³⁷ Thus, the performance of this absence may be seen as a way of embodying and communicating the social absence felt during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it can also be seen very much as a product of its time: a reflection of the global feeling of absence in the historical moment of 2020 and the early reactions to COVID-19.

35 KE Onderdijk, F Acar & E van Dyck 'Impact of lockdown measures on joint music making: Playing online and physically together' (2021) 1 *Frontiers in Psychology* 2.

36 IA Taylor, S Raine & C Hamilton 'COVID-19 and the UK live music industry: A crisis of spatial materiality' (2020) *Journal of Media Art Study and Theory* 231.

37 D Taylor *The archive and the repertoire: Performing cultural memory in the Americas* (2007) 2.



Figure 3.1: Screenshot from the concert with performers in isolation. (Screenshot by author)

7 Conclusion

This chapter has engaged with the intersecting notions of site-specific music performance, and the conceptual shifts that physicality place on the performer and their practice. These sites need not be a physical, geographic or ontological site necessarily, but could be extended to a historic site, or the site of a moment in history. The initial considerations I had in conceiving of this chapter were centred around physicality and time: what were the embodied experiences of musicians partaking in a virtual recording project, and how did these align or cascade into the notions of creativity during a global pandemic.

While these are interesting questions, and ones that I believe I have engaged with (although by no means thoroughly answered), other factors began to emerge through the consideration of my body in this project. What was the role of sight in my artistic praxis? Why did I have a desire for temporary blinding, and how was my praxis altered and reconstructed through the removal of the visual interaction with musicians, a removal over which I had no control? What did the absence of the presence of my interlocuters mean to the conversation?

An interpretive parallel can be drawn between my own self-blinding and the lack of the physical presence of my band mates in the recording process. Both speak to absence, to the vulnerability of the musical moment, heightened by the microscopic precision of recording praxis. I wish to

hide behind my eyelids but miss the visual cues and camaraderie inherent in ensemble performance. However, more than anything, exploring my bodily experience within this project reflected a need I had for control during a historical period of minimal power and agency over one's life. I wanted to choose the moments that I could retreat into blinding, and the moments that I could interact visually with fellow musicians. I sought a centralised control over my own musical praxis, and over my life.

As I hit the final chord of this final minuet, I hold my body completely still. Another trope of live performance: holding one's body completely still after the final chord has decayed allows for the musical moment to be all too briefly held. It is a tension that you as the performer choose to release, a moment of emotional manipulation on your audience, making them wait for you to relax your body so they may cease listening.

I break the tension as I so often do – with humour. For the first time in the project I look directly at the camera and give a wide smile and thumbs up. For me this is the opposite of my performance blinding – it is an obvious and deliberate acknowledgment that there is an audience observing me. I close my eyes to deny their presence – to capture the selfishness of my relationship with music. This moment – that was kept in the final cut of the project – is an acknowledgment that this music is existing in a realm beyond myself and my musical interlocutors. It is the moment that the audience are brought into my life, into my home, into my vulnerability – not blocked out by my eyelids.

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