Creating a Virtual Heart:

Arts practice with a defective mind

Colin Webber, M.Mus (Comp)
Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts
December 2010
Abstract

Creating a Virtual Heart uses an interdisciplinary lens to explore music making from the point of view of a person with Asperger's Syndrome, a pervasive developmental disorder on the Autism Spectrum, and conversely provides a musician's view of Asperger's Syndrome. In addition the dissertation uses new forms of methodology for conducting and presenting research in the creative arts. Autoethnography, systematic self-observation, surveys and interviews are used to explore the ways in which the heightened autistic traits of the condition impact both positively and negatively upon his practice, both in musical and social terms. The study reveals how the “differences” of autism can be capitalized on or circumvented by compensatory mechanisms.

Autistic traits that impact on creative practice include impairments in empathy, Theory of Mind and emotional response to music, sensory anomalies and increased local coherence. These traits affect the author’s creative process in composition through an enhanced interest in detail versus gestalt, the inclusion of unusual auditory experiences and the means of embedding affect within the music. Collaborative work is examined in terms of communication and understanding between members of creative teams, including verbal and non-verbal language and empathic responses.

The study documents an internal perspective on two very personal, and almost inseparable themes - a musical life and the experience of Asperger's Syndrome. By their very nature these themes are strongly loaded with subjectivity, bias and very personal experience. The resulting analysis of this affects first, foremost and strongest, the researcher himself and offers a window through which the reader may glimpse another reality.
Acknowledgments

At the end of any difficult process it is hard to decide who is important to thank publicly for their support, and who will know anyway and prefer not to be named. So I made notes as I went.

Thanks to;

- my Supervisors, Dr Brydie-Leigh Bartleet for believing, for knowing when to push and when to back off, and for giving me permission to not know the answers, and Professor Huib Schippers for keeping my feet on the ground and encouraging me to pursue something worthwhile.

- the research faculty at QCGU, Dr Stephen Emmerson for reminding me that uniqueness is the domain of all, Professor Paul Draper for conning me into research in the first place and not for mincing words, and Dr Gerado Dirie for saying important things with poetry.

- my colleagues at JMC Academy, Brisbane for discussions and proofreading. Carol, for her support, Manny, for telling me about flying, and Stavros for the title.

- Zen Zen Zo Physical Theatre Company directors, performers and photographers for their permission to use the wonderful images.

Phil Tyrer of amparose.com for the beauty and function of the website.

- my family, near and far, for things that only they know.
Statement of Authenticity

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.
About this submission

As is detailed within the dissertation, autistic traits may affect the ways in which ideas are formed and developed, both in creative practice and the derivation of meaning in daily life. These traits are also reflected in creative musical output and communication of ideas to others. It is not possible to explore the interactions between musical experience and autistic experience without an interdisciplinary approach. As such the dissertation has utilized methods and processes associated with sub-disciplines of music including composition, technology, and teaching and learning, as well as those within fields of psychology dealing with non-typical cognition. As a composer with Asperger’s Syndrome, who uses technology extensively to create and record, and who teaches these disciplines at tertiary level, these processes seem entirely appropriate.

This dissertation does not take the form of a traditional paper document. Instead it is a semi-linear multimedia document based in Web technologies, incorporating evocative and analytical text, music, photographs and video materials. These materials are intrinsic elements of both the methodology and the presentation format, rather than ancillary elements suitable for a media appendix, and are immediately available to the reader in context within the text.

The website therefore seeks to give an experiential insight into these processes, an insider’s view of thinking and creating, while preserving an appropriately logical flow for an academic submission. As a study principally concerned with musical and cognitive processes, the format reflects the author’s own research and creative experience as much as possible, presenting a document that allows the reader to explore and engage with the material in unique ways that suit their own style of discovery. This is enabled through extensive use of commented hyperlinks within the text, “suggested reading” links and “related posts” generated by the web server software. The reader can choose to take a linear path through the document by reading each page in order, but they are also free to follow pathways of particular interest or personal relevance.
The dissertation text is presented in two distinct styles relevant to the methodological approach of autoethnography. Evocative pieces are presented alongside more traditional text, and the two styles provide commentary upon each other, mirroring the relationship between the “heart” and “mind” of the author. While the document adheres to a high standard of academic rigour, it is also written with a non-academic audience in mind, an audience that includes other musicians and creative people, people with heightened autistic traits, and those around them.

The web-site consists of 200 interlinked pages approximating 82,000 words, with 90 minutes of embedded music and video. The navigation system that combines a Table of Contents, designated Suggested Reading and software-generated relationships is a significant aspect of the study’s methodology and is designed for active on-line web-server operation via the WordPress semantic publishing system. The assessment version of the document however, has been “frozen” into static html to comply with the University’s criteria ensuring a physical and unchanging delivery. Post assessment, the website will be publicly available on the Internet, a “living document” in a format that allows and encourages commentary and interaction, and will itself become a source for further investigation.

The publication of the dissertation for public consumption in addition to academic libraries has been a significant consideration in the design and implementation of the document. The subject matter, encompassing autistic traits and their impact upon both creative practice and the social functioning of the author, has wide implications in the public arena, where academic research can be difficult to obtain. A paper-based document could not have fulfilled this function.

It is clear from the wide range of quality of the existing Web based resources about Autism Spectrum Disorders that there is a significant gap between researchers and the community that research both targets and purports to serve. The Australian Digital Thesis repository and other Open Access academic collections improve the availability of information, they are still by and for academics in developed countries. The publication on the web of a research piece that is written with the layman in mind as well as academic credence is the author’s small contribution to this problem.
As indicated above, the site has been “frozen” into HTML to run locally on a computer and web browser with Quicktime. This is supplied both on DVD-ROM and USB memory stick. Opening the media will present a folder and the “read-me.html” file. Opening this file by double-clicking or from your browser will begin the dissertation.