Reflections On Soundscape Box Feedback Session

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by Mick Byrne

On 16 July 2020 Andrei Marberley and past music technology intern/ facilitator Matt Davis participated in an abridged trial of the 1st workshop in the series over Zoom. In preparation for this a kit with most parts was sent out. This session has a limited max time of 90 min. Phil Gullberg also attend most of the session in order to capture photographs of the session.

The Feedback session was started by explaining that both Cardboard and Plywood version of box were sent out in order for Matt and Andrei to give feedback on which box was preferable (the Cardboard next to nothing to produce and plywood about $15 to produce).

Also explained the difficulty that we have had getting the contact microphone to interface with contemporary laptops and smartphones, but that we would try not to get bogged down in this with our limited time.

Workshop 1

have a video wintergatan playing as participants arrive - *explained that i would be doubling down on "workshop best practice" in order to test the viability of Zoom for social learning. Also had difficulties with OBS, Webcams and Zoom (discussed below)*

Step Zero

- Intro to hands-on workshops in Zoom (10 min)- *Matt felt this was very important and agreed that the participant behaviours in a successful social learning / noise making workshop could be the opposite of efficient Zoom etiquette in a business setting*

- Media Consent and IP (5 min)

- Intro to the Facilitator and the Workshop (5 min)

explained my personal story of my practice 20 years ago performance creator, honours graduate in theatre studies and "Art for the Dole" facilitator as a context for my interest in creating subtle, textural soundscapes. Matt commented that this was important information to ground the range of activities we would be doing in the workshop and to explain to participants that they were going to be encouraged to [Paraphrasing here] "experiment with sound in the workshop not just to make a box".

- Show stimulis videos (5 min)

- Participants intro themselves -share interest in the workshop, what do you like to make, favourite sound. (5 min)

Step 1

- Assemble Box (10 min)

- Install Thumb Piano and balloon drum head (10 min)

- Assemble beater (10 min)

As per usual, I underestimated the motor skills and practical complexities of constructing the box. Andrei noted that all three of us are generally proficient at contracting these kind of assemblies, turning screws and especially assembling laser cut tabbed boxes, a manual skill set that participants may not posses. Even with this underlying practical confidence, Andei and Matt struggled to understand how the box assembled. This was exacerbated by the Zoom Factor.

This issue can be resolved with the following:

- Premade example shown

- assembly diagram printed on other side of Materials list/tidy drop sheet paper.

- number name part for easy identification.

- identify parts that require glue in first assembly (some parts are not glued until participant has settled on their own customised design).

Matt asked for a metal thingy (punch) for pushing out laser cut parts. If using Plywood version of the box, tabs on front lid (This is the last part to be fitted and is a tight interference fit) need to be pre trimmed and tested for fit before packing. Andrei identified preference for easy assembly wins, early in the peace(low hanging fruit). ie do not assemble complicated thumb piano first - [paraphrased] "we were more than 1 hour into a music workshop and we'd hadn't made a single sound!" Possibly start by making some noise before commencing box construction and move onto simple assemblies first. A pre-constructed thumb piano demonstrated before leaving this to last thing attempted will give context and may sell the commitment required to build this relatively complicated assembly.

Break Play videos

Step 2

- Install Counterweight blade, Free spring and Cam Tensioned spring (10 mins),

- Install Counterweight, Rubberband bass and steel string (10 mins),

Step 3

- Explore and document Sonic Vocabulary (Make and document 10 sounds)(10 min)

- Break off into pairs and share explore together. (10 min)

- Share favourites with the group (10 min)

Saying "explore and document a sonic vocabulary" **is a very loaded sentence that needs to be unpacked and assumes some principles of shared understandings-**

- The eventual outcome in this workshop series is **Assembling / performing and recording a kind of expressive soundscape made of found sounds for a short film.**

- This an exercise in scoring - and the artist that do this (film score composers) can treat sounds as a language for communicating with an audience

- but being proficient and communicating in this way, requires a composer to possess a vocabulary of sounds the composer to speak to her audience.

- so in this section of the workshop we are going to establish a way to experiment and document (record somehow so we can remember how to replicate them)

- And this will provide us with a vocabulary or pallet of sounds for the performances we'll make in the 2nd week of the series.

To be able to carry out this documentation we need to arm participants with language to transcribe the sounds they are making. Matt had some great ideas for effectively facilitating this section of the workshop. as well as describe how you made a noise "striking the side of the box with a muffled beater" Matt suggested I discuss and encourage the use colours, feelings, textures and onomatopoeia " an earthy brown thudd" or "uplifting, bright, chirpy tinkles over a metallic thrum" to describe the sound of running a plectrum over a compression spring under tension. Andrei commented that participants might feel uncomfortable when asked to go off into "breakout" rooms in pairs and could just sit there in silence. Participants would need to be encouraged to engage in this way (no different from a face to face workshop situation) and would hopefully understand that this is a big part of the point of the workshop. Facilitator will need to monitor this and perhaps break people up into groups of three so participants aren't left in a virtual room alone with a weirdo. If numbers of participants are low then facilitator could consider doing the exercise "around the circle"

Step 4

Contact Microphones (5 min)

Step 4

- Introduce open source film content
- Homework - customisation and vocab development
- Brief Reflection on workshop

Workshop 2

Step 1

- Welcome back
- Share customisations (10 min)
- Share Vocab (20 min)
- Recording (60 min)
- Workshop Reflections.

Step 2

Learn Audacity basics and make recording After workshop participants

1. email/dropbox recordings
2. identify accompanying film content
3. confirm name spelling.

Facilitator to compile and post these to a Vimeo video with blog post

Discussion of Contact microphone input issues

This is a significant problem as the workshop could essentially be identified as an indirect "intro to contact microphone use" workshop - the focus of the workshop can be simplified to a " session where we tune the sensitivity of our attention to the artistic possibilities of subtle sonic textures by customising and collaborativly experimenting with a pocket noise/music capturing machine." As Matt put it it is an exercise in acoustic "restraint". It is not a "Junk orchestra" style workshop where participants fashion their own instruments and joyfully express themselves in a loud cacophony...

...back to microphones, the ability to capture and amplify the subtle sounds that can be created with

the *Soundscape Box* require the capacities of a contact. Windows PCs, with some effort and adjustments in system preferences can be made to recognise input signal from a contact microphone direct via standard TRRS/ 4pole 3.5mm headset socket. Mac and Smartphones.

The theory is that the signal that PC / zoom is recieving is very weak, is being interpreted as noise and rejected/ ignored.

Solution is to try build a preamp and we have begun scoping this already.

OBS, Webcams and Zoom

The Workshops was conducted/ streamed from the new Facilitator PC using the 2 new Logitec Webcams. This and other computers recognise the webcams as the same and it looks as though the two get mixed up. it also sounded like the Webcam USB connection was dropping out from time to time and so OBS was loosing/ confusing its connection to the webcams. we did not get a chance to test the breakourt rooms function of Zoom.