

Diaries of Syncretic Musical Experiments #15: Unfolding Project X 2018 and its reverberations

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Abstract

In this paper, we describe and discuss the 2018 edition of *Project X*, held between October and December of 2018 in Aveiro and Viseu (Portugal). *Project X* is a framework that aims to promote “musical experiments” designed to foster human development, inspired by community music practices and listening experiences. Though the collaboration between Companhia de Música Teatral (CMT) and the Universidade de Aveiro (UA) is central to the development of the project, each edition features an established relationship with other entities – in this case, special needs people from Associação de Viseu de Portadores de Trissomia 21 (AVISPT21), visual artists from CentroPontoArte and students from different schools in Viseu. By presenting the specificities of *Project X 2018*, we intend to inspire a discussion about the nature and role of creative and collaborative processes in exploring the boundaries of music.

Introduction (Context)

The authors’ work, in which artistic projects act as laboratories, is developed in three axes: the creation of musically-based multidisciplinary work, the study of human communication, and the generation of tools to promote human development.

The practice of reflection on artistic creation and its communication is, then, an essential process and methodology, one that allows us to complement intuitive thinking with reflective thinking. The term “diaries of syncretic musical experiences” or “syncretic music experiments” was created to designate a platform in which these practices could be communicated in a sequential, organised way. These diaries describe several activities and reflect on performative practices and methodologies, and syncretism refers to the experiences’ relationship with technology, community, education and other arts, as inspired by Roy Ascott’s (2005) description of the term.

Project X 2018 is an example of this syncretic perspective, combining a visual sculpture and musical installation (the *Porcelain and Crystal Gamelan*) with a performative experience based on contemporary aesthetics, experimental music and soundscapes' integration against a social development background. Inclusiveness is offered by providing safe spaces of artistic sharing, conveying listening exercises, inspired by Schafer (1977), that intend to accustom the ear to a new level of sonic perception, as well as non-verbal pathways of communication (essential in establishing relationships between people who might have verbal difficulties). The project is also inspired on Community Music principles, since artists operate as facilitators, including the participants in the creative process and in the artistic result, specifically in the training of music students, proficient at their instruments but often lacking the social skills to prepare them for educative practice and musical projects (Higgins 2012). Although parallels can be made between community music projects and *Project X*, its idiosyncrasies, contexts and aesthetic principles are singular.

As in other projects run by the authors, *Project X* emphasizes an attitude based on a permanent exercise of creativity in dialogue with the act of human communication and social interaction. This is observed not only during the development stage of artistic creation, but also on the transformation that happens when performers and performance alike are given some degree of freedom to react to the environment and engage in playfulness. We relate these ideas to both Dewey (1980) and Paynter (1992) writings, prioritizing the experience of art and creativity, especially in educational environments.

Awareness of the world around us, and its subtle changes, requires the capability to understand our responsibilities towards one another, and the ability to react with sensibility and imagination (Paynter 1992). The path to achieving these is attained, we believe, by practicing creativity and spreading it towards a holistic presence, cultivating safe spaces for human interaction and development.

These ideas are at the core of Companhia de Música Teatral's work (CMT), a group of artists based in Portugal, including educators and performers who share a desire to develop ideas and art experiments to promote human connections and encompass multi-disciplinary artistic and educational works (shows, workshops, training courses, projects, installations).

Project X

Project X was created in 2014, from the confluence of three academic universes in which co-author Paulo Maria Rodrigues was a common element: a course from the Master's degree in Music Teaching named "Music, Community and Education," the PhD work of Inês Lamela with a group of inmates from Estabelecimento Prisional Especial de Santa Cruz do Bispo, and the Master's degree project of Pedro Costa in Estabelecimento Prisional Regional de Aveiro.

The project celebrated Communities Day (June 10th) by preparing a performance in which the different groups gathered to create and share musical experiences. X "marks the meeting point where each participant has, through artistic experiences, the opportunity to express his individuality and build with others a common voice." X is also "the expression of the unknown that surrounds a creative process that is rewritten as it develops and whose final result cannot be anticipated." X is, finally, "a mark in a game of human relations where there are only winners."¹⁵⁷

This first edition is documented in the PhD thesis of Lamela, which describes details of the planning, execution and discussion of sessions (Lamela 2017). The general plan for the project was as follows:

- Classes with the university students were planned envisioning the capacitation of students to work with communities, exploring both musical and artistic environments, and focusing on social interaction skills;
- Rodrigues, Lamela and Costa gathered regularly to plan the development of sessions with their different groups, while they operated separately;
- Grouped sessions were scheduled in the establishments, for students to rehearse with the secluded groups;
- Performances of both secluded groups were made at the University of Aveiro (UA) and the establishments, as part of the sharing process and as preparation for the final performance;
- The final performance took place at the Department of Communication and the Arts of UA, on June 10th, gathering all the participants in a joint and collective work.

¹⁵⁷ Adapted from the video *Porcelana, Cristal e Pássaros*, available at <https://vimeo.com/313127916>.

The project was established as an annual event, when students from the Music, Community and Education course would have the opportunity to interact with communities and be a part of a practical learning experience. In 2015, the project featured a Ukrainian community based in Aveiro, and the group Música100idade,¹⁵⁸ from a nursing home in Calendário, Famalicão, through the masters project of Joana Teixeira, documented in her dissertation.¹⁵⁹

In 2016, the Music, Community and Education course was extinguished, and Paulo Maria Rodrigues assembled a group of interested students, CMT artists and collaborators and people from the association Pais-Em-Rede, an association based in Aveiro that helps and promotes the professional integration of people with disabilities. The project took place at Fábrica Ciência Viva, in Aveiro, specifically in a CMT installation called *Pianoscópio*.¹⁶⁰ Thus, the collaboration between UA and CMT became more evident, with the latter broadening the artistic scope within which the project took place.

In 2017, motivated by Mónica Reis masters' project, *Project X* followed a different path. Mónica was working with CERCI-Feira, an association that welcomes disabled people and that collaborates with Orquestra Criativa de Santa Maria da Feira on a regular basis. Participants from the previous edition, namely the Pais-em-Rede association, were interested in being involved again, and thus meet this new group of people. *Project X 2017* edition was entitled *Viagem à Fragilândia*. People were invited to arrive early and participate in a workshop that enabled them to take part in the show. Thus, *Orquestra Frágil* (a 'fragile orchestra') was created, gathering all the participants and lasting only for one day.¹⁶¹

GamellN / Project X 2018

GamellN was the 2018 edition of *Project X*, named after the words "gamelan" and "inclusion." It was scheduled from October to December 2018, with weekly sessions, culminating on a final performance in which participants would showcase their experiences. Since the main focus was inclusion, all sorts of people were involved: high school students from the Visual Arts course; undergraduate students from the School of Education;

¹⁵⁸ Group of elderly participants from the Música100idade project.

¹⁵⁹ Available at <https://ria.ua.pt/handle/10773/14626>.

¹⁶⁰ *Pianoscope*. See <http://www.musicalteatral.com/pianoscopio/en/>.

¹⁶¹ Dissertation available at <https://ria.ua.pt/handle/10773/23258> and video documentary on *Project X 2017* available on <https://ria.ua.pt/handle/10773/23258>.

students from the Music, Creativity and Education course;¹⁶² artists from CMT (namely, the first two authors and video producer Luís Margalhau); visual artists from CentroPontoArte; people from AVISPT21, with mental and/or physical disabilities, ranging from late teens through adulthood.

The meeting point was the *Porcelain and Crystal Gamelan* (GaPC), an instrument / installation created by CMT for the *Opus Tutti* project, in 2011, as a part of a performance named *Um Plácido Domingo*, at the Gulbenkian Foundation Gardens (Companhia de Música Teatral 2019). The GaPC is a collective musical instrument inspired by the traditional Javanese gamelan, with porcelain, earthenware, glass and crystal pieces, arranged in a metal and wood frame, which can be combined in different ways to integrate the architectural space it inhabits (Rodrigues, Rodrigues, and Rodrigues 2016). This is an exceptional instrument for inclusive projects, since it has a considerable visual impact but does not require formal musical education to be played – people with different skills find different abilities and challenges within the instrument (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. The *Porcelain and Crystal Gamelan* at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in Lisbon. Courtesy of CMT.

¹⁶² Hereon mentioned as MCrE students. This course is offered in the Master's Degree in Music Teaching, at UA.

The GaPC was assembled at the Igreja de S. Miguel do Fetal, in Viseu, a church that provided a mystical and poetical atmosphere, and offered the needed human logistics to host all the participants.

Process and methodologies

Apart from the MCrE students, there was an average of 30 participants. In order to run workshops adequately, the overall group was divided into two. We took into consideration the diversity of backgrounds, whenever possible, and tried to combine them heterogeneously.

Each group had a visual arts workshop and a musical workshop per week, in a total of 12 sessions each. Visual arts workshops were coordinated by CentroPontoArte tutors, and participants had a chance to experiment with different techniques such as printing, press, and painting. These workshops were connected to the GaPC installation, which served as inspiration to the artworks produced. Paintings and merchandise were later showcased at the performance and made available for purchase, with proceeds going to AVISPT²¹.

The musical workshops were led by authors Paulo Maria Rodrigues and Mariana Miguel, and focused on three main aspects:

- Fostering a sense of community and group;
- Enhancing listening skills, both aurally and socially;
- Exploring collective music-making practices and artistic communication through movement, voice and music.

Each workshop lasted for one hour and was divided into three parts: **warm-up**, which consisted of name and interaction games, breathing exercises and listening exercises, based on Pauline Oliveros' *Deep Listening* (2005), and space/movement exercises; **in-sight**, named after the GaPC possibilities for inclusion and insight, and its inside and 'in sight' senses; and **reminders**, a farewell session for sharing important information for the next week.

In-sight correlated the focus obtained during warm-up with the acknowledgment of people around us, by practising communication (with signs and/or with music), interaction (between peers and between participants and leaders) and awareness (of others, of self-made sounds, of others' sounds). This was mainly gamelan-based, though some instructions or reflections were given on occasion.

In order to facilitate listening and concentration, most communication was non-verbal. The leader used a set of signs (see Fig. 2), which provided basic instructions and could be used individually or in a series.

In addition, we set up pairs inside the group, with an able person and a disabled one. In terms of movement, this helped prevent accidents, but also made sure everyone could follow the instructions and participate fully, even if they did not understand the request at first. Consequently, there was less need for verbal communication, which provided for better sound awareness opportunities.



Figure 2. Set of signs used for non-verbal instructions. Courtesy of CMT.

At UA, classes lasted for three hours, once a week. Since the students were proficient in playing their instruments, the focus was on exploring unconventional sound resources, movement and voice exercises.¹⁶³

Practice and difficulties

At the GaPC, the sessions had some specificities worth mentioning. From the thirty-two people initially involved, there were three drop-outs, one after the first session, for lack of interest in the project and a feeling of vulnerabi-

¹⁶³ For further information, see: <https://www.ua.pt/deca/uc/8622>.

lity (explained by the AVISPT21 workers), the other after a couple of sessions, by his caregivers' inability to arrange transportation, and the last for more complex reasons, as described below. We had a group of twenty-nine participants, plus organizers from AVISPT21 and the artists from Centro-PontoArte, who participated actively in the workshops, and facilitated external participation whenever needed.

Due to schedule constraints, one workshop group had more participants than the other, despite the original division. The proportion was circa 60-40%, which in turn resulted in similar though not identical sessions for both groups.

One of the initial participants, herein referred as G., had a severe case of autism. His participation was considered highly beneficial personally, with his school facilitator constantly present. G. was non-verbal and thought to be hearing-impaired, though this showed to be untrue in some singing and playing games. When engaged with group singing, or listening to the gamelan (either played by himself or by others), G. changed his behaviour, showing attentiveness. He soon developed an intense relationship with the workshop environment, showing affection for the participants and excitement at the beginning of each session. Although the benefits were clear and his facilitator reported a big evolution in school activities, accommodating for his individuality and insistence on his own activities proved difficult in the workshop environment. Other participants were very open and helped him engage, though this was sometimes frustrating and a setback in terms of carrying out the workshop plan. In order to continue providing for a relevant and thoroughly diversified experience to all participants, it was decided that G. would stop his participation in the workshops a couple of weeks before the final performance, though he was welcome to visit the gamelan and the participants either before or after a workshop.

Project X modus operandi includes a focus on the process, since the performance result is unknown until the final rehearsals, when leaders start arranging the materials into an artistically valid narrative. This was especially relevant considering that it was not possible to bring the MCrE students to Viseu ahead of the performance day, which added a new layer of "unknown" into *X* – MCrE students did not know the GamellIN people and vice-versa. In fact, the songs and pieces planned by Paulo Maria Rodrigues and Mariana Miguel were assembled for the first time only an hour before the performance, at the dress rehearsal.

Results (Porcelain, Crystal and Birds)

The week before the final performance, Paulo Maria Rodrigues and Mariana Miguel composed the performance piece, helping to establish some degree of reliability for the participants. This comprised several movements and smaller pieces that they were already familiar with, and those contents, with the participation of MCrE students, added a layer of complexity to what was already happening with the *GamelIN* participants.

For instance, in the piece 'estátuas' (statues), MCrE students created echoes for the *GamelIN* voices – an activity practiced by Paulo Maria Rodrigues in the MCrE lessons, incorporated with a piece created by the *GamelIN* participants, and then applied in the dress rehearsal.

Since space was limited, we asked participants to restrict invitations for the final presentation to one of their relatives. We then spread boxes (normally used to store the gamelan pieces) through the space, providing seats within the performative space (see Fig. 3). The dress rehearsal had these already placed in their spots, to check for safety and mobility issues that could arise.



Figure 3. Project setting at Igreja de São Miguel do Fetal, in Viseu. Courtesy of CMT.

The final performance took place on December 3rd, 2018, lasting 50 minutes.¹⁶⁴ The participants played the gamelan and their instruments, sang, danced, recited and performed. We included electronics using pre-recorded sounds that transformed soundscapes, adding sounds of nature and drones. *Gamel//N* participants sang and played the gamelan, both with mallets and violin bows, and vibrated tuned fish bowls (using the same principle as crystal glasses) (Figs. 4 to 6). MCrE students echoed their voices and brought *orizurus* (bird shaped *origamis*) that travelled within the space, aided by hands, bows and instruments. These students also experimented with metal bells, in interaction with the participants, and improvised on their instruments.



Figure 4. Example of gamelan playing using a violin bow. Still frame from the documentary. Courtesy of CMT.

¹⁶⁴ A short documentary (11 minutes) is available online, at <https://vimeo.com/313127916>.



Figure 5. Example of bell playing using a violin bow. Still frame from the documentary. Courtesy of CMT.



Figure 6. View of part of the audience and participants. MCrE students blend with the audience, in a singing moment. On the right, two *Gamell//N* participants play the glass bowls. Still frame from the documentary. Courtesy of CMT.

Outcomes

Throughout the years, *Project X* participants have furthered their interest in Community Music, either by enrolling in other courses or projects, or by trying out their own, during their Masters' and PhD courses.

For the *Game//N* participants, there were obvious changes in behaviour. For instance, one of the participants, who was highly self-conscious about his speech and voice during the workshops, asked for singing lessons at the end of the performance. We had the impression that he had become aware of his own voice during the project, which meant a lot to us, as the discovery of voice is related with identity and self-expression (Welch 2005). Another participant reunited with her instrument – the cello, which she had stopped playing a couple of years before. Additionally, CMT created an artistic video (or audiovisual poem), using footage from the performance, called *Gliding over Porcelain, Crystal and Birds*.¹⁶⁵ Almost a year later, the participants keep in touch through social networks, and organise social gatherings and activities. These are some of the anecdotal evidences that confirm the strong sense of belonging and togetherness that everyone reported during and after the project.

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