

## **The Dirtying Intention': poignancy, puerility and performance**

**Amy Jolly and Ellen Sargen, 2023**

**Saturday 1 April, Eavesdropping London**

Ellen: Today we are going to present a work that we are currently developing about discomfort in performance (as bodies, instrumentalists and creators present and watched on stage). For today's performance, it is necessary to tell you some of the intersections between Amy and I. Both women, both doing PhDs about collaboration in contemporary music and both living in Manchester, we have created this work around our similarities and our differences as physical bodies in a creative space. Amy is here as a cellist, co-creator of the piece and is premiering her appearance as commentator, too. I am a composer, but here as co-creator of the piece, a once upon-a-time flautist, live electronics performer and commentator too. This piece is created from two years of collaboration, including quotations and video footage of moments we have shared during this time and the conversations we have had.

Amy: I've been on a research path since 2017 when I embarked on a performance PhD. The 8 duo collaborations I've been part of have brought up many different topics. I've considered the meaning of collaboration; the relationship between me and my collaborators; the psychological journey that creating a piece of music involves; and more recently: the meaning of co-creation. However, my research has always brought me back to one aim - creating music that makes life technically more comfortable for cellists and documenting how I have intervened with composers to do that.

Ellen: Amy is one of the [seven] performers that has joined me over the last four years in placing their relationship with performance (and the physicality of performance) at the centre of new works, to be interrogated, subverted, pushed, mined, played with, transformed and even lied about through musicking together. This practice is highly participatory and a key outcome of the work is that in many instances, my collaborators and I have created spaces for ourselves as participants to 'be ourselves' in. Created entirely around the participant and their idiosyncratic palette of movement around, and technique at, their instrument (which is often re-built in the collaborative space), these pieces are often narrative-led and constructed around the performance experiences of the individual (or duo including myself).

Amy: Ellen and I met as part of a reading group initially. She always stayed quiet for most of the sessions, and then managed to say the most interesting thing when the rest of us had finished arguing. As far as I remember, we decided to work together from the first time we met. When Ellen said early on that I looked very stoic when I played, I didn't think much about it - I think I just took it as a compliment. I've thought about this a lot more recently. So what did Ellen mean when she said that I look

stoic? What exactly would I be hiding? Nerves? That I've worked hard to get it up to standard? That some positions are uncomfortable and I've had to practice them a lot to make them manageable? I'm not sure I'm feeling much at all once it gets to the performance, it's the lead up and preparation that presents discomfort, and that can be summed up in three categories:

One - the exhaustion caused by learning something new

Two – not being able to play something as well as I want to, which is either when something is poorly written and it doesn't work well at the instrument, or when I haven't had time or the inclination to practice and I have to bluff my way through a performance.

Three- the physical discomfort: aches from not practising consistently and then forcing the body to do something it isn't fit enough to do – and the pain of getting the left hand used to new combinations of notes and chords, which only reduces by doing it over and over.

By the time it gets to the performance, I don't want to be feeling any kind of discomfort or that I have to think too much - I just want to ride on adrenaline and go up and play. The discomfort has been in the preparation, in order to be ready for stage. As I went on to tell Ellen more recently, it doesn't really concern me what people think when I'm playing. If they like it, that's amazing, but if they don't, there's not much I can do about it. And what they think about my body or movements (or lack of) is beyond my control. More recent works have meant I've had to think about movement more, but only within the context of cello technique - exaggerating arm or hand movements for example. I'm not a dancer, I'm not on stage to show how I can move - I'm there to perform an audio track essentially - anything physical that isn't how I naturally move with the cello would have to be written into the part.

Ellen: Perhaps strangely in this context, Amy and I chose to focus our work on 'discomfort' in performance – exploring where we have felt discomfort in the Concert Hall, and where this has impacted our relationship with our physical bodies in performance. For me, this has been an opportunity to transform the discomfort I have often felt at being unable to control any narrative when I'm a 'body watched on stage', and for *Bonjour Claude*, this has been an opportunity to subvert the narrative of gaze, define our *own* aesthetic space, and create new rules that determine 'how we will perform' and 'who we will be'. What came as a surprise to me then, was not knowing who I should be in this freed up space.

This work as *Bonjour Claude* has disrupted my conception of 'who I am' while musiking far more than any other project; as a female performer and creative and body on stage, as a composer and even as a PhD researcher, disseminating our process here to you now. We hope you enjoy our hybrid piece as we perform to you as instrumentalists, composers, autoethnographers, interviewers, film makers, improvisors and deep listeners.

## Maps for Claude

00:00 Pre-recorded audio of low, bowed sounds, captured from a contact microphone stuck onto the cello. The resulting sounds are slightly echo-y, as if we are inside the cello itself. The sound pans around the space so the audience are enveloped inside the soundworld. The sounds become screechy as Amy (pre-recorded) explores different parts of the cello, moving from the tailpiece to the strings beneath the bridge. 'Crunchy sounds' are introduced when Amy (pre-recorded) smooshes her bow against the bridge.

00:38 Live Ellen begins adding some more pre-recorded sounds to the mix. These are similar to the existing soundworld, all pre-recorded from the cello with the contact-mic.

01:37 Live Amy begins introducing violent pizz. chords. These are muted-sounding, and the full resonance of the cello cannot speak.

[the pre-recorded audio of the contact-mic cello continues]

02:37 Live Amy plays a sequence of gestures that slowly ascend in pitch (although this is largely obscured by the distortion in the sound, created from bowing overpressure). The sequence includes sounds that almost sound strangled, created by using the hand positions you see on the screen on the strings being stretched horizontally in strange ways. The final gesture in the sequence is a low, quiet croaking sound.

03:53 Video Amy: "Am I aware of being watched? I don't know if I'm performing I'm aware of my body being watched, no. If I'm watching a cellist, I more watch the cello. The hands on the cello, on the body of the cello. I think that's the more interesting bit because you can't see the body of the person. It is a very physical instrument... It's hard to take that question in a positive way."

Meanwhile, a gruesome sound is introduced in the backing track. This is recorded with the contact mic again but it is not longer delicate, it is harsh and rough and heavily distorted. It is a horrible sound, created when Amy (pre-recorded) squeezed the flesh on her hand over the wood of the cello.

Live Ellen: "Sometimes I think I'm overly aware of being watched." [Audio introduced again of low, (more delicate) bowed sounds recorded from the contact mic on the cello].

Live Amy plays a sequence that is more musical than we have heard before, more expressive. It still sounds very dissonant and strange, and is played with hand positions on the cello that are unfamiliar, and uncomfortable.

Live Amy says the following while interrupting herself with a pizzicato sequence: “I used to not like moving at all. I guess I was always quite inhibited. I never really liked to dance. I guess I was quite shy.” (The pizzicato sequence reminds us of the muted pizzicato we heard before, but is more musical and expressive this time.)

Live Ellen says: “I hate the way my body moves when I play certain pieces” while interrupting herself by triggering more pre-recorded sounds, of a similar nature to before, but more screechy and violent.

Video Ellen: “I think over the years, I’ve just hated the repertoire I’ve played on it... it’s so fragile and pretty and doesn’t at all reflect how I want to communicate myself through an instrument.”

[The video goes blank but the backing track continues]: “If you thought of this as one of our gruesome passages, what would you do to make it more gruesome?”. Pre-recorded Amy: I want it to sound nice. Pre-recorded Ellen: What do you mean? Pre-recorded Amy: I want it to sound all lovely and in tune and beautiful, but that’s obviously not going to happen.

Live Amy starts to play expressively, then interrupts herself to say: “Practicing what we’ve created together is tiring. Some of the hand positions are tiring to hold. It’s not pain as such, more to do with muscle memory and stamina.” Amy continues to play expressively.

Video Ellen: “I find it a really interesting place for the performer to be in... I enjoy it when... I like it when... something interrupts the flow. I think as a performer I’m happy to make myself feel physically uncomfortable, but I don’t like to feel like I don’t have a choice.”

Live Amy begins improvising using the uncomfortable hand positions she has been talking about. After listening for a moment, live Ellen goes over to Amy, touches the cello in a manner similar to the suggestive imagery seen on the video earlier and says “What makes me really squirm is that people would think *this* is just something childish and simple.”

Amy continues improvising then wraps this up to say “One of the things I specifically said was that I didn’t want this piece to have any sexual content in it.” She plays a violent and reactive improvisation.

Ellen says “I don’t think it is that sexual”, which Amy responds to with a calmer improvisation.

Amy says "I think I'm right in saying that you wouldn't have written this if I hadn't given you the green light."

Ellen says "I feel awkward that it's happening again, this unintended intimacy. I feel awkward about what people think I'm trying to be. I doesn't match with who I think I want to be. This safe space we're looking for... I don't think we've found it."

Ellen introduces some quiet pre-recorded sounds from the cello again, and gradually fades them out.

*The end.*