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Redefining Community Music-Making:

An Exploratory Study of a Musical Playground Installation

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Background

How might music education and community music be conceptualized when there are no walls to contain the sounds being created, no teachers on hand, no appointments made for lessons or rehearsals, no predefined roles for the musicians, and no pre-determined cultural traditions to celebrate at the present moment? While one might think of community music as requiring at least one of these components, Kari Veblen (2013) recognizes that “a variety of alternative structures, [formal and informal, planned and unplanned,] exist to teach, experience, and perform music.” In our case, a formal physical structure (i.e., a musical playground) creates informal and unplanned, ephemeral musical communities, drawn together temporarily by this specific geographical, public space.

Susan Solomon (2005), in her historical research on the function of playgrounds in America, argues that, although urban areas have included playgrounds for children since the early 1900s, these playgrounds no longer serve as the central gathering places for a community as they did in the early 20th century. Recently, it has been proposed by architect Jan Gehl and others that public spaces such as playgrounds can be redesigned to offer possibilities for social interactions and community building (Gehl & Gemzoe, 2004). We propose that public spaces can be redesigned for community *music*-building as well – an alternative to community music as music instruction with trained musical mentors.

In 2009, one of the presenters was approached by Doug Schmitt (Vice President of Music Education at Schmitt Music and past-President of the City of Lakes Rotary Club) about the possibility of creating a “musical playground” in a Minneapolis park. As a result of a generous donation of \$40,000 from the City of Lakes Rotary Club, part of the organization’s 40th anniversary celebration, a musical playground was installed in Jackson Square Park in northeast Minneapolis, adjacent to Thomas Edison High School. Mr. Schmitt introduced us to a website for durable, outdoor musical instruments (Freenotes Harmony Park; <http://freenotesharmoniypark.com>), which we explored in an effort to determine the best configuration of instruments, providing a variety of interesting tonal combinations that might inspire creativity in this park setting. As a result of this exploration, we settled on the following seven instruments: Manta Ray, Tuned Drums, Glass Imbarimba, Sunset on the Yantzee, Outdoor Pegasus, The Swirl, and Contrabass Chimes (Appendix A). [Please note that there are several companies that make such instruments; this presentation is NOT intended to be a promotion for Freenotes.]

Dr. Lipscomb submitted a formal proposal to the rotary club in 2010, including a research component to assess the impact of the musical playground on the local community. We

then moved forward with purchasing the instruments and having them delivered to the park. On September 15th, we held a groundbreaking ceremony to initiate the installation and organized a ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the opening of the Musical Playground on September 24th. The instruments were installed in the playground according to specifications of the Americans with Disabilities Act to ensure that they were accessible to all.

Research Questions and Method

No research exists concerning musical or social interactions among those who create music with permanently installed instruments in a public space (e.g., a park setting). The closest example of research that we could find is a report by St. Clair and Leitman (2009) in which the researchers created adult-sized playground equipment for the Burning Man Arts Festival in Nevada. As the adults spun merry-go-rounds, swung on the swing, and swayed on a teeter-totter, their movements created musical sounds or gestures that were manipulated by the speed or the direction of the playground equipment. St. Clair and Leitman described that the participants were able to “explore musical interaction and the creation and control of musical gestures by learning the musical mappings of the play structures.”

For our study, we were interested in two questions. First, what is the impact of adding a “musical play” component to this Minneapolis community playground? Second, do children engage musically with the instruments or socially with one another in different ways as a result of this sound-making opportunity? We hypothesized that the presence of these musical instruments would result in a high level of musical engagement by community members of any age. We also thought that there would be a high level of social engagement between individuals, enhancing the frequency and quality of interactions in this public space.

In order to capture interactions of individuals playing the instruments, we installed a motion-detecting video camera on the roof of the YMCA across the street from the park. We were able to zoom in on the instruments to acquire a sufficiently high quality, video image; unfortunately, however, we were unable to record sound due to the distance between the video camera mounted on the YMCA roof and the playground. Therefore, results of the research study are limited to those aspects of engagement and interaction among individuals playing the Musical Playground instruments that could be observed visually.

We collected videos from mid-April to December 2012 and from March to July 2013. Vastly surpassing our expectations, we collected hundreds of hours of video from the park; unfortunately, despite significant troubleshooting to avoid the capture of meaningless video, a large percentage of the videos collected were triggered by some motion other than individuals playing the instruments. While this may seem like an exciting, positive outcome, given the resources available for this research project, it was simply impossible to review such a large amount of video. As one means of reducing the amount of data, we decided to review only those videos that were 30 seconds in duration or longer. Since we

were interested primarily in interactions between those performing on the instruments, we considered this duration an appropriate threshold for establishing a meaningful level of interaction.

Therefore, of the 23,352 videos collected, Dr. Clementson reviewed 4,654, assigning each to one of three categories based on video content: (a) active playing (i.e., two or more individuals are seen playing the instruments), (b) highlight (i.e., something of particular relevance is occurring), or (c) trash (i.e., one person is in the frame [playing an instrument or not] or no person is in the video [e.g., the motion detector was triggered by car lights at night or an animal walking across the park]). After this time-consuming review process, 3,192 videos were assigned to the “active playing” category, 20 were identified as highlights, and 1,433 were determined to be trash.

Results

Beginning with the 20 videos that caught our attention, we started by cataloguing a musical event: when someone began playing an instrument, the event began; when instrument playing ceased, the event ended. This resulted in 14 events over the 20 videos (remember that sometimes the camera stopped recording and restarted). Of these 14 events, the shortest event was 18 seconds. The longest was 9 minutes, 42 seconds.

The presence of the Musical Playground instruments did provide opportunities for playground visitors of all ages to interact in ways that would not otherwise have been possible. We witnessed numerous examples of musical collaboration, creative music-making, social interactions, and even dancing. The types of interactions we witnessed varied widely, including playing the instruments, instructional guidance (e.g., a parent instructing a child or a child demonstrating for a parent), looking at one another, musical interactions (e.g., having a musical “dialogue” among two or more players), focused attention, and sounding out a melody by ear (e.g., listening to a cell phone ringtone and attempting to play the same melody on the instruments).

One unexpected observation was that group participation often mimicked ABA form. A single person would be in the frame playing an instrument, then another person or several persons would join, swelling to a large group. After some time, individuals would begin to leave the Musical Playground, leaving a single person playing. There was another unpredicted, but welcome, outcome of this project. When attempting to determine an appropriate location for the Musical Playground at the very beginning of this process, Park and Recreation Board (PRB) staff expressed some concern about Jackson Square Park, since past data revealed a relatively high level of theft and vandalism in the area. We are pleased to report, as confirmed by staff at the Minneapolis PRB, that, in the period since the instruments were installed, there have been zero instances of vandalism or theft regarding these instruments. In fact, the only maintenance that has been required is replacement of the mallets as they become worn. In addition, the instruments are holding up well to harsh Minnesota winters and can be played at any time of day or night.

While our ability to generalize to other parks or geographical regions is limited on the basis of this single research investigation, we are confident in concluding that the presence of the Musical Playground has been a positive addition to the neighborhood, providing more opportunities for social interaction through collaborative music-making. Likewise, members of the local community appear to have taken pride in the instruments and enjoyment in the process of making music or of listening to others do so.

While our data are limited, capturing music creation without sound allowed us to focus on the physical aspects of making music together. Cunha and Lorenzino (2012) noticed the physicality present in their study of two amateur ensembles. They noticed, as did we, that bodies move spontaneously when making music (e.g., nodding, bobbing, and dancing). Certainly, adding microphones to the site or speaking with participants in the park would add to the richness of the description of what might be happening at this musical playground. How else are people communicating with each other? Were they talking, singing, or communicating through the musical sounds they produced? What would people share about their experience?

What was most striking to us was that this Musical Playground brings community music-making directly into the community, into a public space. While it is possible that some music-making was planned (e.g., the person who was looking at their cell phone and playing pitches), we suspect most of the music making was spontaneous. Musical leadership was spontaneous as well; mentors emerged informally within groups of people. Susan Hallam and Raymond MacDonald (2008) summarized that “every human being has a social and biological guarantee of musicianship ... everybody, regardless of social, educational, psychological, or medical aspects can communicate through music.”

References

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Appendix A: Instrument Selection

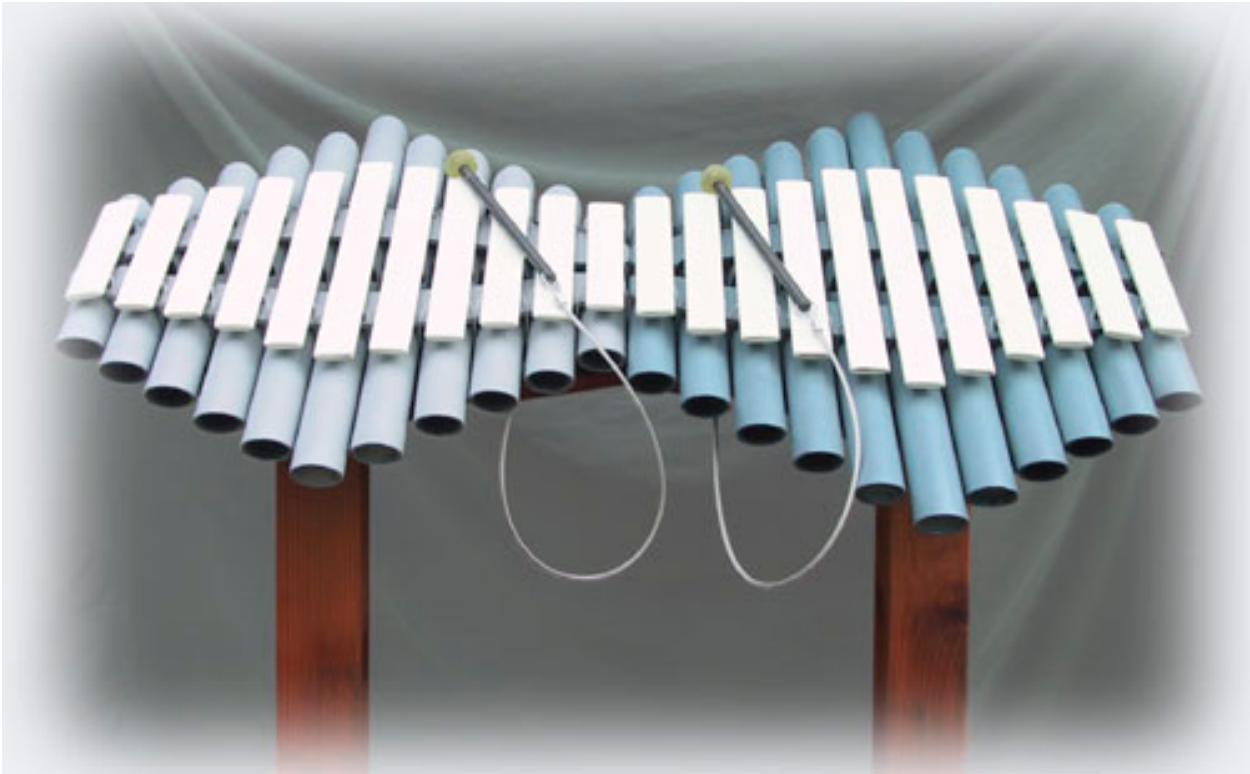
Manta Ray



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