

***Disdance* - new artistic environment**

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Abstract: *Music and dance improvisation is, first of all, a matter of communication, and online creation has to face different perspectives and challenges as well. Technically, dance is integration of sound, rhythm, space and movement. All these technical characteristics were restricted in online but, being receptive, together with TonArt Ensemble Hamburg, we discovered new improvisational and compositional approaches. The activities of the project Disdance took place every Monday evening between 15 of April and 15 of June 2020 on zoom platform. As artists, we wanted to continue to work in spite of all restrictions caused by Coronavirus pandemic lockdown. Involving in practical and digital actions of online meetings we became familiar throughout the project activities with a multitude of innovating techniques and procedures in terms of form and artistic language. This online music and dance improvisation project made me more confident in planning and online delivery of an art moment and it proved the limitation of communication and space is no longer a problem. Music and dance could create a new environment and new audiences.*

Key-words: *online improvisation; digital technology impact; distance creation; new artistic environment*

1. Online music and dance improvisation

Disdance was a project born from a cooperation of choreographer and dancer Nicoleta Demian and some of the musicians of *TonArt Ensemble Hamburg* (Michael E. Haase – Zither; Georgia Ch. Hoppe – Clarinet, Saxophone, Loops; Nicola Kruse – Violin; Ulla Levens - Violine, Kalimba, Percussion; Manfred Stahnke - Violin; Sven Uber – Viola; Krischa Weber – Violoncello). The activities of the project *Disdance* took place every Monday evening between 15 of April and 15 of June 2020 on zoom platform.

As artists, we wanted to continue to work in spite of all restrictions caused by Coronavirus pandemic lockdown. We think we had a unique personal experience to share – the step forward someone has to do in order to adapt to the world's changes appeared when the COVID 19 pandemic lock down has come, on March last year. We engaged in online delivery of an art moment hoping that it would have proven the limitation of communication and space was no longer a problem, due to actual technologies and internet facilities.

Online music and dance improvisation were restricted in online but, being receptive, we discovered new improvisational and compositional approaches.

Improvisation is a process that implies generally:

- creation and final work in the process of performance;
- a process of acting or performing between limitation and freedom;
- to focus and to cross boundaries;
- composing and interpreting at the same time.

To be successful in this online project the musicians had to be aware of the agreed improvising rule(s), to watch the body movements of dancer and other musicians, to listen to

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all the sounds in every performing moment, to use a personal repertoire of sounds in contact with their own instrument, to risk a certain degree of experiment, failure included, and to play with passion and determination.

Involving in practical and digital actions of online meetings as a dancer, I became familiar throughout the project activities with a multitude of innovating techniques and procedures in terms of form and artistic language. Dancers are permanently confronting with ideal shapes and forms of body movements. Performing in front of web camera reached some problems but it could stimulate new kinds of knowledge, could built new mental and physical constructions. Each improvisation experiment was a metaphor for my inner feelings and, the recordings of our meetings became emblematic for me as a dancer, it seemed like an inner journey.

Dance improvisation techniques was based on structural and stylistic suitability of music and dance: “music released into the brain an image that started an impulsive movement and, perceiving music patterns, the body movement became expressive.”² In my dance improvising experiments music, movement, body and mind merged on a dramatic visual expression.

Exploring the interaction between real/physical dance movements and different music sounds, we created experimental compositions involving digital technologies. The recurrent experiment of our project was a music and dance improvisation with a sort of parallel development. Dancer and musicians experimented the various possibilities of expression - blending music and dance and yet, indulging their autonomy at the same time.

Musicians try to step beyond the boundaries of the specific music sound of a classical instrument, experimenting with different kind of use a personal repertoire of sounds in contact with their own instrument. And, all of us, musicians and dancer were always involved in the process of “materialization” and communication of our ideas, concepts and thoughts.

The project we propose, *Disdance*, intended to present the (virtual) audience a new settlement of space and motion, a new corporeality and, by means of technology we want to remove the (false) barriers of the remotely artistic activities.

Our music and dance performance used digital technologies and the features of zoom digital platform in order to create an artwork that was collaborative, trans-disciplinary, it had elements of interactivity and, it was presented exclusively online.³

2. Digital technology impact

Turning disadvantages to opportunities, focusing on the conceptual music and dance improvisation that was grounded on specific dance techniques, we created highlights for new musical content in the new context. Dance and music practices are been reshaped as musicians and dancer had have access to this new computer-supported collaborative system that is much more different from the familiar physical environment we were used to. Using technology in new and creative ways, we projected the struggle of an artist for finding his/ her true way of expression, regardless boundaries and restrictions.

² Paul Bourcier.1994. *Histoire de la danse en Occident, II, Du Romantique au Contemporaine*. Paris: Edition du Seuil, p. 95.

³ *Disdance*. Online - improvisation: Dance & Music from Nicoleta Demian (Cluj, Romania) and TonArt Ensemble (Hamburg). Rehearsed during Corona lockdown. Ein Projekt des Online Musicking Call Mai / Juni 2020 des Verbands für aktuelle Musik Hamburg, gefördert von der Behörde für Kultur und Medien Hamburg. <https://youtu.be/f3UNAIL6Hyc>

The dancer had interactions with the various sounds of a specific instrument. Giving the body the role of an instrument of visual expression, the dancer/choreographer pointed out the musical structure. The bodily presence started a dialogue, in this very context, with the interactive digital system created, music and dance becoming partners. The dancer's movements were retrieved and had been transformed in sort of a meta reality by screen sharing and spotlights, and the camera had become an extension of dancer's body. In that way, a kinetic space was created, in which the reality of dance movements is extended by the interactive video system, gaining visual artistic values.

Targeting technical and artistic new ways of expression, new possibilities of performing in a new environment, we, musicians and dancer, discovered new ways of perceiving and acting, interacting and communicating. It was a challenging process because we worked remotely via zoom and sometimes the sound of music had a bit of delay or we had music and image interruptions due to internet problems.

Using properly the unconventional space we had (living rooms, attics, terraces, etc.) and learning how to use digital tools for music playing and dancing, all of us – musicians and dancer – became more and more confident in our ability to express ideas and feelings musically by dance via internet. Online dance and music improvisation experiments made the transition from the typically structure of a traditional music and dance improvisation/ performance that took place in a conventional space of a stage or a studio to one of the features of the present performing art – the (unconventional) virtual space.

The restrictive conditions were seen as a challenge, a new normal situation and, once again, the technology has been seen as additional tool for music and dance composition.

3. Creating music and dance remotely

Considering online music and dance improvisation a valuable compositional tool, all of us, musicians and choreographer, intended to change the preconception about online performance limitations. For example, dancing in front of web camera reaches some problems but it could stimulate new kinds of knowledge, could built new mental and physical constructions. Through that kind of new body experiments as a dancer, I could reach to proper gestures and body movements, and I could produce an expressive and meaningful dance form.

Dance improvisation set up a spatial and a temporal rhythm: sometimes the spatial rhythm comes first, other times the temporal rhythm made dance more exciting and accessible. The music is frequently used in dance compositions in order to configure and structured its movements. The method of improvisation has had a “great application for training dancers and choreographers to form deeply felt relationship among eye, ear, memory and one's kinaesthetic awareness.”⁴

As a dancer and a choreographer, I have been familiar to prepare dance compositions translating musical concepts into body language. Dancing on improvised music is different from dance improvisation on a pre-set, well-known music score because dancer must be capable to identify instantly music particularities and find out the functional yet impressive body movements that could visualize music.

Improvising together with *TonArt Ensemble* was a real challenge not only because dancing on improvised music needs great mental and physical effort in order to be done successfully, but also, we need a compositional concept as well. Every musician and the dancer had to agree on the spot with the compositional concept and then we improvised following one

⁴ Marc Raymond Strauss with Myron Howard Nadel. 2012. *Looking at contemporary dance: a guide for the internet age*. Hightstown NJ: Princeton Book Company, p. 2.

another trying to coordinate our compositions. It also was a challenging process because we work remotely via zoom (as I mentioned above), and sometimes the sound of music had a bit of delay or we had music and image interruptions related to internet problems.

Online creation of *Disdance* was, first of all, a matter of communication, of trying to experience music and dance composition in a different manner. Technically, dance is integration of sound, rhythm, space and movement. All these technical characteristics were restricted in online but, being receptive I discovered new aesthetic perspectives. Using properly the unconventional space of my attic, body movements became more symbolic in order to express my ideas and feelings musically by dance. Another technical method was to move the camera of my smart phone over my body offering guided imagery to musicians.

Even if dance improvisation means free body movements it always needs preparations. Our Monday nights' meetings were preceded technically by preparing the working space, the digital devices, then there was a short session of warming up my body. And, last but not least, I always thought about a concept proposal for the improvisation sessions: sometimes body movements led the music, or the dancer improvised with a veil, or there were music sounds which determined corporeality.

Our online music and dance improvisation meetings comprised different experiments by which dancer, and musicians as well, had experienced various compositional approaches; some of them are mentioned below:

Experiment 1: a body part led the music: dancer's body parts shared a specific instrument while improvising – hands with the saxophone or kalimba; legs with the violin; head with viola; torso with cello. Every musician played only when the specific part of the dancer's body was moving. This method created special connections between sound and movement, and facilitated the construction of a complex body image.

Experiment 2: symbolizing objects: the sound of every instrument has to be characteristic of a specific object – every musician had to play as if their instrument symbolised the movements of a flame, or a tree, or a book, etc. Musicians took over from each other or play at the same time, while the dancer had to embodied the object that had been chosen as a structural pattern.

Experiment 3: symbolizing weather phenomena: the sound of every instrument symbolized a specific phenomenon (wind; rain; storm) - musicians took over from each other or play at the same time, while dancer had to do movements inspired of the weather phenomenon the musicians had chosen to play like.

Each experiment of music and dance improvisation made me more conscious of the sense of rhythm and developed the musicality of my dance movements. Music and dance languages relied on an equation that includes: time, rhythm, form, symmetry related to space, dynamics, style and expressivity. Space was not the only thing that was changed, we also have to change the way of communication. Our online dance and music improvisation sessions were adventurous in terms of experiencing various and different artistic ways of sharing.

Presenting dance figures, gestures and motions for online improvisation meetings I faced special challenges in order to realize:

- coordination of body movements according to online sound of music (rhythm, tempo, dynamics, form, rhythmic design, etc.);
- free orientation in space according to the choreographic design, in spite of limited and improper space for dancing;
- movement with a correct posture and appropriate dance techniques.

Limitation of space is a general issue in online dance performances, so I had to manage the improper floor for dancing, and the restricted area of movement around my room, and even

the limited jumps and turns executions. During the remote improvisation sessions, as a dancer and a choreographer I tried to proactively manage my choreographies for virtual audience, moving the accent from the accurate technique execution to the meaning of a dance movement.

A technique specific to online dancing crystallized gradually, relying on several experimental principles. Dance improvisation and dance composition relied particularly on the available space I had, moreover, the dance steps were combined depending on my web or my smartphone's camera.

4. New ways of expression – new possibilities of staging

In *Disdance* project we started working on solo dance improvisations when music follows dance patterns, then, I was inspired to do "rolling", "sliding" or "pivoting" dance movements⁵ accordingly to the sounds and rhythm of the music. As time went by, we became a team, and together, musicians and dancer, developed a kind of virtual contact improvisation, we experimented new ways of perceiving and acting, interacting and communicating. Online music and dance improvisation experiments involved special communication and different levels of being active, reactive, interactive.

Music and dance improvisation experiences we shared and performed were:

- Listen to a musical piece and express freely the specific musical patterns through body motions;
- Body movement related to space, gravitation, rhythm;
- Exploring qualities of dance movements such as fluidity, tension and energy.⁶

Our online music and dance improvising and performing were interdependent and led to a mental and kinaesthetic experience. In detail, our work was to explore, to discover, to experiment, to optimize sound and movement quality. Working together, we gave impulses to each other, found a flow for soloist and the group of musicians, and we discovered that online improvisation developed its own aesthetic rules and staging tools.

Disdance Project had started because we wanted to find ways of interactions in spite of isolation, we had to continue practicing art on different levels (even remotely), and we found out new insights and recognition. Producing a video to share, we discovered new ways of expression and new possibilities of staging.

In this project we started with rhythmic and physical exercises, we analysed and found the best artistic structure and we proposed our own key elements to managing a music and dance online performance that can withstand a mere experiment and promotes a genuine artistic experience.

Taking into account the technological progress and, following the digital explorations in the art of dance in 21st century, I exploited the relationship between dance and music on the one hand, and between dance and image, on the other hand.

Reflecting on our recorded performance, I could say that music and dance improvisation, as synthesis of imagination, body motion and emotion are fundamental in the development of expressiveness and creativity. From this point of view, it is a valuable method and a cardinal principle of dance composition. Even online.

This online music and dance improvisation project made me more confident in planning and online delivery of an art moment and it proved the limitation of communication and space is no longer a problem. Music and dance could create a new environment and new audiences.

⁵ Karl Frost. *Body Research*. Retrieved April, 15, 2021, from: <https://www.bodyresearch.org/contact-improvisation/fundamentals-of-contact-improvisation/>

⁶ Isabelle Ginot, Marcelle Michel. 2002. *La danse au XX^e siècle*. Paris: Larousse / Vuief, p. 86.

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