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Application Study

Jazz Piano Trio

Conceptualizing the Recording Project

Early in 2005 I conceived of a recording project that involved a jazz trio of piano, acoustic bass, and drums. I wished to use the expanded capabilities of computer-based recording technology to explode the conventions of traditional, improvisational jazz, without the results being apparent in the final recording. I began with a jazz piano trio that had a history of playing together. We selected a familiar jazz standard, one not especially associated with a particular artist or recording. We agreed upon a basic arrangement of song sections and solos, and a tempo for the recording of this composition. I then recorded each individual musician separately, at different times and without the other musicians present. Each musician listened to a click track so there would be tempo consistency between all the performances. Because the horizontal arrangement was charted out for the musicians, the performances lined up as far as the chordal structure was concerned and each had an idea about what part of the performance he was in (e.g., statement of melody, piano solo, etc.). This consistency in rhythm and harmony ultimately allowed all of the parts to be edited together. I was the only person to hear the musicians play their parts or interact with them regarding their performances. I then constructed a version of the composition that drew from elements of multiple individual takes from each musician. Finally I sent the musicians the completed version of the recording and got their responses to the work we had done together.

The ability to conduct this project was completely dependent upon the new capabilities provided by the DAW. This technology provides potential
for enormous shifts in responsibilities as well as providing vast new capabilities. This is summarized well by the producer/composer Brian Eno:

“The technologies we now use have tended to make creative jobs do-able by many different people: new technologies have the tendency to replace skills with judgment—it’s not what you can do that counts, but what you choose to do, and this invites everyone to start crossing boundaries.”

In this process I have both replaced skills with judgment—from performance interaction to editing judgments; and I have shifted key portions of the creative work, from improviser to recordist.

I am crossing musical boundaries by borrowing from genres that are steeped in these new methods of constructing compositions and adapting them to the world of jazz improvisation. Of the popular genres, dance music is often pointed to as the ultimate in production where “musicians have become little more that raw material which is manipulated, transformed, and recomposed in the studio itself.”

Jazz is usually considered to be at the opposite end of such studio construction, so my project challenges some of the basic assumptions of the idiom. A key difference between this project and dance music construction is that the final recording is not meant to sound constructed. It is not meant to point to its own process in the way that dance music announces its constructive nature; instead it retains the sound of traditional jazz.

This project also resonates with “found” music, musique concrète, and other avant-garde musical conceptions. It uses technology to create music in unexpected ways, in this case also seeking to “hide” this process from the listener. Ultimately the conceptual aspect is intended to shock and surprise the listener after the initial experience of the recording—as was sometimes true of these earlier uses of technology that stretched the bounds of music construction. Theoretically these practices are in line with DeNora’s observations regarding the interaction between music and culture. She suggests that technologies may “structure use and users [but] artefacts do not compel users to behave in preferred or prescripted ways.”

The freedom to break from traditions is a part of the gift of human imagination.

My project has particular significance in its relationship to one of the hallmarks of jazz—the practice of improvisation. My approach here bypasses the immediate temporal interaction and becomes a kind of improvisation of the imagination on the part of the musicians and an improvisation of construction (editing) on my part. To the extent that “patterns of perception, modes of attention, structures of feeling and habits of mind are inculcated in and through musical media” these qualities are meant to
be expanded by the notion of improvisation. And the qualities of improvisation are intended to be expanded here by escalating the importance of imagination and chance. In traditional jazz improvisation, imagination and chance play an important role but they are guided by the temporal exchange between musicians. Here the imagination must take center stage and the musician is forced into new modes of thinking about the progression of improvised ideas. With this model, it is the recordist, using the tools of the new audio construction, that guides the heightened imagination and the potential intersections of fortuitous musical connections.

Historically jazz has been a genre that has been resistant to technology, and in chapter 6 I go more deeply into the specifics of that resistance, as well as various ways that jazz musicians and theoreticians have embraced technology and contemporary modes of music construction. From the controversy over Lennie Tristano’s use of fadeouts in his 1950s recording to the outcry over the use of technology in Herbie Hancock’s seminal Head Hunters recording in 1973, many from the ranks of both jazz critics and practitioners have attempted to restrain the adoption of recording technologies within the idiom. While my intention with this project is to press the boundaries of the entrenched jazz ethic, I don’t believe that it steps so far beyond the tradition as to be irrelevant to the genre. Instead I see it as a part of the historical process that continues to bridge the gap from performance to recording and as a part of the process that has extended the primacy of performance in jazz to various interactions with the capabilities of recording technologies.

A (Fragmented) Day in the Studio

On August 9, 2005, I went to the pianist Dana Atherton’s home studio and started setting up for the day of recording. Dana and I had consulted previously on a couple of occasions, and he had assisted me in planning out a strategy for the day. We had chosen a jazz standard and had devised a simple arrangement for each musician to follow. It was a standard jazz arrangement: statement of the melody, a piano solo that played twice through the song’s chord progression, a bass solo that played once through, and some trading of four-bar sections between the piano and the drums before the restatement of the melody at the end. We chose an appropriate tempo that we would use for the click track. This would guide the musicians so that their performances would fit together on the same rhythmic grid, regardless of their position on the musical timeline. The song was simple—its
chordal structure forms the basis of many jazz standards—so it would not present any special challenges to the musicians. It had been widely recorded, so it didn’t have any strong associations with previous recordings. This particular trio had played the song together previously, but it wasn’t a tune that they played frequently or one that had strong associations for them as a group.

We had decided to record the piano tracks first, then the drum tracks, and finally the bass tracks, but this was simply based on scheduling needs. Each musician would play his part in a vacuum, that is to say, he would not have heard any of the other performances when he played his part. However, I would be providing verbal instructions that might assist in how the musicians used their imagination as they performed. My instructions might also help to “glue” the performances together by describing general approaches that would ultimately be shared by all three instrumentalists.

I began by instructing each musician to imagine their fellow musicians playing along, as though they were improvising together. These three musicians had considerable experience playing together, so I suggested they imagine the particular sound of the other two playing along as they played their own part. I took multiple recordings of each musician playing through the composition so that I would have a variety of material to choose from in the editing process. For certain recording passes I asked for a denser, more aggressive approach, and for certain passes I asked that they play more sparsely. At times I expanded my instructions by responding to their playing in the way of a bandleader or arranger. I might suggest that they take another pass based on the way they had approached one section in the previous take: “Play the whole piece again using that legato feel you used on the bridge in this last take,” for example—and I would play for them the part that had caught my attention to remind them of what they had done. For each musician I also took a couple of passes asking for a specific rhythmic approach—a reliance on figures that employ quarter-note triplets—as a means of getting some particular phrases that I might use to create an “unexpected” convergence of musical ideas.

It was certainly a new and different experience for everyone. The biggest struggle was keeping track of the arrangement without the reinforcement of the other players. I think this was a bit of a revelation for all of them—the extent to which they rely on each other for reinforcement of position in the song structure. This presented the most difficulties for the pianist Dana, because when he’s soloing in this imagined trio environment he is not using his left hand to outline the chordal movement with bass
notes or simple chords as he would likely do in a typical solo piano environment. With no bass player and drummer to signal transitions or parts, he would sometimes lose his way harmonically. There were some similar problems for the drummer, Jason Lewis, because he didn’t have any of the usual harmonic signals. The song has a “B” section that comes around after three “A” sections in a typical AABA compositional scheme. Jason discovered that, while he knew a transition was made (they would happen every eight bars), he would normally rely on the harmonic movement of the other instruments to reassure himself when it was the “B” section. Maintaining the arrangement was the least challenging for the bass player, Dan Feiszli, because typical jazz bass playing outlines both musical time and chord changes. The classic “walking” style of jazz bass playing relies on a repeated quarter-note pulse that “walks” through the chord changes, providing simple rhythmic and harmonic structure. Dan’s relative ease with staying within the arrangement reinforced the notion that the bass serves to bridge the rhythmic and harmonic structures in jazz improvisation and cues the other musicians, especially during flights of somewhat abstract improvisation.

Maintaining performance with the metronomic structure of the click also required some special attention from each of the musicians. None of them had much trouble maintaining basic timing while playing to the click, but they all noted that this required a certain amount of attention that was a distraction from improvising. When I did ask them to stretch the rhythm more, around the quarter-note triplet feel, there were more time problems in the performances, including the occasional dropping or adding of a beat.

As a result of the difficulties with maintaining structure and timing, they all said they couldn’t really put too much attention on “imagining” playing with the two “missing” musicians. Yet when they listened back to their performances, without hearing the click and concentrating on structure, they were surprised at how natural the playing sounded to them. Because they do play together often I could hear a certain compatibility between all of the performances, before even beginning to edit them together. Despite the frustrations, the musicians all seemed to really enjoy the session and expressed great interest in hearing the final product. I told them I would be asking for their feedback once they heard what I put together and they all readily agreed to make comments.

One especially interesting anecdote from the day’s session involved the tracks I recorded with the drummer, Jason Lewis. After his first take Jason
noted that, because he wasn’t hearing anyone else’s parts, he thought he might be overplaying. Actually on later takes I think he played even more than on that first take—he was responding to the “space” created by the lack of other sounds. At the end of the day Dana and I had a conversation about Jason’s musicianship. We both agreed that we loved his playing and, while we admired his great sensitivity and taste as well as his awesome technical chops, if we had one complaint it was that he tended to underplay, to be too tasteful (if there is such a thing). But in this situation he did play more than we were used to hearing and we both felt that it might have had a positive influence on his performance.

**Several More Days with Pro Tools**

Once the recording had been completed I began the editing process, which in this case was really more of a construction job. I wasn’t just editing elements; I was actually going to construct performances for each individual instrument and in combination for the ensemble. It is only because of the ease and depth of manipulation over individual audio elements provided by the DAW that this project was even possible. I was editing, arranging, and composing—constructing all the elements of music creation outside of the original, isolated, performance. The musicians were playing to a set arrangement at a set tempo so that by simply starting them at the same time they would apparently play through the song together. One form the construction could take was to simply choose which of each individual’s complete performances to use. More elaborate musical choices could be made by selecting different pieces of each individual’s performance from different takes, such as the piano intro from take 1 and the piano solo from take 2. However, because they were synchronized to a consistent tempo, and because the song contains many repeated cycles of chord changes, it was also possible for me to use elements from each performance in places other than where they were originally played. For example, I could use the first eight bars of the opening melody on the piano as the first eight bars of the closing melody instead, by simply cutting and pasting that part to its new location. This meant that there was a virtually endless number of possibilities for creating a final composition from a relatively few original elements—I had taken four or five complete passes through the song for each of the three instrumentalists. This is adapting current pop music production techniques to the world of improvised jazz.

My goal was to look for interesting combinations of performances that
generated the traditional compositional sense of good jazz improvisation. I did not explore realms that started to stretch the limits of what sounded plausible within a traditional trio environment, though these possibilities were certainly available to me. This approach helped to limit the extent that I would experiment with combinations of elements, given the staggering range of construction possibilities. There was also a significant element of chance that I could allow to come into play. By randomly combining complete performances (e.g., take number 2 from the piano, number 3 from the bass, and number 4 from the drums) I could then listen to the results and see where I thought particularly interesting interchanges between the performances had taken place. It was some element of chance that made these moments occur, though there were also elements of imagination on the part of the musicians as they anticipated the playing of the others. Then it was my responsibility to make judgments about what was “good” or “interesting” or “appropriate” as an “improvised” moment in the overall composition. Despite all those words in quotes, this is actually in line with traditional production responsibilities—the producer is often responsible for choosing the best take when multiple takes of jazz recordings are made. However, in this project the role of the recordist is being elevated to the level of active, creative participant to an extent never previously possible.

The actual construction project was creatively very stimulating, especially in the early stages. I would combine various of the three instrumentalists’ takes and listen through to the results. When I heard a particular passage that I found appealing for whatever reasons, I would copy and paste that element into a composite playlist. Perhaps something with particular synchronicity had occurred, as sometimes happens with improvisation—when two or more of the musicians spontaneously phrase things in a way that connects them in a particularly musical and conceptually harmonious way. Or they might just have played something that felt really good together, that “grooved”—or perhaps one musician had left a bit of a space and another had played an intriguing figure in that space. For whatever the reason, I would take the passages where things jumped out at me as interesting.

As I started to build bits of an overall arrangement, made from elements that I had chosen, I then had to consider the overall integrity of the composition and of each individual track. I began isolating each instrument and listening for continuity—placing and replacing various elements to make a more cohesive sounding progression of musical events. I would
go back and forth between the individual tracks and the ensemble to hear how the parts were working together. I took great pleasure at finding the “right” bass track—at finding the “right” drum edit—and hearing a larger section come together in a way that seemed both musically interesting and plausible from a performance standpoint. I discovered that the transitions between sections were the most difficult to negotiate. Sometimes finding a way for each instrument to move from the “A” section to the “B” section required a lot of trial edits. In order to find something that was both internally coherent in terms of the individual instrument and sounded “correct” from an ensemble point of view I might have to experiment with parts that had come from different points in the overall arrangement. Dealing with coherency in the solos was also challenging at times. Interesting ideas from different takes did not always connect together in ways that made musical sense or sound as though they might be something that the musician would actually play. Of course I could have ignored such considerations and created a more abstract musical construction—and that would be an interesting project in itself—but my intention was to create something that had the “sound” of a jazz piano trio playing and improvising together—that the listener would believe could have happened in a traditional ensemble context—and I constructed parts with this idea in mind.

The process was fascinating but it was also very time consuming. I spent two hours putting together the first (of two) cycles of Dana’s piano solo. During this process I also discovered that Dana’s earlier passes were stronger and more cohesive than his later takes. I remembered this same phenomenon from having recorded Dana in more traditional recording environments—he’s the type of musician that needs to be “caught early” in a recording session in order to get his best performances, usually in the first or second take. Some musicians need to warm into their studio performances and do their best work four or five takes into the process (not many people do much good work after six or seven takes). Dana’s tendency to perform best in his first couple of takes held true to form in this “artificial” environment in which he was performing in a vacuum.

Construction of the final version of “A jazz ‘improvisation’” (audio clip 11) took about sixteen hours and produced four minutes and thirty-four seconds of music. This flies in the face of conventional recordings of improvised jazz, which take the amount of time it takes for the musicians to play the piece! What is the value here? There is a whole additional level and layer of engagement with the music and the process on the part of some-
one outside of the performance process. This is very much in line with Brian Eno’s suggestion that new technologies allow a whole new level of choice in music creation. This project crosses musical boundaries and opens new doorways where new paths to creativity are given an opportunity to grow.

Beyond Editing

After finishing the completed version I sent copies to the musicians for feedback. I wondered how they would respond—the extent to which it would sound natural or unnatural, obviously edited or plausible, to them. These are the things that I have struggled with in my own process, but I wondered how different the experience would be to those who actually created the original performances? I asked each musician for feedback in the most general terms—I didn’t want to skew their responses by directing them in any way. I asked for their overall impressions of the recording, their personal performances, and the performances of their fellow musicians. I also suggested that they might comment, positively and/or negatively, on more specific aspects of the recording, or on particular passages.

In my initial conversation with the pianist, Dana Atherton, after he had heard the final version (March 3, 2006), his first comment was an expression of surprise over how cohesive it sounded: “It sounded like we were playing together.” This reinforced my general sense that the experiment had been successful in its fundamental goal of re-creating a “natural” sounding traditional jazz recording in a most “unnatural” way. When asking for a more critical response, he indicated that to him the drummer’s performance was the most problematic. Because the drummer is tied to rhythmic structure but not to harmonic form, “his limitations are fewer” and thus his performance seemed the least cohesive. Drummers are sometimes referred to as the “glue” of musical ensembles, and the lack of context may be the most challenging for the one trying to create the rhythmic connections. Perhaps we had not gotten so “good” a performance from Jason after all. Dana volunteered that some of the edits were obvious to him but some undoubtedly slipped by unnoticed. What he liked best about his own performance was that it was “nonrepetitive,” in a way that he found refreshingly different from his typical recorded performances. For the pianist to discover something fresh in this constructed performance suggests ways in which a project such as this might uncover new areas of creative expression through an expanded collaboration. It is impossible for improvis-
ers to completely break out of patterns and predilections in their own performances. While this represents the strength of individual expression, the ability to hear one’s own ideas freed from one’s own larger tendencies of construction might also be personally liberating and instructive, as well as creatively successful.

The email response from the drummer, Jason Lewis (March 13, 2006), was somewhat less positive. Perhaps this was a reflection of the greater difficulties mentioned by Dana—without the harmonic structure Jason was cut more adrift from the music experience. “My overall impression was that it sounded a bit like a science experiment rather than a cohesive piece of trio music,” he wrote, but he did acknowledge that “Taken in small phrases it sounds like a trio playing together.” In regards to someone else reconstructing his performance his response was that it was more of an alienating experience than one that might provide elements of discovery for his own playing: “It is surprising to hear how some of the edits have been put together. It’s like someone has taken my brain and hands and manipulated them for their own purpose.” While not completely negative—“It is amusing to hear phrases that sound like my playing but put into places I wouldn’t normally put them,” I got the sense that by calling them “amusing” he was being generous and that “disturbing” might have been closer to his true response. I know that Jason enjoyed the day in the studio, but it was apparent that the final version provided him with little musical satisfaction and did not serve as a means of learning new things about his own performance or improvisational work. It was noteworthy to me that Jason’s responses focused on the way the ideas were put together, and not on the overall rhythmic “feel,” which was apparently less problematic for him.

The email response from the bass player, Dan Feiszli (March 15, 2006), struck something of a balance between Dana and Jason and was the most detailed. Dan found some passages convincing and others not: “Overall, it’s very interesting. Some sections sound more like ‘normal jazz’ (bass solo, some of the drum trading, the head out). Others, especially the head in and parts of the piano solo (especially the breaks), sound like somebody’s pulling the strings.” Dan was more specific about what in the construction he thought made some of these specific elements sound like they were externally controlled:

I think what makes it sound like that to me is the “on or off” nature of this kind of construction—we, individually and together, go directly from one idea to another and back, without the usual in-betweens that
occur in normal playing. We’re either playing one idea or another, and in normal performance you can hear the ideas develop from one to another, sort-of allowing you to hear the performers think. Here things move very suddenly from one to the next.

This points to a concrete difference that may occur when more people are participating in the creative process. The condensing of ideas is a part of editing that is not usually a part of the improvisatory standard in traditional jazz. The process itself may bring a different general approach to composition. Dan is only offering an observation here, not a value judgment. One could argue that this new compositional sense brings a fresh approach to the spirit of improvisational jazz or that it defeats the primacy of individual expression.

Dan also noted a technical challenge that was unique to his position as an acoustic bass player.

An interesting thing about the bass solo is the intonation—you can hear my pitch drifting in and out in large segments over the course of the solo. More of a technical thing having to do with me having no external audible pitch reference when I played; generally if (OK, when . . .) my pitch slips in and out over a solo, it’s on more of a note-by-note basis than a line-by-line.

Neither the piano nor the drums have any control over pitch as part of the performance, so this was not an issue for them. Stringed instruments without frets and all wind instruments must be constantly adjusted for pitch as they are played. In a solo performance the variations Dan refers to would largely go unnoticed, but when they are later combined with an instrument with a fixed pitch reference—in this case the piano—these inconsistencies in intonation are revealed. It’s interesting that this was only noticeable to Dan during his solo—his intonation was stable enough in the ensemble passages, even without hearing the ensemble. This bears a relationship to the observation that intonation tends to be more strictly defined when musicians are sight reading and looser when they are playing better-known or rehearsed pieces. This might also suggest the need for further refinement of this process, such as regular sounding pitch references along with the click track as a part of the structure for the individual performances where adjustments in intonation are being made.

All three musicians agreed that the most problematic element in terms of cohesion was the edited version of the drum performance: “I’d say that
Dana’s playing sounds the most natural, mine the second-most, and Jason’s the least natural.” Dan acknowledges, however, that this sense of what is “natural” may be highly subjective: “Dana’s playing sounds more natural to me than mine, though this could be because he’s the lead more often and it makes more sense for him to change direction often, or it could be because he likes quick changes in his playing naturally, or it could be just that I’m more sensitive to edits in my playing than his.” This ambiguity in his ability to place the cause of his response reinforces the idea that this experiment is stretching the bounds of the creative process. While all three musicians enjoyed the challenge of making the recording, Dana and Dan seemed also to enjoy at least some of the results of the editing process as well. Dan especially notes that the “drum trading is cool, it sounds like a trio playing jazz where everyone’s sort-of doing their own thing without any one idea dominating, which happens naturally in the real world as well.” After getting their responses I wondered what would have happened if we had all four set about the editing process together. This was not practical because of the time involved (and the lack of budget!) but my sense was that even the difficulties with the drum performance could have been resolved and that a final version that was more stimulating and less problematic would have been the result.

I have played this piece for other colleagues who are either jazz musicians or jazz appreciators but I have not asked for any kind of analytical response. The casual listener, even if steeped in jazz recordings, accepts this recording as a typical product of a typical live jazz session. The project would have to be developed further, along some of the lines mentioned above regarding better cueing tracks and a more collaborative editing process, before I would want to ask for outside scrutiny of the final material.

For my own part this application study emanated from a desire to explode the traditional idea of a piano trio recording. As part of my larger explorations of the new paradigms of music construction it stretched the limits of the social structure of traditional jazz, which has previously been rooted in the physical connection between the improvising musicians. This project highlighted the computer-aided construction models that are capable of helping to free musicians from routinized musical behavior. It explored the potential for a deepening of the inexplicable and ineffable elements of musical connections between improvising musicians by moving that connection solely into the realm of the imagination of the isolated performer. At the same time it expanded the direct participation in improvisation to the domain of the recordist, and expanded the dialogic envi-
environment of musical collaboration. Such an expansion suggests some interesting implications for notions of community that are a traditional part of music performance.

The Community of Improvisation

The relationship between music and the social construction of community is deeply rooted. Chanan suggests the breadth of this connection: “music is always—among other things—an expression of actual or ideal social relations. There are certain affinities between the forms of music making and those of society.”

Chanan has placed this observation in the context of the cultural and historical contingencies that are an important part of the subjective experience of music, yet they may be difficult to dissect: “The problem is that such external determinants are always symbolically coded, frequently in paradoxical ways.” It is these paradoxes that may obscure how contemporary expressions of musical networks continue to build social networks. What appear to be practices that are dislocating and fragmenting may also be socially active and constructive.

For some, the practices of contemporary composition, production, and consumption of jazz have tended to move the idiom away from its traditional capabilities of providing social structure and cohesion. Matthew Butterfield’s writings seek to incorporate a greater understanding of the community aspects of jazz. He references Ingrid Monson’s work, which has developed “a ‘vernacular’ theory for the interpretation of jazz” that uses African-American cultural aesthetics as the starting point, as opposed to traditional tools of music analysis. Monson emphasizes the social processes of the music and situates them relative to the conversational kind of expressions found in black idiomatic linguistic practice. In the same way as conversation, then, Monson “shows how musical interaction in jazz not only represents, but actually enacts social values, which simultaneously operate as the core aesthetic values of the music.”

Monson’s approach retains the solitary nature of analytical activity but encourages the analyzer to look beyond conventional analysis “for idiomatically appropriate and interesting social interaction through music.” My application project represents a previously unexplored version of this kind of activity. It not only looked for these elements in the music but also enacted them, along with more traditional musical constructive elements, through active, creative participation. Butterfield notes that Monson’s model for analysis “thus acts indirectly as an agent of commu-
nity formation, for it facilitates the listener’s participation in the social life of jazz performance events.”15 My application project, while still solitary and thus operating indirectly, heightens the agency of community formation and expands creative participation by including someone who is not a direct participant in the performance of the music.

Butterfield wishes to expand Monson’s mandate through what he terms “situational particularism.” Through this analytical technique Butterfield contextualizes Monson’s integration of musical and social structures by using the structure of the particular musical situation to set the terms for analysis. In focusing in this manner Butterfield observes the kind of interpersonal solidarity and vulnerability involved in the collaborative process of jazz improvisation.16 I contend that a closely related form of collaboration is extended to recordists in the recording process, which extends the social structure of creativity beyond the immediate circle of improvising musicians. My application project involved collaboration at the beginning and dialogue at the end, but it could easily have incorporated more collaboration in the construction process, as is common in pop music production.

Ultimately Butterfield does incorporate recording into his model. He acknowledges some ways in which recordings free the consumer from certain constraints of live performance, but he doesn’t touch on the collaborative role of recording engineers and producers. The studio demands the collaboration of recordists, and while their participation may vary in degree, contemporary recording practices have tended to increase their direct participation. My application project heightens this collaborative element and yet removes it from the commonality of place found between recordists and musicians in the traditional recording studio experience. It is true that when anyone works in isolation, that person is removed from “the erotic social potential of live performance events”17 and thus their working process doesn’t allow for the face-to-face social cohesion that may also be a product of live performance. Nonetheless, having extended the collaborative process of studio work, my project points toward ways in which Butterfield’s situational particularism may be expanded to embrace the potential for social cohesion in contemporary music practice beyond face-to-face collaboration. I hope that such activity may reinvigorate and extend, if not the erotic social potential of live performance, the general social structure of musical activity through the intertwining of compositional, improvisational, and analytical activities in ways previously unimaginable.
Cook exactly anticipates my application project in describing the balance between a rehearsed part and a group performance:

But it is not as if each player’s performance becomes so fixed, so over-learnt, that they could just as well perform wearing headphones and hearing only a click track. . . . Instead, making music together means constantly listening to everyone else, constantly accommodating your performance to theirs, being sensitive to other people’s states of mind, knowing when to follow and when to lead. In short, making music together is an enaction of human community, and the sound of music is the sound of community in action.¹⁸

I certainly don’t wish to argue that performers—the performers in my application project for example—will perform just as well in the kind of isolated performing environment I created, but rather that this environment doesn’t necessarily exclude them from the community-enabling process of music making. Cook’s next point reinforces this understanding, as he, following Schutz’s ideas regarding intersubjectivity, notes that “you do not need to be actually playing in order to participate in the intersubjectivity of music, you become a member of the musical community just by listening.”¹⁹ I believe that this community participation applies to the listener of recorded music as well as to live music, especially given the predominance of recorded music in the culture and the manner in which listening and buying habits influence music creation. And if the listener is experiencing this musical community while listening to recorded performances that were played in isolation, is it any less of a community? So, the question becomes, at what point does intersubjectivity enter the picture? Broadly argued, then, contemporary music practice allows intersubjective musical relationships that were never before possible, and the participants become a part of the musical enaction of community. Not only might the listener have this kind of intersubjective experience in listening to my constructed piece of music, but also I have had a profoundly intersubjective relationship with the musicians as I constructed the piece from their performances.

Porcello addresses Schutz’s notion of intersubjectivity as part of his ethnographic study of contemporary recording sessions. On the one hand he contends that the studio process of construction of music that he observes, and that coincides with much of the studio practice that I describe herein, is characteristically postmodern—involving a fragmentation of musical process resulting in a simulacrum of a shared musical experience. “Nonetheless,” according to Porcello, “the vast majority of musicians and
engineers I have worked with strongly believe and articulate ideas of shared musical experience virtually identical to those described by Schutz." Ultimately Porcello characterizes this “tension between the romanticized emic and the overly cynical postmodernist theoretical discourses” as part of a broader tension that is characteristic of attempts at cultural representation. Although Porcello’s observations are most telling, he doesn’t provide much insight into the position of the “vast majority of musicians and engineers” that he references here, nor does he try to square those sentiments with the contrary sense of a scattered intersubjectivity that he has observed.

I would suggest that it is the breadth and depth of musical experience of musicians and recordists that is the cause of their resistance to the relegation of the process to mere simulacrum. Porcello lacks the countless hours of musical activity that create the backdrop of the contemporary recording process when engaged in by the kind of experienced professionals that he was monitoring. Porcello acknowledges the fluidity of roles between the musicians and recordists, as well as the varying degrees of expertise (some musicians know a lot about the technical elements, some less—some engineers know a lot about music theory, some less, etc.) but he still perceives the process as having substituted a simulation for a truly shared musical experience. And on the surface this is true. But the reason it is not perceived this way by the musicians and recordists is that there is a direct connection between this process and the most essential kind of live music performance—the thing that has apparently been “lost” in the highly convoluted studio process. Just as the composer or songwriter holds onto the notion of the final piece to be performed live somewhere in the fragmented process of composition, so musicians and recordists hold a connection to shared music-making throughout the similarly fragmented studio process. The nature and depth of the knowledge that provides the underpinning for this understanding is defined as tacit knowledge and detailed by Susan Schmidt Horning in “Engineering the Performance: Recording Engineers, Tacit Knowledge and the Art of Controlling Sound.”

In regards to broader issues affecting music and technology Porcello concedes that cultural critics “often reinforce the sense that technology is problematic for music” and that this “early problematization of technology has cast a long shadow into the scholarship that grapples with music/tech-
nology relationships.” Though he argues that not all scholars see this relationship (music/technology) as problematic, he notes that even those who don’t “usually find themselves arguing from a persistently defensive position.”

Cook places his reflections on the community-building qualities of music in line with this same long history of writing about music that sets music in opposition to technology. By associating music with the positive attributes of community “instead of being technological, industrial, and alienating it became natural, human, and authentic.” However, Cook identifies this negative predisposition toward technology as suspect in the way that “anybody who has the slightest acquaintance with the literature of critical theory or deconstruction is immediately put on guard by invocations of nature, the classic stratagem by which writers further their own agenda under the appearance of just saying how things are.”

So, those of us positively disposed toward the ancient marriage of music and technology are free to embrace the idea that the enactment of community continues in today’s highly technologized musical environments. Even the dislocating application project at hand may produce music that constructs social relationships. In opposition to decades of writing about music in which music and technology are seen as being at odds, and in support of Cook’s proposal that there ought to be “an indefinite moratorium on equations of analysis and value judgment, and indeed more broadly on equations of academic research and aesthetic approval,” I embrace the playful and creative potential of the marriage of technology and music.

In a 1994 article about the Frank Sinatra CD Duets, the New York Times critic Hans Fantel reflects on the fact that the two singers in each supposed duet were recorded separately in both time and space. In the context of primarily negative reflections on what he prefers to call “sonic collages” rather than duets, he too anticipates my application project when he “wonders if a jazz group, fragmented in time and space and later electronically recombined, could match the musical cohesion and spontaneity of the Benny Goodman Quintet ecstatically crowding about a single microphone to cut their old wax platters.” The clear implication here is in the negative. Fantel’s particular brand of technological phobia is interesting in its combination of speculation, nostalgia, and non sequiturs. Fantel wishes to stir the controversy, without committing to any real opinion about technological mediation or about the CD he is reviewing. His statement could easily be reversed to speculate on the advantages of technology—one could wonder how a reconstituted jazz performance might exceed the capabilities of live
performance—and Fantel does make the obligatory allusion to Glenn Gould later in his piece as perhaps representing an opposing point of view. He acknowledges the success of the Sinatra CD but only fleetingly mentions its potentially gratifying musical contribution in the context of his questioning its fairness as a constructed performance. Fantel associates technology with an assault on musical integrity, but his assault is really nothing more than nostalgia for earlier technological mediation, such as single microphone recordings. Fantel speculates widely on the potential alienating qualities of certain technological capabilities, without balancing his view with their potential advantages.

If, as Martin suggests, “We are dealing, in short, with the relationship between individual inspiration and the expectations of the collectivity in which it must be expressed,” then we need to look more closely at what constitutes such expectations. Chanan points to the breadth of the powers of music both to form and to represent the positive construction of community: “Music, at the same time a direct and a symbolic expression of social relations, retains the power of affirmation.” The expectations of collectivity may be more fluid than is generally supposed, and it is my contention that assumptions about the alienating qualities of technology are not as fundamental as they may first appear. Music is able to expand its socializing message even when the technology circumvents the traditional social interaction, and people are able to expand their capabilities to create community beyond the face-to-face requirements of traditional social networks. As this application study has expanded these notions of community, the following studio study explores realms of musical intention that reach beyond the traditional idea of musical study, practice, and performance. Together the two studies continue to extend the notion of what it means for musicians to be performing music in the contemporary technological environment.