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Community of difference: The liminal spaces of the *Bingodisiac Orchestra*

ABSTRACT

The Bingodisiac Orchestra, a nomadic improvised community music project without fixed membership, is explored in this article as a case study examining the 'open participatory' aspects of Do-it-Yourself (DiY) sound culture. Established by the researcher in 2002, the 'orchestra' is an audio-visual event that attempts to break down barriers between diverse musical forms while also engaging in various strategies to maximize the interaction between audience and performer. In doing so, Stephen Duncombe's idea of the 'community of difference' is employed, whereby the orchestra becomes a practice that embodies a de-centralized approach to both social organization and the organization of sound. Other concepts discussed in this article include the 'fairground effect', a strategy of the Bingodisiac Orchestra to de-centralize the production of sound through the use of liminal spaces traditionally ignored in music performance: creating a more participatory space for the performance, which allows different styles of music to be simultaneously and spontaneously incorporated into the performance. In this way, liminal space and the 'community of difference' are identified as being a part of the process of creating musical communities that encourage improvised music that is 'free' of any particular style: altering the focus of musicians from the need to find a common ground as a basis for their sound improvisations, while also enabling the temporary construction of a community sound experience.

KEYWORDS

DiY sound culture
community of
difference
improvisation
liminal space
decentralised
community
open participatory
Do-it-Yourself ethos

The *Bingodisiac Orchestra* is a group without fixed membership. The name is used in the context of a temporary assemblage of musicians, many of whom have never played together before, who are brought together for the purpose of creating an improvised soundscape to a silent experimental film for the duration of a single performance. Over the years 2002–12 the *Bingodisiac Orchestra* has performed fourteen times in six different cities in New Zealand and Australia. Each performance has involved between seven and 25 participants and over 100 different participant-musicians over the entire duration.

There is no single participant who has been involved in every performance, that is, except for myself, an organizing principle responsible for inviting musicians, arranging the venue, creating the visuals, promoting the event and designing the cueing system that allows diverse types of music to be combined. While this situates the researcher in a primary role as participant, and as a major source of the data collected in this chapter, this should not detract from viewing the process of the *Bingodisiac Orchestra* as a highly collaborative project. The research significance of this project is not in any sense of 'success' or as representing a widespread or recognized social trend but in the research possibilities offered through the connection between the researcher and a project that has evolved over such duration and through the collective actions of its many participants. Although I am situated as the primary organizer, responsible for making each event happen, my role as organizer has been to minimize centralized intervention and to maximize participation within certain selected elements.

The strategies used to minimize centralized intervention, on an aesthetic level, has resulted in a complex cueing system using random numbers to allocate segments to each musician, hence the name 'Bingo'-disiac. There is a sense of 'contradictory combination' between the centralized intervention of the cueing system and the aim to maximize participation, since the form and structure of the project is something that has been created by a primary organizer. This means that participants are denied a direct engagement with certain elements of the structure, but are allowed complete aesthetic freedom within their allocated segment. In this aesthetic sense I view the project as a collective and collaborative event.

The aesthetic aims of the *Bingodisiac Orchestra* has always been a process of combining various and conflicting musical styles, to assemble a group of musicians who would not likely be found working together. In terms of skill and aesthetic taste, diversity can often mean a community of irresolvable differences. The strategy has been to mix practitioners of diverse genres of music and create, through the tension of conflicting styles, unexpected combinations of sounds and unorthodox forms of musical expression. The conflict, created by assembling disparate musicians from different traditions and expectation, is part of an attempt to destabilize structures of cultural control, introducing the possibility of other agencies to emerge: this is related to the unexpectedness and 'unpredictability' expressed by participating musician Carlos Pla (audio interview, 26 September 2011).

In a sense, the aims of *Bingodisiac* flow against more traditional perceptions of community music, as the aim is to disrupt the formation of structures based on the common ground found between musicians and to fragment the production of music into the production of unstructured sound: as reflected in my research journal dated 15 June 2011:

[t]he cue system attempts to break down the predictability of the 'musical jam'. *To prevent music and to encourage sound...* This is part of the paradox of control used to destroy control – to prevent structure (emphasis mine).

In breaking down the socially formed structures usually associated with community music, *Bingodisiac* is a commentary on the dispersal of *control* away from musicians, removing the potential of consensus between musicians due to removing the types of 'control' that individual musicians would usually expect to be able to exert within the context of a community music event, as participating musician Geoff Doube observes:

[t]he individual musicians didn't have control over a lot of the elements that you'd normally have control over... I guess you could say there was distributed control... [but] there was no kind of final control.

(Interviewed by the researcher via e-mail,
21 October 2013)

This removal of 'final control' or even 'control over a lot of the elements that you'd normally have control over' indicates that *Bingodisiac* is operating under a different set of assumptions and social conventions usually associated with community music. The basis of these alternative assumptions is the 'community of difference', as discussed below.

THE BINGODISIAC ORCHESTRA AS A 'COMMUNITY OF DIFFERENCE'

The nomadic membership of the *Bingodisiac Orchestra*, as well as the geographical spacing of the performances, is one of the ways in which a 'community of difference' has been maintained. In Do-it-Yourself (DiY) culture, and in the formation of DiY communities, it has been noted that there is a sense of conflict between individual practitioners, the formation of a perceived group identity, and the conflict between the individual and the aims and outlooks of the group: referred to by Stephen Duncombe as a 'community of difference' (2008: 66–70).

The community of difference of *Bingodisiac* can be seen as a series of collaborations with different DiY communities, with varying degrees of collective identity, in the various locations of Hamilton, Auckland, Wellington, Dunedin, Catalonia, New Plymouth and Melbourne. This has included more formal groups such as members from the Vitamin-S collective and Audio Foundation in Auckland, musicians from Wellington's Frederick Street Light and Sound Exploration Society, Suns of the Seventh Sister and The Venting Gallery in Melbourne, members of the Polybandery group in New Plymouth and the NiNiCrù in Catalonia via Internet connection, musicians from the Urban Serpent zine, the None Gallery and Arc Café in Dunedin, as well as more informal groupings of participants gathered from communities surrounding the Dunedin Fringe Festival and the Hamilton Fringe Festival.

While the above organizations have provided access to participants at short notice, it can be argued that some aspects of diversity have been sacrificed and that the *Bingodisiac Orchestra* is an extension of the 'Bohemian ghetto' (Duncombe 2008: 212) in which performers and audience stay within their predetermined social groups and ideas remain unchallenged through choices within a specifically narrow strain of available diversity. In terms

of maintaining aesthetic diversity there are several factors that counter this occurrence of ghettoization: the nomadic membership of the orchestra means that conflicting styles can avoid being resolved, since most participants are only there for one or two performances; avoiding rehearsals before the show means that there is less time to allow musicians to converge towards a particular style; and a diverse combination of instruments and technologies means that there is less potential for common ground being found through similar instrumentation.

While there is less overt common ground, in terms of genre and styles, for the musicians to interact within, it has been observed that there is a particular type of musician who would turn up to play in the *Bingodisiac Orchestra*. Given that the *Bingodisiac Orchestra* is based on the desire of the musician to improvise, there will be a limited range of participants who are either willing or able to take part. These are musicians who do not, or are not, attached to a particular style of playing: either as a result of being highly skilled versatile, listening-based musicians, or as untrained, beginners or hobbyists with more open attitudes to musical style. Musicians who are not attached to a strong sense of group identity, or to a specific style of music, generally have less resistance to improvise with other musicians. Improvisation, except for the highly skilled Jazz tradition, is more associated with musicians who 'play by ear' rather than by musical notation. To 'play by ear', within the 'non-idiomatic' style, means starting without a fixed idea of what will happen and to be more immersed within the immediacy of the practice, rather than a pre-prepared structure. The differences between idiomatic and 'non-idiomatic' improvisation are defined by Vitamin-S as:

1. Idiomatic improvisation: the most widely used, and concerned with the expression of an idiom – jazz or flamenco, for example – and taking its identity and motivation from that idiom.
2. Non-idiomatic improvisation: here other concerns are fundamental. It is usually found in so-called 'free' improvisation.

(2013)

In this sense, the connections between a 'community', or assemblage, of improvising musicians, particularly when they have not played together before, are more aligned to a community of difference, rather than as a community based on practice. The 'community of practice', discussed below, is derived from a shared repertoire and has a more fixed idea of membership than the nomadic membership offered by the *Bingodisiac Orchestra*. Without the possibility of a shared repertoire built upon repeated experiences there are fewer underlining structures to maintain a consensus between musicians.

In the 2003 version of the *Bingodisiac Orchestra*, difference was sacrificed for consensus and 'democratization', which can be seen as a more equal share of power. During this time there was a distinct narrowing of the diversity of sound produced: particularly lacking were the extremes of dynamics between sound volumes experienced in later performances. This seemed to be due to a more coherent group identity, a more fixed membership of the group, rather than the nomadic non-fixed membership later employed. This gave a more equalitarian share of power within the group, with the result that a more stable community generated less unpredictability in the sound, and diversity was replaced with cohesion. The group became what Robert Park defines as a community: 'a collection of people occupying a more or less clearly defined

area [as] a collection of institutions' (1925: 115 cited in Duncombe 2008: 52). The institutionalization of the group, with each member 'occupying a more or less clearly defined area', is not a community of difference but a community founded on 'sameness'. This process has had the effect of placing more power on the side of the community, in the ongoing conflict between community and the individual, resulting in a formalization of the affinities and affiliations between members as the group divides and fragments into core members of the community who have succeeded in defining the identity of the group. This 2003 experience formed the basis of later experiments with the idea of community music based on difference rather than a shared repertoire.

In a 'community of difference', the cohesion of community identity is less emphasized than the inclusion of potentially disparate voices (Duncombe 2008: 66–70). The 'community of difference' allows differences in outlook, intention and aims to occur between its individual members and recognizes the importance of participation without the need for a strong collective consensus over what that participation should involve. In a community of difference, individual identity is not limited or subsumed by a homogeneous collective identity, allowing a focus on the diverse expressions of the individual as an active agent in creating the community (Duncombe 2008: 56–58).

In contrast, the idea of a group held together through common practices is expressed in Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's 'community of practice': a coherent identity formed through reception and production of artefacts (1991), through shared activity and 'concrete practices' (Fox 2000: 854). A community of practice, in this sense, would impose a particular identity onto the DiY practitioner, held together through shared aims and attitudes. However, Duncombe proposes that DiY culture engages in a different type of social organization and formation of structure:

[i]f community is traditionally thought of as a homogeneous group of individuals bound together by their commonality[... a DiY] network proposes something different: a community of people linked via bonds of difference, each sharing their originality[...] It allows people the intimacy and primary connections they don't usually find in a mass society, but with none of the stifling of difference that usually comes with tight-knit communities.

(2008: 57–58)

Therefore, according to Duncombe, rather than produce a 'homogeneous group of individuals bound together by their commonality' a community of difference creates 'a community of people linked via bonds of difference, each sharing their originality' (2008: 57–58): meaning that the originality and difference between individuals is what creates a sense of community.

This idea of 'community of difference', as a way of creating a structure that does not revolve around a particular centre of power, such as a common practice or belief, can be described as 'non-totalizing', since it cannot be reduced down to a particular 'totalized' or centralized identity. The 'non-totalizing' aspect means that each participant within the community of difference has an influence on the multiple formations of identity, and that there is no subsuming identity that is placed over the actions of the community.

In *Bingodisiac*, the breaking down of individual control over aspects of sound usually expected to be within the agency of musicians is part of a strategy to disrupt the expected function of the musician to produce music. This

seems to go against ideas of community music that attempt to ‘empower’ individual musicians by allowing open participation since the aim is to disrupt rather than encourage, as if, as participating musician Paul Smith suggests:

[t]he idea [is] that you take someone out of their usual context with the hope that they will not try to ‘show off’ because if you’re a trained musician... and you’re been learning your craft... [he will want to] prove that he’s really good at it... well, you’ve created your own limit by doing that.

(Interview, 19 November 2013)

This means that rather than encourage the musician to perform music and display a set of learnt skills, *Bingodisiac* operates to take the musician beyond the limitations of musical style and into liminal areas of sound that are based on difference rather than a consensus of musical form.

THE LIMINAL SPACES OF BINGODISIAC

By pursuing the aim of de-centralizing the production of sound, the *Bingodisiac Orchestra* seeks the use of liminal spaces traditionally ignored in music performance. The aim is to create a participatory space that allows different styles of music to be simultaneously and spontaneously incorporated into the performance. In this sense, liminal space and the ‘community of difference’ are identified as being a part of the process of creating musical communities that encourage improvised music that is ‘free’ of any particular style. The idea of liminal space is influenced by Victor Turner, as the dynamic space discussed in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*:

[L]iminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial... [Liminal entities are marked by] ambiguous and indeterminate attributes.

(2008: 95)

Being ‘betwixt and between’ categories, Turner’s liminality describes many DiY practices that operate across various boundaries traditionally assigned as specializations of ‘validated knowledge’. Turner’s idea of the liminal has been applied to a variety of practices that ‘elude or slip through the network of classifications’ (2008: 95). This is particularly relevant to the art practices of working between recognized disciplines, such as those documented in Hans Breder’s *Intermedia: Enacting the Liminal* (2005), or between the human and the machine in Chris Salter’s *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (2010), both of which focus on the dynamic enactment of liminal spaces within multi-media performance. This is also true of DiY practices that position themselves as ‘liminal [social] entities’, linking the idea of the liminal with Duncombe’s view of DiY culture as a ‘community of difference’, in which positions and identities are not fixed classifications but are a series of ‘ambiguous and indeterminate attributes’ (Turner 2008: 95).

The liminal space of Turner’s ‘betwixt and between’ (2008: 95) was part of the strategy used by the 2011 *Bingodisiac* performance in breaking down the boundaries of performance space: promoting the process over the finished product, and offering a view of participatory culture that attempts to dissolve the distinct space of the audience. Liminal space was used as a part of the

mode of address and as a strategy of blurring the distinction between audience, performer and technical space.

Distinct designations between audience, performer and technical space are a common feature of the proscenium arch mode of address. The main aim of the proscenium arch is to eliminate everything from the stage area that does not contribute to the maintenance of an illusion that separates audience and performers into two distinct spaces. To further examine the *Bingodisiac* mode of address I have included a map of the commonly designated performance areas below.

The above image shows a typical plan of the audience–stage engagement. The side areas of the stage are traditionally called the ‘liminal’ space, meaning the ‘marginal areas’ of the stage area to be avoided since the audience view is limited. For the purposes of this discussion I have extended these areas to include the sides of the audience space and the back of the audience, as these spaces can also be considered liminal performance spaces for the same reason of providing a limited audience view. These side and back spaces of the audience can also be considered technical spaces, since it is where lighting and sound operators and equipment are located. Since both the audience and the performers need to be facing the video screen space, there is a limitation on the typical mode of address in which it is usual for the performers to face the audience. This leaves the options of placing the performers: in front of the screen, in the stage area, with their backs to the audience; in the liminal spaces behind the audience and to the sides of the audience; or actually inside the audience space, mixing audience and performers together. In practice, all of these options have been used with varying emphasis – for example, one 2002 performance had the performers arranged in front of the audience

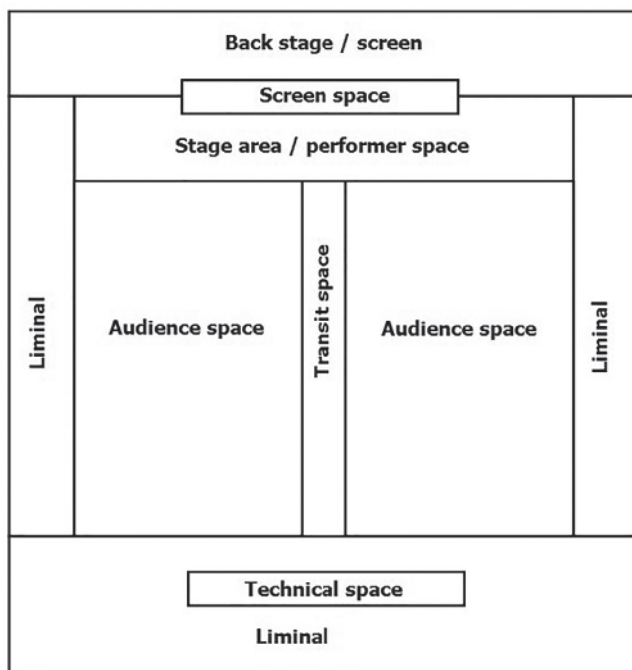


Figure 1: Typically designated spaces of the audience–performer engagement (Diagram by author).

facing the screen but with backs to the audience, while in 2011 the performers were situated at the sides, in front and behind the audience, as well as mixed among the audience members.

As well as solving the practical problem of both performers and audience locked into facing the same way, placing the performers among the audience, to the side and behind the audience, creates a mode of address that also serves the purpose of disseminating a DiY ethos of breaking down the designated performance space and allowing the process to become a part of the visible: as an ethos of 'open participation', which includes audience, performers and technicians by breaking down barriers between categories and distinctions.

The above figure shows the performance space of the 2011 Auckland performance of *Bingodisiac*. The first impression may be the 'messy' nature of the spaces as compared to the previous diagram, where particular spaces were more clearly defined. I will deal with each element to the performance in turn, starting with the determining factors of the placement of the musicians and the way in which this differs from a conventional idea of performance space. The circles around the liminal edges of the conventional audience space are the placement of the musicians, each with their own acoustic instrument or amplifier. The placing of musicians within the audience space means that the audio-visual source is multiple and dispersed: the experience of the audience is 'de-homogenized', meaning that the *difference* between the perception of individual audience members is not minimized as it would be in a conventional theatre set-up. This is particularly true of sound quality where each member of the audience will hear a difference mix of sound depending

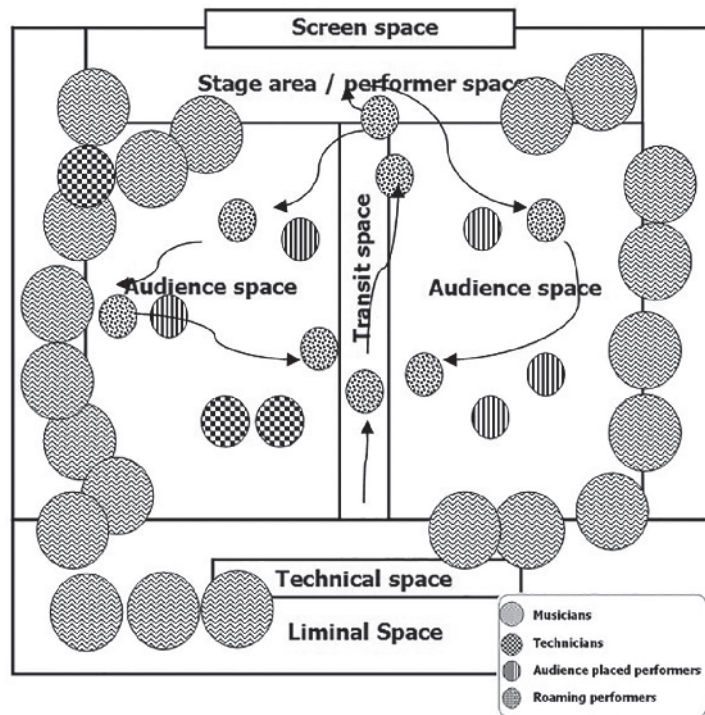


Figure 2: Diagram of performance space for 2011 Auckland performance (Diagram by author).

on where they are sitting. In this way, the audience too is subjected to the 'community of difference': disrupting the common experience of the audience.

The aim of the dispersed placing of the multiple sound sources is to create a 'fairground effect', which is similar to the experience of walking through a fairground with multiple sound sources playing different songs: a 'de-homogenized' sound that changes depending on the space occupied. The 'fairground effect' heightens the experience of space and movement, sacrificing structure and homogeneity, which would be a single soundtrack played through multiple speaker so that the same sound would be heard no matter where the listener was located. The 'fairground effect' is a mode of sound that is analogous to a 'community of difference', in that diversity is valued above a coherent group experience. If coherence is seen as a centrally controlled volume and spatial direction of sound, such as would be experienced if the sound from all of the musicians was fed into a single pair of P.A. speakers placed at the front edges of the stage or screen area, then a multiple sound source coming from all directions is part of the expression that could be expected from a 'community of difference', represented by the *Bingodisiac Orchestra*.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the *Bingodisiac* set-up is not really as different as this analysis presumes, that spatial difference is a common feature of 5.1 surround sound, common in many theatres and cinema experiences. In this case the *Bingodisiac* offers a variation on 5.1 surround sound: a 22.1 surround sound (if there are 22 musicians and 22 sound directions). The agency of each individual musician to control their own sound environment, rather than have a centralized control of the sound, is an approach that allows diverse factors to be a part of a participatory event. In this sense, the 'fairground effect' of the *Bingodisiac* is a decentralization of agency, differing from a 5.1 surround sound, since it is not a space designed with spatial coherency in mind, but instead a chaotic, haphazard and ad hoc environment determined by complex factors. There is no one person directing the absolute placement of the musicians. Their positioning is due to various indeterminate reasons, as recorded in my research journal, dated 19 June 2011, written after the first Auckland performance:

[m]anaged to speak to them all as they drifted in, [in] drips and drabs. [...] gave them their [bingo] card and told them to only play on those numbers. Too many musicians to tell them what to do[:] you go here you go there, do this do that [...] Didn't want to tell them too much [...] better if they decide. It worked out OK that they just turned up and found their spot and set-up [...] [new musicians gravitated to] the back of the audience if they seemed nervous.

Within these sets of informal verbal instructions, differing each time that a musician arrived to set up before the show, there are a wide range of complex variants that determine the individual placement of each musician and the resultant sound mix: the availability and positioning of power points; the musician's individual sense of a space of 'comfort' and nervousness; the indeterminate order of arrival of the musicians at the venue, which meant that certain spaces were taken and others available; equipment needs, meaning that some had to share an amplifier. All of these factors, and more, determine the placement and characteristics of the sound sources – and it is in this sense that the *Bingodisiac* surround sound differs from a coherently determined technology of surround sound.

The venue of the 2011 performance, the empty basement space leased by the Audio Foundation from the Parisian Tie factory beneath St. Kevin's arcade in Auckland, New Zealand, also played a part in the layout of the musicians and the resulting mode of address. This is recorded in my research journal, dated 14 June 2011, written during the set-up of the performance space:

[s]tarting with a blank room and a few days to set-up everything. Never been used for shows before. Just an empty basement [...] Thinking where to place screen, audience and the musicians? Nice to not be limited by an existing set-up [...] need a bit of time to sort out the basics – luckily we have four days to set up... Lot of options. It's quite a small room so it will easily be full of the musicians – almost as if the audience are secondary and it doesn't matter if there isn't space for them.

It is interesting to note the size of the venue and that with twenty or more musicians and performers it would be difficult to not invade the space of the audience. The lack of an existing set-up, where certain furniture would be fixed in place, also contributed to the musicians being placed within the audience space.

The traditionally liminal spaces, identified on the above figure, include 'technical space', which is usually occupied by lighting and sound operators. By placing the musicians within the audience space it means that technical space has been pushed up front and into the visible space of the audience. This represents a heightened engagement with materiality and process, part of the DiY ethos of 'open participation', in which the technical aspects of the performance are not isolated or separate from the performer-audience space. By designating the technical space as an aspect of performance, the material and technical processes are placed within the same expanded stage area as the performers and are equally visible. This brings the process closer to the audience, part of the DiY aspect of *Bingodisiac*, comprising the proximity of performers, the visible cueing system and the improvised nature of the performance, as a convergence of the technical and performance space.

As an example of the collaborative nature of the project, individual participants have created further strategies for eroding the designation of distinct areas. These non-musician performers have taken on the role of roaming performers, shown by the arrows on the above diagram, who move among the audience members. In this, the stage area, the traditional performance space, becomes used for the mundane purpose of preparing popcorn to be dispensed among the audience. In addition to this, the audience space is re-functioned as a performance space, as reflected in the programme notes given to each audience member:

[a]t each screening new numbers are randomly allocated to the musicians by the Bingo-Master, who incidentally also dispenses pop-corn to the audience when their own 'number comes up' [...] A performer covertly placed in the audience may be awaiting their cue to perform an improvised dance evoking and channelling the deity of Bingo-Number intoxication known as Nana Shamanic.

(Programme notes, 2001)

This is the aim of the programme notes, quoted above, which plants the suspicion of performers 'covertly placed in the audience', and that some of the

audience members are also performers. This is designed to work on the imagination of the audience and to signal that the audience are also within the participatory space of the *Bingodisiac*. The invented character *Nana Shamanic*, the archetypal bingo-playing old-age pensioner turned mystic shaman whose body is sporadically possessed by random agency, is a participatory character available for any audience or performer to use. Presumably having read these notes there have been several occasions of the audience adding vocals, or shouts; in the first few minutes of the Wellington performance, one audience member emitted a prolonged glossolalia of random vocal sounds, which was a skilful interpretation of *Nana Shamanic's* Bingo-Number intoxication from which the word *Bingo-disiac* derives.

CONCLUSION

As an experiment in forming a community of difference, the *Bingodisiac Orchestra* has revealed certain things about the nature of control and strategies in the breaking down of structures. To be able to maintain differences within a musical community it seems necessary that a de-centralized approach be followed in terms of physical space and sound space. In the *Bingodisiac Orchestra* this is achieved through various strategies such as the 'fairground effect': in which sound production is de-centralized; delineations between performance-audience-technical space are broken down; and through a nomadic non-fixed membership (and lack of rehearsal) musicians are prevented from forming a consensus over musical practices. The cueing system is also responsible for fragmenting and disrupting the interactions between musicians, so that diverse musical styles are able to exist concurrently within the same space.

In terms of community music, the strategies adopted by *Bingodisiac* are a way in which community can be built upon the foundations of difference. There are several implications associated with the community of difference and the practices of *Bingodisiac*: a more 'open' participatory ethos than a community based on similar practices or a consensus of musical style; the breakdown of audience-performer boundaries since the skill of the musician is less of a feature; a convergence of technical/performance space; and the breakdown of musical structures as well as social structures. The community of difference and the liminal staging of the performance, as discussed in this article, offer two strategies that may be used to develop more diverse forms of community music than would traditionally occur following a community of practice model. Diversity within community artworks, an important concern that is often overlooked, provides a way in which participation can be made more 'open' to all levels of skill and all types of styles, experiences and outlooks of participating musicians, while retaining many of the beneficial qualities of community, such as networking, social contact and potentials for further collaborations between participating members. *Bingodisiac* questions the role of 'structure' within community and collaborative works as something that limits the expressive and therefore participatory qualities of the work. Through the disruption of socially occurring structures, such as the kinds of consensus negotiated between musicians, community music becomes less concerned with the formation of communities based on the propagation and maintenance of 'sameness', but instead is a break beyond the limitations of what is considered a 'community' project both in style as well as in organization and social structures. In this way, this article represents a starting point for further practice-led research into diversity and de-centralization: challenging the idea of community as a space of consensus and introducing

the potential for improvised musical practices in which the encouragement of diversity and difference becomes the focus. As such, this article suggests that further research is required into other strategies that promote the creation of 'communities of difference': other ways in which both sound production and communities can be de-centralized and ways in which 'open participation' can be encouraged between diverse musical styles and approaches.

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