

Stages and Breakthroughs: An Illustration of the Story-to-Song Method

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Abstract: Story-to-Song (STS) is a collaborative musical process in which a participant and a musical guide work together to create a song from the participant's spoken story. Within this process can be found stages that progressively transform a written text into a song with a melody, verses, chorus, groove, and chord progression. The authors, who have worked as both musical guides and participants, explore this method in a scholarly realm in order to deconstruct the stages for composing a song. Through a creative deconstruction of this method, they have gained insight into how to create a sustainable, collaborative partnership.

Keywords: autoethnographic songwriting, interactive interviewing, sustainability, collaboration, story, song, arts-based research

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Collaborative partnership provides a model for sustainable leadership and for showing individuals within a community—be it geographic, academic, or professional—a way of working together. This article reveals some of the conflicts that new partners may face. It exposes the inner struggles as well as the musical differences that arise as two musicians—a woman and a man—create music through a method they call Story-to-Song. Most important, this paper illustrates how collaborators can transcend conflict and differences of opinion through dialogue and creativity in the realm of social inquiry and arts-based research.

Story-to-Song (STS) is a musical process wherein a participant works with a guiding composer to create a song from a story. STS is a method of lifting song from story, as well as an in-depth interview from one person to another that explores the human experience and the vicissitudes of life. The final product is a song that gives voice to an event from the participant's life, which can be shared with the participant's community.

A song written in the STS tradition may take many sessions of work between guide and participant. Within the STS process, there are definitive stages that allow participant and guiding composer to move from story telling to story singing. During each stage, emotion and meaning are bestowed upon the words of the story through the discovery and creation of a melody, a musical key, a chord progression, rhythm, groove, and arrangement of lyrics taken directly from the story itself. There are also moments when the participant, guiding composer, or both may have difficulty moving forward—moments the researchers deem being *stuck*—followed by moments when a shift occurs that allows for continued movement within that stage or on to the next stage—a *breakthrough*.

The stages identified thus far include:

1. Participant shares a story, which is captured verbatim by guide.
2. Promising melodic germs, along with rhythm and groove, are revealed from a recording of participant singing text.
3. Chorus structure is developed.
4. Verse structure is developed.
5. Verses and chorus are arranged in a way that captures essence of story.
6. Run through of verses and choruses
7. Chords and strumming pattern
8. Performable work of music for voice and accompaniment

The following reflections are commentaries on the individual stages in the songwriting process as each researcher experienced them during an STS session. These passages are excerpts from longer pieces that explore each of the stages in this process. In her reflection, Marieke explores her experiences working with participant Wren Logan, a fellow member of her cohort in the Prescott College Ph.D. program. Marieke reflects on her experiences during Stage 4 of the STS method, when she explored possibilities for the verse structure for Wren's story about identity and cultural challenges faced by a young mother. Malcolm's reflection focuses on an STS session working with Marieke as participant. He describes a situation during an STS session working on Stage 3—developing the chorus—in which he railed against Marieke's wish to sing a particular note in a chorus. While each reflection offers insight into only individual stages in the overall method, there is much that can be learned and revealed from deconstructing these experiences.

Marieke Slovin—Of Lyrics, Verse Structure, and Inner Voices

The process of reworking and revising Wren’s song has been happening sporadically over the past few weeks. It is especially challenging with the three of us—Wren, Malcolm, and I—living in different places and all busy with life, the building of houses, children, and so on. In spite of such challenges, I have been inspired and awed by the beauty of the words and meaning behind this song. It has been particularly moving to see how we three have created a true sense of community and commitment to this project, though none of us is being reimbursed monetarily or in any tangible way for our efforts.

Of note, I want to elucidate on an inner voice that has been revealed in me over the course of this project. I have begun to hear and feel a strong and quite demanding voice from within, insisting on particular lyrics in the shaping of this song. I have found that each time I immerse myself in STS, I discover a number of these voices, ranging from an inner critic, who seeks to dispel any confidence that would allow me to move forward in the musical process, to a confident singer, who thwarts the efforts of my research partner’s inner voices in an attempt to ensure that certain melodies, notes, or chord progressions endure in the creation of a song.

Reinharz (1997) describes each of these inner voices as a “self” (p. 3). Researchers “both bring the self to the field and create the self in the field” (p. 3). She describes these selves as affecting her “ability to conduct research” (p. 4). She also writes of their ability “to shape and obstruct the relationships that the researcher can form and hence the knowledge that can be obtained” (p. 4). Similarly, I have experienced the barriers created by the voice of my inner critic, thwarting my musical efforts and success until I experience a breakthrough that quiets the critic for a time. I seem to experience an ongoing battle between my own inner selves with each STS experience. Perhaps, these inner voices I describe have existed for decades. However, I have

only become aware of them to the point of giving them identities and character traits through participation in STS.

We made quite a bit of progress in shaping the song after Wren sent a series of verses she had created via email. The words she chose were haunting and beautiful. I spent a couple of hours sitting with them and looking for ways to create individual verses that, when sung together, would reveal the meanings in Wren's story—namely, the struggle for a woman to maintain her sanity and self of sense in the wake of becoming a mother, particularly with the challenges of cultural pressures.

I sang different lines over and over. As I sang them, I found that I was offered musical gifts that allowed for what Malcolm and I call a musical *breakthrough*. This concept of a breakthrough is essentially a magical moment when the feeling of being *stuck* musically is suddenly eliminated by a thought or idea for a melodic germ, lyric or chord choice, rhythm, speed, or other musical element. This notion of a breakthrough is really a musical watershed, a moment when you realize that the song is revealing itself, that everything is going to be all right musically in the end, and that you have permission to carry on and move forward.

In STS, both participant and guide combine efforts to discover a song from spoken text. As my research partner Malcolm has explained, the song is already out there, waiting to be discovered. Pieces of the song are revealed in stages if the participant and guide are open and respectful to the experience of receiving them. The composer has to work at finding the song but does not have control over when and how the parts of the song will be offered. There is a certain level of respect, chance, and paying attention in the process of finding pieces of the song as they are revealed. The composer can only do so much to help move the process along (M. Brooks, personal communication, October 23, 2011).

Berkes (2008) describes a similar belief in the hunting tradition of the Cree in northern Canada. The Cree believe that a hunter must first respect an animal he or she hunts. A successful hunt results only after the animal decides to offer itself to the hunter. Berkes (2008) writes:

The hunter always speaks as if the human is the passive partner in this relationship. If the animal decides to make himself available, the hunter is successful. The hunter has no power over the game; the animals have the last say as to whether they will be caught. The hunter has to show respect to the animals because the hunter is dependent on game. The game is not there for the taking. There is no guarantee of a kill. The game must be pursued. (p. 99)

The result of a successful hunt is irreversible. In composing, there is also a sense of irreversibility and inevitability, for when a musical breakthrough occurs, there is no going back. The musical gift, however small, makes it nearly impossible to remember or to even conceive of ever having played or sang the song differently. An example of this phenomenon can be found in two emails from Wren to me. In the first one, she requested that I sing higher notes for the line *leaving was a severing*. Moments later, she wrote a second email saying that she realized that I had already sung the notes higher in a recording I had previously sent her. She thought that perhaps the fact that she had already heard me sing the higher notes was the reason she desired to hear them sung this way. She could not recall if she had her idea of singing higher notes prior to listening to my recording. The question arises as to whether the idea been planted in her mind because she had the innate sense that it should be so or as a result of hearing me singing it that way and then couldn't remember or imagine it being sung any differently.

Another example of a breakthrough appears in a song I worked on collaboratively with Malcolm called *Size Doesn't Matter*. Following the STS method and working iteratively, I sang the chorus multiple times. One time I sang the line *It's only how you feel* slightly differently from previous times but in such a way that Malcolm exclaimed, "That is it. We can never go back to the earlier version" (M. Brooks, personal communication, November 28, 2011).

A number of these breakthrough moments occurred in the carving out of Wren's *Canyon Song*. I choose the term "carving out" because I truly felt that the song was present in Wren's words the entire time. I had but to carve and sculpt to find the exact words that would help to give voice to her experience with the most feeling and poetry. Since words, chords, and melody are all that an audience who is not familiar with Wren or her story will hear, they must be chosen to fit together so as to channel the emotion and meaning in the song successfully. I am including the song structure in its entirety below so that my subsequent references to individual lyrics and phrases have context.

There's a place in the desert
I've gone to for years
Every time I go visit
A journey to myself
It's just a dry desert wash most of the year
When you start hiking, signs of life appear

Can I find the courage
To part with you, my love
And nurture my own spirit
You're part of me, my love
Each day you bring joy to my life, little one
Leaving you is the hardest thing, I've ever done

Chorus:
(There are) Cottonwoods in the distance
Water in the wash
Birds are singin' if you listen (there are)
Bright yellow and orange rocks
Saguaros are hanging on the cliffs and
Somehow
Everything sorts itself out right here
Somehow everything sorts itself out right here

One life for another
My body's not my own
I carried you inside of me
For 9 long months all alone
Like a drug, I couldn't get enough of your love
Your smiling face and your baby smell, my little one

I wasn't sure just what to do (but I was)
Losing my mind
Peaceful nights disrupted
My own needs cast aside
People tryin' to tell me how to love
What gives them the right to judge love?

Chorus

So leaving was a severing
Then the greatest joy
It was the first time I left my baby
The first time on my own
It was the first time I got my body back
In a year
The first time I'm returning
Here

Chorus

One example of a breakthrough occurred when I found myself replacing the words *get hiking* with *visit* at the end of the second line of the first verse. The line *Every time I go hiking* became *Every time I go visit*. I was uncomfortable having the word *hiking* twice in one verse. I also found that having the word *visit* and then *hiking* helped to establish the importance of two events taking place in that first—the meaning behind Wren traveling to this sacred place, as well as the transformation that occurred when she immersed herself in the canyon wilderness. A second breakthrough happened in replacing the words *Then* with *When*, as well as deleting the word *and* from last line of the first verse. The line *Then you start hiking and signs of life appear* became *When you start hiking, signs of life appear*.

These differences may seem small, but the deletion of even one small word can make a line feel even better to sing and make it easier to share the meaning with the audience with more forthrightness and clarity. It can also alter the meaning of the phrase ever so slightly but in meaningful ways, such as with the example above of changing *get hiking* to *visit*. There are times

when more words can add more meaning and depth; however, I am finding that, in the case of songwriting and especially in song singing, less is more. Having fewer words allows time for the audience to take in meaning and digest everything happening in each moment of the song, of which there is a lot—rhythm, melody, chords, and lyrics. The full meaning is revealed when individual lyrics are tied together in a single line, then tied together with all of the lines of a verse, then connected from verse to chorus, and then connected to all the verses and choruses. One word change may seem small and unworthy of much attention; however, when you have only a few words in a verse and even fewer in a single chorus, as well as only two to four minutes of time to share the power of the human experience, the pressure is great to do justice to that story without saying too much, without making the song so long and verbose that it grows cumbersome to listen to, and without changing the rhythm, speed, and word choices so much that the meaning of the song strays from what the storyteller intended.

Another example of a musical gift appears in the line *Birds are singing if you listen*. When I first began working with the words in this phrase, I felt awkward singing *trees thicken*. Moreover, even though the words made sense in the context of the spoken story, I was concerned that they would not succeed in creating a comprehensible image for a person listening to the song without the complete story in hand. There was also a part of me that delighted in the idea of hearing birds singing in the canyon and wanted to bring them back into the song. I had let go when the line disappeared earlier in the songwriting process, but I could not resist seeing how it felt to put them back in. I did a run-through of the song and tried singing the chorus slightly different each time it came around in the song. By the end, the line *if you listen* had revealed itself after the beginning part *birds are singing*. Eureka! A breakthrough moment had occurred once again. It felt so wonderful to sing this line. It also seemed to fit cerebrally with the idea of

going to a place to awaken the sense of your most inner self by awakening your senses. What better way to truly be *who* you are than by paying such close attention to *where* you are?

Then there are the “let’s just try singing it this way” moments. These are simply experiments to try to hone down the words to the point where they feel absolutely wonderful to sing. They require paying very close attention to details—what feels better and sounds better? What feels and sounds round, clean, and polished? When is it appropriate to sound polished? In the case of the *Canyon Song*, I sought a polished feel and sound and shifted the word *this* to *a* in the very first line of the song. The line *There’s this place in the desert* became *There’s a place in the desert*. The third to last line also received this change. *It’s just a dry desert wash most of the year*.

Explaining why this feels better and why I care at all about such a tiny change is actually quite challenging. Malcolm believes that it demonstrates that I am a true singer and writer. All I can say is that when I tried singing it with even that subtle change, it felt better and clearer. It was easier to sing *There’s a* rather than two words beginning with *th*. It also seemed to lend more importance to the place, which held such sacred meaning for Wren that she chose to travel there at least once every year to restore her sense of self and equilibrium. Calling it this place seemed to diminish the significance of the canyon over all the other canyons in Arizona where she could go hiking.

There were also examples of moments when my inner singer simply felt good singing particular words, cutting out others, or dropping a syllable from a two-syllable word to make it a one-syllable word. *Journey into myself* became *Journey to myself*. No matter how hard I tried, my inner singer just would not sing the *in*. Since this small change did not seem to alter the meaning of the line in any great way, I felt comfortable with the shift. The shift in meaning

actually became even stronger in illustrating that, in traveling to the canyon, Wren was actually going to find herself—her own identity, as revealed most strongly when she spent time immersed in a desert wilderness. That is pretty powerful, especially when thinking about our many inner selves and how different situations, people, and events reveal different elements of who we are.

Then there were the serendipitous moments—happy accidents—which were even more interesting. For example, I felt very strongly about the words *my love* at the end of the judgment line, and I even sang both words in the recording. However, when I went back and listened to the recording, I noticed that I had sung the word *my* so low that it had not quite registered, leaving the word *love* as the sole focus of the preceding words *What gives them the right to judge*. The line and meaning of the line became even more powerful and chilling, and this improvement had occurred completely by accident.

In this emergent method of social research we have called Story-to-Song, Malcolm and I have used music to give voice to Wren's experiences, as well as to offer her a means of expressing her struggle by sharing her song with family and friends. Tel-Or (2008) uses interview and written ethnography to illustrate a Jewish woman's struggle as a mother and wife in the Hassidic tradition in Tel-Aviv, Israel. While I do not consider my relationship with Wren as a researcher seeking an understanding of Wren's life experiences, the result of our work together has helped me to gain insight into what it means to be a mother and a woman with an individual identity, as well insight into the cultural stereotypes and stigma of how mothers should behave and the kinds of choices they should make. Tel-Or (2008) also writes of being concerned that she will not be able to engage in intimate conversation with her informant Hanna due to the strictness and secrecy dictated by Hassidic culture. Of interest here is that Wren initially expressed a reticence to participate in STS because she was far too nervous and afraid,

yet when the opportunity to participate with only Malcolm and me in a private setting arose, she eagerly volunteered. She even spent hours writing up her story ahead of time, an action which points to the importance of the experience for her. I did not have to pursue her as a participant from whom to learn, because she asked Malcolm if we would work with her after he had mentioned that we were looking for a volunteer. It was also perhaps less difficult for Wren to share her experience within the mores of our culture than it was for Hanna in Israel. Additionally, Wren had already established a sympathetic relationship with Malcolm and me as members of a cohort in the Prescott College Ph.D. program in Sustainability Education.

Malcolm Brooks—The Mind and Body of a Musician

Working with Marieke has caused me re-evaluate the tidy research personalities that I had assigned to each of us. Denzin (1997) divides new social science writers into two categories: ethnographic realists and cultural phenomenologists (p. 201). The realists look outside themselves to find a topic of interest in the world, while the phenomenologists look inside themselves and find a topic to introduce to the world. I told Marieke that I saw myself as more of the former, an ethnographic realist who looks outside himself for a topic to explore. I recalled how I spent delightful hours at the Maine Folklife Center, reading through interviews of people who were born over a century ago. The details of their lives seemed like Christmas presents to me. I wanted to sing about the man who loved to snowshoe, the boy who found the raspberries after the fire, and the woman who loved to douse for water because she found dousing fun. Marieke, on the other hand, seemed to me to be more of a cultural phenomenologist. I believed that, when writing her blog *Ranger M Goes to Alaska* (2011), she chose to explore her inner experiences and to draw out the inner experiences of others.

During my research with Marieke, I have found myself exploring my own inner experiences and engaging in phenomenological inquiry because there was no other recourse. As uncomfortable and draining as it has been, I have had to look within myself to find explanations for why I feel a melody or lyric phrase merits some adjustment. Again and again, I find myself knowing something “in my body,” on a visceral rather than cerebral level. I have had to confront my reluctance to embrace this method of research that calls for exploration of the dark recessed of mind and body. I admit that I find comfort in the positivist view that there may be some sort of objective reality that I might explore outside of myself without questioning my own bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Denzin (1997) helps me see the craft of ethnographic songwriting as valid anthropological research. Songs are performance texts, and performance texts “can undo the voyeuristic, gazing eye of the ethnographer, bringing audiences and performers into a jointly developed and shared field of experience” (p. 94). Creating these performance texts requires turning one’s attention inward. Far more disconcerting is the task of communicating all that I observe when I turn my attention inward. I can find no one, simple interior realm to explore and express. Rather, there are distinct realms of pitches, rhythms, and words.

Marieke calls these realms “scapes.” I think of them also as “sites.” Marcus (1998) refers to sites in terms of physical locations or social locations, but I think of a song as an object of study with multiple musical sites. For me, the site of the melody, with its structural rises and falls, is far different from the site of the rhythmic pulse—or “groove” as musicians call it—where a river of beats flows evenly. Lyrics and accompaniment form their own sites. Although I may not leave the room of a building when composing, I do travel somewhere distant with my

attention. In a sense, I follow the established practice of the anthropologist's traveling off somewhere to conduct research (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

In trying to teach Marieke how to transform a story into a song, I experienced the benefits of employing a dialogic hermeneutic model (Michrina & Richards, 1996). Instead of a one-way flow of information—in which I would speak and Marieke would listen—we maintained a conversation. After any statement I made, Marieke felt free to challenge and question me. This sort of interactive interviewing allowed for a natural interchange (Ellis, 2004) among two students and reduced hierarchical differences between expert and novice or between interviewer and participant (Ellis, 1997). From what I have experienced so far, this dialogic process seems to ferret out biases and help build a fuller, shared understanding of a topic (Michrina & Richards, 1996).

Dialogical method can be especially effective, though uncomfortable, when two researcher partners are man and woman. The discomfort that can arise is not limited to the gender divide. In one instance, Marieke's challenge generated a conflict between my own mind and body. To this day, thinking of the conflict makes me squirm. This example deserves further attention because it is complex. It reveals how a composer may wrestle with opposing perspectives in his own mind. It also reveals how a male bias can cause a man to continue to resist a woman's opinion, even after a man admits the woman is right.

Here is the story. It may be helpful to offer lyrical context before I reflect on specifics. Below are the lyrics that Marieke and I distilled from the story she told. I have placed a box to show the spot where I contested Marieke's melody.

I have layers and layers of people from over the years.
I keep losing myself in their words. It's all that I hear.
I have been inclined to let them cover my own voice.
I've got to shed those layers and be

Free in the moment, free.
Free in the moment, free.
One layer down and one layer shed,
One layer down and one layer shed,
Free in the moment.

I've got a friend in Alaska, he won't let me hide.
He said, "Girl, you can wail, here's how. We're going outside"
He said, "Don't be inclined to let them cover your own voice"
"You can shed those layers and be
Free in the moment, free.
Free in the moment, free.
One layer down and one layer shed,
One layer down and one layer shed
Free in the moment.

So I tried, my back was bent over.
I wanted to wail, but I couldn't wail at all.
It was coming from up here, not down here.
He said, "Why don't you try standing,"
"Maybe a little more."
But I wasn't gonna go there,
I wasn't gonna let out
Till he said, "1 2 3 Scream!"

And I felt free in the moment, free.
Free in the moment, free.
I've got one layer down and one layer shed,
One layer down and one layer shed
Free in the moment
Might last a moment
May lose it but I'll find it again
Cause I know, I know,
I can be free.

Early on in our compositional work together, I told Marieke that the chords to a song should contain most of the notes in the melody. If a melody rests on a particular note for several beats, then the accompanying chord should contain that note. Yet at one point in our search for a chorus melody, Marieke persisted in singing a note that was not found in the chord that I was playing on the guitar. I grew upset. I later realized that I had resisted Marieke's choice of melodic note for three reasons—I felt that background singers would have difficulty finding and

singing notes to complement Marieke's note; I deemed it an unsophisticated compositional trick to use melodic notes outside of a chord in order to create tension; and I kept hearing in my mind a muddy combination of notes because I had mentally transposed Marieke's E above middle C down one octave where I could comfortably sing it. I describe these three issues in detail in the following pages.

The Melody Stands Alone

While we were testing out possible melodic lines for the song *Free in the Moment*, Marieke would frequently sing a particular note that was not contained in the chord that I was playing on the guitar. This note, an E above Middle C, lasted three beats. Marieke was singing it over a B minor chord, a chord that does not contain an E. I had not insisted upon playing the B minor chord, but Marieke had said earlier that she liked it at that place in the song. I had provided her with an alternate chord that I could play—an A chord—which contained the note E in its structure. She had listened to the A chord and said that she preferred B minor.

Marieke did not know it, but she was threatening an identity that I had constructed for myself—that of a composer who could create melodies of such interest that they did not need chordal accompaniment. In years past, I had observed that the melodies of composers like Tchaikovsky and Bizet held emotional power without chordal support. These melodies created mood by their own pitch and rhythm structures. I had vowed to write melodies with that same quality. As part of forming my own image, I pictured myself as different from those composers who employed chord progressions to create a sense of movement and tension. To sing a note that was not contained in the structure of the accompanying chord was, in my view, to employ a cheap effect. For me to endorse Marieke's singing a note outside of a chord was tantamount to

my descending to the ranks of the lesser composers. I felt that a melody should be able to stand alone; it should be able to evoke a mood without chordal accompaniment.

Yet sustaining this E over a B minor chord created a tension between voice and guitar that Marieke evidently enjoyed. She did not seem to have any concern about casting herself as a greater or lesser composer. If a particular note felt good to her inner singer, she followed the feeling, along with her own sense of musical intuition. I did realize that this concern with seeing myself as a sophisticated composer was my own issue and chose not to mention it at that moment. Besides, there were other musical worries I had regarding Marieke's choice of melodic note.

What of the Backup Singers in the Band?

I said to Marieke that backup singers would have trouble finding harmony notes if the melody contained this E that she persisted in singing. I have learned through experience that melodic notes outside of chords can make it difficult to arrange harmony parts. I did not make my protest in a casual, unconcerned way. In my body, I had taken on the role of background singer and I was expressing a physical discomfort. Furthermore, I was vicariously sensing the discomfort of two background singers, since background singers often work in pairs and sing two separate notes that combine with the lead singer's note to form a full three-note chord.

Marieke replied that, from the perspective of a lead singer of this song, she could report that singing this E above Middle C—the one outside of the chord—felt so pleasurable that she was unconcerned about what notes the harmony singers would sing. Marieke is a compassionate soul, and I knew that she was exaggerating her insouciance to make her point with a bit of humor. All the same, her feeling in her body as a lead singer conflicted with my feeling in my body as a background singer. Both bodies were sure that they were right.

I decided that my worry over background singers' possible discomfort was a small concern in light of Marieke's enthusiasm for singing her E. I had also decided that my motto "great composers do not cheapen themselves by using chords to create tension" might be suspect and too wobbly to take a stand over. So I capitulated. The E over the B minor could stay.

A Question of Pitch

Marieke's desire to sing the E continued to haunt me. Even though the argument had been settled, a voice inside me continued to resist the idea of Marieke's singing that note. To allay these persistent misgivings, I searched for precedents and thought of another song in which the melody contains an E sung over a B minor chord. I recalled how John Lennon sings an E over a B minor chord during the first line of the chorus of *Help* (1965). The words *Help me if you can* are all sung on an E above middle C. I also recalled with some self-righteous satisfaction that the background singers make no attempt to find or sing notes to support the E while it is being sung over a B minor chord. The harmony parts enter only when the accompanying chords change to an E. After that point, with the instruments playing an E chord, and with the singer singing an E note, harmony parts are easy to find and sing. I do not know whether the Beatles tried and then discarded harmony parts, but I could observe that they had chosen to create a melody with E note over a B minor chord. Marieke now had the Beatles on her side. Both she and Lennon were singing the same pitch in the same register over the same minor chord. Why was I still resisting this idea?

I considered how Lennon executes the note. I realized that it lies in the upper end of his vocal range and so he must sing it with sufficient energy to reach the pitch. This E also lies high in the range, or tessitura, of the melody of the song *Help*. The majority of pitches in that song lie below this note. Then, I considered how Marieke executes the note. It lies in the middle of her

vocal range. Marieke is able to sing the note with less energy and at a lower volume.

Additionally, the E lies in the lower range, or tessitura, of the melody of *Free in the Moment*.

The majority of the notes in the melody lie above this note.

I realized, then, that although both Marieke and Lennon were singing the same pitch over the same chord, there were differences in how the note was being sung and the function and position of the note within the melodic line. Lennon was sitting near the top of his vocal range at a high point in the melodic line. Marieke, on the other hand, was singing near the lower end of her vocal range at a lower point in the melodic line. Perhaps, by exploring these differences, I might find the source of my misgivings.

I considered how, when Marieke and I are working out a melody, we often test out each other's melodic suggestions. Marieke might sing a phrase to see how it feels to her, and then I might sing that same phrase to see how it feels to me. My voice mirrors, or echoes rather, the notes that Marieke sings. Yet because Marieke is a woman and I am a man, I make an adjustment during this echoing process. My throat automatically matches the degree of tension in Marieke's throat and, to do so, automatically sings her phrase one octave lower. I transpose the notes that Marieke sings to make adjustments for our difference in gender and vocal ranges.

Unless I make a conscious effort to do otherwise, my body assigns a higher priority to matching the tension in Marieke's throat than it does to matching the pitch and octave of the note that Marieke sings. In the case of Marieke's singing an E above Middle C over a B minor chord, I unconsciously transpose that E down one octave so as to match the degree of vocal tension in Marieke's throat.

I make this downward note transposition so unconsciously and so often that I can imagine how the lower note feels in my throat without even singing it. I can even react to this imaginary

singing and assess the imaginary comfort level of my throat. Furthermore, I can even imagine whether a note will be easy to hear in my mind during the moment before I am to sing it in a performance. Most important of all, I can imagine how it feels to sing this note within a cluster of other sounds that make up a chord.

Clusters of notes played in the higher register on the piano sound interesting, crisp, and clear. In other words, it is possible to hear and appreciate each individual note. Clusters of notes played in the lower register, however, tend to emit an indistinct, blurred sound that almost blends the notes together so it is difficult to identify any one note individually. One of the first things that a music student learns in music school is that a cluster of high notes, all close in pitch, can sound pleasing. On the other hand, a cluster of low notes, all close in pitch, can sound like mud. After a few years of arranging experience, even the thought of a cluster of low notes can prompt a wincing reflex. When I imagined singing Marieke's E above middle C—and unconsciously and automatically transposed it down an octave—I heard and felt mud in my mind and body.

I realized that I resisted Marieke's choice of a melodic note because I could not stop imagining my singing it one octave down and could not stop imagining a mud of low notes. I could not stop imagining the difficulty of sustaining the note accurately down there while a bass and guitar played notes on nearby pitches. This discomfort, imaginary to my mind but real to my body, caused me to resist Marieke's idea.



Were Marieke a man singing the very same the pitch, I would not unconsciously transpose a note down an octave. I would hear and imagine the note as it truly sounds and not be disturbed by an imaginary muddy cluster of low notes. I see now that it is my own conception of a physical difference between a man and a woman that makes me react and transpose what Marieke sings into something that makes feels comfortable to a male voice. However, the result of the transposition is a loss on my part of the pleasing tension that Marieke feels when she sings a note in an upper register.

I recognize that there is even more to be examined here. While the man in me may be unsettled, there is also an 11-year-old boy in me who spontaneously reacts with delight when he hears Marieke sing her E against the guitar's B minor chord. To this lad, free of knowledge of music theory and innocent of the voice change ahead of him when he reaches puberty, Marieke's idea is simply "cool." This 11-year old boy, I also notice, does not care whether that sophisticated, purist composer in me is miffed. The boy has yet to form any paradigms about whether chords should or should not be employed to create musical tension.

Other "selves," so to speak, became more apparent to me through this dialogic research with Marieke. I encountered a self-proclaimed sophisticated composer, an 11-year old boy, a

background singer, and a lead singer, but also a bass player self, a drummer self, a producer self, a listener self, and a dancer self. These selves held strong opinions about the directions of the composition. Their opinions often differed. Working with Marieke was bringing these opinionated selves out into the open. The term “composer” ceased to look so tidy.

Like Marieke, I had encountered the concept of multiple selves before, not as a mental disorder, but as a means of presenting oneself to research participants in a way that facilitates cooperation. Reinharz (1997) conducted an analysis of the multiple selves she uncovered in her field notes during her work in a kibbutz in Israel. She found 20 different ways that she referred to herself in her notes. She categorized these references into selves that helped her perceive how she presented herself to the community and how the community’s responses were affected by her choice of self. Reinharz may have been negotiating with an outside world while I was negotiating with an inner world, but the approach was the same: a different self would appear when needed. Reinharz’s work reassured me since she had uncovered 20 selves within her. That is a big band. I felt grateful that my band of selves seemed to have fewer members. How ironic that one small detail of one melodic pitch would stir up feelings about my very identity—or identities.

Conclusion

These commentaries have provided a window into phenomenological and interpersonal events that transpire during the STS process. They have also revealed the value of interactive interviewing interspersed with individual reflection. Of interest is the fact that these excerpts were written independently and when shared, both researchers were astonished by what the other had experienced and expressed.

A research design has begun to emerge through this work. We have discovered that there is a dialogical process that occurs during actual musical exploration, as well as during discussions between two researchers and between a participant and a guiding composer.

Musical collaboration has shown itself to be multilayered and complex. Change and adaptability may be required if sustainability is to be achieved. Adjustments may need to occur not only in actions, but also in thought. Partners may find themselves managing their own personalities, such as balancing the opinions of an “inner critic” with those of a “confident singer.” Additionally, partners may find that their collective understanding is affected by physical differences, such as the difference between a female and male vocal range. When two people create together, the output may be musical and serendipitous personal growth.

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Marieke Slovin



Malcolm Brooks



Wren and her daughter: Graphic to represent article