

Adapting practice through a pandemic and increasing hearing loss (when you're not Beethoven!)

Sonia Allori

Composer
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
S.Allori@res.ac.uk

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Abstract. The journey through 2 years of a pandemic has not been easy for anyone. Everyone has had their own experiences and path through this and for this paper I am tracing one path, my own one, as a composer/performer adapting to increasing hearing loss and to working online. I trace my journey through the past 2 years through the musical works I have been commissioned to write and the projects I have been involved with in a creative capacity. I end the paper in Spring 2022, back to working in person and detail the surprising conclusions I've made about my life and work during the past 2 years.

Keywords. Composer, performer, pandemic/Covid, music, disability, deaf, inclusion, adaptive practice, captioning, audio description.

Adaptar la práctica a través de una pandemia y aumentar la pérdida de audición (¡cuando no eres Beethoven!)

Resumen. El camino de los dos años de pandemia no ha sido fácil para nadie. Todos hemos tenido nuestras propias experiencias y caminos y, para este artículo, estoy trazando un camino, el mío propio, como compositora/intérprete adaptándome a la creciente pérdida auditiva y al trabajo online. Trazo mi viaje de los dos últimos años a través de las obras musicales que me han encargado escribir y los proyectos en los que he estado involucrada creativamente. Termino el artículo en la primavera de 2022, cuando vuelvo a trabajar presencialmente y detallo las sorprendentes conclusiones que he sacado sobre mi vida y mi trabajo durante los últimos dos años.

Palabras clave. Compositora, intérprete, pandemia/Covid, música, discapacidad, sordera, inclusión, práctica adaptativa, subtítulos, audio descripción.

This wonderful picture is of the Cairngorm Mountains nearby to where I live in the Scottish Highlands. I'm a composer, performer, writer, researcher and community music therapist working with companies throughout the UK. I'm also deaf and a power wheelchair user which impacts both my music practice and how I live my life. I've just started to work in person again after 2 years of being locked

in my living room shielding away from the world and the people in it. I'll be the first to admit that I've forgotten how to, "people"! By that I mean that it feels

strange to be amongst other folks so closely again and there is something slightly discomfiting about admitting that and about having to get used to it again! I'm sure that I'm not the only one transitioning from one state of being to another post-pandemic. I thought I would write some words about how my music practice developed through all of those Covid days and through increasing hearing loss. In the following paragraphs I'll take you on a journey through my musical background and in more detail from March 2020 to Spring 2022.



Donald Ellis Ross

A little background

I started composing music in Secondary school with some small chamber works and some songs full of teenage angst! Songs and the combination of words and music have followed me through the ensuing years from school through undergraduate and postgraduate music studies to my PhD. During my PhD I started to lose my hearing and moved from writing in a wholly acoustic contemporary classical style to incorporating technology until I found my niche creating electroacoustic music. The folio for my PhD has works which mirror

this development, showing a change in forces and exploration of a wider sound palette while still illustrating my fascination for using words and music.

Today I'm a busy composer and combine this with performing, researching and working as a community music therapist. All of the strands of my practice flow into one another and have at their core a need for diversity, insatiable curiosity and inclusion. I now have very little useful hearing and have been learning to adapt my approach in the ways I can collaborate, create and continue to work as a musician. During the past 2 years in particular as we have all been on our different journeys and experiences through the pandemic, I have learned to work in a completely new way which incorporates my deafness as a new tool for creativity and innovation through the use of live audio description in text which I follow in captions as I play and write. I still write songs, but they are multi-faceted these days and the songs and other works I write incorporate layers of texture and samples mixed with live acoustic and digital instruments.

Spring 2020, when the world changed ...

In March 2020, when the world changed, and lots of people found themselves in various dire situations all of my work got cancelled. I was not unique in this respect of course but as 2019 had proven to be a year of great momentum in my career I felt this change and sudden isolation and inertia all the more keenly. I remained motionless and numb for around 6 weeks and then new offers of work and an artist residency with Drake Music came at just the right time and I found new ways to flourish and to dissipate the inertia safely shielding in my living room. I joined everyone working alone but together online but found my deafness as the cause of a silence I never thought I would find ways to penetrate.

However, I quickly found that although I could no longer hear birdsong that I could still remember what birdsong sounded like and could in fact call upon a memory bank of sounds built up over years of being in the hearing world instead of this new silent one. I started to work with lovely live captioning humans and found 2 in particular who are based at the totally opposite end of the UK from me and who are now my ears from a certain point of view. They caption speaking and presentations and training courses but also live music and sounds in stream of consciousness prose which fills my mind with colour and light and remembering and I can respond and "hear" these sounds as I read the words in their captions.

Working online and captioning

I've grown used to working on Zoom where I often talk of collectively being alone as we have all been in our homes alone but meeting in new online social and workspaces together. It was rather odd at first and especially if you are deaf and can't hear what anyone is saying. It is almost possible to lip read if you are one-to-one but as soon as you invite more people to the online space the squares we have been inhabiting on Zoom and on other platforms reduce in size and it is headache inducing trying to squint in to see the detail. Quite soon after the first lockdown I started to work with captions. These can be generated automatically by software which listens to speech and gives you a sometimes almost accurate

and at other times hilariously random approximation of what is being said by a speaker. For example, someone might have climbed Mount Snowdon and eaten

a cheese sandwich only for the captions to interpret this as someone who climbed Mount Snowdon and found Jesus... both are plausible but give wildly different experiences by the plucky mountain climber! (Incidentally, this is a real-life example from a Zoom conversation early on during the first lockdown in the UK)!

The other version of captioning is where you have a lovely live human being your ears and writing in text what is being said or presented as it happens. I've been working with live captioners for 2 years now and work with several in particular who have helped me to revolutionise my music practice despite us all being in the throes of Covid. Why the revolution you might ask? If you can imagine for a moment not being able to hear the music, you are listening to and suddenly having it illuminated for you live in wonderful stream of consciousness descriptive prose then you are halfway towards understanding the process of audio description. Taking this process still further it can become a creative process if the captioner is audio describing in text a live improvisation with other musicians on Zoom.

Sonic Bothy

One of the organisations I work with is Sonic Bothy, an inclusive experimental music ensemble based in Glasgow. During the first lockdown our work quite quickly transferred online, and we started to have improvisation sessions on Zoom. It works like this:

1. Someone makes a sound or plays an instrument.
2. The captioner audio describes this in text.
3. I respond to the audio description.
4. Other musicians in the ensemble respond to me.
5. The cycle is repeated, overlapping and being dependent upon what the captioner audio describes.

Of course, there are several other forces at work especially when working with sound on Zoom and of course the primary one is latency. At Sonic Bothy, in our explorations with experimental music and improvisation we have worked through this whereby the texture and resulting improvisation becomes more complex because of the time lag. We don't address it directly but allow it to become part of the music we improvise.

In May 2020 we co-composed a new work called *Verbaaaaatim* for the BBC Tectonics Festival. It shows the process of improvisation and live captioning to brilliant effect with quirky visuals which further underline the processes at work. *Verbaaaaatim's* creative production started simply with a captioning text transcript of improvisation during a previous online rehearsal. In a later online rehearsal, we recreated the previous improvisation from the captioning text transcript which included detailed audio description. Through repeated versions

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of this initial transcript, we built a new work which captures our use of live captioning as an intrinsic creative tool.

Curiouser



Donald Ellis Ross

I'm a multi-instrumentalist and play clarinet, sax & bassoon. Late on in 2019 I added an Electronic Wind Instrument (EWI) to my collection which is now pushing my knowledge further as I explore new software and hardware using Ableton. I wrote a new work for EWI in December 2020 called, *Curiouser* as part of a residency with [Drake Music](#) which was shortlisted for a Scottish New Music Award in 2021. This work was inspired by a picture shown above which was taken on the beach at Burghead, Moray in Scotland and shows a shell casting a shadow which look like a pair of ears. *Curiouser* has an insistent 4-note fragment which permeates throughout the work in the various instrumental sounds of the EWI. It seems to say, "hear me" as it undulates through different textural guises. The residency provided a great sense of stability during a very unstable time throughout 2020. I learned a great deal through the gift of paid time to think and explore my practice and to collaborate with the other artists on the residency. Surprisingly I found a new confidence in the music I write and was able to trust that I could still write and produce new music despite increasing hearing loss using my brain's own audio library of remembered sounds and a vivid imagination hungry to invent more.

Songs in isolation

During 2021 I continued to work online with Sonic Bothy and in early Spring a digital “Covid commission” from [Disability Arts Online](#) to write a trio of new songs detailing my experience as a musician through the pandemic. Later in the summer I worked on a commission for Angel Field Festival with Rarescale Ensemble which traced the journey of the first email sent in 1971 through 50 years to the present day. In, *Songs in isolation* for Disability Arts Online I wrote blog-style posts to accompany the songs so giving 3 snapshots in time during the creation of each song and what I was experiencing in the pandemic in those moments. I found it a good commission for my mental health too as way of taking stock of what was happening and how I felt about it. Writing music can often be a solitary activity if you aren’t collaborating on that particular project and I was grateful for the opportunity that this commission gave me just to actually pause for a moment to see how I was doing. I had worked throughout 2020 and into 2021 without pause, burying myself in work almost as a way not to think or process what was going on and finally there was a chance to reflect. The rest of 2021 was filled with more work, and I looked back upon this little pause as a bit of a gift.

2022 is looking to be busier than ever especially now that I’m back working in person again. I’ve also found my way into writing which so far has involved research and more reflective pieces such as the one you are currently reading! I have a shiny new website and have started to write monthly updates and blog posts although I’m not entirely sure who these are aimed at or if anyone is reading them as I haven’t included statistics or anything like that in the web design package. I’m not sure I actually want to enter the scenario where I investigate who and how many folks may or may not be looking! I guess it is simply a place to put everything I’ve done so far and to add new things as they come along!

Room to breathe

I have recently started working on a new commission with [Drake Music Scotland](#) and [Nevis Ensemble](#) called *Room to breathe*. Ultimately it will be a multi-movement work to be performed later in 2022 which explores breathing post-Covid in different ways with text, spoken word, song, digital instruments, acoustic orchestral instruments and synthesised electronic tracks. In March, myself, Drake Music Scotland and a trio of wind players from Nevis Ensemble met online in a Zoom workshop on breathing led by artist, writer and yoga teacher Laura Gonzalez. It was a fascinating session and led into 2 further workshops in early April where we explored in sound and music some of the ideas from Laura’s session and questions around anxiety and hope as we continue to transition out of the pandemic.

Following the workshops, I composed a movement from the work called, “Fear, hope & breathing”. I posed 5 questions to the 3 wind players and their responses were recorded and woven into a voice collage. It begins and ends with the

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musicians breathing and the whole work can be described as an uncoiling spring or exhaling breath, anxious at first and becoming slowly more hopeful. The picture above shows the Nevis Ensemble players (Gabriela Jaros - flute, Elisabeth Lusche - trumpet, Will Gold – bassoon) and me at a performance of the movement at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in late April 2022.



Drake Music Scotland

Adventures in Captioning

My next work is a digital commission from Disability Arts Online called, *Adventures in Captioning*. It begins with some words, a deaf performer, a lovely live captioning human and auto captioning software and I'm not quite sure where it will end up as yet. However, it will basically be a comic exploration of the new creative process developed while working online during the pandemic. The forthcoming online performance will go live in September 2022 and involve spoken word, song, soundscape and lots and lots of captioning!

You can find out more about my practice here: <https://soniaallori.co.uk>