

The Soundcastle Theory of Practice

A Manifesto and Framework
for Participatory Musicking

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Abstract

In modern society, social isolation, cultural differences and a lack of community connectedness are ever present issues. It is within this context that the Soundcastle Theory of Practice seeks to make change. The practice seeks to genuinely empower communities in collective musicking, exploring how working within a scaffold of integral values can lead to community connectedness through music. This paper introduces the Soundcastle Theory of Practice for the first time, the result of several years of action research undertaken by Soundcastle in community music settings throughout London. Whilst the theory encompasses concepts from a range of disciplines and connects them to contexts found in modern society, this paper focuses on the structure of the theory of practice itself and how to apply it to practical contexts. It includes an interactive diagram which serves as a facilitator for facilitators working in community music. The presentation will raise the question of how we can combat cultural stagnation and challenge the concept of outreach, instead promoting local music made by and for local people. We will explore how to embed the practice in a setting, growing it from a community and context. Further, we address the deeply responsive nature of facilitators and whether it is possible to sensitively transition responsibility for the practice to the community themselves. The Soundcastle Theory of Practice is not an instruction manual for facilitators. It is a living, practical approach which continues to adapt to new settings and challenges. Its site-responsive and therefore flexible parameters are vital to its success. Our implementation has been an ongoing learning experience as well as deeply rewarding, resulting in members of communities musicking beyond projects, within their homes and schools and even setting up entrepreneurial ventures. Soundcastle seeks to instigate a return to musicking as an active and living part of culture, fundamental to society and owned by all. We believe the route to this shift of perceptions is a socially grounded approach to participatory music-making and the Soundcastle Theory of Practice is the start of this.

Keywords: Soundcastle Theory of Practice, community, music, facilitation, musicking, social isolation



Introduction

Music is for everyone. It is a fundamental part of being human. It is the first thing that we respond to when still in the womb (Ball, 2010), and it is the last thing preserved in our memory when mind and body deteriorate (Levitin, 2008). Whilst collective musicking has been around since early man, evident in every culture and across every era that we are aware of (Levitin, 2008), it is apparent that we may be entering a period of cultural stagnation. This is an era of passive consumption as we lose faith in our instinct to create new music and hand over responsibility to a select few professionals (Levitin, 2008). Soundcastle seeks to instigate a return to musicking as an active part of culture, fundamental to society and owned by all. We believe the route to this shift of perceptions is a socially grounded approach to participatory music-making and introduce the Soundcastle Theory of Practice as a means of achieving this. Whilst the theory encompasses concepts from a range of disciplines, connecting them to contexts found in modern society, this paper will focus on the theoretical structure of the practice itself and how to apply it to practical contexts. The Soundcastle Theory of Practice is not an instruction manual. It is a scaffold of values designed to aid facilitators in the pursuit of community connectedness through creative music-making. It is a living practice which continues to adapt to new settings and challenges. The practice is currently employed in all Soundcastle projects and throughout the paper, we provide examples from the communities we collaborate with to illustrate its benefits.

Glossary of terms

Axis of Transition: An interactive tool within the Soundcastle Theory of Practice (See Fig.1). At the facilitator(s)' discretion, it can be rotated up or down to transition greater responsibility within a project to the community.

Creative process: The creation of new music.

Community: A group of people, living or working in the same geographical setting.



Community member(s): Individual members of a community, more commonly referred to as 'participants' within the context of participatory music projects. Soundcastle has the longterm goal of communities taking autonomy for their musicking and therefore we consider each individual to be a creative collaborator or partner rather than a participant. For the sake of clarity in this paper, we refer to them as community members.

Facilitator(s): A deeply responsive musician or musicians who act as guardian of a creative process, remaining creatively neutral, whilst enabling the community to find their unique creative voice.

To music (v.) (or musicking): The action of creating, playing, performing, rehearsing, interacting with and/or listening to music in any way (Small, 1998).

Scaffolding/Scaffold I: We refer to the separate vertical arrows (Fig.1) as pieces of scaffolding which combined form the scaffold of the theory of practice. Each piece of scaffolding represents a different value of the practice. Within this support framework, the creation of new music, resulting in community connectedness can take place.

This approach is not concerned with “outreach”, or the commonly cited motivation to generate new audiences for concert halls. It is about communities reclaiming music as an integral part of individual and collective identity. This is not a linear path, but a conceptual scaffold that is essential for the outcome to have a meaningful social impact. It would be possible to create new music with only some pieces of scaffolding in place, however if the process is compromised, the social impact is limited.

¹ The Soundcastle Theory of Practice is influenced by but not identical to 'Instructional Scaffolding' - a well known learning process in educational contexts designed to promote a deeper level of learning.

The Soundcastle Theory of Practice

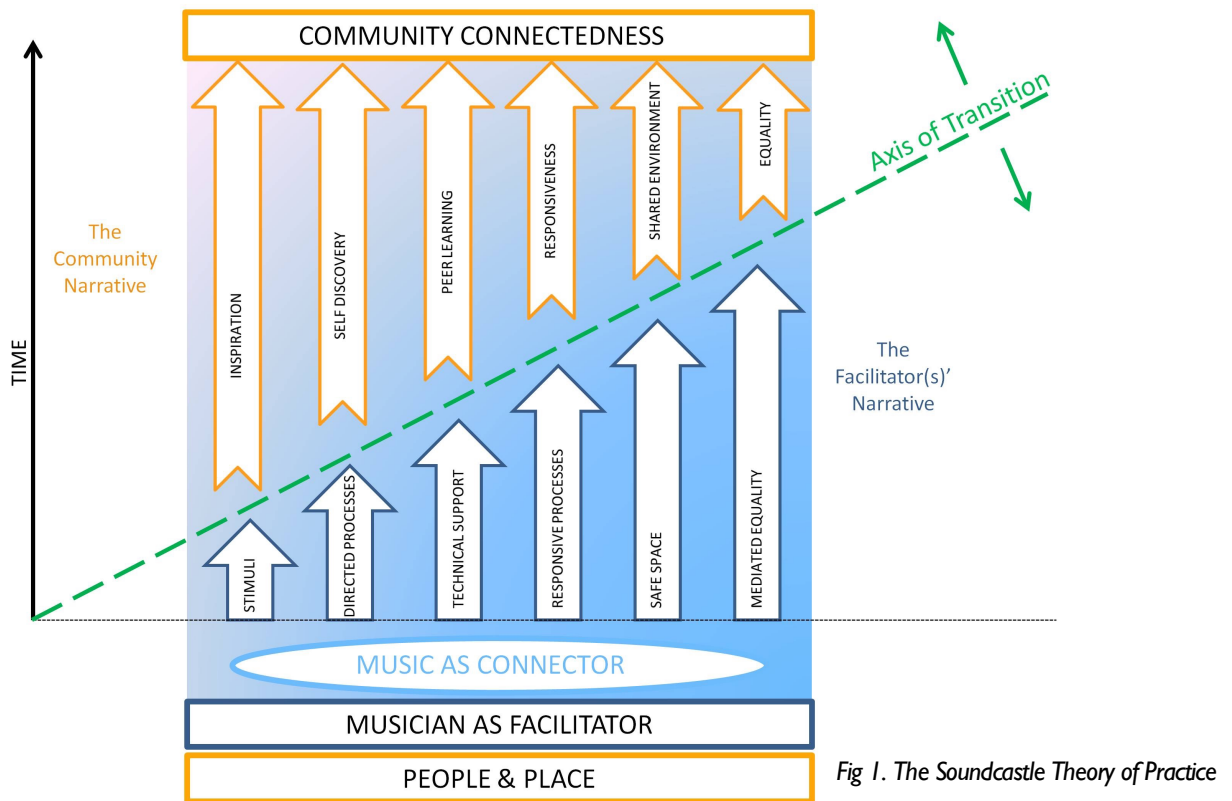


Fig 1. The Soundcastle Theory of Practice

The theory of practice is dependent upon three elements (see Fig. 1):

1. Music as Connector
2. The Facilitator(s)' Narrative
3. The Community's Narrative

The facilitator's narrative grows from people and place. In this context, they start to assemble the foundation of the scaffold (represented by the lower vertical arrows). These lead towards the upper arrows, representing the community's narrative who ultimately embody their own responsibility of the scaffold. Within, between and around all this is music as connector, the vital tool with which to build connectedness and sustain it beyond the project. The axis of transition is a moveable line under the direction of the facilitator which indicates the division of responsibility between facilitator(s) and community. This will rarely lie completely with one party and require ongoing collaboration. In this way, the practice is a fluid framework within which the facilitator(s) can engage in pursuit of community connectedness whilst remaining imaginative in their own personal approach. We now explore the three main elements in the following sections.



Music as Connector

In this section we examine why musicking in itself is so crucial to connecting the social elements of the scaffold and why we place such importance on the collective creation of new music within the practice in order to grow wellbeing. In modern society, social isolation, cultural differences and lack of community connectedness are ever present issues, and it is in this context that the Soundcastle Theory of Practice seeks to make change.² Music is something that already connects people, as a virtually universal element of the human condition. A group of people musicking, could be experiencing neurological and physical synchronicity (Benzon, 2001), a shared emotional state (Koelsch & Stegemann, 2012), a cohesive and co-operative mindset (Mithin, 2005) and a sense of group identity (Benzon, 2001). In this way, music is an extremely powerful tool with which to develop connectedness. Despite music seeming widespread in Western society, ever present in the media, a plethora of listening experiences available both digitally and live, we are living in an era of passive consumption. The musical elite providing these experiences are perceived as exceptional, revered as celebrities, and this places any ownership of music of this calibre as something unobtainable to the everyman. Cognitive scientist William L. Benzon warns of the danger this poses to the future of culture:

The abject veneration of genius devalues the musical capacities of the rest of us and encourages us to substitute recordings for our own music. That path leads to cultural stagnation. (Benzon, 2001).

How can we reverse this trajectory and ensure that our musical culture thrives, evolves, and does not stagnate? In order for musical culture to be alive, people of all backgrounds need to be actively engaged in the processes of creating and producing music. People should be able to feel ownership of their music,

² Soundcastle's flagship project Musical Beacons runs in Bow, in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Its diverse community faces challenges of overcrowding, low income and reduction of affordable housing. An example of lyrics written by community members demonstrates a sense of group identity and solidarity. It includes various languages spoken by individuals: 'We are family, mimi na wehweh' (me and you in Ghanaian) 'We are powerful, vamos la' (Let's Go in Brazilian Portuguese)



free from value judgment and externally imposed quality standards, whilst also being able to appreciate and engage with the music of others. Andrea Creech demonstrates how change may begin with community music:

...the principles of community music may be seen as a backlash against pervasive specialisation and professionalisation of music and an acknowledgement of the rapidly growing evidence that everyone regardless of social, educational, psychological or medical aspects, has the capacity to communicate through music. (Creech, 2010).

Facilitating the collective creation of new music is integral to the theory of practice. The scaffold demands that the musical process within it holds the values of equality, sharing, discussion and responsiveness. The concept of failure is disregarded, exploration and risk-taking are supported. Facilitator(s) ensure that community members explore both the individual and collective identities. This provides a platform both for self-advocacy and for group cohesion as complimentary, rather than conflicting, elements (Davidson & Emberly, 2012). Within Soundcastle projects there have been several notable examples of improvements to wellbeing and feelings of self-worth. One mother attending sessions with her child began with very low levels of confidence, and over the course of a project re-discovered her singing voice, reporting that she had found her hidden talent. Another mother reported that her five year old child who suffered from excessive shyness had begun contributing at school after discovering through the “safe space” (Higgins, 2012) atmosphere that her ideas were welcomed and valued. During a project in a homeless hostel a service user told staff that Soundcastle sessions had inspired him to return to writing his own music after a gap of more than two years brought on by anxiety.

In order for collective musicking to effectively achieve connectedness through a sense of ownership, the creative process requires expert facilitation. Whilst quality of facilitation is under constant discussion in Soundcastle’s practice, this particular paper will not explore the intricacies of the subject. This



interactive guide is for an already highly skilled facilitator, allowing them to build their own narrative suitable for their unique context.

The Facilitator(s)' Narrative

This section explores the facilitator(s)' narrative within the theory of practice and discusses Fig.1 as a facilitation tool. Facilitator(s) must engage in responsive collaboration, themselves becoming part of the community's creative journey without imposing their own artistic aims. A breakdown of hierarchy is needed to ensure that an atmosphere of equality and shared safe space is maintained. Any artistic ego must be left behind. This is affirmed by Peter Renshaw: "Self-referential mentality plays no part in community engagement, which necessarily entails the artist connecting to a wider context in their search for shared social, cultural and artistic meaning". (Renshaw, 2010)

With this in mind, the theory of practice requires six essential pieces of scaffolding to be assembled by the facilitator(s):

- Stimuli: The provision of stimuli for dialogue which will explore local identity, and the mediation of the exploration of ideas which will in turn lead to musicking.
- Directed Processes: The modelling and guidance of process-based skill development e.g. discovery of how to create music.
- Technical Support: The offer of support in practical musical skills. There will be times when a small fragment of information, such as a ukulele chord fingering or a new rhythmical structure may unlock further creative possibilities for the community member.
- Responsive Processes: The adaption of the creative process to support new directions and ideas that are instigated by the community members.

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- **Safe Space:** No meaningful creativity can take place until a safe and welcoming environment is established. Everyone in the room must feel respected, and understand that their contribution will be accepted and appreciated.
- **Mediated Equality:** The facilitator acts equitably in their engagement with all community members in order to ensure everyone's voice is heard and valued equally.

The above pieces of scaffolding form the structure within which a creative process can emerge, where an atmosphere of risk-taking and play can be implemented, where there are no mistakes, only creative opportunities. The scaffolding acts as a framework to empower musical inventiveness in the community members.

Music-making experiences such as these can be uncompromising, personal, and “alive,” a process that evokes a telling of “their” story over those of the music facilitator. The self-worth that comes from being “enabled” to invent is powerfully affirming (Higgins, 2012).

Whilst facilitator(s) are required to initially assemble the scaffolding, its maintenance importantly, is not their sole responsibility. As a project progresses, facilitator(s) should look to transition more responsibility to the community. Soundcastle projects show that the more responsibility successfully handed over the greater the sense of connectedness. To be clear, it is not solely the creation of new music, but having ownership of the scaffold itself that leads to community connectedness. Further, it empowers community members to start creating music beyond the project, in their own homes, challenging the concept of cultural stagnation head on. In the case of a particularly shy community member, aged 5, at Soundcastle's family project Musical Beacons in Bow 2014 his mother fed back the following;

When we first started coming, he was so shy and didn't talk to anyone. Then he started drawing himself playing the instruments and started to realise that people were interested in him and his



ideas. Now he is talking in the session and doing music anywhere he can - at home, he puts on concerts with lots of instruments and his Dad and me take part too!

The most challenging aspect of the facilitator(s)' role is to determine where the Axis of Transition should sit for a particular project. This will be both context and time dependent. The project is by no means a failure should the facilitator decide it appropriate to maintain the majority of responsibility throughout. However we follow the theory of practice with the ultimate aim of moving the community towards greater control of their own scaffolding. Different scaffolding elements transition at different rates. For example, mediated equality, safe space and responsiveness represent complex and subtle areas of facilitative training and remain longer in the care of the facilitator, no matter how far the Axis of Transition is rotated. However, technical support, directed processes and stimuli can start to be handed over to the community at an earlier stage.

In this way, the transition of responsibility is staggered, requiring collaboration between both facilitator and community. Having shared ownership of the scaffold as well as the musicking, establishes a sense of collaborative working practice within communities, empowering them to grow their own narrative alongside the facilitator.

The Community's Narrative

The Soundcastle Theory of Practice is site-responsive. It is not placed into a context, rather it must be embedded in, and grown from its community and context. Although "A community can be defined as a group or collective with a common social representation and a common social identity" (Murray & Lamont, 2012) Soundcastle's work operates within geographical communities, where people are connected by the place that they live or work. In modern society, it cannot be assumed that the above social definition will apply in these cases. Therefore, while the theory of practice can be embedded within a geographical community, it will seek to foster and develop this social sense of community. Within the



Soundcastle Theory of Practice, the creation of music in the pursuit of connectedness is seen as a journey in developing a community narrative.

A community narrative is a shared story held by members of a community... It is not only concerned about past events but can also be concerned with future possibilities. The narrative can thus become an organizing framework to facilitate social change (Murray & Lamont, 2012)

This narrative may arise from local history, personal stories, shared landmarks, perceptions of the wider world, personal interests, desires for change or sensory experience. However it begins, the discursive path that follows will be unique to the people and the place involved.

As mentioned earlier, the facilitator implements the scaffold, embedding it in a context. Fig.1 demonstrates how responsibility for the scaffold shifts with time from facilitator(s) to community. The details of the transitions are as follows:

Stimuli - Inspiration

Facilitator(s) may initially suggest stimuli for dialoguing and thus musicking, however as the community gains confidence, they will be inspired to contribute their own stimuli, thus increasing their sense of ownership.

Directed Processes - Self-discovery

As community members are guided in how to create music, they can soon start exploring and experimenting with sounds themselves, with less directed support from the facilitator.

Technical Support - Peer Learning

As individual community members develop their instrumental and theoretical skills, they can start taking responsibility for supporting their peers.

Responsive Processes - Responsiveness

In order for a creative process to be truly collaborative, responsiveness to the ideas of others is key. Facilitator(s) will be modelling responsive processes from the start. With time, the aim is for



responsiveness to become inherent in the practice of the group and for the community to take responsibility for collaboration.

Safe Space - Shared Environment

As community members start to respond to the safe space, with time they will take ownership. Transitioning it to a shared environment means that the community takes responsibility for nurturing that space and ensuring a sense of belonging for everyone within it.

Mediated Equality - Equality

The most challenging aspect of the facilitator(s) role is to mediate and maintain equality between all community members. For this reason, equality remains longest in the facilitator's responsibility. With time the ultimate aim is for all community members to hear and value all voices equally within the collective - the ultimate form of collaboration and connectedness.

As responsibility for the scaffold transitions, community members start to demonstrate music-making in their own homes and communities, extending connectedness within the family and beyond to the community. At Musical Beacons, Bow 2012 a participant was so empowered that she set up her own parent/baby bilingual music group for families to sing in Mandarin and English together. Not only was she inspired to music in her community, but she turned it into an entrepreneurial venture.

The community narrative is unique to every project. It may be embedded in history or it might grow from nothing but geographical proximity (Murray & Lamont 2012). This means the Axis of Transition stands differently for every context. Communities embody their responsibility for the scaffold in different ways. For this reason the role of facilitator(s) remains integral. Through this approach to creative music-making, we enable communities to explore, discover, create and celebrate their shared story. As they take ownership of the scaffold itself, we see a deeper sense of connectedness, travelling further into the community, beyond the project.



The Soundcastle Theory of Practice is a catalyst for socially grounded participatory musicking. It is a flexible and thoughtful approach to building site-responsive, sustainable creative music projects. In the role of highly trained facilitators, musicians have the power to confront cultural stagnation head on. By using the inherent power of music to connect people within a carefully constructed scaffold of values and approaches, communities can create new dynamic narratives that enhance wellbeing in community members of all ages. The creation of music and the nurturing of social cohesion are inseparable. If there was no music created, the social connections would be less meaningful. If there was no social cohesion taking place, it would not be possible to collectively create music. For this reason the scaffold and music as connector are inseparable.

Our manifesto: Musicking is for everyone, to **own**, to **create**, and to be **part of**. It is time for our communities to reclaim musicking and **build their connectedness** and the Soundcastle Theory of Practice is how we seek to bring about **change**.

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