

From Intersections to Crossroads: Navigating Interactions between Performers, Researchers, and Composers

Andrew Filmer & Chen Zhangyi

ABSTRACT

Violist Andrew Filmer's commission of a work from New Zealand composer Karlo Margetić and Singaporean composer Chen Zhangyi's triple concerto provide insights into collaborative practices. One is a work for unaccompanied viola where the performer *disinvites* his own subjective aesthetic voice to see what would happen in purely objective technical exploration. The other is a triple concerto in which the composer intentionally *invites* an incorporation of the specific personalities of the soloists. These two intersections provide a crossroads to explore musical partnerships, expanding the model put forward by Sam Hayden and Luke Windsor. Findings from this research include the idea that a single composition can include multiple forms of partnerships between composer and performer, and that when a collaborating performer removes subjective aesthetic inclinations and puts on the hat of a researcher, unexpected discoveries can occur, advancing technical instrumental capabilities for the composer.

Keywords: Singaporean music, New Zealand music, practice as research, viola music.

INTRODUCTION

Hayden and Windsor lay out two principal findings: a categorization of partnerships between composers and performers, and whether there is any correlation between the level of collaboration and the quality of the compositional product. (Hayden & Windsor, 2007). On the first of these, the authors suggest three types of partnerships: the *directive*, where the composer determines the performance through the score; the *interactive*, where some level of technical discussion occurs between the two parties but the composer has sole artistic responsibility; and the *collaborative*, where there is a sense of mutual music-making, and largely within an improvisatory platform.¹

It provides an interesting basis for a discourse on partnerships between composers and performers, and the authors themselves mention that despite the demarcations of categories, these indeed exist on a continuum. The present authors do not intend to contradict this model; rather, they suggest other places on the spectrum where interesting partnerships take place.

CASE STUDY 1: *Two Translations* by Karlo Margetić, commissioned by Andrew Filmer

Background

Of the many partnerships of a composer and a performer of a bowed stringed instrument, two stand out as particularly remarkable: that of Johannes Brahms with Joseph Joachim, and Felix Mendelssohn with Ferdinand David.

For the Brahms and Joachim, Boris Schwarz (1983) characterized the nature of the relationship succinctly:

Only a few compositions were written in such close collaboration and consultation between composer and performer that personal idiosyncrasies of the instrumentalist were reflected in the emerging work... the most illuminating example of collaboration between composer and performer is the Violin Concerto of Brahms, written *for* and *with* Joseph Joachim. (p. 503)

The very direct influences of the performer can be seen in Joachim's red ink on the manuscript.

The connection is interesting in that Brahms actively sought Joachim's corrections and changes in Letter no. 379 dated Jan. 24 1879, but only four letters and two months later, would comment: "I'm eager to know how often and how energetically your handwriting will appear in score and solo part; whether I'll be 'convinced' or whether I'll have to ask someone else which I don't like to do" (Schwarz, 1983, p. 509).

In any case, when a performer today takes it on, there are no significant changes one is likely to make. There is one exception: fingerings. When sent for publication, Joachim put in his fingerings subtly into the solo part, saying, "I don't consider them superfluous." (Schwarz, 1983, p. 510). Some editors do not concur, and thus, we have a variety of editions, some with his fingerings, and others without.²

In Felix Mendelssohn's violin concerto,³ it is clear that Ferdinand David was quite influential in its genesis, with Sir George Grove writing: "The cadenza, Mendelssohn's own (or rather, as the autograph and correspondence show, his and David's..." (Grove, 1906, p. 612). Overall, the correspondence tends to note that the composer was indeed willing to make adjustments for his violinist:

"Do you like the altered and extended cadenza? ... I suppose also that the *diminuendo* into the *pp* can be easily managed. Is the alteration at the end of the first movement easy to play? I should think so." (Grove, 1906, p. 614)

While David had quite a hand in the genesis of the work, Mendelssohn seems assertive with his own ideas, and with the final "I should think so" also seems to make a mark as to what extent alterations can be considered reasonable.

David's role has impacted at least one recording, with violinist Joshua Bell composing a new cadenza. He writes: "My desire to write my own came after my discovery that the 'original' cadenza may have been written, in large part, by Mendelssohn's friend Ferdinand David, who was the concerto's first champion." (Bell, 2002, p.12)

The takeaways are as follows:

1. The nature of the collaboration can see the performer function in a compositional role;
2. In technical execution, the collaborative performer might not just advise on whether something can be practically executed, but lead to what may be seen as an authoritative (or at least “not superfluous”) interpretation of the composer’s notes;
3. This can have an effect to what later performers consider essential, and what may indeed be optional.

While Hayden and Windsor write specifically on contemporary composition, this glance at historical milestones provides some precedents in collaborative formats. Specifically, we have a combination of Argyris and Schön’s nuanced *type II* interactions (Argyris & Schön, 1974), with both Brahms and Mendelssohn actively seeking input and Joachim pushing his interpretations into publication, but also assertive compositional authority in Brahms’s “whether I’ll be ‘convinced’” and Mendelssohn’s “I should think so.”

Towards Translations

In contrast to Brahms and Joachim, the partnership of Margetić and Filmer in 2013 specifically had in mind avoiding that situation where “personal idiosyncrasies of the instrumentalist were reflected in the emerging work” (Schwarz, 1983, p. 503). This was part of the design of the collaboration itself, the commission being part of the dedicatee’s PhD research into scordatura – the unconventional tunings of stringed instruments. In this regard the connection was unusual in that there was a condition set for the composer: the work had to utilize scordatura. Related to this, the starting point would be the doctoral research and experimentation already completed. Apart from that stipulation, the performer in this case chose to act entirely as researcher rather than violist. On one front, this meant that the performer would actively refrain from any artistic intrusions. On another front, the performer was very active in working with the composer with the principal feature of scordatura. This encompassed advice on what has been possible based on existing works, as well as experimentation to extend boundaries of the use of this technique.

The genesis of the composition can be seen in the following flow chart:

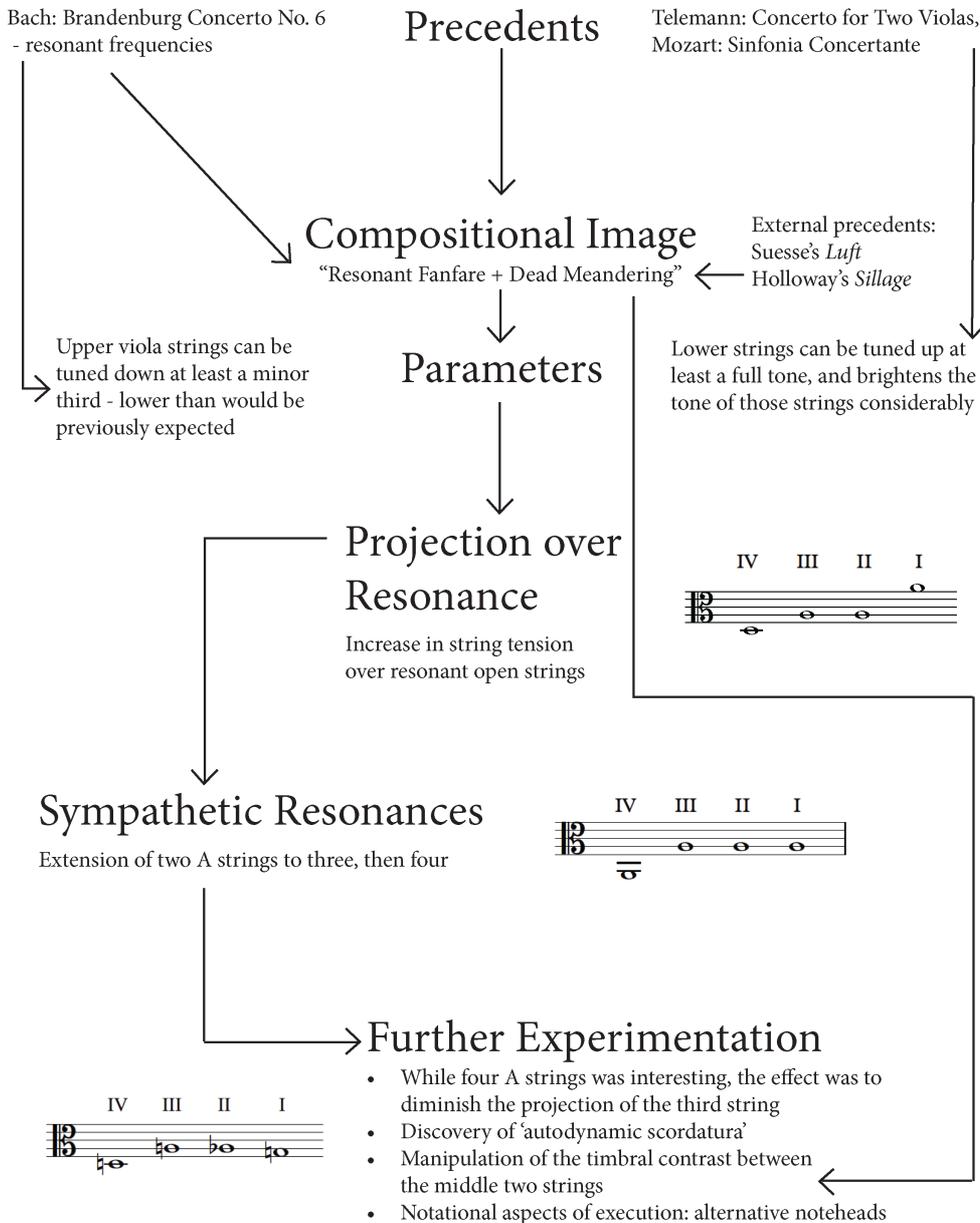


Fig. 1: Flow chart indicating the determination of the scordatura tuning used in Margetić's *Two Translations*.

The *Precedents* section indicates the other projects in which the violist-researcher was engaged. The project on Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 utilised the viola's natural resonances of B flat and F and tuned two strings down a minor third – a significant degree, when contrasted to other uses of the technique in existing repertoire. Even though this was initially seen as the bottom end of available tunings in the *Parameters* section, the composer eventually went quite a bit further.

In the experimental process there were choices to be made, such as sacrificing the natural resonances of B flat and F in favour of high string tensions that would aid in projection, and then the use of sympathetic resonances instead of natural ones.⁴

These were tested for the composer, either with the composer present, or between meetings, independent of the composer.

The roles that we had chosen for ourselves – the independent composer and the researcher-rather-than-performer – had particular effects. These collectively constitute the principal finding from this case study: what can colloquially be called ‘happy accidents’, or more formally results from undirected research. This contributes a new angle to the Hayden-Winsor model of collaboration.

We will look at one such discovery here. The composer decided to experiment with very low tunings, possibly influenced by Samuel Holloway’s *Sillage*, which has a bowed guitar with a gradual reduction of the string tension on strings during the performance, to emulate the sound of waves as a ship moves through a body of water. Filmer did not feel this fit into the established limits of retuning, but kept that reservation to himself, and proceeded with the experimentation.

The new string tunings had a curious side-effect, that might not have been discovered were it for the subjective artist instead of the objective researcher. At this point the literature indicated that there were two types of scordatura: in most cases a choice of tuning is determined and set on an instrument in advance, but in occasional instances tunings can be changed in the middle of a performance.⁵ *Sillage* utilises *dynamic scordatura*, i.e. instances where the player manually changes tuning during a performance.

In *Two Translations*, we discovered another aspect to this: that strings tuned low enough would have the ability to pitch bend when subjected to a quick acceleration of the bow. This **automatic** change of pitch – the first of its kind where a pitch change occurs through the use of scordatura while the bow is in motion – was coined as “*auto-dynamic scordatura*”.

This became incorporated into the composition, as seen here:

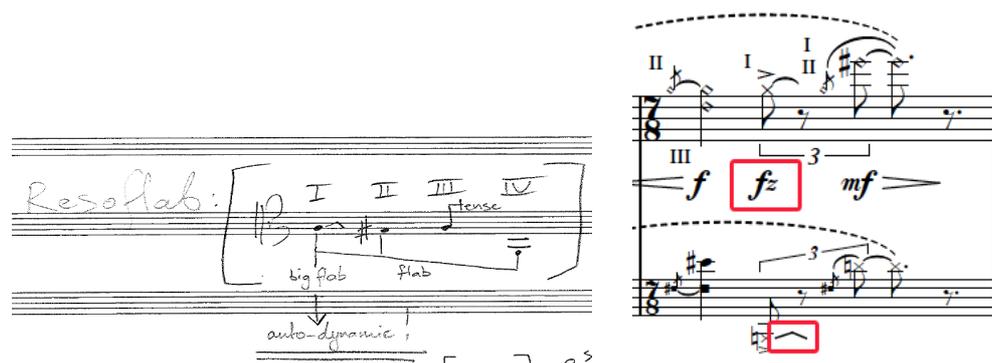


Fig. 2: Composer’s sketch (left) indicating the discovery of the autodynamics scordatura, and eventual composition of *Two Translations* (right) second movement, measure 14, with fingered notation above and sounding notation below.

Eventually this appeared in the composition marked as an accent with a *fz*, but sounding instead as an accent, followed by a pitch bend. In this excerpt from the composition, the top line indicates the instruction to the performer, and the bottom line indicates the sounding pitch. This is not the only outcome from the project that breaks

new ground in scordatura, but it is one demonstration of the kind of results from our collaborative model.

In summation, this project supports the Hayden-Windsor model insofar that collaboration of a performer and a composer can be productive if the participants are willing to stretch beyond their preconceived, traditional roles. The partnership fits their *interactive* sector quite well in that the composer had full authorship, and the performer advised on technical matters that furthered the composer's artistic goals. However, it departs from the model in that the technical aspect need not be simply what the performer is aware is *currently* capable on that instrument. The openness to which a performer can participate in experimentation can result in extensions to instrumental technique not restricted to ideas envisioned by either composer or performer, but indeed undirected discoveries that come as a surprise to both parties. Indeed, should more projects proceed with this in mind, these pleasant accidents could be almost planned – or at least, hoped for – outcomes.

CASE STUDY 2: Chen Zhangyi's *Triple Concerto*

Precedents

In Takemitsu's *November Steps* (1967), the cadenza reveals an "open-loop" partnership for the soloists of the premiere – Katsuya Yokoyama (*shakuhachi*) and Kinshi Tsuruta (*biwa*). An idiomatic style of graphic notation is employed for each soloist, who each had a separate page of unsynchronized graphic notation that indicates "all of the sequences can be played in any order". The *shakuhachi* cadenza features lines, various kinds of vibrato, small and large leaps, and *muraiki* (breath-tone). Contrastingly, the cadenza for the 5-string *Satsuma-biwa* indicates a more prescribed notation similar to tablature, where the specific string, fret position, and even finger pressure are given, in combination with hits and rubs on the body and strings, as well as tremolo (*kazure*). The latter case may have been due to the composer's own knowledge of the instrument, having studied it rather seriously under the *Chikuzen-biwa* player Hirata Kyokushu (Tokumaru, 1993, p.62).

In transcribing part of Yokoyama and Tsuruta's cadenza into staff notation, Uno Everett concluded that the soloists had agreed on a set order of sequences. Takemitsu provided a structure whereby the performers could improvise, implying an overall *directive-yet-collaborative* mode of collaboration. Examining an interview between Yokoyama and Tokumaru, Yayoi Uno Everett extrapolated that the *interactive* nature between the composer and performers were critical to the development of the graphic score notation.

Takemitsu developed the graphic notations in close consultation with the soloists; the notations allow for the soloists to engage in a semi-improvisatory musical dialogue, where they exploit the expressive capacities of these instruments using traditional performance techniques for the *shakuhachi* and *biwa*. (Everett, 2002, p.139)

However, Yokoyama respectfully credits Takemitsu fully for coming up with the graphic notation. In the same interview, Yokoyama affirms that the relationship between the performers and composer did not go beyond the technical informant (*interactive* mode), stating that "with *November Steps*, there was no room for the players to make any substantial commitment." (Tokumaru, 1993, pp. 65-66).

Nevertheless, the *shakuhachi* master surmises that Takemitsu's idiomatic use of graphic notation that applies to the idiosyncrasies of both instruments gave

substantial artistic space for the performers to contribute to the cadenza, implying an *interactive-collaborative* nature. This is exceptionally true in the performance practice of traditional instruments where subtleties of *yuri* (vibrato) and *sawari* (noise) could affect the musical outcome to a large extent (Tokumaru, 1993, pp. 65).

Parallels: Other Singaporean multiple-instrument fusion concertos

Tony Makarome's *Jewel of Srivijaya* for tabla, mridangam and orchestra (2019), strikes a parallel to Takemitsu's *November Steps*, employing two instruments that are not usually heard together within their respective traditions. *Jewel of Srivijaya* provides a platform for the *tabla* and *mridangam* to interact, fusing Hindustani and Carnatic music/instruments, a practice termed *jugalbandhi*. In his programme notes, Makarome writes:

(...) a commonality in both traditions is that their performers are always required to improvise and embellish at specific points within a set musical framework, and so in the same vein, every performance of this piece will be different depending on the improvisations of the two soloists. (Makarome, 2019, p. 19, measures 83-88)

Concrete notation of rhythm in some passages is combined with the expectation of the soloists to improvise and embellish at certain points, implying a *directive-yet-collaborative* collaboration. A professional jazz bassist, trained composer and conductor, Makarome also studied the Mridangam seriously and evidently infused his understanding of the Carnatic and Hindustani musical traditions within the setting of the orchestra. Makarome commented on the mode of collaboration of *Jewel* leading to the premiere, saying:

I felt like the piece was more directive rather than collaborative in the sense that I outlined a space (in jazz terms "measures to fill") and the soloists play within the "directed sections". FYI, the soloists were also quite conservative with their improvisations because they did not "throw" the orchestra with any tricky polyrhythms. (T. Makarome, email interview, February 5, 2020)

The score (see Fig. 3) instructs the soloists to improvise with the rhythms in both staff notation as well as *konnakol*. Here the soloists are asked to improvise, with the "rhythm of melody given only as guide".

Fig. 3: Tony Makarome, *Jewel of Srivijaya*, measures 83-8

With ample experience working with *tabla* players and first-hand proficiency of *mridangam* playing, Makarome had not consulted the soloists during the compositional process – he simply "...wrote something that I could perform on the *mridangam* myself." The intimate technical knowledge of the composer strikes another parallel with Takemitsu's relationship to the *biwa*. Although the soloists could read Western notation, he had made a *konnakol* guide with rehearsal letters for the soloists, who speedily memorized the piece in two sessions with the composer.

Ho Chee Kong's *There and Back*, for violin, cello and Chinese orchestra, which also premiered in 2019, is an example of an 'inverse fusion concerto', where the 'Western' solo instruments are supported by a Chinese orchestra. From a compositional standpoint, *There and Back* lies squarely within the directive mode of collaboration, where the composition was written in solitude, albeit having in mind the lyricism and virtuosity of the soloists Qin Li-wei (cello) and Siow Lee Chin (violin). In conversation with Ho, he shared that there was an interpretative aspect in terms of the performance practice. With some verbal instructions from the composer, the soloists were encouraged to tastefully add *portamenti* to their interpretation of the work. In Ho's words:

Yes, in the way that soloists can include appropriate ornamentations to the melodic lines or motives to bring out a more personal affectation in relation to the emotional relevance implied. (Ho C. K., interview, 9 July 2020)

Ho adds that within his oeuvre, depending on circumstances, the mode of collaboration often differs, especially when it involves instrumentalists who are comfortable with improvisation.

The Triple Concerto (2019)

As mentioned in 'Intersections in a Triple Concerto for *erhu*, *ruan* and percussion', there was an initial discussion between the composer and the conductor (Jason Lai) on how using sub-sets of the given instrumentation can bring out different colours from the given instruments (of orchestral winds, percussion, and three soloists). Consequently, the music for each soloist and their supporting sub-ensembles were based on the composer's impressions of their personalities. These were essentially characterizations that are accurate only to a certain extent and mostly apply to their initial individual sections; as the concerto progresses, these materials gradually develop in different directions. Referencing the Hayden-Windsor model, the creative process began *interactively*, with composer meeting the soloists separately, as a preliminary step in understanding the possibilities of instrumental techniques, timbral resources of each instrument, as well as the strengths and inclinations of the performers.

With each sketch/draft of the solo parts, the instrumentalists were very kind to provide advice, albeit with some extent of deference. The scenario of the lecturer-student relationship (at the time of composition) is seemingly advantageous to the composer in terms of the performer yielding to the directive demands, yet in the spirit of true artistic collaboration, Chen advocates that technical errors could be communicated more frankly without fear of disrespect, especially in an Asian context.

For instance, coming from a background as a violinist, the composer expects hear a timbral contrast between *normale* and *sul ponticello*, that is achieved through bow placement. However, when Likie Low (*erhu*) was playing through one of the drafts to the composer, he was surprised to hear no timbral change where the score clearly indicated to 'gradually change to *sul ponticello*'. Only upon asking, Low quietly explained that the playing style of *erhu* does not necessarily allow a gradual change from *normale* to *sul pont.*, since the *erhu*'s bow is naturally at a low near-bridge position.

Regarding the *erhu*, the high register proved to be an area of worth exploring. It involves challenges in intonation (surmountable with practice), in exchange for its

exquisite rarefied timbre. In a post-performance interview, Chen asked: ‘What would you change in the music, if you could?’ Low responds with her penchant for the *moto-perpetuo*: “more running passages that focuses on the *erhu*” (L. Low, interview, 9 July 2020).

With Yuru Lee (*paigu/marimba*), deciding on the solo percussion setup amongst the wide array of percussion instruments was an initial hurdle. Yuru’s recommendation of contemporary Chinese music repertoire was helpful for the composer to immerse himself in their sonic worlds. Eventually, the composer returned to the initial experience of hearing Yuru perform a marimba showpiece (Kolinski’s *Luminosity II*) followed by the athletic *paigu* in the Chinese staple ‘*A Well Matched Fight*’ (龙腾虎跃), thus resulting in the combination of *paigu* and marimba.

The *paigu* sketching process began with the basic sticking possibilities of left and right, and Yuru provided further useful advice such as ‘double stops’ on accents, using a single drum as a pivot, etc. As the *paigu* writing progressed, Yuru was consulted regarding marimba-writing; he gave a simple and useful piece of advice: to apply the patterns already present in the *paigu* to the marimba part. Adopting this idea, the opening ‘*changgu*-inspired’ *paigu* passage and the rhythmic fluctuation (acceleration and deceleration) were subsequently incorporated into the marimba writing, bridging the materials from unpitched to pitched. Lee was quick to observe that “the feedback come to fruition” in the next versions. From Lee’s perspective: “I felt extremely engaged in the compositional process. (...) There was this two-way traffic that it made it feel more like a collaboration” (Lee, interview, 9 July 2019), thus affirming the highly *interactive* process.



The figure shows two musical staves. The left staff is for 5 Drums (paigu), starting at measure 20. It is in 3/4 time, marked 'slow' with a tempo of 45, and includes the instruction 'without sticks'. The notation shows a series of notes with accents and dynamics like *sfz* and *mf*. The right staff is for Marimba, starting at measure 392. It features chordal textures with dynamics like *mp*.

Fig. 4. *Triple Concerto*, measures 20 (*paigu*) and 392 (marimba)

In an interview with the ever-positive Sulwyn Lok (*zhongruan*), he sang praises on Chen’s *ruan*-writing, and touched on an interesting point about the three-way relationship between composer, instrument and performer:

You could see the logical flow in the thinking of certain fingerings, certain right-hand techniques, and it’s very intriguing because in a sense, [it shows] someone who plays the instrument now but without learning the instrument in the formal Chinese way. (S. Lok, interview, 9 July 2020)

Although it is not entirely true that Chen is proficient on the *ruan*, having the *ruan* to test out chords and fingering patterns accelerated the *interactive* collaboration with Lok in the creation of an idiomatic solo part. In chordal passages, Lok’s advice to ‘allow more time and space for the resonances to ring’ was adopted. It appears that the ‘outsider’ approach provided a different take on the *ruan*, perhaps similarly for the *erhu* and *paigu*.

Cadenza-Extension

At the premiere, there was a written-out cadenza for the trio of soloists. However, when the soloists gathered again for a conference presentation (*Telling Stories*, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, 2019), Chen suggested that they perform the cadenza, and take the *fermata* to extend the cadenza, freely incorporating any material from the concerto, effectively transitioning to the *collaborative* mode. The dynamic and virtuosic result was a satisfying 'happy excursion' as the working relationship evolved even after the premiere. It notable that the nature of this collaboration is not static, as it marks several distinct points on the *directive-interactive-collaborative* continuum.

CONCLUSIONS

In the two compositions discussed here, we have an intersection of composer and performer that allows for an expansion of the collaborative model proposed by Hayden and Windsor. The authors put forward three principal findings:

First, that while the Hayden-Windsor model does acknowledge that its three categories of partnership exist on a continuum, Chen's Triple Concerto goes a step further: that a project does not have to be confined to a single category. There may be parts that are *directive*, others that are *interactive*, and – as seen with the alteration of the cadenza – parts that may be collaboratively improvisational, and even a variation from one performance to the next. Additionally, Chen's work indicated that the interactive category need not be limited to technical advice but could include artistic impact.

Second, the Margetić-Filmer project indicated that within Hayden and Windsor's *interactive* category, the role of technical input need not be limited to the *existing* technical knowledge of the performer. When the performer acts as a researcher, experiments can lead to unexpected discoveries. In turn, these add to the eventual artistic quality of a work. In *Two Translations* some of the special features displayed in this work – indeed, new applications of scordatura never previously discovered – were a result of the interactive process between the composer and the performer, which became of artistic value. With this in mind, while the volume or closeness of a collaboration need not guarantee a level of artistic quality, in limited circumstances, the nature of collaboration can result in some artistic contribution.

Finally, Chen reflects that while the nature of the partnership need not affect the quality of the composition, it certainly can impact the success of the premiere performance. The composer notes that the process of collaboration allows for the work to develop organically with the performers. Rather than the idea of challenging a perceived authority of a completed work, collaboration allows for a more engaging and communicative environment. Chen further observed that with large ensembles, there are greater challenges to successfully manoeuvre a truly collaborative relationship, other than with the individuals that play a more important role, i.e. soloist(s) and/or conductor. In his own practice, he increasingly seeks the expertise and input of my collaborators through informal workshops, as it enhances the process, improves the work, and relieves the conventional solitude of the composer. Filmer, in turn, believes that this approach may lend itself to extensions of the performer's craft as well, in a crossroads of composer, performer, and researcher.

ENDNOTES

1. It is slightly problematic that Hayden and Windsor have used the term *collaboration* in this narrowly defined context, and at other times with the more general understanding of that nomenclature (in fact, this is done even in the title of the paper).
2. Bärenreiter with Joachim's fingerings and cadenza, Henle with both Joachim's and Franz Peter Zimmerman's fingerings, IMC with Joachim's cadenza but Zino Francescatti's fingerings.
3. More precisely his second violin concerto, in E minor, to which this is commonly referred. He also wrote a concerto in D minor at the age of 13.
4. Thus, some strings would resonate sympathetically because of the tuning of other strings, rather than because they matched the natural resonant frequencies of the instrument.
5. Schumann requires this for the cello in his piano quartet to play a low B flat and Haydn did this for theatrical and comedic effect in his 'Il Distratto' Symphony No. 60.

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BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AUTHORS

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The music of Chen Zhangyi has been described by BBC Radio 3 as “music from a voice of the future.” Nature is often a source of inspiration in his instrumental compositions, such as his violin concerto *Vanda*; his dramatic works such as the chamber opera cycle *A Singapore Trilogy* explores the musical representation of Singaporean culture. Zhangyi currently leads the Analysis and Composition department of YST Conservatory, National University of Singapore.