From Vox Rosa to Follow the Sun:
A Journey from Mixed-Media to Transmedia Performance

Alex Evans (Senior Lecturer, Kingston University) & Dr. David Osbon (Professor, University of West London)

**INTRODUCTION**

From *Vox Rosa* to *Follow the Sun*, an interrogation of the progression from live multi-media performance to multiple platform interactive mixed media, with reference to the practical applications of both hardware and software and to the manipulation of audience expectations with reference to Reception Theory. Practice based research embedding experimentation with web based communications technology.

Authored by the creative and artistic directors this chapter illustrates the challenges and solutions encountered in the performance projects *Vox Rosa, The Hero’s Journey, Bodies in Motion* and *Follow the Sun*. Across the four performances the creative directors have progressed multi-media (live and electro-acoustic music, dance, animation and film) performance in a single venue to multi venue, multi country, simultaneous mixed-media performances incorporating real-time manipulation of creative content by performers using wireless technology. Each performance has been a ‘laboratory’ where different communication technologies have been tested against the practical requirements of real-time performance.

Each of the works in this series presents the performers in live, recorded and geographically remote forms/locations, and creates an environment in which they either interact with, or are co-present with, other performers, the live material or their own virtual presence. Thus, the idea that presence means present ceases to be relevant. Through the creation and execution of these works the boundaries between the presence and/or absence of performing artists, creative artists and audiences are being made more fluid. The creation of such performative environments imagines a different relationship between the live and the mediatised. One that is, perhaps, more closely informed by Hayles’ Virtuality (2000).

In exploring the mixed reality performance “Can You See Me Now?” by Blast Theory, Rosemary Klich (2007) addresses “how much mixed-media performances rupture the demarcation of the real and the virtual, creating an augmented space.”

The creative and technological content of these performances has required the creative directors to challenge audience perception and test their understanding of Reception Theory against socio-cultural expectations, and to test these expectations in the context of a multi platform environment, the evolution of 4G and audience interactivity.

**INTRODUCTION**

This chapter seeks to interrogate the fusion of live, interactive and pre-programmed performance parameters in a succession of works from *Vox Rosa* to *Follow the Sun* devised and presented by the music department at Kingston University, London and the London College of Music at the University of West London. It seeks to present a performance landscape in which linear and non-linear performance confronts wider perceptions of practice and perception in the performing arts. This article seeks to address how such mixed-media performances engage with the boundaries of live performance and how an enhanced ‘space’ becomes available to creative and performing artists through performer/audience interaction in a multi-platform environment. If such a space is to exist then engagement becomes ‘transmedial’, suggesting an enhancement to the analytical framework for mixed-media performance.

Since the early 1990s there has been a debate that has somewhat polarised the analysis of performance practice into live and mediatised performance practice; Phelan (1993) asserts that performance cannot be reproduced whereas Auslander (1999) argues that performance exists in a state of mediatisation. The performance environment first devised in *Vox Rosa* and culminating in *Follow the Sun* challenges the assumed differences between live and mediatised performance and creates an environment whereby the boundaries cease to be significant.

*Vox Rosa, The Hero’s Journey* and *Bodies in Motion*  have, through the incorporation of more and more non-linear parameters, sought to fuse the live and mediatised into a single creative/performance experience. Performers are, at one time, both present/absent and presenting/interacting, in a mixture of performance media and presentation platforms. Thus the arguments for and against live or mediatised need to be tested against an analytical framework that recognises the new reality of contemporary performance practice.

Marsha Kinder (1991) uses the term transmedia intertextuality as a means to describe how a particular narrative is presented across a range of formats and has different levels of interaction. The cultural theorist Henry Jenkins gives an erudite explanation of transmedia storytelling in his book *Convergence Culture (2006):*

“A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels and comics...Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game or vice versa.”

If this is the case then we have a potential format whereby the audience members can assemble their own version of the narrative from the range of platforms and genres to which they have access, the crucial factor being the intertextuality of the content – irrespective of the platform – and no single platform has all of the content. Thus it is not simply a case of presenting the same work in different ways or on a wider range of platforms.

*Follow the Sun* is a transmedia environment in which multiple, yet intertextual, narratives are explored, in a linear and non-linear fashion, across the full range of platforms resulting in an interactive mass participation activity designed to offer parity of access to content irrespective of social, cultural, economic or educational environment. Participation will be active over the lifetime of the project with extensive workshop and development activities. There will be a constant mass/multi media documentation exercise over the lifetime of the project which will, in turn, contribute to the legacy and outcomes.

**THE WORKS**

Kingston University’s mixed-media performance *Vox Rosa* was produced by the music department in association with the dance department and the central ICT services lab. Initially conceived as a ‘collage’ concert is quickly evolved into an experimental project that explored notions of physical and virtual space in performance; sound, lighting, design and projection were used to create a unique performance environment designed to engage with the socio-cultural expectations of audience.

Two other performance projects: *Appassionata* and *Missa Celtica* were, like *Vox Rosa*, complex mixed-media performances. That, in addition to blurring the distinction between the live and the mediatised in performance sought to engage with the boundaries between audience perception/expectation and interpretation. *Appassionate* used, as its primary source, *Dido and Aeneas* by British composer Henry Purcell. Not staged but presented as a concert performance with an original film (including graphics and animation) featuring the performers as their characters. Interesting maybe, but not necessarily engaging with socio-cultural expectations, beyond showing the drama as a film rather than staging it. The challenge to the audience, and their expectations of what constitutes a university music department’s performance of a baroque opera, came in the form of original compositions (using the motifs from the Purcell original) in the style of contemporary urban music to replace the dances, and through the use of creative music technology to move the sonic content to different parts of the performance space through live sound diffusion.[[1]](#footnote-1) Having once replaced a baroque dance with hip-hop and a film of parcour and, having altered the audience’s expectations, how can the creative/performative elements respond to the new expectation environment? *Missa Celtica* presented similar challenges, although the audience expectation base was lower because it is a rarely performed work (by British composer John Cameron). It is, however, created using a wide range of cultural identifiers: Timbral (uillean pipes, drones), linguistic (setting Celtic and Welsh), historical (subject matter), environmental (setting within the traditional structure of the Requiem Mass).

*The Hero’s Journey* and *Bodies in Motion* (presented as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad) were the first attempts to present a transmedia performance mapping content onto a multi-platform consumption model. Multimedia content could be consumed in different ways according to the access point. In *The Hero’s Journey* the performers were split between Kingston University, London (live music performance) and the Amsterdam Conservatoire (dancer and real-time interactive electro-acoustic music performance) with shared content exchanged via high-end conference call software (such as has been used at the Manhatten School of Music for its distance learning programme and inter-conservatoire collaboration since 1996 – see <https://www.dl.msmny.edu>) vision mixed live with pre-recorded video/graphics and web cast in real time. The event could be accessed as: Live performance in either of the two venues PLUS the consequent webcast projected into the performance space, or as an exclusively webcast ‘finished product’ on an event specific website. *Bodies in Motion* extended this concept to involve larger ensembles: Chamber orchestra plus live electro-acoustic elements, rock band, chamber choir and DJs – all of them with dancers and vision mixed video, graphic design and animation. The main difference being the use of free-to-access platforms: SKYPE, Facetime and Bambuser, rather than expensive conference call platforms and the extended use of ‘off the shelf’ interactive media tools e.g. Wii motes and Connect Boxes, all of which were interfaced with the creative music technology software via JunXion, a Mac OSX data routing application devised by Frank Baldé at STEIM in Amsterdam.

*Follow the Sun* is the natural successor to *Bodies in Motion* and moves the ‘grand project’ from mixed, or multi, media to transmedia.

*Follow the Sun* is a new type of transmedia event that combines live music and dance with electro-acoustics, animation and video into a multi-platform, and interactive and performance across a range of platforms. It is designed to inhabit the contemporary version of our physical realm - an environment that we populate with personal and virtual content – and to trigger responses on an individual and societal level by mapping onto the socio-cultural and environmental history of all who experience the event.

The event will involve performance groups in New Zealand, Singapore, Italy, London, New Jersey, Michigan, British Columbia and Hawaii performing original material. The live interactivity will use commercial games controllers and other, passive, triggers that will manipulate creative content in real time using, once again, JunXion to control the music production software Ableton Live. This in turn will be vision mixed with other, primarily digital, media in London. The finished art work is a conflation of the various venue’s performances which can be accessed in the variety of ways available to any individual at any time via any of the media available to them at any one time – plus to those who are passing through certain spaces at certain times where the piece happens to be e.g. via projections in public spaces – on screens in schools, libraries etc., even onto buildings. The actual performance date is a live performance in all of the venues (directed from London via weblinks) with all of the elements vision mixed. Live and in real time to be web cast and shown on screens in each venue. The interactivity works on different levels and at different times, the details are given in the next section, what is important is the intertextuality of the creative content and the engagement with audience and cultural expectations.

From a practical standpoint this will involve creating a range of content that not only engages with, but is also accessible to, different audiences through the media portals involved in their everyday lives. To make this possible the *Follow The Sun* narrative is developed by three characters, all of whom deliver unique content to the various media. The content generated by these characters/media portals is linked to the main narrative and, of course, synchronised.

**MIXED MEDIA PERFORMANCE**

So far this chapter has employed a range of terms to describe performances that use a range of media, either as a parameter within the creative content, or as means whereby the performers can spread an audiences viewpoint. Mixed media, commonly associated with the visual arts is being used by performing artists as they are able to recognise that so much of their work is combining performance genres, from dance or theatre and music right through to live performance with real-time sonic manipulation e.g. *Zil* by Istanbul based American composer Pieter Snapper which captures and compresses a passage of orchestral music and then plays it back in reverse within the same piece. Intermedia seems to come in and out of fashion, but it does, rather helpfully, describe performances that fall between the obvious descriptions of performance genres. From Varese’s *Poem Electronique* through to Damon Alban and Jamie Hewlett’s project *Gorillaz*. As the name implies, multimedia is the integration of multiple forms of media. This includes text, graphics, audio, video, etc. For example, a presentation involving audio and video clips would be considered a "multimedia presentation." Due to the advancements in computer speeds and storage space, multimedia is commonplace today.

*Vox Rosa, Appassionata,* and *Missa Celtica* being single events with various media being used to present the overall performance event, with a view to adding value to the core performance product (in each case music) probably fall into this category. Interestingly this had become such common practice in music at Kingston University that most public facing events embedded at least some multi-media content.

As internet usage became part of the everyday experience in many societies, creative artists and storytellers sought to explore the newly available platforms.

From the origins of telematic art…etc., the real-time multi-player experience afforded by alternate reality games has, in recent years, developed into a single player environment. The “interactivity” and “participation” and the “continuity vs. multiplicity” questions explored by Jenkins introduce the fascinating concept of the abdication of creative content to that of user-generated content. For us, as the creative team behind *Follow the Sun* where on the ‘grid’ of characters-access portals-interactivity should the user-generated content determine the course of the narrative? In tracing the evolution of this, popular music presents perhaps by far the most examples, from the simple; Metallica’s By Request tour (2014) where fans were able to pick each night’s set list, to the more adventurous; the creation of Imogen Heap’s Ellipse album (2009) where the artist encouraged fans to pioneer use of social media, creating music, mixes, artwork… even biographies and press releases.

**TOWORDS TRANSMEDIA INTERTEXTUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE**

In *Follow the Sun* we have a potential format whereby the audience can assemble their own version of the narrative from the range of platforms/genres to which they have access, the crucial factor being the intertextuality of the content – irrespective of the platform – and no single platform has all of the content i.e. it is not simply presenting the same work in different ways or on a wider range of platforms. There is, however a far greater purpose in the exercise.

The proposed outcome of this proof of concept research is a global pan-educational transmedia teaching and learning environment for all – including the most difficult to reach communities. The legacy content of the actual event will be available across all platforms and media (social, broadcast, active and passive web content, apps, written and spoken word, public realm etc.) each with their own identity whilst remaining intertextual with the central narrative(s), as told by the three main protagonists in both linear and non-linear ways.

The first pilot for *Follow the Sun* took place on April 6th 2016 using a live, interactive, performance delivered simultaneously at Rowan University (New Jersey) and Kingston University (London). This was a first test of the technology and content required to sustain multi-platform simultaneity of live content to a dedicated web page, youtube, instagram, facebook and twitter content. It also tested pre-and post event content management, real time character/audience interactivity and can be viewed on <http://www.followthesunoffical.org> or by joining FTSofficial2016 on the social networks listed above.

Rosemary Klich, in her article “Performing Posthuman Perspective, Can You See Me Now?” (2007) credits Gabrielle Giannachi (2004) with the term “Virtual Theatre” in which, although she is really discussing an entirely digital arts environment where “both the work of art and the viewer are mediated” she does help us to identify some of the language that we will probably need to analyse and articulate performance events with a high level of digital or mediatised content.

**A CULTURE OF EXPECTATION**

Reception Theory, a development of Reader Response Theory and largely credited to Hans-Robert Jauss in the 1960s, and being advocated by cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1973) in terms of media and communication and gives us a structure within which to understand how, in the case of this paper, mixed/multi/transmedia performance is experienced by an audience. By analysing a performance from this perspective one is able to gain an insight into the consumption of creative content by audience members and how meaning is created by that person. The idea being that the creative content itself has no meaning until it has been ‘received’ by the audience member and meaning is created as the creative content is placed into the context of the audience members socio-cultural, environmental, economic background. Thus the contextual rather than the textual influence the understanding and meaning. These contextual factors include the circumstances and processes involved in the performance itself. The ability to engage with preconceived notions of modes of consumption or production becomes a very useful tool in the hands of an artist engaging with a range of media. This is not as challenging as it might, at first, appear because Reception Theory also tells us that the socio-cultural background of an audience is likely to be very similar to that of the performers.

*Vox Rosa* challenged the audience’s preconceptions on a number of levels. The simplest, and most obvious, being that there was no programme – indeed no indication at all about the content – thus no audience member could establish a context in advance of their exposure to the content. The content itself juxtaposed genres and media which, although there was a creative curve to the performance with a narrative thread, forced the audience to reengage with each of the works. All of the commonly understood waypoints of a performance were removed e.g., there were no places for applause (even at the end as the audience found themselves in a flashmob event that removed them from the traditional performer/audience dynamic).

With *The Hero’s Journey* and *Bodies in Motion* the creative team had the opportunity to use the primary mode of consumption, a dedicated website, to create a flexible context for the creative content in which the interface between genres became masked. The link between the dancers and the audio they were manipulating in real time was never apparent – thus it was unclear if they were choreographed to the sound or were reacting to the consequences of their own movement. The audio content in these segments was a deconstruction of the original compositions performed live, and which was programmed as an interruption of the live music, at the same time as happening in two different countries. The transmedial element here being for the live audience, rather than the web audience, where the principal performance parameter was different depending on which venue you were in and, in the case of *Bodies in* Motion, which day you attended as there were 3 different iterations of this piece with 3 different sets of original musical content.

The transmedia performance environment of *Follow the Sun* is, amongst other things, an opportunity for the creative team to challenge the reception theory concept of audience profile mapping onto performer profile. By performing across media and by presenting multiple points of access the audience being invited into the event will be much wider than one would normally expect to encounter and will, therefore, have many different preconceptions of how to engage with creative performance content. Adding in an element of interactivity also invites audience members to move away from being passive receivers of content and information.

**TECHNICAL CHALLENGES**

The journey from *Vox Rosa* to *Bodies In Motion* has presented the creative and artistic directors with an increasing series of technical challenges. In terms of ambition, it has been prudent to start small and grow the projects successively, as lessons learnt along the way have been invaluable. One of the first examples to illustrate this was the fact that many venues, formerly fit for purpose for conventional performance work, just weren’t appropriate when it came to the technical demands of staging mixed media performance. For example, when working on *Vox Rosa*, it soon became apparent that using additional lighting and projection equipment drew considerably more power than the venue’s fuse board was capable of coping with.

*Bodies In Motion* has been the most ambitious project to date, and as such, has presented the biggest set of challenges. With *Bodies…*, the performances would be watched by a house audience, as well as a web audience, thus the aesthetics of the venue staging the UK performances were to be of particular consideration. The venue also needed to be able to support the performances’ considerable technical requirements, in terms of providing adequate power, sound, lighting, projection, as well as allowing access to fast, broadband internet. Finally, a suitable amount of space would have to be allocated for the ancillary equipment and technical personnel needed to webcast the performances. In light of this, The Rose Theatre, a 1,000-capacity, professional theatre in Kingston upon Thames was chosen.

Musically, *Bodies…* was diverse featuring a chamber orchestra, choir, rock band and solo vocal performances. Multiple microphones and D.Is were required to capture the diverse range instrumentation, and from this, a FOH mix and stereo audio feed for the web were created. Multiple cameras were also used to capture the visual footage of the performances, and the feeds from these were combined with pre-recorded video footage and stills imagery in a vision mixer.

Similar challenges existed in Holland and the US, with the need for each country’s visual and audio feeds to be mixed live at source, before being encoded and sent to the UK. At the Rose Theatre, each feed arrived at a separate iMac computer, and were then were also fed into the vision mixer. The output of this was then encoded for upload using Bambuser, an interactive mobile video-streaming platform.

Ultimately, the performances could be watched via a webpage that was built specifically for the event by Information Services at Kingston University. When working with such a broad range of technology, one must anticipate there will be problems to resolve along the way.

Firstly, there were multiple conflicts between the versions of Bambuser and computer operating system being used, which took valuable time and expertise to resolve. Similarly, at The Rose Theatre, on the evening of the final performance, there were problems with the webcast due to sudden and unexpected bandwidth-limiting issues arising at the venue.

In Amsterdam, the performance work was created through dance. junXion, a data routing application that can process 'sensors' from any human input device, was used to trigger samples, synthetic textures and loops, as well as operating performance controllers such as filtering and volume. This was made possible through Wii-motes being strapped to the dancers’ wrists and ankles, the bespoke choreography allowing the dancers to then perform the composition. There was a considerable amount of work involved in the creation of the software environment for this, as well as subsequent rehearsals to perfect the performance. This necessitated staff and students from Kingston University being sent to Holland to provide their expertise and, again, resolve the inevitable problems that arose. Prior also to the first performance, there was a last minute venue change to a local church, where it transpired there was insufficient internet provision. A solution was found by purchasing 200m of CAT6 cable, and running this to a neighbouring school in order to access a faster broadband connection – less than ideal, but a practical workaround nonetheless.

The important lesson learnt has been that when faced with unexpected problems, it has been prudent to remain calm and look for creative ways to fix the problem, remembering the ultimate aim is always to ensure that the performance can and will take place.

**A NEW LANGUAGE OF ANALYSIS**

By moving performance into a transmedial environment *Follow the Sun* introduces the unpredictable as a creative parameter. Access to, participation in and interpretation of the work are no longer subject to predictable patterns. Our history and traditions of performance has given us a thorough understanding of how to control physical space, by embedding public information networks into the performance realm we are engaging with a more complex, and potentially uncontrollable, environment. How do we engage with this, understand it, analyse it and, ultimately, create the control mechanisms that so many of us need?

Works such as *Bodies in Motion* and *Follow the Sun* have created a permeable interface between the live and the mediatised. Rosemary Klich, using Hayles (1999, 2000) identification of the ‘posthuman’ argues that we must go beyond the duality of these two and that “analysis must avoid adhering to a framework that connect live with presence, and the virtual with absence. A framework based on the intermingling of the dialectics of the presence/absence and pattern/randomness offers a new lens through which to holistically view the complex processes of communication and embodiment, disembodiment or re-embodiment in multimedia performance. Such an approach also offers performance theory a new strategy with which to formulate the fluid relationship of the live and the virtual within performance.”

Another challenge for the theorist in transmedia performance is the concept of authenticity. Phelan (1993) insists that the body or presence is entirely relevant, that ‘liveness’ defines performance. In transmedia performance the body is both present and absent – or rather displaced – and that access to the live is determined by the audience, either through choice or available access points. The audience too can be both present and absent, they can consume the product in both linear and non-linear formats. Transmedia performance doesn’t supercede the live, but it does recognise, and embrace, the mediatised as complimentary. Intertextuality is critical in maintaining the complementarity, *The Hero’s Journey, Bodies in Motion* and *Follow the Sun* were all conceived and delivered as original creative works and as performances, not as virtual reality games.

**References**

Auslander, P. (1999) Liveness: Performance in a Mediatised Culture, London: Routledge

Giannachi, G. (2004) Virtual Theatres: An Introduction, London/New York: Routledge

Hall, S. (1973) Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse: Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979, London Taylor & Francis e-library (2005)

Hayles, N.K. (1999) How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press

Hayles, N.K. (2000) The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media, P. Lunenfeld, ed., London/Massachusetts: The MIT Press

Jenkins, H (2006) Convergence Culture: Where Old and NewMedia Collide, New York/London: New York University Press

Kinder, M (1991,1993) Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Klich, R (2007) Performing Posthuman Perspective, Can You See Me Now? https://www.scan.net.au/journal/display.php?journal\_id=91, accessed November 22, 2012

Phelan, P. (1993) Unmarked: The Politics of Performance, London/New York: Routledge

Smith, A (2009) Transmedia storytelling 101:

https//:www. blogs.middlebury.edu/mediacp/2009/06/17/2-transmedia-storytelling-101/#, accessed April 08, 2013

Software cited:

JunXion/STEIM – Amsterdam, https://www.steim.org/product/junxion/

Ableton Live, <https://www.ableton.com/>

Works cited:

Albarn D and Hewlett J (1998) Gorillaz, London: https://www.gorillaz.com

Cameron, J (1998) Missa Celtica for chorus and orchestra, London: Chester Music Ltd.

Purcell, H (1698) rev. Margaret Laurie and Thurston Dart (1966) Dido and Aeneas, London: Novello

Snapper, P (1999) Zil for orchestra and live electronics, https://www.mian.itu.edu.tr

Varese, E (1958) Poeme Electronique, <https://ccrma.stanford.edu/CCRMA/Courses/.../Vareses%20images.htm>..., taken from Trieb and Felciano (1996) Space Calculated in Seconds, Princeton: University Press

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)