

Lloyd Coleman on How He Has Music at His Fingertips

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Anthropology's aim is to see the world through the native's point of view (Malinowski 1961[1922]:25), and intersubjectivity is often the trigger of fruitful ethnographic discoveries, as well as human bonds in general (Jackson 1998:65). But what happens when a disparity between the sensory endowments of the actors intervenes in their encounter? To answer such an anthropological question, we turn to the relationship that Lloyd Coleman has with sound, music, and his clarinet. Educated at the Royal Academy of Music and recently appointed Associate Music Director of the Paraorchestra, the world's only large-scale ensemble of disabled musicians, he is a hearing- (and visually) impaired composer. Michael Jackson has pointed out that crucial to one's sense of being is having control over the balance between Self and Other (1998:18-19), whether that Other is another person or a machine (2002). What happens at the interface of hearing aids, ever more sophisticated pieces of material culture, and musical talent? Annamaria Dall'Anese, PhD student in anthropology at UCL, is conducting a broad ethnographic study on visually impaired Londoners. As part of her research, she met Lloyd Coleman in London in early January 2018. Lloyd, who is a hearing-impaired clarinetist and composer, shared some thoughts on multi-sensory music-making. The conversation also touched upon the potential of disabled people in society. This is a topic that Lloyd, as newly appointed Music Director of the Paraorchestra, is passionate about, and one that also features prominently in Annamaria's project.

AD: If we ask people what potential they see for disabled people in our society, they could very easily imagine a visually impaired musician, or a hearing impaired visual artist. But there are some cases that challenge these preconceptions. I am thinking of Sargy Mann, the blind painter of

Peckham, who produced some of his most famous canvasses when he was totally blind. This leads me to ask you about your hearing impairment, because I'm sure some of our readers, but also myself, still have some questions concerning how you actually hear.

LC: I use hearing aids to help me a lot; I am wearing them now to listen to you, and this is a very nice, easy environment in which to listen, because it's just the two of us in the room, a little bit of traffic noise coming from the outside, but it is a very quiet room. Recently it's been really interesting because I've changed hearing aids. One of the most amazing things is if this was a conversation happening in a really noisy pub, I would be able to hear you really really well. They are incredibly directional. They pick up the noisiest thing the closer to you, isolate that, and home in on it, which is brilliant in really noisy environments. This is so ironic: after 20 years of being the person who is impaired, the person who would be the last person to pick up on a conversation in a group in a noisy pub, I have actually recently found myself being the first person! This is quite amusing, and this has happened suddenly thanks to technology, admittedly expensive technology. But, and there is a 'but', I am not sure if they are better in music, because of the same reasons that I've just described. When I play clarinet, particularly in the higher register, I'm getting the note, which I can hear and I know what the note sounds like, but I'm also getting two or three higher harmonics amplified.

AD: You told me that these hearing aids you are using are tailor made, and they amplify the higher frequencies, which are those where your hearing loss is most profound. But you also mentioned that you have chosen to have three functions on your hearing aids (which can actually accommodate up to ten): day-to-day, the T setting, and music. I'm curious to know what happens if you switch from the day-to-day to the music setting.

LC: On the music setting it reduces the higher frequency by about half, so I would normally go into my music setting for a rehearsal. When I play clarinet in the orchestra, the clarinet doesn't sufficiently amplify over the rest of the instruments for the hearing aid to then pick out these higher frequencies. So that's why I think it is particularly bad when the clarinet is played on its own at home. Because I think the technology in these hearing aids is going like: 'Ok, I can hear this single sound source of the clarinet, and it's right here very close, I'm just gonna amplify what I think Lloyd can't hear, which is obviously the higher frequency'. What I need to do is team up with a really superbright audiologist who is even a musician themselves, and who totally gets the physics behind it. It's gonna be a journey of discovery. I like this idea of working with a big company because there's absolutely no doubt that many musicians in my generation are going to lose their hearing much quicker. I think there's gonna be a hearing crisis.

AD: Really, why?

LC: Because there's just noise everywhere now. And we don't know how to look after our hearing. My hunch is there's gonna be people in my generation, musicians and non musicians, who will have lost a lot of their hearing, and many more people will be using hearing aid technology in

whatever form. Anyway, no one is ever gonna want to stop listening to music unless it is physically painful to do it, so maybe it would be quite nice to be at the forefront, creating that technology to work with live music now, because it's gonna be a big part of what people want to experience in the future. But what I want to try first is to take out the hearing aids all together in music making.

AD: How would you feel the music?

LC: You are getting on to what I think I do a lot more in terms of another person, which is actually feeling what the sound is like. My clarinet teacher, Jo Patton, instead of simply saying 'Oh, let's see if I can work out what your hearing is like', she had the nous to just go 'Oh, that's just pointless, because I'm not gonna be able to teach him through that. He can't explain to me what his hearing is like, and I can't explain to him what my hearing is like. We all have different levels of hearing'. She just said 'Ok, what I'm gonna do is just to take a different approach. We are going to teach him maybe to rely a little more on the feeling of the sound', because at the end of the day I'm holding like a column of air; when I'm making a good, decent sound on the clarinet, I know what it feels like underneath my fingers.

AD: Through a combination of hearing and tactile feeling?

LC: Yeah, a combination. It's never just one or the other. A lot of our lessons instead of just being like 'Can you *hear* that you are making a not very nice sound?', it's like 'Can you *feel* that, can you make a note of what that *feels* like?' I'm so lucky to have a person like that, who completely understands me. I think she'd make a great anthropologist, actually. She is just curious about the world, and people, and learning. She's the kind of person who would be like 'Yes, I would like to learn from you, I'm interested to know what that is like'.

AD: What you have just said reminds me of a book I've read: On Blindness: Letters between Bryan Magee and Martin Milligan. It is a dialogue on the nature of knowledge between two philosophers, one sighted, one blind nearly since birth. A compelling idea presented in this book is that the difference between what the blind miss and what the sighted miss is almost nothing in comparison to what we all miss (1995:28). In fact, the whole universe of feelings, sensations, and information is filtered through our senses, which are intrinsically limited. For instance, two sighted people will consider each other sighted, and 'normal', although neither of them can see infrared light, which other animals can see, thanks to a sensory apparatus different from ours. Taking this perspective, a disabled person is just somebody who has a different filter, and who picks up different types of information.

LC: Yes! I love that!

AD: A very good point they are making is: 'What we think as fully equipped human beings are individuals who share same sensory limitations as us' (1995:16).

LC: Yes, yes! And the eventual logical conclusion of that is this whole idea of the social model of disability, and the idea of a disability being termed as such only because of 'We are disabled by our surroundings, or by what society expects of us'. People sometimes get really embarrassed by the word 'disabled', but if we think about it we are only really embarrassed by it if we view the term 'disabled' as being a negative one.

AD: What you are saying resonates with me as well. In particular, many of my visually impaired participants often make the point that adjustments made for them in various domains, for instance technology, can be applied to the broader public. This leads me to ask you about the Paraorchestra, whose ethos is the integration of disabled musicians into mainstream ensembles. What can you tell us about your collaboration with this ensemble?

LC: The Paraorchestra is not about throwing open the doors to everyone, and to every musician with a disability. All musicians in the Paraorchestra are excellent in their own fields. It is about creating a new environment in which everybody is welcome to contribute, but contribute something of excellence. I think there's a lot of talk at the moment about what does the 21st century orchestra look like. What I have been realising more and more recently is that the way a mainstream orchestra works, where they work, how they work, with whom they work, is incredibly limited and exclusive. We have to put in things in our projects that will allow our musicians to perform their best. These can sometimes be adjustments that, with all the will in the world, you just can't imagine a seventy-piece orchestra making. The analogy I like to use is that of the oil tanker: it is very difficult to effect that change in a mainstream orchestra. And I think that is why the Paraorchestra needs to exist for the time being. Instead of having the same conversations about how classical music can move on, we should rather grab the art form and be a bit proactive with it, take different risks. And then there is the issue of how are we gonna share this music with the public, how do we persuade the public not to just stay at home, watch TV or Netflix, or go to another live gig, where they can hear their favourite rock band. Maybe it is about changing the way we work and being more dynamic and agile. And doing things that surprise people.

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