



# WHERE ARE WE GOING? AND WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

Aaron Moorehouse

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**Abstract:** This article discusses responses to the survey-score *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?*, which sets out to explore how Anglophone composers choose to ground the impacts of their compositional practice. The composers' responses primarily centred around the psychosocial impacts of composition, and the article unpicks some of the implications of this focus. The article then details the effect the survey-score had on my own composing, before outlining the affordances of narrative approaches to the act of scoring, and their ability to shine a brighter light on the impacts of our practice, both retrospectively and also with regards to future performances.

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## 'What has your Music Done?'

Over the course of 2020, as part of a survey-score<sup>1</sup> titled *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?*, I attempted to contact every composer listed on the British Composer Index of the British Music Collection.<sup>2</sup> Although the index names more than 2,000 composers, many are deceased and many entries consist solely of a list of a composer's published works. However, several hundred composers were more extensively profiled and their entries contained contact details or links to personal web pages with contact forms. To these composers, I sent a short message, which, after a general preamble, offered the single question 'What has your music done?'

For the composers who responded, 'done' became the question's operative word, as well as its greatest point of contention. This may seem unsurprising, yet when I addressed the same question to a group of music therapists most began by clarifying what their music was and whether it could be (or ever had been) theirs. One might also imagine that other artists, working with or without sound, would begin by rejecting 'music' as an appropriate label for their work.

<sup>1</sup> The label 'survey-score' is applied here for two main reasons: first, as a composer of text scores, an open-form survey on the subject of composition was a logical extension of my own creative practice and my interest in post-conceptual music; second, the responses I received from the British Music Collection's composers were in turn repurposed as prompts for a series of my own complementary compositions, sketches and pieces of writing, which appear alongside these responses in printed versions of the work.

<sup>2</sup> The British Music Collection is an archive of scores and recordings accessible through a website – <https://britishmusiccollection.org.uk/content/about-british-music-collection> (accessed 22nd January, 2023) – and as a physical collection of over 60,000 scores and recordings held at Heritage Quay in the University of Huddersfield.

Clearly, the *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?* composers' preoccupation with 'done' was a product of their interpretation of the question, rather than of the question's structure, and this in turn validated my initial rationale for conducting the survey.

Over the previous months I had found myself becoming increasingly disillusioned with how composers talked about their own work. In the majority of the discussions that I read or participated in, both formal and informal, there was an overwhelming tendency for composers to focus either on their next work or, more occasionally, their newest work. While the site of current composition clearly provides fertile ground for learning and stimulation, I felt that other areas were being unduly ignored. A future-oriented perspective may be the most productive, but it is the least suitable for reflection, and tends to propel itself past that point. I found myself preferring to hear why people composed and what their compositions had done, although these kinds of conversations were significantly harder to find or initiate.

I recognised that my preferences for these kinds of discussions were personal and also part of the reason for my gravitation towards socially engaged art and sound practices in my own composing. Yet, counter-intuitively, I had also become similarly frustrated with how some theorisations dealt with questions of impact there. As Oogoo Maia points out, although each of the successive frameworks used to appraise socially or politically engaged art or music (from Bourriaud,<sup>3</sup> to Bishop,<sup>4</sup> to Barrett<sup>5</sup>) professes to be more critically contextualised, they remain 'a few steps removed from the immediacy of experience itself'.<sup>6</sup> While the potential meanings of a performance are well articulated, its impacts are glossed over: what did the performance do, and to whom? It is my belief that these questions are integral to the evaluation of socially engaged art, yet the documentation, interpretation and criticism of works from this tradition rarely engage with these topics. In both socially engaged sound practices and composition more widely, the issue of impact on individuals is left largely untouched, despite its prominence during the compositional process.

Generally, the psychological, somatic, emotional and intellectual impacts of a work are a composer's concern at every point along the curve of a compositional act. This holds true whether an audience is imagined, internalised or embodied. As composers we are concerned with the effects of our work and usually this interest extends beyond an insular concern with how the work affects us. It follows that such work is intentionally<sup>7</sup> socially engaged, or at least psychosocially engaged, whenever any interest in this reception can be found, even if a work's impact is only anticipated or measured intuitively. Yet few composers explicitly direct attention towards this intentionality in discussions of their own practice.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110 (2004), pp. 51–79.

<sup>5</sup> G. Douglas Barrett, *After Sound: Toward a Critical Music* (New York City: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Aaron Moorehouse, Harry Matthews and Oogoo Maia, 'Post-Sonic Perspectives on Socially Engaged Compositional Practices: Composing 'After Sound' and Beyond Music', *Organised Sound* (2022), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> As Uri Agnon has acknowledged, intentions may be unfashionable but sometimes they are all we have to work with. Uri Agnon, 'On Political Audiences: An Argument in Favour of Preaching to the Choir', *TEMPO*, 75, no. 296 (April 2021), pp. 57–70.

Perhaps composers are hesitant to engage with this question because of a reluctance to burden their work with the activist associations of socially engaged art. For example, if composers conduct their practice within the context of a university, it is possible that they are discouraged at the prospect of gaining the institutional ethical approval that accompanies work that explicitly explores its psychosocial impacts, fearing the sting of sanitisation on their artistic pursuits and creative freedoms. For some composers it may also be advantageous to discuss and construct their practice in a way that relegates the importance of response and reception in favour of the pursuit of a pioneering (and disinterested or dispassionate) novelty or perfection, even if this construction may contradict a composer's primary intentions for their work. If this final assertion seems questionable, the responses from the composers who participated in *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?* illustrate this artifice at play.

### Psychosocially Engaged

The collected responses to *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?* offer a variety of illustrations of how individual composers engage with the impacts of their compositional practice and the impacts with which they choose to engage.<sup>8</sup> Every iteration is instructive, resulting in a cumulative impression of the British Music Collection's living composers and evidencing how they construct their identities through the narratives they present. Taken collectively the responses also embody an animated and idiosyncratic dialogue surrounding measures of value in the arts, with many composers explicating one measure before disassociating themselves from it entirely and moving on elsewhere.

A significant number of composers evaded or declined the survey's question.<sup>9</sup> Some were too busy to reply; some perhaps simply forgot to respond; and some argued that considerations of impact are not a composer's responsibility. These responses fail to address the issue of 'how' we engage with the impacts of our work, instead focusing on the 'if' and the 'when'. However, many more respondents provided detailed answers covering a broad range of impacts: environmental, political, financial, emotional, sexual, spiritual, psychological and relational. Yet, despite the breadth of their initial explanations, respondents generally went on to reduce their articulation of these impacts, explicitly or implicitly, to the impact of their creative practice on the well-being of themselves and others, the psychosocial impacts of what they do. For example, environmental impacts might terminate in feelings of guilt, as in Clay Gold's response below, or financial impacts in feelings of satisfaction, worth or dissatisfaction; emotional impacts either on themselves or others might result in feelings of connectedness, purpose and value, and even intellectual impacts were overshadowed by feelings of gratification, fulfilment and pleasure.

Clay Gold's response to the question 'What has your music done?' is a good example of this process, and illustrates how various concerns eventually led them away from traditional composing entirely:

<sup>8</sup> Aaron Moorehouse, *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?* (2020). Excerpts of the composers' responses are available online ([www.aaronmoorehouse.com/writing/whathavewedone](http://www.aaronmoorehouse.com/writing/whathavewedone)), while full copies of the entire work are available on request.

<sup>9</sup> And many more composers either ignored my correspondence entirely or did not receive it in the first place.

There was a time when ‘making’ music was like riding a bike. Now it is like flying an aeroplane.

I don’t mean that making music is more complex now than it was, but its impact on the earth’s resources is heavier. Once upon a time its impact was reduced to the production of a vehicle, a musical instrument, and anything beyond that, the operation of the vehicle was not detrimental to the environment (perhaps the replacement of worn parts – it’s negotiable).

These days however, many musical instruments require electricity and/or amplification. We live in a noisy world and we want to be heard. Composers, even those who work exclusively with acoustic instruments, write and produce with computers; they store music and promote their work online.

I read that a single Google search uses the equivalent resources of driving a car forwards and backwards 10 metres. Arguing about whether this is true or not, misses the point.

Once, following the sound of music would lead to a musician. Now, most likely it will lead to a loudspeaker.

The world is heavy with information, and music is ambiguous information. Music is wonderful, powerful magic. It is also unnecessary and ubiquitous.

I don’t know what my music has done other than add weight to the world. I haven’t made any new music for three years, except inside my head as I ride my bike.<sup>10</sup>

*Where are we Going? and What have we Done?* illustrates that composers were either intentionally pursuing practices that engender meaningful well-being effects, or that they perceived well-being effects in general (both positive and negative) to be the most prominent impacts of their composing, as is clear from Linda Lamon’s response to the survey’s question:

What my music has done is achieve what I set out for it to be – and that is to try and make a difference to humanity and for it to be used as a communication tool for the good.

For example, in 2015 it brought people together throughout the world when my song *Rainbow of Light*, performed by soprano Katerina Mina, was used as an official anthem for the UNESCO International Year of Light. The piece highlights the fact that we may not be alone in the universe and that the rainbow could contain the answer to the many unanswered questions humanity is still asking.

Previous to this, ‘The New Woodland Song’ was performed by community choirs to raise awareness of the urgent need for the afforestation of native woodlands and my library and festival work with children’s workshops engaged youngsters from babies to ten, with real instruments and singing.

When Manchester applied to host the Olympic Games, my music was pivotal in raising hope for local people when my song *Fly The Kite For The City* was performed and broadcast.

My songs have also been used to raise funds for charitable causes such as the homeless, NHS Together and wildlife organisations.

Finally, what my music has done for me personally is to give me a sense of purpose, which in turn has created wellbeing and connectiveness to wider social groups, leading to collaborative opportunities with other musicians. It has also taught me that there is no age limit or barriers when using your gift to inspire others.<sup>11</sup>

In short, this is what we *are* doing as composers, and we know this intuitively, yet these topics are rarely broached within the institutional discourse of composition. Even published discussions of the *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?* composers’ own practices generally ignored, de-emphasised or dismissed the psychosocial impacts that these same composers offered as the crux of their compositional practice. An acknowledgement of these omissions is not, however,

<sup>10</sup> Clay Gold, 27 July 2020, in Moorehouse, *Where are we Going?*

<sup>11</sup> Linda Lamon, 3 December 2020 in Moorehouse, *Where are we Going?*

intended as a criticism of the *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?* composers. Instead, it explores the kinds of discussions that composition's contexts can afford and enable, as well as what kinds of discussions they prohibit or discourage and, by extension, what kinds of knowledge, expertise and insight are buried if the impacts of composition are neglected.

### **(Re)focusing Practice**

While working on *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?*, and sifting through the composers' evaluations of the impacts of their work, I began directing and redirecting the survey-score's question towards my own compositional activity. In particular, I became concerned with the efficiency of the pieces I had recently been writing. I had been composing pieces with the primary aim of providing participant-performers with the opportunity to strengthen their views of their relationship with themselves and with others, but it became clear that in actuality the pieces were poorly executed. Many musical elements (and often my own vanity) obstructed my psychosocial intentions, even though I deemed these to be the most important impacts of my work. After this realisation the questions became: why am I writing concert music if these are my goals? Is a new-music audience my preferred audience? Why am I composing alone if my focus is on the experience of others? And latterly: what more can I do? After some consideration, I decided to work with SEN (special educational needs) children, in order to become directly involved with a population I wanted to help.

The following three years were immensely rewarding. I worked in many kinds of SEN schools, for various music charities and disabled children's services, with post-trauma populations, neurodivergent populations, children in care, children who had been abused, children with terminal illness and children with profound and multiple learning disabilities. In these contexts, my aim was often the same as before – to strengthen children's views of their relationship with themselves and their relationships with others<sup>12</sup> – but now this aim informed the location of my work, not just its content.

The result was a wealth of experiences that uncovered neurodiverse and atypical perspectives on music: how different childhood populations experienced music and what kinds of (new) music they seemed to experience in a significant way. To this end I utilised adapted forms of graphic scoring, text scores, improvisation prompts, participations and sound-art exercises that either provided children with a foundation for more musical work or helped to reinforce positive relationships with me, others or themselves. In this context, a primary focus on the experiences of these children, rather than on the specifics or sustained incorporation of musical elements in my interactions, also afforded me the opportunity to not compose, and instead to help in whichever way I felt appropriate at any time, even recognising the limitations of music in some moments and providing something different. Music-based interactions form the basis of my discussion in the remainder of this article but they were substantially outweighed by interactions that contained no recognisably musical elements.

<sup>12</sup> Alongside a number of complementary aims determined by my various employers (for example, building confidence and resilience, providing recreational activities, improving gross and fine motor skills or teaching music).

## Documentation and Performance

As I worked with these children, I became happier with the outcomes of my practice and found it easier to answer the *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?* question, but two new issues presented themselves: first, how might I document and discuss the psychosocial impacts of my work within the context of my doctoral research, without compromising institutional ethical guidelines; and, second, how could I articulate the insights I had gained as a composer of new music, while working alongside vulnerable and protected groups of children, without compromising relevant safeguarding practices?<sup>13</sup>

In discussion with my supervisors we recognised that my identity as a composer–researcher prohibited some forms of documentation of my practice and its evaluation (particularly with regards to determining and generalising psychosocial outcomes), but we also recognised that this identity simultaneously afforded me some liberties. Specifically, as a composer, the most durable resource that I had available to me was the act of scoring. By putting information in the form of a score, I was able to document and infer conclusions and insights in ways that might have been deemed problematic, from an institutional research perspective, in other forms. Subsequently, a collection of pieces named *H-E-L-P (and Music)*<sup>14</sup> form the primary documentation for my practice, each piece containing two elements: a narrative account of the work I did with each child and a handwritten text score composed in response to these interactions (see [Examples 1](#) and [2](#)).

Here, as in the collection itself, these two elements are presented consecutively, first with regards to a child who has been identified as JM:

JM lived with his mother and younger brother, in a perennially windy village in rural England. Aged 12, his favourite activities were cutting open fruits and vegetables, and collecting both superhero action figures (of which he had amassed an army numbering well over 500) and Disney audiobooks – most of which he could recite by heart even though he struggled to communicate using his own speech. He was also profoundly autistic and epileptic.

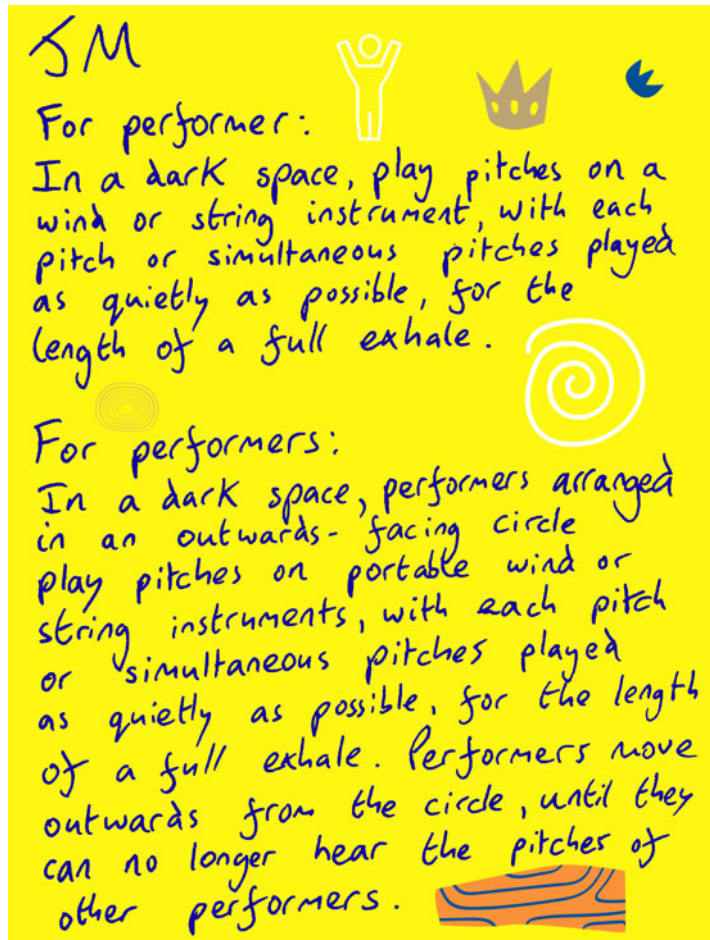
Almost every day, both at home and at the PMLD school (for pupils with profound and multiple learning disabilities) that JM attended, he would become dysregulated – a heightened psychological disposition in which he would struggle to regulate his own emotions, predominantly his anxiety. In this state, he would become violent, controlling and non-verbal.

At these times, JM would be encouraged to move to his bedroom, where I would remain with him to ensure his safety, and to build his trust. Typically, I'd stand next to the door and keep as much distance from him as was possible, as he often threw his superhero collection around the room, and at me if I tried to communicate with him. However, after some time (usually between 30 minutes and two hours), and with the curtains drawn and lights turned off to reduce sensory stimulation, JM would either become tired and fall asleep, request food (which usually comforted him) or begin playing with his action figures.

After a few weeks, JM looked forward to my visits and was also used to my presence in his bedroom while he was dysregulated. And after these episodes had passed, he'd communicate that he was ready to resume interacting with me by inviting me into his superhero games, or telling me to come and sit with him. However, he continued to react aggressively to any premature attempts to communicate verbally that were initiated by myself, and clearly

<sup>13</sup> Clearly, in the case of my specific research with SEN children, there is some overlap between the intentions of institutional research guidelines and the intentions of child-safeguarding measures. However, in a general sense, there are considerations that make the prediction or the evaluation of a piece's psychosocial impacts problematic within the context of institutional research, and these are applied universally, not only while working with protected populations.

<sup>14</sup> Aaron Moorehouse, *H-E-L-P (and Music)*, unpublished score (2023), copies available on request.



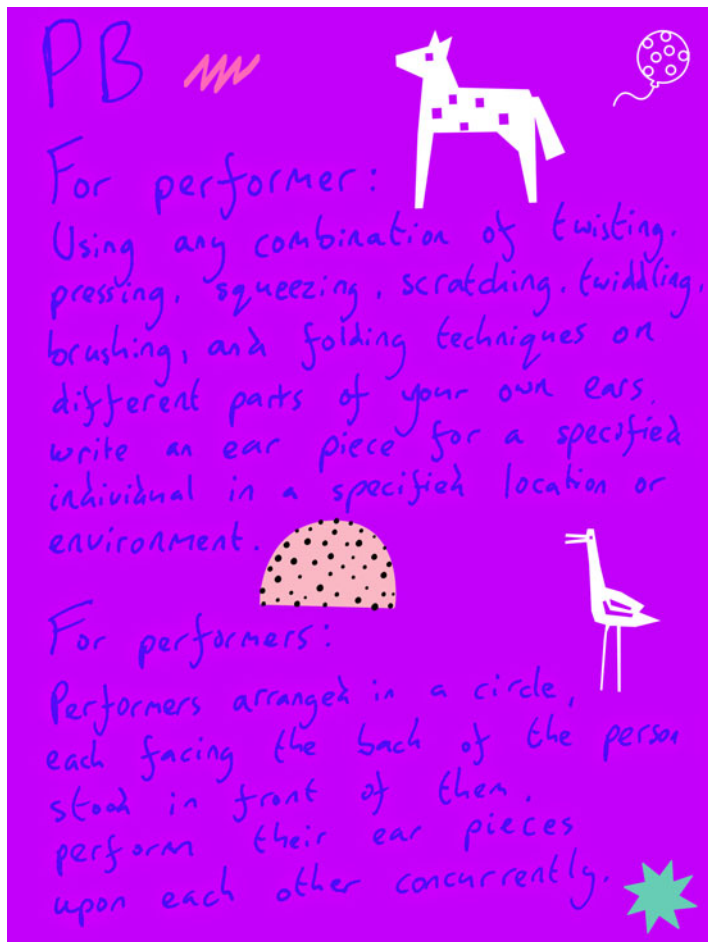
Example 1:  
Aaron Moorehouse, JM score.

still preferred for me to keep my distance while he was in a heightened state. So, despite our progress, my verbal and physical attempts at communication and interaction remained maladaptive while JM was dysregulated. Therefore, it was at these times that I began to communicate musically instead, and this felt appropriate as JM had previously chosen to play his piano with/for me on other occasions.

While I experimented with different instruments and playing styles, JM responded negatively to every form of guitar-playing, keyboard-playing and singing that I tried. However, JM responded positively to harmonica-playing; I used to sit with my back against his door and breathe as slowly and as quietly as possible through a minor-tonality harmonica that rested in my mouth. And whereas JM had become more agitated at the introduction of the sounds of other instruments, the infirm harmonica pitches had the opposite effect, and he began to settle as he listened. Furthermore, while the harmonica-playing allowed me to model calmer breathing to JM as I played the instrument, this piece also encouraged me to calm myself at the same time (which offers some ambiguity as to the cause of JM's calming). Additionally, the instrument also provided an unpredictable, but soft, source of varied sensory stimulation.

For the next ten minutes or so, I continued to breathe through the harmonica while JM listened, before I stopped, and asked him whether he'd like to play with his superheroes, to which he responded positively.

The harmonica-playing had allowed me to enter into, and contribute to, the environment of JM's period of dysregulation (whereas previous attempts had been rejected), and in this space we were able to regulate our emotions alongside each other. Additionally, after playing the harmonica, I had, for the first



Example 2:  
Aaron Moorehouse, PB score.

time, been permitted to guide JM into an activity that signalled the end of his period of dysregulation and was thus able to shorten the period of time that JM spent dysregulated.

**Example 2** shows the score that I produced during a similar process with a child identified here as PB:

PB attended a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) in the UK – an alternative education provision for primary-aged pupils who had been repeatedly excluded or removed from mainstream education settings (mainly due to aggressive, disruptive or dangerous behaviour). Here, pupils had a range of diagnoses such as foetal alcohol spectrum disorders, neonatal abstinence disorders, mental health diagnoses and attachment disorders, while many were also the victims of childhood abuse.

Aged eight, PB had found his early years similarly distressing, and he was particularly preoccupied with the episodes of domestic abuse and parental imprisonment that had occurred throughout his childhood. As such, the unit implemented a 'Nurture' programme that offered pupils such as PB the opportunity to form the kinds of positive adult–child relationships that may have eluded them throughout their childhood so far. And, in this environment, PB would regularly request to sit on an adult's lap during class, to playfight during break or to hold hands on trips off-site.

However, despite clearly enjoying these kinds of interactions, and although the development of these relationships was demonstrably beneficial to PB's general school experience, his ADHD limited the forms of learning he could



access and the amount of information he could absorb while in class. For example, it would often be the case that PB would happily sit on an adult's lap, fidgeting and pulling funny faces, while the class's discussions and the teacher's explanations passed by his ears unnoticed.

Over time, PB gravitated towards me – he often asked to sit on my lap during lessons, and I was subsequently tasked with keeping him engaged with the class learning. And although the forms of contingent touch (tracing letters and lines on the back of PB's jumper, or stroking his ears) that PB requested helped him to stay settled, he nevertheless remained unable to focus on information delivered verbally by the class teacher. Therefore, with PB's permission, I began exploring playing with his ears while the teacher spoke – alternatively filtering, distorting, manipulating and amplifying the teacher's voice with the hope that increasing PB's levels of sensory stimulation, by constantly varying the nature of the intended stimulus itself, would similarly increase his engagement with the teacher's speech.

These explorations were supplemented by many hours spent playing with my own ears – discovering which sensations were the most pleasurable, which were the most interesting sonically and where the tipping points were for when speech in an environment (and what kinds of speech in what kinds of environment) would become inaudible or incomprehensible.

In terms of encouraging PB to engage with more discussion-based and verbally transmitted learning, the ear pieces were promising if not transformative. With the ear pieces, PB generally became able to recall a subject that had been discussed, and he was able to occasionally recall phrases that had been said, although he was still hesitant to contribute to discussions himself, and his understanding remained patchy. However, in addition to these small gains, the pieces also undoubtedly strengthened my relationship with PB – their affectionate and intimate nature provided PB with the opportunity to further reinforce a positive attachment with a familiar adult, and to gain increased access to the benefits afforded by these kinds of relationships.

In the collection, the intention is for the relationship between the two elements of each piece to be symbiotic: the text scores offer a more generalised or abstract deployment of the musical situations presented in the accompanying narrative. At the same time, the text score's presentation alongside these narratives frames the instructions and invites a certain kind of consideration of how the work should be performed. Even in cases where the links between the narrative account and the text score are more ambiguous, it is hoped that readings and performances of these scores will always be informed and accompanied by the written material that precedes it. To this end, the collection makes clear that anyone performing an interpretation of any of these scores must have already familiarised themselves with its accompanying narrative, and so too must any audience that encounters one of these performances. In short, the pieces are always attached to the narratives of the children who brought the works into being, although in performance the practicalities of how to implement this requirement are left undetermined.

While precedents for these kinds of compositions can loosely be identified in the work of Michael Pisaro-Liu's *harmony series*,<sup>15</sup> in which text scores are each prefaced by an accompanying piece of poetry, my collection shares closer links with case studies from music therapy. In contrast to music therapy documentation, however, the inferences present in my collection's quasi-case studies<sup>16</sup> are articulated as material to be explored through performance in an indeterminate context, rather than as conclusions or insights that are predominantly used to inform theory and future practice within music therapy. Moreover, because the pieces

<sup>15</sup> Michael Pisaro-Liu, *harmony series: 34 pieces for a varying number of performers*, unpublished score (2004–2006).

<sup>16</sup> In the case of the narrative accounts in my collection, many identifying details (not only initials and names) are often removed or altered, and occasionally my work with multiple children is condensed into a singular account.

link back to my employment with protected childhood populations, these performances involve performance rather than participation. Indeed, these pieces articulate individual, neurodivergent and post-trauma experiences of music in which participation is not a possibility; they can only be performed. Temporally, the pieces are scored interpretations of my previous, and now inaccessible, work with these children; ontologically, the experiences of these children were similarly inaccessible to me, even though I was in their company.

### Narrative and Impacts

Yet, even if the experiences of these children remain inaccessible as the works are performed, they are present in other ways. The child-like decoration of the text scores in the collection (and their titles), alongside the narrative accounts of the children's experience, encourages the collection to be read as short stories about those children and my work with them, rather than as a disembodied collection of text scores. Making a collection of scores that is shepherded by the narratives of young people and the impacts the work has already had also encourages future performances informed by similar psychosocial considerations; again, the explicit articulation of what the piece has done bridges the gap towards considering what it might do next. This is how the collection harnesses its future therapeutic potential without prescribing for whom that might be (and thus remaining on the right side of various guidelines for institutional research). As Meretoja and Davis explain:

Artistic storytelling practices have the potential to enlarge our space of experience in the present by creating new possibilities of experience, thought, and imagination; they can transform the ways in which we, through understandings of the past, orient ourselves to the Future, and imagine the yet to be.<sup>17</sup>

Through these means, the collection of pieces presents one possible manifestation of an evaluative process that refers back to the title of *Where are we Going? and What have we Done?* Each piece begins by articulating and evaluating its creation through narrative accounts that detail the impacts a work had on a specific person, at a specific time, in a specific place. Each piece in the collection begins by making clear what it has already done before moving on to the question of what it will do next as a text score to be performed. By conceptually strapping each narrative account so tightly to its accompanying score, it is hoped that the dialogue becomes not only 'What has been done and what will be done next?', but 'How will what has been done inform what will be done next?'.<sup>18</sup> It is this consideration – an evaluation of the impacts of our previous practice, rather than the contents of our practice – that may ultimately enable not just a wholly psychosocially engaged practice (and the discussions and subsequent insights that this may facilitate), but also a more successful practice in general, one equipped to more competently, persuasively and determinedly answer the question 'what has your music done?'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis, eds, *Storytelling and Ethics: Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> The score presented in [Example 2](#) illustrates this process with regards to my own work: it uses a piece that has been continually redeployed and altered over the past six years. What began as a piece for private performance in 2017, next became a concert piece, then a piece exploring the links between mindfulness and music, was finally introduced in my work with JM. At each stage, the piece was repurposed, evaluating what it had previously done to discover what else it could do.