

The17 in Geneva

The voices in my head must have always been there, but it was not until sometime in the very early years of this century did they start clamoring to get out. This coincided with a time in the history of music where music was so ubiquitous that it was possible in theory to listen to any piece of recorded music, from the entire 100 year history of recorded music, wherever you were, at whatever time, while doing almost anything. For many a music lover this was what he / she had dreamed of all their lives. I was one of those music lovers, I had done the dreaming, but then something started to happen, it was something to do with the voices in my head.

This ubiquity of recorded music inspired me to want to make music using the voices in my head. Music that was about time, place and occasion. Music that you could not hear wherever, whenever, while doing almost whatever. I wanted to make music that was not product, music that if you wanted to hear, you had to be part of the making of it. Music that was not made by the anointed, for us the unwashed. Thus music you could never buy on a CD, listen to on the radio. Music that did not exist to be a soundtrack or to sell a product. Music, no matter how much you searched the internet, you would never find.

In my imagination, I was seeing the 20th century as the century where the technology to record music had seduced nearly all forms of music into becoming one genre and that genre being Recorded Music. Every form of music that was now on sale at iTunes had morphed into this one genre, be it classical, jazz, world, urban, folk etc. they had all become the same thing. And what defined this genre was that it could be turned off and on and be bought and sold. For me the heralding of the age of the internet, where music's monetary worth was in a complete state of flux had the effect of marking the point in time where folk in future will look back at the 20th century as the century where the art form that was Recorded Music began its descent into being a has-been art form. An art form in terminal decline. A point in time when a new, as yet unknown music will begin to rise and take shape, a new era where music will be freed from the shackles of being a recorded commodity. I was fuelled by an almost naïve idealism about what was happening and what was possible.

It was those voices in my head, which took the shape of some unruly and almost discordant choir that showed me the way forward. If I could only liberate those voices from my skull and turn them into an out there shared reality, maybe a year zero in music would be possible and these voices could herald the new dawn of a post recorded music era. This choir already had a name, long before I mentioned it to any one else – The17. There was no real reason for the name of the choir, although I have made up numerous reasons over the past decade.

I knew I did not want the music of The17 to rely on melody, rhythm or words. I wanted it to start from as basic a form as possible, a form that was hardly music. A music where there was only the collective human voice, where it would be the combined soul of everyone taking part in the performance that would give it its strength, leaving nothing down to mere individual genius or star status.

It is over these past ten years that I have been trying to explore what The17 might be, and how it could function. First and foremost it was to have no fixed line up, it could be whoever was there, for however long the performances lasted. I wanted The17 to exist and perform in ways and places that had nothing what so ever to do with any other existing traditions – an impossible dream I know. Secondly there would never be an audience for The17, if you wanted to hear The17 perform, you had to be part of The17. Thirdly and most importantly, The17 are never recorded for posterity. The only thing that is left after a performance by The17 is what is left in their memories.

January 2006 is when I started to go public with The17 and those voices in my head were liberated and began coming out of other peoples mouths. I instigated performances across Europe. At the same time as this I was writing numerous very simple text based scores to be used as starting points for these performances. I also encouraged other people to write scores to be performed by The17.

In 2008, The17 set out on a 40 date worldwide tour called Coast-to-Coast. But this would be a sporadic, fits and starts tour. A tour that would stretch over five years. It would include 20 performances within the British Isles and each performance featuring a different score. Each of these performances would be twinned with a performance of the same score somewhere else in the world. The17 at all of these performances would be primarily made up of people local to the area. Some of these performances would be so intimate that they would involve no more than one person, others have involved thousands taking part at one time. There were scores to celebrate the birth of a new child another to celebrate someone's life once it has been completed. One to be performed at the top of a mountain another while you are lying in bed in the morning, where all that is required from you is to listen to all the sounds you can hear in turn before you get up.

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Then there is the score that The17 will be performing in Geneva on the 24 November 2012. This will be Score 328: SURROUND. I hope that this score is printed alongside this text, thus there will be no reason for me to explain the logistics of how it works. What I will tell you is that City-to-City is a parallel world tour to Coast-to-Coast. But this protracted world tour consists of ten performances of SURROUND within ten different cities around the world. The performance of it in Geneva will be its ninth. I will not go through each of the dates so far, but will tell you that there was a performance in Beijing, China, where the 100 members of The17 taking part were all market stall holders in a massive sprawling market and there was no perfect circle drawn on a map,

but the cry was carried up and down the lanes of the market, travelling the five kilometers until it got back to where it started.

As for Damascus, Syria, the plan was that the performance was to take place around the medieval city walls that so happens were just over 5K in circumference. But the Arab Spring and ensuing civil war prevented the performance happening as planned. Instead the performance took place in London with the majority of The17 taking part being Syrians in exile. This performance followed the outline of the Damascus city walls drawn on to a map of London.

With each performance to date of SURROUND, whatever the location or weather condition, there has been a unifying power. This power comes from taking part in something that you may have to wait over an hour in your position before you make your first cry and in that hour you are bound to question the validity of the thing and how come you are wasting your time in taking part. But this is balanced with the knowledge that if you abandon your post and head for home, there will be link in the chain missing and you will be letting down the other 99 members of The17 taking part. Another very powerful part of it is when after waiting however long it is, that you hear in the distance the cry being passed from individual to individual as it gets closer to you. And as it gets closer a fear and anxiety builds up in you until it is your turn to make the cry. And suddenly a sense of relief sweeps through your body as you hear the cry that you have passed on, being repeated again and then again and then... until it disappears into the distance, lost in the other sounds of the city.

In a sense this is a score that is hardly music at all, but I hope will live on in the memories of all those that take part as one of the musical highlights of their life.

The tenth and final performance of SURROUND is to be performed across the rooftops of Jerusalem next Spring. A performance that need not take any notice of how the city is politically or religiously divided up.

On the evening of the 28 April 2013, a very intimate performance by The17 will mark the end of my involvement with choir. On the 29 April, I will turn 60, time for a new chapter in my life to begin.