

Circlesongs

[NB!: This handout will be updated after the festival, at the latest August 22.]

Bonfires and gas flames

Quite often I meet people who think making circlesongs are the same as playing a sequencer game. In my definition this is not the same. To me circlesongs are more than patterns layered on top of each other. To me circlesongs is not an exercise. To me circlesinging is an organic art-form.

I tried to come up with a good analogy this afternoon, and bonfire vs. gas flames came into my mind. What I like about the bonfire is the hypnotic effect it has on me. I can stare into it for hours even though nothing happens. But something does happen though! The bonfire is alive, it transfers energy from matter to heat, the changes are very subtle, but over time you'll find the wood is no longer the same. Also the fire - the energy transition - differs in an organic way. Sometimes flames are big and powerful - other times they are simmering happily or even just glowing as hot red potential between the logs.



The gas flame (as on a stove). It's convenient and controllable. You can turn it on and you can turn it off. You can control the flame by levels but the burning is sterile and steady. You can cook anything you like on it, but it won't make you sit around and sing for long.

So what has all this got to do with circlesongs? I like to think of circlesongs from the bonfire perspective. In a circlesong the musical path is the important thing. The process in which the energy transition happens. I want to follow every move - and I want every move to be organic and be the natural continuation of what came before. Circlesongs shouldn't be controlled by a knob, level 1-6. Circlesongs should catch fire if the flames ignite in new wood. Circlesongs are transition of energy.

The solo is the piece - the patterns are the canvas.

While transcribing and studying more than 130 original Bobby McFerrin circlesongs in 2008 I came to the conclusion that the compositional structures were not the actual substance of the music. McFerrin's constant soloing was the real substance while the structures merely formed his playground. It was like a dance show. The interesting part was more how the dancers moved than where they were located at a given time.

You are not responsible for the music

Now, circlesongs has a creator - which I rather refer to as The Medium. Why? Because throughout history cultures found that the artist is not responsible for his product. The artist is the medium creations. In ancient Rome they blamed the genies living in the walls and in Greece they had muses who would deliver the inspiration. The reality of creativity's origin is discussable, but I find that thinking this way helps you not to block, or stick in self-blaming while trying to create. Don't take responsibility for your imagination! You don't have to like what comes out of you. You are not the music. Stand aside - listen instead.

Therefore I would like to define a circlesong in 3 elements:



Creative FLOW

The fundamental of it all. This is *the medium* of the circlesong pouring out the musical inspiration given to him/her.

- Sing one note after the other
- Do not “want” things to happen. Let them happen.
- Explore ideas, notes, timbers, sounds, words.
- Accept everything.
- Stay with an idea for a while and explore it.
- Get grabbed by the music/flow.
- Don’t look for patterns - they will come.

Vibrant ENERGY

There will be no fire if the wood is wet. This is the choirs responsibility to give back energy to the medium by caring for the pattern as well as the overall music. This can be done by:

- Enjoy - singing, repeating, the moment.
- Externilize
- Follow changes and gestures.
- Let the music develop.
- Intonation
- Groove




Simplistic COMPOSITION

The composition is the structure on which you can explore some more. The medium will usually be the one to compose while creating. Here are some short reminders and advice:

- Intuitive is better (The first idea is usually the best)
- Make it continuous
- Set different starting points, but let them meet somewhere
- Fill out the gaps
- Overall repetition length should be 2-4(8) bars
- Harmonic shifts: Seek to tune into new harmonic worlds between every song
- Interlocking figures
- Engine + 3 part harmonic (is a great simpel structure)

Thorough descriptions of games and exercises from the workshop can be found on my website kristianskarhoj.dk in the download section. They are described in handouts from other workshops. Later this fall there will be an e-book with a collection of inspirations and thoughts on the subject.

Recommended TED talks and examples

	Scan to watch directly on your smartphone		Scan to watch directly on your smartphone
Elizabeth Gilbert: A Different Way to Think About Creative Genius http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/elizabeth_gilbert_on_genius.html		Itay Talgam: Lead like the great conductors http://www.ted.com/talks/itay_talgam_lead_like_the_great_conductors.html	
Stefon Harris: There are no mistakes on the bandstand http://www.ted.com/talks/stefon_harris_there_are_no_mistakes_on_the_bandstand.html		TEDxRainier - Will Hewett - Singing Yourself Alive http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxRainier-Will-Hewett-Singing	
Bobby McFerrin plays... the audience! http://www.ted.com/talks/bobby_mcferrin_hacks_your_brain_with_music.html		Benjamin Zander: The transformative power of classical music http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/en/benjamin_zander_on_music_and_passion.html	
Some examples of stage improv from my own musical life:			
Kristian Skårhøj's Debut Concert: "Circlesong #8" Example of a circlesong. https://vimeo.com/35269588		Kristian Skårhøj's Debut Concert "Ain't We Sweet" Example of a trio improv. https://vimeo.com/35267309	
Kristian Skårhøj's Debut Concert: "Tak fordi I kører langsomt!" Example of a collaborative group improv. https://vimeo.com/35270533		Skårhøj / McFerrin Duet Example of a duo improv https://vimeo.com/23502110	