

Report: Workshop *Chorós* by Valentin Gabelier

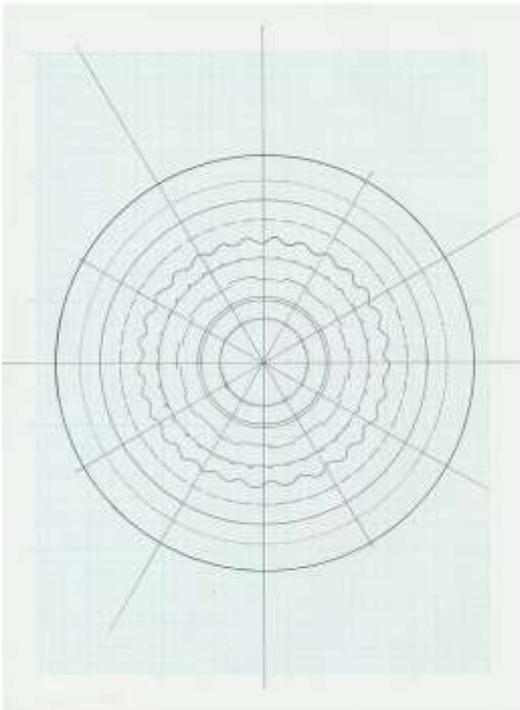
Juliet Reiko Knapp

CONNECT₂_ 2021: Connect, Continue, Expand is a project that aims to promote diversity and an inclusive society through art. As part of this project, Kyoto Art Center organized the Expanding Worlds Workshop series which consisted of two different workshops by two Kyoto-based artists, Valentin Gabelier and Alina Zhdanova.

This report outlines and reflects upon the workshop *Chorós*, created and led by artist Valentin Gabelier, from a participant's perspective. The workshop was open to anyone, regardless of previous experience, and took place over three three-hour sessions with a short fifteen-minute presentation at the end of the third session.

Through mediums such as performance, installation, video and sound, Valentin Gabelier's work largely focuses on the voice and the different relationships this allows between ourselves and our surroundings. *Chorós* is one of his most recent works and was first created and performed at festival Baléapop in France in 2019. The basic concept of the piece is a 'moving chorus' which is created by the voices of the performers who walk on a circular score drawn on the ground. Each iteration of the work is different as it depends on the participants themselves but also on the size and design of the score. Gabelier tells me his inspirations for the piece include British musician Phil Minton's [*Feral Choir*](#) and Polish artist Marta Górnicka's work [*Chór Kobiet*](#) as well as the circular University Hall inside Kyoto City University of Arts.

The workshop at Kyoto Art Center marked the third iteration of the work and on this occasion the score, placed in the center of the hall, takes the form of a large white circular cloth approximately six meters in diameter. On the cloth are printed six concentric circles and then six further lines across the diameter of the circle that divide it in to twelve equal parts (see fig. 1). Over the course of the workshop twelve participants, including myself, learn how to use these lines both as guides to walk around the circle and as guides to produce various sounds with our voices. It is therefore a score for each participant to follow not only musically but also choreographically.



(fig. 1)

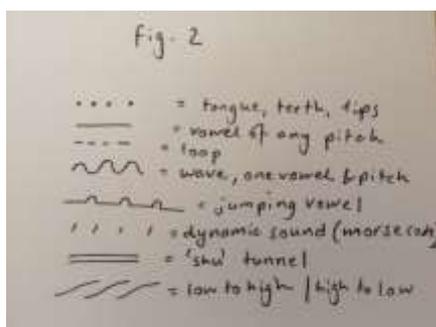
The first session begins with the twelve of us standing around the circumference of the circle, each at a five-minute mark if we imagine it as a clock. Gabelier explains there are a number of different methods to use the score and that unlike a usual chorus, we will not be creating the same sound but instead, each voice will be different and individual. There are also no 'wrong' sounds and he reiterates that no previous singing or performing experience is necessary. The aim is to collectively create an ever-evolving and moving sound sculpture.

Before using the score however, a large part of the first session is made up of a number of vocal and movement exercises. After a basic warm-up of stretching, relaxing the vocal cords through lip rolls and yawning, and creating an awareness of breath through focusing on the diaphragm, Gabelier leads the group in creating a number of vocal sounds together. These include a continuous sound that fluctuates between low and high, a vowel sound using vocal fry (created using little strength and breath) and rapid consonant sounds that get increasingly faster until they can't be made out, like a broken machine. The group instinctively follows Gabelier who conversely encourages us to listen to but not follow each other and create our own individual sounds at our own pace. Other exercises include attempting to recreate, as a group, the sounds of dogs howling, birds singing and cicadas crying as well as pretending to communicate with each other in a made-up language, and trying different intonations to express happiness, anger or sadness. Then again attempting this with mouths closed or mouths open and tongues stuck to the bottom of the mouth.

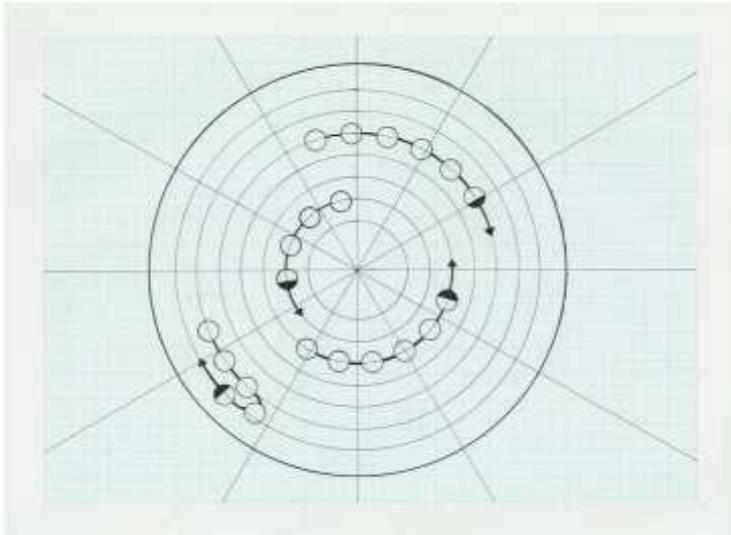
Although a chorus the sounds produced are not musical in the conventional sense. Instead of pitch or tone the focus is on the shape of the mouth and the use of breath and the result is something halfway between language and song.

Giving our vocal cords a chance to rest, Gabelier then leads a number of movement exercises. These include an exercise in which participants walk freely around the room yet must decide when to stop and start all together and another in which we stand in a line and must all move across the room while preserving this line (again the group must decide when to start and stop). In the final exercise we are split in to three groups of four and the four members of each group stand side by side to form three lines like clock hands on the score. The line must move around the circle clockwise like a clock hand and each participant must look ahead while at the same time keep an acute awareness of the bodies to their left and right. Each of these exercises relies on the group to move together without a leader, which heightens the way the group interacts or listens to one another.

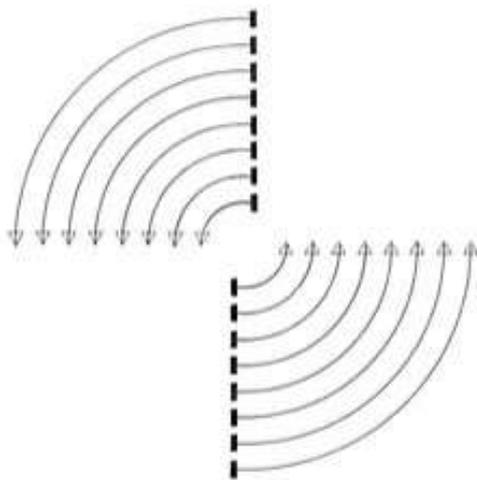
The final hour of the first session and much of the second workshop is focused on learning how to read the score and practicing this as a group. Gabelier explains that each of the six concentric circles signal a different kind of sound (see fig. 2). He then explains two methods for using the score. In each method the twelve of us are divided in to three groups of four. The first method is the simpler of the two, each group stands in a line facing the back of the person in front. The person in front leads the group around the score, following any line they wish, and each person must vocalize the sound of the circle they are walking on (see fig. 3). In the second method each group creates the hand of a clock, one person close to the center and the others stood facing the same way side by side in a line. For this method a number of coloured lines are additionally drawn on to the score and each group is assigned a colour. While moving slowly around the circle like the hand of a clock each group must look at where their colour falls and vocalize whatever line the coloured line falls beside (see fig. 4). There is also one final rule, the faster you move the louder the sound, the slower you move the softer the sound.



(fig. 2)



(fig.3)



(fig.4)

To begin with this is a lot to take on and is a bit like patting your head and rubbing your stomach however after some practice and confirmation of the rules, the group starts to relax in to moving and reading the score and elements such as the movement start to become more instinctive. In this sense the movement itself provides a kind of grounding. The structure of *Chorós* and method for interaction with the score means that while each participant is free to play with their own voice, they must continuously stay aware of and connected to the group.

In the third session Gabelier outlines a structure for the performance itself. We start by

taking our positions in our groups as clock hands and do one round of the circle with a 'shu' sound and then another round with a continuous vowel sound gradually going in to a crescendo. We then follow method two of reading the score by colour and then method one of following the leader in each group. The performance ends with each participant walking to the edge of the circle and off the score. Participant availability meant that throughout the three sessions some members joined and others left. The way this impacted the piece as a whole certainly emphasized the collective nature of the work and I would be interested in seeing how more sessions at length with the same participants affects how the work develops. I also felt the potential for experimenting with different age groups, people who speak different languages and also the acoustics of the location of the performance.

As a final and additional note, during the last three months of 2021 there were a number of similar workshops and presentations that took place in Kyoto. Rully Shabara's *Raung Jagat: Drone of Colours* that was presented at Kyoto Experiment 2021 Autumn in October and recent Villa Kujoyama artist in resident Marcus Borja's workshop and presentation *Voices of Kyoto* in December also have the concept of an absent conductor and a vocal or sound performance created by a collective chorus at the heart of their work. The performers in both Shabara and Borja's works, like *Chorós*, were largely made up of non-professionals gathered through an open call. However, despite the strong similarities between these works, each artist's approach and therefore result varies astoundingly. One interesting point is that in each work a certain tool is used to replace this lack of a center or conductor and aid the collective process. Shabara's work utilizes an AI-generated program, Borja conducts the performance in complete darkness and Gabelier uses movement through the circular score. In all three works, both in terms of process and presentation, seeing the strengths and also difficulties of creating work collectively with non-professionals revealed for me that there is much potential in experimenting further.