Dame Evelyn Glennie: Live On the Road with Trio HLK

By Georgina Hughes
File Attachment: Dame Evelyn Glennie: Live On the Road with Trio HLK [1]

To anyone who has not keenly followed the eclectic career path of the world's first solo multi-percussionist, Dame Evelyn Glennie's recent collaboration with Trio HLK might at first appear incongruous. Generally associated with virtuosic performance in the domain of art music, Glennie has created and sustained a career centred on developing and expanding the remit of solo percussion. This has resulted in an expansive discography which includes work in the contexts of popular music (Bjork), avant-garde improvisation (Fred Frith), film scoring (Mark Knopfler) and EDM (Roly Porter). Choosing to define her professional identity as "sound creator," it is clear that Glennie refutes categorizations or classifications which may serve to limit her creative scope. Glennie's appearance as a featured guest artist on Trio HLK's debut album *Standard Time* (2018) is therefore not an anomaly. However, her decision to tour with the trio is a more notable departure. This has repositioned Glennie, temporarily at least, as a gigging musician. A virtuosic percussionist and pioneering solo performer has opted to embrace life on the road as an ensemble member in an emerging jazz group.

Formed in 2015, Trio HLK have established their professional identity primarily through deconstructed interpretations of jazz standards. Touring is an intrinsic aspect of "paying their dues" in terms of establishing professional credentials. To this end, a number of questions must be posed: Does Glennie's interest in pursuing a long-term relationship impact the trajectory of the ensemble? How has Glennie's prominence in the zeitgeist of contemporary music impacted reception of Trio HLK in more general terms? What is the appeal of life on the road in this context?

After an initial review of the genesis and development of the collaboration, the focus will be twofold: firstly, an analysis of the tangible result of collaboration in terms of venue size and social media outputs will contextualize how Glennie's prominence may serve to heighten interest in Trio HLK. The second aim will be to construct a reception history of Glennie's live performances with Trio HLK (focusing primarily on events promoted as part of the album launch tour in 2018). This will ascertain how her presence has impacted the prominence and credibility of Trio HLK, appraise how she is reviewed in comparison to the rest of the group, and evaluate how the public responds to a classical musician operating in the domains of improvisation and jazz performance. At the center of the study is an interest in establishing the value and appeal of the live performance experience.

Context

Scottish ensemble Trio HLK, named for the surnames of each member (Rich Harrold, piano; Ant Law, guitar; and Richard Kass, drums and percussion), are typically described as a jazz group. Harrold and Kass began playing together in 2014, and were joined on New Year's Day 2015 by Law, a meeting defined by the group as an "arranged marriage band date" (Foster 2018). In alignment with Glennie's own strident eclecticism, the trio generally seek to elude categorization. Pursglove, however, suggests that the descriptor "jazz musicians" remains applicable, regardless of the clear influence of a diverse range of genres: "As one nowadays expects from ensembles of young musicians regarded as playing jazz, the music of this trio draws on much more than just the jazz tradition" (Pursglove 2018).

The collaboration originated when Trio HLK approached Glennie and alto saxophonist Steve Lehman to feature as guest artists on their debut album. Both musicians willingly agreed to participate, with Glennie contributing to three tracks (Broom 2018). It is clear that Glennie was motivated by the prospect of expanding her remit as a performer: "I found it hugely difficult. It's very complicated stuff, really interesting material that definitely made me sit down and work on it" (Walton 2018).

Standard Time was released on May 11, 2018, and critical reception of the work has been extraordinarily positive. Interestingly, the reviews are not centered on the appeal of the high-profile guest artists, but are much more concerned with the musical product which the collective has created. *The Herald* (Scotland) describes it as "a thing of swaggering confidence" (Jamieson 2018). *London Jazz News* ended their review by summarizing the album as

"urgent, elegant, dizzying, serene … and maybe unlike anything you've heard before" (London Jazz News 2018). *Standard Time* was selected as one of the best albums of 2018 by a number of jazz websites (see *Bird is the Worm* and *Bandcamp* 2018), and also appeared on the list of Gramophone's Critics' Choice Recordings of the Year (*Gramophone* 2018).

In contrast to the instrumentation featured on the album (wherein Glennie plays only marimba and vibraphone), live appearances reposition Glennie as a multi-percussionist, with large set-ups which change and evolve between performances. A review of the Bristol International Jazz and Blues Festival (which predated the album launch tour) remarks: "The trio were squeezed onto half the stage to make space for guest Evelyn Glennie's spread of marimbas, timpani, vibes and other percussion" (Benjamin 2018).

The potential power imbalance between an established and renowned virtuosic solo percussionist and a recently formed band is to some extent diminished in light of the fact that Glennie is a relative novice to the domain of jazz performance. Entirely comfortable with free improvisation, which is directly connected to her identity as a sound creator, Glennie has forged a professional path centred on experimentation and innovation. Yet jazz, even in a deconstructed and contemporary interpretation of the genre, is a largely new frontier. Speaking of the value of the collaboration, Glennie acknowledges this:

GH: Have you learned anything about yourself as a performer through working with Trio HLK?

EG: Well, put it like this: I've been ordering a lot of books and materials and so on as regards to improvisation within a jazz context … and that is something that I feel needs to be developed in my case. So when it comes to sound color, sound moods, or rhythms, I'm much more at home with that. So I've really seen a need to develop the harmonic understanding with greater ease than I do. So that's been good for me to realize (interview with Dame Evelyn Glennie 2019).

Constructing a creative democracy

Glennie has sustained a diverse and successful career. It is clear that this was not accomplished by narrowing her remit, but by continuing to seek inspiration in challenging and eclectic projects. A driving mission "to teach the world to listen" (the motto emblazoned on the Glennie website) underpins her musical and philanthropic commitments. Outreach, public speaking, mentorship and role modelling are intrinsic features of her public profile. Glennie maintains a visible cultural presence on social media, which contrasts sharply with Trio HLK's limited following. Figures from June 2020 illustrate this difference: Trio HLK have one hundred seventy-nine YouTube subscribers in comparison to Glennie's 19500; Glennie has 12200 Twitter followers, considerably more than Trio HLK's 432; Glennie's Facebook page has 38000 followers while Trio HLK's has 1282. In terms of expanding their reputation, it is clear that the trio stands to benefit from allegiance with Glennie.



Figure 1. Album Launch Tour Dates
(Source: Trio HLK Facebook page, March 24, 2018).

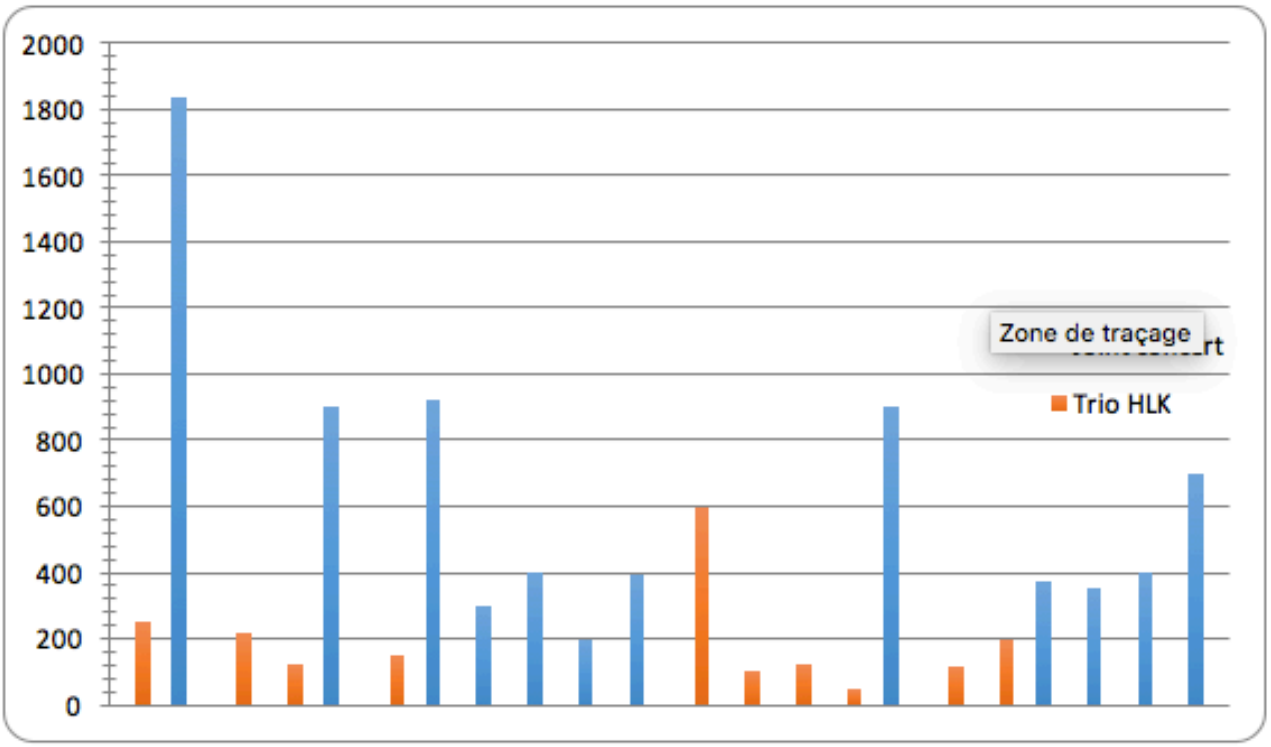


Figure 2. Trio HLK and Evelyn Glennie Album Tour Venue Capacity
(Following chronology of tour dates detailed in Figure 1; venue capacity obtained from google).

Figure 2 presents an overview of the venue capacity for each of the dates on the 2018 album launch tour. With one exception, concerts featuring Glennie accommodate larger audiences than those for the trio. The name recognition offered by Glennie's presence suggests the potential for increased interest in Trio HLK's performances. This is further consolidated in social media commentary by the trio, who frequently reference the fact that events featuring Glennie are sold-out shows (see @TrioHLK twitter posts: 3rd June 2018, 28th July 2018 and 23rd August 2018). It is important to note that Glennie has also chosen to embrace the challenges (and lessened financial recompense) of smaller venues, thus assuming the role of a touring musician (and not a featured solo virtuoso). Glennie has opted to become part of "HLKG," a term first used by the trio on Twitter, 16th November 2018. The tour has established the collaboration as a quartet, repositioning Glennie as a band member rather than a guest artist.

Concert reviews

In order to evaluate how the collaboration has been received by the general public, it is useful to consider concert reviews and interviews from the album release period. The central aim in my analysis of these critiques is to establish how the collaborative venture impacts perceptions of both Glennie and Trio HLK. A number of performances and promotional work preceded the official album launch tour, the purpose of which was primarily twofold: to ensure that the ensemble fused effectively in a live context, and to heighten anticipation for the album release. Writing in March 2018, Hadfield opens his review with the acknowledgement that "I was a little dubious about Trio HLK with Dame Evelyn Glennie" (Hadfield 2018). Proceeding to an exposition on Trio HLK's musical style, it is clear in Hadfield's commentary that Glennie may be susceptible to greater public scrutiny in the context of live performance than the group, despite the fact that her public profile is significantly more established. An interview with Glennie for *The Scotsman* in April 2018 acknowledges the risks of transition, but also articulates the appeal of embracing new challenges in order to evolve further as a performer (Walton 2018). The potential power imbalance is addressed directly in a joint interview on May 4, specifically in relation to Kass (drummer/percussionist) working with a renowned virtuoso percussionist. His confident response, though deferential, offers clarity on the democratic and egalitarian ethos of the venture:

As a drummer growing up I used to watch her videos and was really inspired by some of the stuff she'd done. So, for me it was quite a big deal. But she's such a nice person, such a lovely person. She makes you feel very at ease (Jamieson 2018).

The interview is concerned subsequently with introducing the work of Trio HLK to the general public; Glennie's voice is marginal, and her views on the collaboration definitively articulate respect for the ensemble:

They are all about the music, the journey of a piece, creating suspense, surprise, sparseness, density, twists, and turns. Their music, in my opinion, is timeless and cannot really be categorized (Jamieson 2018).

The first joint performance on the album launch tour took place on May 13, 2018, in Queen's Hall, Edinburgh. Mactaggart's review for *Scottish Jazz Space* focuses initially on summarizing the achievements of the emerging trio, referencing Glennie only at the end of the second paragraph: "It is a compliment to a young jazz trio that it can attract collaborators of the stature of Glennie and Lehman" (Mactaggart 2018). The review retains focus primarily on the musicianship of the trio, embracing Glennie's role in the ensemble yet noting that her presence is "not essential to the overall sound" (Mactaggart 2018). Gilchrist's appraisal of the concert follows a similar trajectory, acknowledging Glennie's presence, but focusing on the trio as the creative epicentre of the performance:

Glennie, hemmed in by a veritable stockade of vibes, marimba, tympani and assorted percussive gewgaws, emerged for a solo spot, hands flickering in an urgently driven piece for steel handpan and prepared tape, and to spar energetically on a separate drum kit with Kass in a number which concluded with a formidable break from the HLK drummer (Gilchrist 2018).

As is consistently the case, Trio HLK are confident and assured with regard to their musical identity. Interviews are clear on the fact that Glennie and Lehman, though welcome contributors to the album, did not alter the creative direction or ambitions of the group:

We are all thrilled to be working alongside our wonderful guest artists, who are both operating at the very top of their game and who each have brought their own particular and highly significant layers of color to our cherished debut album (*Gazette and Herald* 2018).

A review of the performance at the Devizes Art Festival (June 3, 2018) is consolidated with interview excerpts from Glennie. The critic comments approvingly on the fact that Glennie unloads her own instruments into the venue, a small but significant gesture which definitively positions her as a band member and part of the team. This image is included in Trio HLK's Twitter feed (June 4, 2018). The reviewer also discerns this democratic framework in the context of performance:

With the exception of her stunning solo on the halo drum, it quickly becomes clear that Evelyn is "just" one of the band. It's all about the collaboration, this. It's not just about Evelyn. Therefore anyone expecting The Evelyn Glennie show is disappointed (Foster 2018).

A review of a performance at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in June, although not part of the album launch tour, illustrates again the sense that this is an ensemble of musical equals:

Evelyn Glennie was brought on stage at the end of this first number, taking up her position behind her considerable array of percussion (including vibraphone, marimba, timpani, a basic “jazz” drum kit — less complex than the one played by Kass — and a substantial collection of “small” instruments) (Pursglove 2018).

Several references to the “quartet” in this instance attest to the sense of a musical democracy onstage, and the establishment of a collaborative creative alliance. A promotional interview with Trio HLK in July reflects self-awareness of the potential publicity generated by featured guest artists, but articulates clearly that Glennie and Lehman were chosen in order to complement the pre-existing aesthetics and ethos of the group. Harrold notes:

The music itself is quite heavily based on contemporary classical music, but there’s a lot of improv and jazz language, so we wanted to get some guests who might reflect that dual nature of the music. We thought we’d aim high as high as possible and see what happens (Broom 2018).

Harrold is also clear on how the organic and evolving experience of collaborative live performance transcends and expands the ideas framed in the album recordings:

The live shows have massively changed from the recordings. There’s so much extra stuff she’s bringing to it, every rehearsal she’ll come in with something else, it’s incredibly creative and collaborative … Even at the gigs, she’s constantly throwing new things out there (Broom 2018).

In August 2018, Trio HLK and Glennie were featured in an interview in the *Jazz Journal*. The publication opted to feature an image of Glennie on the front cover, a significant sign of approval regarding her work in the domain of jazz, yet also a potential slight to the other members of the ensemble (Youll 2018). The interview does emphasize Glennie’s role in the project, but is keen to comment on the sense of camaraderie apparent in performances. The article recounts how Glennie “joked with the audience that she was a brunette before working with the band” (Youll 2018).

It is clear that Glennie was attracted to the challenges of live improvisation and group collaboration; these are defining features of much of her output over the past decade. Thus, choosing to consolidate her guest appearance on *Standard Time* with a U.K. tour is perhaps a logical addendum to a positive working relationship in the studio environment. Yet, the concerts have since extended well beyond preliminary efforts to promote the album. Glennie’s commitment to the group is illustrated in European tour dates (detailed in Table 1); the initial appeal of small-scale concerts closer to home has therefore been replaced with a larger impetus to continue making music as part of this collaborative project — in whatever organic directions this may evolve.

Date	Venue
February 3, 2019	Royal Northern College of Music
March 24, 2019	Music Hall, Union Street, Aberdeen Jazz Festival
April 27, 2019	Sello Hall, Espoo, Helsinki
July 25, 2019	St Lawrence College Theatre, Ramsgate Festival of Sound
August 26, 2019	Rottingdean Village Hall
February 11, 2020	Fasching Stockholm, Sweden
February 12, 2020	Pärnu Concert Hall, Estonia
February, 13, 2020	Estonia Kontserdisaal,Tallinn, Estonia
February 14, 2020	Vanemuine Theatre, Tartu, Estonia
March 4, 2020	St.Mary's Church, Henley-on-Thames

Table 1: Trio HLK and Glennie tour dates 2019/20
(Source:
https://www.evelyn.co.uk/events/list/?tribe_paged=5&tribe_event_display=past&tribe-bar-date=2021-05-11)

"Quartet HLKG" are paying their dues in the traditional way, choosing to define their identity through the forum of live performance. The album launch tour offered Glennie and Trio HLK the requisite rite of passage in establishing their credibility as a cohesive creative unit. Subsequent tour dates are borne not of necessity, but of a sense that the experience of performing together is mutually rewarding. The interactive groupmind environment of positive, democratic and egalitarian collaboration offers a natural means of forging new creative directions in contemporary music.

Social media promotion for the album tour

Figure 3 indicates that early in the tour, Trio HLK maintained relative independence from Glennie in their posts. Images of the band members and references to solo concert appearances form the foundations of public engagement. Later in 2018, Glennie's presence is celebrated in a much more consistent manner. Any reluctance to subsume Glennie into the professional identity of Trio HLK is no longer a concern.

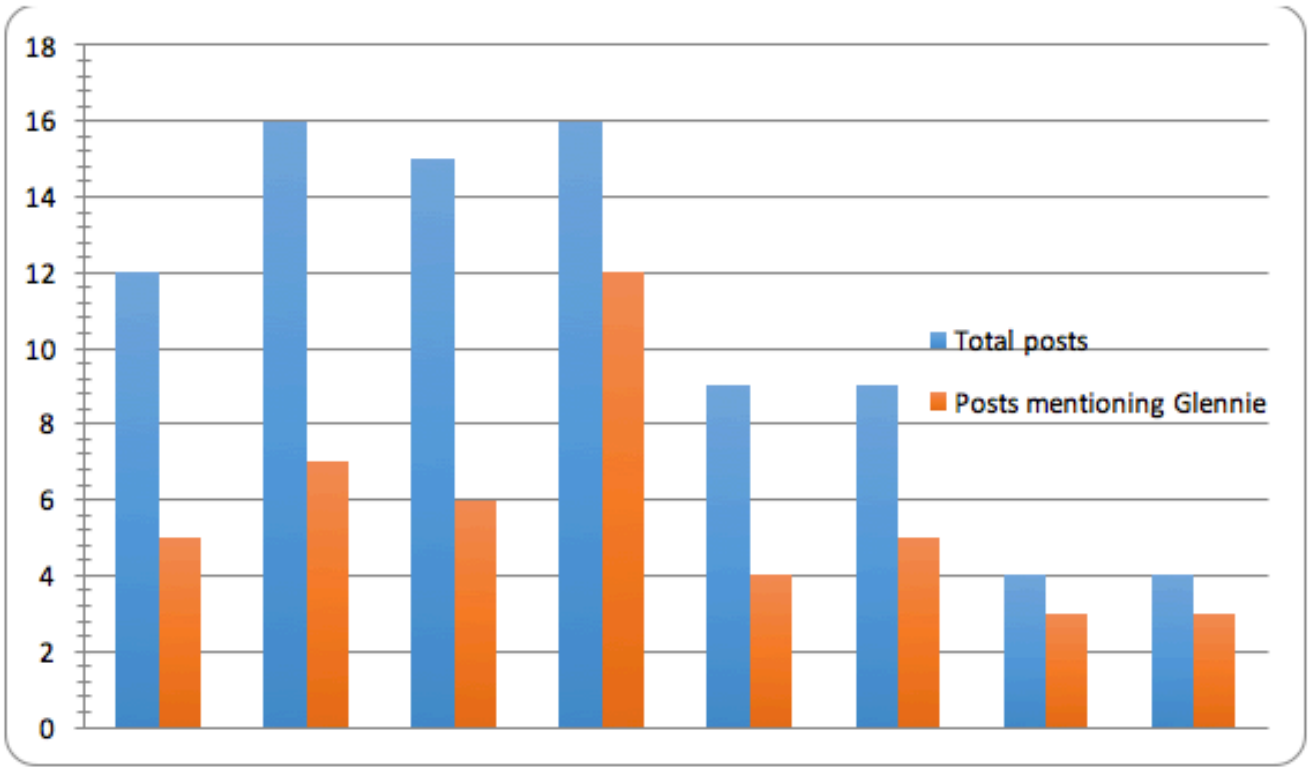


Figure 3. Trio HLK Twitter posts (during album launch period)
(Source: @TrioHLK 11th May – 20th December).

The decision to include Glennie in more promotional activities suggests that initial reticence to attain a public profile directly associated with the collaboration is no longer an issue. Promotion for concert dates following the album launch tour represent a significant part of Trio HLK's social media content. References to Glennie in Trio HLK's 2019 and early 2020 Twitter posts (excluding retweets) articulate the role played by this ongoing collaboration in terms of profile development. Of the forty-six posts between January 23 and March 16, 2020, seventy-six percent of these reference work with Glennie (concerts, videos, documentaries, photos, and rehearsals). When compared to Twitter promotion during the earlier stages of the album tour, the sense of a growing relationship between Trio HLK and Glennie is apparent, celebrating an alliance which no longer conflicts with the group's identity.

Conclusion

Positive, mutually respectful and challenging collaborations offer an important means by which the artist can diversify and evolve, as Glennie argues:

> GH: Do you feel that collaboration may represent the future of music?
>
> EG: Yes I do. I mean, there's always been collaborations … and I think that we're tapping into different kinds of collaborations whereby it's difficult to categorize the music. I don't think we have to categorize the music; I think we can just simply celebrate that this is music that planet earth is capable of finding, developing and experiencing forever (interview with Dame Evelyn Glennie 2019).

In working with Trio HLK, Glennie has presented to the public a new incarnation of her identity as sound creator. This has been accomplished, not in the context of her familiar role as a solo percussionist, but as part of an

ensemble. Collaborating in order to create meaningful, connected musical experiences has driven the union between two potentially disparate entities. If the future of music is one where eclectic and experimental collaborations forge new directions, sounds and genres, Glennie is continuing to innovate. As a multi-sensory form of performance art, solo percussion is arguably best understood in the context of live performance; gigs with Trio HLK renew the sense that percussion is beholden to no single genre, epoch, culture or musical identity. The collaboration embraces a post-genre attitude to contemporary music.

It is exciting to think that new directions for twenty-first century music in the U.K., irrespective of genre, are to be found in the gig economy and not in the concert hall. The live performance experience is central to the success of the collaboration between Trio HLK and Glennie, which makes a powerful statement about the ethos of sound creation and innovation in music today. The camaraderie of life on the road has fostered a new and exciting collective identity, reframing our concepts of genres, the profession of music, and the locus of creativity. Essentialist views of musical categories are wilfully eschewed in the interest of pursuing dynamic and organic performance experiences which opt to transcend classification. Driven by a desire to connect with the listener, the gig offers a forum where preconceptions and assumptions can be negated; the music is what matters.

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