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SEARCH AND REFLECT: THE CHANGING PRACTICE OF IMPROVISATION

Abstract: The first part of the essay paints an insider's picture of the British improvisation scene (among its representatives are the AMM, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Derek Bailey, and John Stevens), mainly during the 1970s, based on the author's own experiences as a musician within this scene. An improvisational attitude is placed opposite a culture that favours planning, control, and structured, goal-oriented strategies.
The second part of the essay is a description of the author's academic pedagogical work as conductor of a large improvising ensemble, the Laptop Orchestra, based at London College of Communication. Supported by his own experiences as an improviser, the author presents the Orchestra with exercises, qualities that are needed to create satisfying improvisations, and possible learning outcomes. Keywords in his approach are interaction, close listening, sensitivity, tolerance, and self-determination.

Key words: The Laptop Orchestra, pedagogy, improvisation workshops, the British improvisation scene, John Stevens.

Humming in the background of all life is improvisation. To listen is to improvise: sifting, filtering, prioritising, placing, resisting, comparing, evaluating, rejecting and taking pleasure in sounds and absences of sounds; making immediate and predictive assessments of multi-layered signals both specific and amorphous; balancing these against the internal noise of thought. From moment to moment, improvisation determines the outcomes of events, complex trajectories, and the course of life. Humans must learn to improvise, to cope with random events, chaos and accident in order to survive even the most mundane encounter. Yet as an antithesis to this improvisational necessity, we find an insidious culture of management strategy, planning and structured goals expanding through all social institutions in a desperate attempt to find an antidote to global uncertainty and economic instability. In this context, the central role of improvisation in human behaviour is consistently underestimated, devalued and ignored.

This is true even in the study and practice of music, despite the central role of improvisation in so many forms of music making. In 2007 I took part in the Jerwood Foundation Opera Writing Course, held at Aldeburgh Music in Sussex. Composer Harrison Birtwistle led the second part of the course, and during that week I argued the case for a compositional method based on guided improvisation. This would use a hybrid of visual representation and text, a pre-recorded digital track and rehearsal time with singers and musicians. During a one-to-one conversation, Birtwistle agreed with me that this should be possible, even within the conservatism of the opera world, yet in practice, he claimed, there was never enough time to successfully

achieve this goal. In his view, a notated score (whether traditional or not) remains the most efficient means of retaining the integrity of the composer's vision, which can then, in theory, be transferred intact into any situation where an orchestra can decipher the music.

Since I began playing music in the early 1960s, I have been far more interested in what happens when musicians are given the latitude to make their own decisions, and contribute material that they consider appropriate to the moment. Inevitably, from this perspective there is a greater focus on the interaction of the ensemble, rather than the ideas and formulations of a single individual. In 1972 I formed a short-lived London-based ensemble called The Flute Orchestra. This was not so much a band as a space in which improvisation could take place. The determinants were simple: the music would be improvised and the sole instruments would be simple but very large end-blown flutes that I had made from bamboo. The first performance, a private concert retrospectively entitled *The Isle of Speaking Birds*, was given by a group of 11 players. Few of them were musicians, or had previous experience as improvisers, except in the sense that they were open-minded and flexible in their approach to life. Ironically, considering the conversation documented above, I was commissioned in 1977 to make similar flutes for Harrison Birtwistle's music theatre piece, *Bow Down*.

My influences at this time came from diverse sources, but what I knew about musical improvisation was drawn from playing electric guitar in blues bands and listening to many forms of African-American music, including soul, jazz and free jazz, and by later coming into contact with the emergent improvisation scene in Britain and Europe. In particular, I would go out to listen to concerts of improvisation groups such as AMM, Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Evan Parker and Paul Lytton, Derek Bailey and Han Bennink, and others. Then in 1971, along with my musical partner of the time, percussionist Paul Burwell, I took part in improvisation workshops held at Ealing College, London. These were convened and directed by drummer John Stevens, leader of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble (better known as SME) and one of the pioneers of what he described as free improvisation, or free music.

The Ealing sessions were the first of many open workshops run by Stevens until his death in 1994. At that time, he was developing a method that would enable musicians to develop skills in listening and interacting, no matter what their previous experience. Each piece began as a short text, though his verbal instructions could be entertaining in their digressions and anecdotes. On one occasion a musician complained that he could not be heard. Stevens responded with a story about the South African bass player Johnny Dyani. He said that even when Dyani was playing without amplification in the loudest of groups, his pulse would penetrate the din. Even so, Stevens cautioned, the group should be aware of the quietest player and adjust their levels accordingly. For the next piece he played cornet and played louder than anybody else in the room.

The music of these workshops tended to be quick, responsive, and based on values of community, cooperation, instant communication and, typical of the time, a utopian ideal of how human society might

evolve into more egalitarian, expressive forms. A typical exercise would be his *Click Piece*, in which each player concentrates on playing the shortest sound they can find on their instrument. The 'music' emerges from this process, and what is interesting to the participants is that self-absorption in a technical problem can lead to a collective music of great rhythmic and textural interest. Only a few recordings of the Ealing group have survived. In one of them, a BBC Radio Three recording made on 9 April 1972 and broadcast on 11 May 1972, the nine piece Ealing group plays the first section of a John Stevens composition entitled *Encompass*. The overall group consisted of twenty musicians in all, many of them already established jazz and improvising players such as pianist Stan Tracey, guitarist Derek Bailey, bassist Jeff Clyne, trombonist Paul Rutherford, and alto saxophonist Trevor Watts.

One fascinating aspect of the recording is an indication of emergent styles of improvisation. The music by the Ealing workshop group could be characterised as light, scurrying, continually mirroring the phrasing of other players (this section of the piece was called 'Search & Reflect'). Given its impression of restless movement, it was a representative example of what would later be called, not necessarily disparagingly, insect music. A transitional passage focussed on Derek Bailey's electric guitar, busy but spacious and clearly anticipating the kind of close group interaction in which Bailey would come to specialize. Sections that might be described as 'dwelling' or stasis followed, in which each player imposed limitations on any development of their material. There are no drones, but the music feels as if it is standing still; this is, in fact, the title of the section, given by Stevens as an instruction: 'Stay where you are'. Finally, 'Ghost' (almost certainly a reference to saxophonist Albert Ayler, one of the most significant inspirations in John Stevens's development as a conceptualist of improvised music) gravitates towards louder, less constrained collectivism. This recalls the free jazz roots of this type of improvisation. With the exception of electric guitars played by Bailey and myself, all the instruments are acoustic. Despite anomalies, notably from Paul Burwell's Indian tablas and the contemporary classical inflections from pianist Christopher Small, the phrasing, tone, expressivity and collective interaction of the playing are identifiable with jazz. For the next twenty years, these styles would typify some of the main currents in improvised music. It could be argued that they quickly became a doctrine, an unspoken set of rules, and that any attempt to exceed their limitations was regarded as a form of heresy.

Collectivism and individuality

In the early 1970s, meanings were ascribed in the perception of improvised music through categories such as styles, record labels, musicians' organisations, personalities and national characteristics. Dutch improvisation was associated with humour, for example; German with high energy free jazz; American with either the jazz tradition or the influence of John Cage and indeterminacy; British with a more intellectual, finely detailed approach. As for record labels and organisations, in Germany there was FMP, in the Netherlands ICP (Instant

Composers Pool), in England Incus and the Musicians Coop, in America, AACM, and so on. Partly through an almost complete lack of studies of this important period in the development of improvised music, an irreducible history collected around historical facts, stereotypes, rumours, prejudice and erratic, inconsistent and often unreliable documentation. Nearly forty years have elapsed since these events; perhaps it is time to re-examine such claims by breaking open the hard outer shell in which they are now encrusted in order to expose the many contradictions and anomalies that have typified the evolution of the music.

The specialist form of improvisation that developed in the 1960s is founded on and energised by a contradiction or conflict. On the one hand, there is the collective, cooperative gathering of   like-minded musicians through which the music takes place, and from which a structure is determined – a subsuming of the individual within the group toward a common aim. On the other hand, contrasting with this collectivism, there is the private, personal development of instrumental techniques and improvisational strategies that can be highly individual and innovative, even to the point of intractability and eccentricity. Cooperation and stubborn individualism may be held in delicate balance only by the moment-to-moment awareness of a shared desire (both tacit) to engage in the music-making process. Both sides of this polarity may lay claim to their own annihilations of history: what came before should not, in theory, be the same as what comes now, or in the future.

For the group to experience renewal it needs individual innovation; to function productively within the group, the individual must temper his or her individuality. In this sense, both the group and the innovations of the individual are sites of destruction. Formulations can be challenged, destroyed and rebuilt, yet conservatism haunts the process. Individual techniques tend to become habitual. They become the recognisable signs of a musician's identity and value, both as valuable qualities within the community of musicians, and within the marketplace that determines the trajectory of a musician's career. Processes and interactions will also become habitual, and the momentum of the group will effect constraints upon each individual within it.

These are problems that are only too familiar from social and political life, family dynamics, and so on, but in the sphere of improvised music they attain a greater poignancy because of the expectations of improvisation, a music that in its formative years was described as 'free.' A music whose origins can be traced to this dream of release from rules and boundaries, a music reinvented from moment to moment and reborn at the beginning of every session, will experience exaggerated difficulties with the normal process of time as it affects cultural movements and practitioners. Some of the greatest struggles within improvised music have arisen from confrontations with new technology, changing conditions within the broader cultural scene, and a recurrent influx of heretical ideas that destabilise established practice. Because improvisation promises to have the potential for infinite re-invention, every improviser carries a unique personal narrative

of improvisation. These differing stories must be acknowledged in order for improvisation to be tenable in practice and adaptable to changing circumstances.

Between performance and sculpture

When I began playing music in the early 1960s, there were four main ways to bring about the public performance of music. One way was recording, which became a kind of time-shifted performance; the second was broadcasting on radio or television, which could send out either a recording or   real-time performance over great distances. The primary model for performance in the physical company of listeners was the concert or gig – concert hall, club, pub, dance hall and outdoor festival – and as an alternative model, lurking in the shadows of contemporary art practice, was the happening.

A landmark event in the history of the happening was John Cage's performance at Black Mountain College in 1952 involved Cage reading a lecture from the top of a stepladder, Merce Cunningham dancing, Robert Rauschenberg playing records on a wind-up gramophone, and poets Mary Caroline Richards and Charles Olsen reading their work underneath the luminous blankness of Rauschenberg's white paintings. These paintings hung from the rafters like empty Zen banners, precursors to Cage's *4' 33"*, a piece whose so-called silence emptied the stage of activity and passed the work of activating sound from composer and performer to audience and environment.

Important variants on this approach followed, such as Allan Kaprow's 1959 staging of *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, said to be the first happening to be seen in a New York art gallery. Kaprow's work was a reaction against the boredom he perceived in painting, music, literature and everything else at that time. 'Instead of music, make noise,' he has been quoted as saying. Of course, there were many precedents and antecedents for whatever a happening might be; the 20th century was full of them. Under attack was the excessively formalised relationship between artist and audience, not to mention the vast gap between art and life, and the barriers between one medium of art practice and another. Something else happened in the 1960s: a less melodramatic effort to redefine the conditions in which music could be experienced, in the moment of its happening, in the company of friends and strangers.

I have strong memories of the English improvisation group, AMM, performing in a non-performance style that was so lacking in definition at its extremes that a lay audience might be unaware that an event was in progress. In the early 1970s I would hear them play at The Place, a dance theatre in London, where they improvised for long periods without a break, without artificial light, without much sense of a beginning or ending, or even middle. These evenings, sparsely attended but nevertheless public performances, felt more like installations than concerts.

The early 1970s was a time when sound art began to detach itself from contemporary music and sculpture, and so sound installations became another significant alternative to the concert or gig. Pioneers of

sound art such as Max Neuhaus, Alvin Lucier, Akio Suzuki, Annea Lockwood, Christina Kubisch and Rolf Julius often, though not always, made constructions which affected a given site. A musician might work within the extended time frame and heightened spatial definition of a sound installation and find new possibilities within its radically altered trajectory. There is, after all, a quality of intensity and deep engagement, a potential for surprise, that is particular to being present during the performance of music or sound work, yet the conditions in which such performances can be presented are, as Allan Kaprow once said, a bore. Stage, no stage, curtains, no curtains, audience in a circle, on the floor, standing, seated in rows, drowning in mud, browbeaten by lectures, in front or behind, interactive, cowed, bored, under assault, blindfold, podcast from somewhere else; apparently all possible permutations have been attempted, so what remains? The challenge is how to move away from existing structures of performance without diluting the experience completely or simply choosing to hand over responsibility to an installation or sculpture.

One of the most interesting developments in improvised music since the mid-1990s has been a rapprochement with silence. Back in the early 1970s, those lengthy sessions in the company of AMM were often punctuated by silence, but in subsequent years silence became a general emblem of fear for most improvisers, the haunting consequence that threatened to manifest when frantic activity stopped. In the 1990s, a new generation confronted this taboo. Often drawing sound from new devices, even working in collaboration with players from a previous generation who were tired of the ratio favouring movement over stillness, they produced music that was quieter, very quiet, silent, sometimes for long durations. Whatever intensity had been lost in the relationship to listeners and places flooded back in.

How can one work patiently with the characteristics of a space, so that the sonic emissions, unexpected incidents and acoustic characteristics of that space become an instrument with the flexibility and potential of all those specialist and personalised devices that we think of as instruments, yet not lose contact with other players, or the listeners, or any sense of developing form?

As questions go, this seems as central and vital to contemporary sound work as any other. Other questions, such as how to reconcile the dramatic variations in experience and expertise between highly skilled players and novices, are familiar from the first John Stevens workshops. The issue of balancing discrepancies between acoustic instruments, amplified instruments and devices, and digital instruments can be related back to certain aspects of those workshops, but in other respects, problems and possibilities arise that are contemporary and unfamiliar.

Unknown Devices

Many of the above ideas have been developed as an ancillary theme, almost private in relation to my more public output as a writer and composer. Since engaging with academic life in 2000, however, I have been given the opportunity to apply them as a pedagogical method leading to performance strategies. In 2005 I began directing an improvising ensemble called Unknown Devices - The Laptop Orchestra. This is a large ensemble of improvising musicians based at London College of Communication, closely linked with LCC's sonic research unit CRISAP (Creative Research Into Sound Arts Practice). Most of the 20+ participants perform on laptop computers, using various audio software programs to manipulate sound; others play amplified instruments - percussion, flute, violin and guitar - or Gameboys, record decks, radios and homemade devices. Unlike other laptop orchestras, the choice of instrumentation is open to the choice of each player (some change their instrument from week to week) and laptops are not linked or networked in any way. In this sense, the group is relatively traditional, since we treat each device as an independent musical instrument, rather than a network, or an icon of contemporary technology. I have also resisted the adoption of uniforms, attempts to break records for the size of a group playing laptops, and other gimmicks. The sessions are primarily concerned with improvisation, not technology.

The group emerged in 2005 from improvisation workshops for Sound Arts and Design students at LCC. Through the instigation of Dr Cathy Lane, course director at that time, I developed a six-week course – Digital Improvisation - as a core option for undergraduates. Although some students were techno or hip-hop DJs, had played in rock bands, or were experimenting with digital audio software, few had experienced the challenges of collective improvising.

Workshops were structured to develop necessary skills for successful group improvisation in electronic ensembles. The main aims were as follows:

1. To encourage an awareness of musical, interpersonal and technical issues involved in sonic improvisation.
2. To develop listening skills and cooperation.
3. To nurture confidence, sensitivity and analytical ability.
4. To instil professionalism.
5. To progress towards the evolution of a coherent group sound.

The sessions are held over six consecutive weeks and each may last from 90 minutes to 3 hours. Punctuality is stressed, partly to prepare those students who are unfamiliar with the practicalities of public performance, and partly to minimise the period of setting up that begins each class.

The first session is devoted to a discussion in which students speak their views on improvised music: what is it, how does it work, how does it relate to other forms of improvisation in the arts, and how might it connect with the improvisation of daily life? Many students begin with very limited ideas about

improvisation. Some even think of it as an excuse for 'jamming', a kind of self-indulgent free-for-all, an emotional outlet with no discipline or boundaries. We begin to explore some of the hidden rules of improvisation, such as the necessity for restraint, collective discipline, self-control, self-criticism, close listening, dynamic group analysis, and a willingness to balance personal aims, desires and skills (or the lack of them) with the needs of the group.

During this first session, we consider some of the qualities that are needed to create improvisations that are satisfying both for the participant and for the listener. Students are given a worksheet, drawn from my own experience as an improviser, which lists examples of these qualities. From a list of 38, this is a selection:

1. The urge to play.
2. An aptitude for reacting quickly to unexpected, sometimes unwelcome developments.
3. Being able to produce ideas and techniques that allow a variety of responses, both to individuals, and to the overall group sound.
4. A sense of form.
5. An acute awareness of time.
6. The ability to identify the nature of a sound and produce an engaging response (this means being able to work with pitch relationships, rhythmic elements, or the complexity of individual sounds).
7. Silence and stillness.
8. Knowledge of your instrument, and confidence in using it.
9. Patience.
10. The ability to think and act at microscopic and macroscopic levels simultaneously.
11. Experience in scanning and evaluating complex situations from moment to moment, yet maintaining personal focus.
12. Tolerance.
13. The strength to fight for space.
14. The strength to be quiet.
15. The ability to turn any of the above qualities on their head.

Exercises in playing, listening, and mutual criticism are used to develop these qualities during the course of the six weeks. The class may be divided into two sections. One group performs an exercise; the other group listens and then gives a critique of the performance based on its success in achieving its aims. The worksheet includes observations which are analysed either in specific points of development during a class, or applied throughout the six sessions. From a list of 32, here are 6 examples:

1. Learn to maintain intensity, concentration, and relaxation simultaneously.
2. Consider the layout and appearance of whatever you're playing. Is it set up so that you're going to trip over a cable, or so that you can't reach something quickly? Does it look like a pile of junk to the audience? Is that the effect you want to achieve? Are you invisible to the audience? Do you want that?
3. Learn how to change a situation when it's stuck.
4. Learn how to be supportive, and how to be disruptive.
5. Don't try to be liked: don't go out of your way to be disliked.
6. Don't be afraid to stay in one spot; don't be afraid to move on.

Some students have professional experience of performing and highly developed instrumental abilities. Others may have no experience of making live music or using any kind of instrument. Conflicts can arise in situations in which one person's confidence may be excessive, their   self-absorption effectively preventing them from listening or responding to the group, whereas another person may be so timid that their ability to participate is seriously impaired. Musical and aesthetic tastes and theories are also an issue, and clashes between incompatible styles are common. Such tensions may tap into conflicts and alliances that already exist at an interpersonal level, so a part of the development of the group will inevitably require a willingness to compromise and negotiate, and to find ways of resolving conflict through musical cooperation.

I give them practical exercises during each class and certain of these exercises will be revisited over the 6 week period as a measure of progress. Four examples from the worksheet are given below:

STILL: The group sits very quietly, listening to the sound of the room, identifying each component of the sound and placing it within the space. Each player is allowed one short contribution, which can be made after the stillness and the room sound has affected their ideas about what they might play. After making the one contribution, the player then sits quietly again. The piece ends when everybody has made their contribution.

COMMUNITIES: The large group splits into three or four smaller groups. One group begins an improvisation; after five minutes, the second group joins in. The first group stops playing after a minute of overlap. Then the third group joins in after another five minutes, and the second group stops after a minute's overlap.

COMMUNITIES II: In a second version of this strategy, the groups decide when to make their own entries and exits. All groups may play at the same time, or stop at the same time, but they must stay aware of their role as a group within a group. Each group must find ways of starting together, and finishing together, without any verbal communication.

CRESCENDO: beginning by listening closely to the room, the group moves from silence to loud noise at a similar pace, taking a few minutes to do so and adjusting volume to match volume levels as closely as possible. Everybody attempts to stop at the same time.

DIMINUENDO: the group moves from loud noise down to silence over a three minute period, trying to match volume levels as closely as possible.

At the end of the 6 week period, the group gives a public performance. This impending exposure to an audience is an important goal - a test of how far they have come and an incentive to resolve technical problems, focus on learning during each session, set aside conflicts, and even begin to self-organise. At the beginning of the course they are highly critical of their own capacity to work together as a group, and in some cases sceptical of the whole idea of improvisation. In all examples of the Orchestra giving a public performance, although individuals have expressed disappointment that certain pieces could have been played better, the overall feeling is a sense of pleasurable surprise that such a disparate group of people can avoid chaos or collapse to produce a sustained performance which gives them personal satisfaction, both as a participatory and listening experience, and also seems to appeal to an audience.

Self-determination

Many students who have participated in the Digital Improvisation workshops have gone on to perform their own concerts, record and release their own CDs, and form alliances to cope with the difficulties of becoming established as a musician in a competitive and overcrowded scene. After three years, the initial aims of the group have been fulfilled in the following ways:

1. Participants have grown in self-determination, confidence and professionalism.
2. They have shown impressive levels of commitment to collaborative music-making and artistic excellence.
3. They have engaged with the complex challenges of improvisation using new technology.

The idea of Unknown Devices - the Laptop Orchestra, is to further develop this self-determination, building upon those skills established during the workshop sessions in order to participate in professional events outside the confines of the college. These expanded sessions are regarded as more intensive than the elective. As well as second year BA students and others from within the Sound Arts and design course at LCC, they are open to graduates from previous Digital Improvisation courses, students from other colleges within the University of the Arts London, and research students at LCC. Guest musicians and composers such as Steve Beresford and Angharad Davies have been invited to participate in leading these classes, to widen the range of available strategies, theories and skills. We have also collaborated with player members of the London Sinfonietta, and with students from the Royal College of Music. These situations prove useful, since they introduce virtuoso levels of instrumental ability to the group, along with differing approaches to improvisation. In particular, they highlight problematic issues of compatibility that arise when acoustic instruments meet laptops. This has proved to be a challenge for all players, no matter what their level of experience and expertise. Always conceived as an egalitarian way of making music, improvisation shows itself to be a great leveller.

At times I have wondered what John Stevens might have thought about this orchestra of computers and other strange devices, most of which would have been alien to his background as a jazz musician. Stevens died in 1994, at a time of momentous changes in both audio technology and improvisation practice. He believed that a strong relationship between a player and his or her instrument was the starting point for improvisation. It is impossible to know whether he would have believed this possible with a laptop computer. What is certain, however, is that his methodology is just as applicable and stimulating in 2008 as it was in 1971.

САЖЕТАК

Дејвид Туп

ИСТРАЖИВАЊЕ И ОДЈЕК: МЕЊАЊЕ ИМПРОВИЗАЦИОНЕ ПРАКСЕ

Улога импровизације у људском понашању, али и у проучавању и пракси музике је подцењена. Радионице које је бубњар Џон Стивенс (John Stevens) водио почетком седамдесетих година двадесетог века допринеле су схватању да су неке од значајних вештина развијених у импровизационој пракси, и кроз њу, (право) слушање и интеракција. Међутим, иако се импровизација темељи на косарадњи, она се истовремено заснива и на индивидуалној способности и иновативности.

Сходно мом убеђењу о важности импровизовања, искуству са Стивенсоним радионицама, као и занимању композитора и писца, применио сам своје идеје о (колективној) импровизацији на један педагошки метод: 2005. године почео сам да управљам ансамблом за импровизацију под називом *Unknown Devices – The Laptop Orchestra* у оквиру Лондонског колеџа за комуникацију. Практичним искуством требало је да се истраже нека од скривених правила импровизовања, као што су потреба за ограничењима, колективна дисциплина, самоконтрола, самокритика, усредсређено слушање, динамичне групне анализе, жеља за успостављањем баланса између личних циљева, жеља и могућности са потребама групе. Кроз ове вежбе, постигао сам (надам се) следеће:
1. да подстакнем свест о музичким, интерперсоналним и техничким питањима која су у вези са звучном импровизацијом;
2. да развијем вештине слушања и косарадње;
3. да подигнем самопоуздање, осећајност и аналитичке способности;
4. да „улијем“ професионализам;
5. да унапредим развој кохерентне звучне групе.