
**Free Improvisation
as a Performance Technique:
Group Creativity and Interpreting Graphic Scores**

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ABSTRACT

The late 1950s and 1960s saw the formation of groups of musicians devoted to free improvisation. These groups deliberately excluded pre-existing musical idioms and focused on the nature of improvisation and the processes involved in spontaneously inventing music and interacting as a group. The history, recordings, and writings of this free improvisation movement is a valuable source for prospective improvisers and demonstrates that free improvisation can be a serious discipline capable of developing meaningful and powerful musical discourse. The techniques that its practitioners developed to stimulate innovation and to explore the interactive possibilities of group creativity can be used in many musical and interdisciplinary applications. The interpretation of indeterminate graphic scores is one such application. Classical musicians are particularly suited to meeting the interpretational challenges of these works, and an openness to improvisational approaches has the potential to reap great rewards in the realization of these neglected works. The work of Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, and particularly his *Decisions* (1959–1961) for unspecified sound sources, serves as an example through analysis of its structure and a critical evaluation of performative possibilities.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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Contents

Introduction	1
Methodology	6
1 A Selected History of Free Improvisation	8
Free Improvisation in the United States	13
Lukas Foss and ICE	14
Larry Austin and the New Music Ensemble	16
Pauline Oliveros	18
Other Free Improvisation Origins: Free Jazz and the New York Avant-Garde	22
Free Improvisation Moves to Europe	24
Rome and <i>Musica Elettronica Viva</i>	25
The Joseph Holbrooke Trio and Derek Bailey	28
AMM, Cornelius Cardew, and the Scratch Orchestra	31
Free Improvisation Today	34
2 Free Improvisation: Spontaneous Discipline	38
Defining Improvisation	38
Music as Process	42
Models of Creative Synthesis: Skill and Perception-Reaction	46
Risk and Responsibility	50
3 Group Improvisation: Practical Issues	55
Leadership	56
Rehearsals	57
Exercises	58
Provoking the Unexpected	63
Observation: Building Foundations	66
Roles	68
Criticism	72
Changing Membership	74

4	The AIR Improviser Experience	77
	Analysis of “Tocatango”	79
	<i>Framework No. 1</i>	85
	Analysis of a Rehearsal Take	89
	<i>Framework No. 1: A Reprise</i>	93
	AIR Improvisers: A Conclusion	101
5	Interpreting Graphic Scores	103
	A Survey of Graphic Scores	103
	Graphic Scores and Improvisation	108
	Roman Haubenstock-Ramati	112
	Visual Elements in <i>Decisions</i>	115
	Structure of <i>Decisions</i>	118
	Recorded Interpretations of Haubenstock-Ramati’s Graphic Scores	122
	Improvisation in <i>Decisions</i>	125
	The AIR Improvisers and <i>Decisions</i>	128
6	Conclusion: Performing Improvisation	132
	Appendix A: Three Tango Exercises	137
	Appendix B: Interviews	139
	Interview with Joel Hoffman, July 9, 2012	139
	Interview with Michael Ippolito, July 12, 2012	146
	Interview with Lindsey Jacob, September 25, 2012	153
	Interview with Stephanie Neeman, October 10, 2012	164
	Interview with Leo Svirsky, October 11, 2012	173
	Interview with Jennifer Jolley, October 28, 2012	178
	Bibliography	190

Introduction

Improvisation is the oldest form of music making; humankind's first musical utterance could scarcely have been anything else.¹ Its practice involves compacting the process of creating music, and thus understanding improvisation is inextricably linked with understanding this creative process. Schoenberg considered composing as "slowed-down" improvisation.² Many improvising musicians who turned to writing prose in order to document their artistic experiences noted the similarity between spontaneous and considered creativity.³ No less a thinker than Albert Einstein improvised frequently on the piano, regarding it as an emotional and intellectual necessity for his work.⁴

The rich traditions of improvisation in Western classical music gradually declined in the early- and mid-twentieth century. Other artistic disciplines also marginalized improvisation during this time; when Keith Johnstone began teaching theater improvisation in London in the 1950s, he was unable to put on a performance because there was no script for approval by the censors. He wrote, "I was told that human beings should always be 'in control,' and that the rise of the Nazis had been caused by 'too much spontaneity' and by

¹See Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 83.

²Arnold Schoenberg, "Brahms the Progressive," in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, Leonard Stein, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 439.

³See David Borgo, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), xiii, and Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent: AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention*, (Matching Tye, UK: Copula, 1995), 4.

⁴Alexander Moszkowski, *Conversations with Einstein*, Henry L. Brose, trans. (New York: Horizon Press, 1970), 235.

‘an upsurge of unconscious forces.’”⁵

The free improvisation movement began in the late 1950s as an amalgam of jazz and contemporary classical thought. Jazz musicians such as Cecil Taylor and Derek Bailey became frustrated by the stagnation and commercialization of mainstream jazz. Inspired by the music and writings of composers such as John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen, they began improvising in a nonrestrictive style that purposely excluded idioms from their jazz heritage. Classically trained musicians such as Larry Austin and Frederic Rzewski felt that the objectivism of classical music had turned it into a museum culture that made it less relevant to contemporary social and expressive needs. Admiring the freedom of expression of their jazz colleagues, they turned to free improvisation as a creative tool—a means to explore creativity in a group setting and to enrich their own nonimprovised compositions. They also viewed group improvisation as a potential catalyst for social change.⁶

A half-century later, free improvisation is widespread, as evidenced by numerous international festivals and an increasing presence in academia. However, the majority of classical musicians have remained both uninitiated in the practice of improvisation and unaware of its recent history. The skills developed in free improvisation have many applications in laptop orchestras and other ensembles, multimedia collaborations, and educational outreach. In addition, a substantial body of open-ended compositions have been written in the past sixty years. Many of these works have become neglected because they require the classical musician’s skills of interpretation as well as improvising ability. By developing

⁵Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 55. An opposing view is provided by Barry Schwartz, who argues that “moral skill is chipped away by an over-reliance on rules that deprives us of the opportunity to improvise and learn from our improvisations.” Thus, the rise of an oppressive regime may have its origins in a lack of spontaneity, not in an overabundance of it. Barry Schwartz, “Our Loss of Wisdom,” TED Talk, February 2009, accessed September 8, 2012, http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_our_loss_of_wisdom.html

⁶Frederic Rzewski was outspoken about the political value of improvisation, saying that “it’s necessary to discover new forms of spontaneity and possibly save the human species from self-destruction.” Daniel Verala and Frederic Rzewski, interview, March 2003. In “Perfect Sound Forever,” accessed August 7, 2012, <http://www.furious.com/perfect/rzewski.html>

the techniques of free improvisation and learning to harness the power of group creativity, we can revitalize this area of our musical history.

My focus on the free improvisation movement's relevance for classical musicians has resulted in the glossing over of many controversies and areas of varying degrees of significance. For example, some might object that it is inaccurate to use the term free-improvisation "movement" to describe a number of largely independent, locally-based movements scattered across the globe; nevertheless, I feel that the connections among them are close enough to warrant the general term. I deal with the history of free jazz only to the extent that it intersects with developments in the classical world.

While I skip merrily through the twin minefields of defining free improvisation and recounting its origins and history, unconcerned with the contentious debates surrounding these issues, certain aspects require further comment. The case of John Cage and his relationship to free improvisation is just one example of the dangerously murky territory that surrounds academic research in improvisation. Because of his extensive influence, particularly among free jazz musicians, Cage's importance can scarcely be ignored. However, his own positions on the subject are highly problematic. Cage was well known for his derogatory comments on jazz and on improvisation in general, but from the 1970s until his death he experimented with improvisation in various ways.⁷ In an interview, he argued that improvisers were too reliant on memorized patterns and needed to free themselves from established idioms, inciting the following response from free improviser David Toop: "This suggests that Cage had not paid close attention to the kind of improvisation, from the 1960s onward, that either began, or learned through practical experience, to do exactly that."⁸ Cage used unconventional instruments in his improvised works to thwart the per-

⁷For a full account of Cage's comments and pieces involving improvisation, see Laura Kuhn, "A Few Words about John Cage and Improvisation."

⁸David Toop, "Frame of Freedom: Improvisation, Otherness and the Limits of Spontaneity," in *Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music* ed. Rob Young (New York: Continuum, 2002), 244.

former's conscious intentions, possibly unaware that free improvisers had done the same for similar reasons. Even before he accepted improvisation into his own works, Cage's activities during his "conceptual art" period in the 1960s were similar to the concept pieces used by improvisation ensembles.⁹

Perhaps the clearest distinction between improvisation in Cage's music and free improvisation is in the use of music as a communicative tool. While free improvisers typically sought to create a group experience or dialogue, Cage was concerned only with the sound itself, saying, "I don't need sound to talk to me."¹⁰ Even this could be contested, however; a few early improvisation groups, such as AMM, seemed more interested in creating sound for its own sake than as an expressive medium. While no one would argue that Cage was part of the free improvisation movement, drawing a boundary between his musical practices and those of the free improvisers is difficult.

The meaning of "free" in free improvisation is equally problematic. The term is typically employed in two different ways; it indicates either no preplanning or no stylistic restrictions.¹¹ In fact, neither definition is sufficient to cover the breadth of the activities of the free improvisation movement. Determining the intended connotation of the word when used by the free improvisers themselves is difficult and often futile, as they usually are referring to their own practical experience and are unconcerned with splitting semantic hairs. My use of the word "free" is dependent on context; while I use the term "free improvisation" to mean no preplanning, "free improvisers" refers to those who used a nonidiomatic style. The "free improvisation movement" is a valuable source for studying the nature of improvisation because its adherents were concerned with the act of making

⁹Frederic Rzewski asserted that these activities fell within the realm of improvisation. Oteri and Rzewski, "NewMusicBox: Frederic Rzewski Visits America." (September 5, 2002), accessed October 12, 2011, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/frederic-rzewski-visits-america/>

¹⁰John Cage, interview with Miroslav Sebestik, 1991, in Sebestik, *Écoute*.

¹¹The former definition comes up frequently—e.g. in the survey of improvisers carried out by Tom Nunn, in Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*, vol. 2, 58–59. For an example of the latter definition, see Derek Bailey's use of the term "nonidiomatic improvisation" in Bailey, *Improvisation*, xi–xii.

music rather than stylistic trappings—riffs, ragas, or rules of counterpoint.

Improvisation research is still in its infancy. The literature on the subject is vast, and efforts to consolidate the myriad loose threads have begun only recently. There are numerous firsthand accounts of the free improvisation movement and its philosophies by its practitioners, including ones by Derek Bailey, Steve Lacy, Edwin Prévost, Frederic Rzewski, Anthony Braxton, Cornelius Cardew, Malcolm Goldstein and Amiri Baraka. To my knowledge, there is no serious attempt to consolidate these accounts into a single coherent narrative. More general resources include George Lewis's book on AACM and the free jazz movement, and an improvisation forum in *Perspectives of New Music* that anthologized interviews and written works of many prominent improvisers.¹² The historical treatises on improvisation that are used by modern scholars to infer the nature of extinct performance traditions have contemporary parallels in practical improvisation books such as John Stevens' *Search & Reflect* and Tom Hall's *Free Improvisation: A Practical Guide*.¹³

Many recent books on improvisation also incorporate elements from other disciplines. David Borgo's book *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* strives to join improvisation research with various scientific disciplines, including chaos theory, fractal dimensions, and swarm intelligence. David P. Brown's *Noise Orders: Jazz, Improvisation, and Architecture* uses jazz pianist Cecil Taylor's professed admiration for architectural structures as a springboard to linking diverse improvisatory and architectural movements. In his self-published book *Wisdom of the Impulse*, Tom Nunn brings the analytical tools of sociology and phenomenology to bear on the practice of free improvisation. Recent dissertations on improvisation include Mary Oliver's account of the mental origins

¹²George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Barney Childs et al., "Forum: Improvisation," *Perspectives of New Music* 21 no. 1/2 (Autumn 1982–Summer 1983), 26–111.

¹³Historical treatises include Carl Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte, Op. 200*, Alice L. Mitchell, trans. and ed. (New York: Longman, 1983), and Frank Joseph Sawyer, *Extemporization* (New York: Novello, 1893).

of improvisational decision-making and Jacqueline Walduck's role analysis within an improvising group.¹⁴

The musician and psychologist Jeff Pressing was a pioneer in the cognitive aspects of improvisation. His work in the 1990s focused on the perception of the complex rhythmic and structural forms produced in improvisation.¹⁵ More recently, Aaron Berkowitz and Charles Limb independently published studies that use functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans to examine the brain areas activated during improvisation.¹⁶

Some areas are still under rapid development, such as the neuroscientific research that was the main inspiration for my own models of the improvisation process. I expect that many of my own assertions will need to be revised or overturned in the near future, as new resources and research come to light. Ultimately, I hope to provide a passionate defense of the value and the discipline inherent in free improvisation, and to encourage other classical musicians to experience this liberating and creatively satisfying practice.

Methodology

This dissertation will address the techniques of free improvisation and their relevance for classical musicians. The fact that there is already a strong tradition of free improvisation among classical musicians will be demonstrated in the Chapter 1, which discusses the history of free improvisation groups. Chapters 2 and 3 cover the theory and practice of free improvisation, examining the nature and purpose of the techniques used in improvisation

¹⁴Mary Oliver, "Constellations in Play: A Model of Improvisation," Ph.D. Thesis, University of California, San Diego, 1993. Jacqueline Walduck, "Role-taking in Free Improvisation and Collaborative Composition," Ph.D. thesis, City University of London, 1997.

¹⁵Ben Williams, "Encomium for Jeff Pressing," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 318–319.

¹⁶Aaron Berkowitz, *The Improvising Mind: Cognition and Creativity in the Musical Moment*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Charles Limb and Allen R. Braun, "Neural Substrates of Spontaneous Musical Performance: An fMRI Study of Jazz Improvisation," *PLoS ONE* 3, no. 2: e1679. <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0001679> (accessed May 18, 2012).

training and performance. Chapter 4 analyzes specific examples of improvisation recorded by my improvisation group, the AIR Improvisers, in order to gain insight into the power of improvisational discourse as well as the benefits of good rehearsal structure. Finally, Chapter 5 looks at how the techniques of improvisation can be applied in the specific case of interpreting graphic scores.

Chapter 1

A Selected History of Free Improvisation

Any history of free improvisation is doomed to be incomplete, because of the scarcity of documentary evidence regarding freely improvised music in the Western Classical tradition before the 1950s. As Keith Rowe, a member of the London-based group AMM, noted, “Who knows when free playing started? You can imagine lute players in the 1500s getting drunk and doing improvisations for people in front of a log fire.”¹

In Western music, improvisation was presumably so ingrained into the traditions of making music that a distinguishing term was necessary only when the promulgation of written music in the mid-fifteenth century resulted in a broader conceptualization of a “fixed” composition (*res facta*).² Until well into the twentieth century, performers frequently improvised onstage; Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt were all renowned for their extemporizations. It was a necessary skill for any virtuoso from the Baroque through much of the Romantic period. François Couperin and J.S. Bach wrote out ornamentation in florid passagework and shapes that would have been previously improvised.³ Singers and violinists were the greatest practitioners of diminutions, although this skill was expected

¹Dan Warburton, interview with Keith Rowe, January 2001, accessed December 18, 2012, <http://www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/rowe.html>.

²Rob C. Wegman, “Improvisation, II. ‘Western Art Music: 1. Introduction,’” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed May 18, 2012, ed. Deane L. Root, www.grovemusic.com.

³Michael Collins and Robert E. Seletsky, “Improvisation: II, 3(iv): ‘Later Italianate Embellishments,’” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed February 5, 2014, ed. Deane L. Root, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

of all instrumentalists.⁴ In eighteenth-century Italian opera, the singers were expected to improvise. In addition, the operatic scores would frequently contain only a bass line below several staff lines with no pitches, only clefs; it is assumed that these were nonnotated string instrument parts which would be improvised.⁵ Stephen Blum points out that while the European languages had many terms to refer to the practice of improvisation, the terms that refer to its practitioners were used only infrequently.⁶ This imbalance may imply that improvisation was both widespread and practiced by a sufficiently large segment of musicians that distinguishing terms for improvisation specialists were rarely necessary.

The practice of improvising free fantasias peaked in the early nineteenth century, with piano virtuosos who astonished the public with increasingly bravura displays of technical skill.⁷ Felix Mendelssohn and Ignaz Moscheles played as a duo team. They would frequently improvise duets as a musical diversion; as Moscheles's son later recalled, "It was exciting to watch how the amicable contest would wax hot, culminating occasionally in an outburst of merriment, when some conflicting harmonies met in terrible collision."⁸ The only current continuous improvised tradition of music in the West is preluding on the organ, and the organ manuals that deal with the subject focus not on the nature of improvisation but rather on skills such as harmonization and phrasing patterns—the basic tools from which a prelude can be built. Kalkbrenner insisted that the ability to create imitative counterpoint in both parallel and contrary motion, in augmentation and in diminution and at various

⁴Ibid.

⁵Michael Collins and Robert E. Seletsky, "Improvisation: II, 3(ix): 'Complete Pieces,'" *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed February 5, 2014, ed. Deane L. Root, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

⁶Stephen Blum, "Recognizing Improvisation," in *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, ed. Bruno Nettl with Melinda Russell, 37–38.

⁷John Rink, "Improvisation: II, 5. 'The 19th Century', (i) 'Instrumental Music,'" *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed February 5, 2014, ed. Deane L. Root, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

⁸Felix Moscheles, *Fragments of an Autobiography* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1899), accessed February 5, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33185/33185-h/33185-h.htm>.

intervals, is the most important skill for the improviser to have.⁹ Analyzing the influence of Hummel's improvisatory skill on his compositions, Derek Carew asserted: "A high degree of general musicianship was accepted as being the most basic requirement for being a good improviser."¹⁰ Treatise from the period include Grétry, Kalkbrenner, Hummel, and Moscheles's accounts of extemporization.¹¹ Carl Dahlhaus argued that this focus on formal elements in improvisation ultimately contributed to its decline, as the increasingly complex formal structures of the late Romantic era were unsuitable for impromptu realizations. Carl Czerny stands out as one of the few musicians who dealt with improvisation more by example than by laying out rules of composition; his treatise *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte* remains a valuable guide to nineteenth-century improvisation practice.

Improvisation gradually fell from esteem in the early part of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the century, Ferruccio Busoni wrote that "notation is to improvisation as the portrait to the living model."¹² Some fifty years later, Lukas Foss's experiences with the Improvisation Chamber Ensemble led him to conclude that improvisation "relates to composition much in the way a sketch relates to the finished work of art."¹³ Busoni and

⁹Frédéric Kalkbrenner, *Traité d'harmonie du pianiste: Principe rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre à préluder et à improviser*, Op. 185 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1849), 8, accessed February 5, 2014, http://conquest.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/9/9f/IMSLP100736-PMLP206790-Kalkbrenner_-_185_-_Trait_d_Harmonie_du_pianiste_sm.pdf.

¹⁰Derek Carew, "An Examination of the Composer/Performer Relationship in the Piano Style of J.N. Hummel," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Leicester, 1981), 189, accessed February 5, 2014, <http://hdl.handle.net/2381/8451>.

¹¹André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry, "Méthode simple pour apprendre à préluder en peu de temps avec toutes les ressources de l'harmonie" (Paris, De l'imprimerie de la République, 1802), accessed February 5, 2014, http://sauseage.whatbox.ca:15263/imglnks/usimg/3/30/IMSLP83389-PMLP170100-M_thode_simple.pdf; Frédéric Kalkbrenner, *Traité d'harmonie du pianiste: Principe rationnels de la modulation pour apprendre à préluder et à improviser*, Op. 185 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1849), accessed February 5, 2014, http://conquest.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/9/9f/IMSLP100736-PMLP206790-Kalkbrenner_-_185_-_Trait_d_Harmonie_du_pianiste_sm.pdf; Johann Nepomuk Hummel, *A Complete Theoretical and Practical Course of Instructions, on the Art of Playing the Pianoforte* (London: T. Boosey, 1828).

¹²Ferruccio Busoni, *Sketch of A New Esthetic of Music*, trans. Theodore Baker (New York: G. Schirmer, 1911), 15.

¹³Lukas Foss, "Improvisation versus Composition," *The Musical Times* 103, no. 1436 (October 1962), 684.

Foss are referring to the same model—an initial inspiration, followed by an attempt to record it—but whereas Busoni finds the true spirit of the music in the freshness of moment, Foss finds that the improviser can only hint at the grand scheme the composer will achieve through a considered structuring of the raw material.

A number of factors contributed to this decline. Improvisation has flourished in musical cultures where notation plays a less important role; reliance on the printed score, as opposed to oral tradition, placed an emphasis on textual accuracy that discouraged experimentation.¹⁴ The jazz saxophonist Evan Parker considered notation to be the principal difference between improvisation and composition.¹⁵ A trend towards larger audiences—international concert tours and major record releases—resulted in a standardization of interpretation that discouraged spontaneity.¹⁶ Improvisers in other traditions relied on live interaction with educated, participatory listeners for encouragement and inspiration, a link that classical musicians found increasingly difficult to exploit as the large concert hall replaced the more intimate salon and private music room.¹⁷ Still another factor was specialization; the technical demands on performers began to reach a level where few had the time or energy to dabble in the creative side of music making.¹⁸

¹⁴For example, eighteenth-century opera singers were expected to improvise fluently but not to read music; many learned their parts by rote. Martha Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy*, 15–16. The connection between Western dependence on notation compared with music in other cultures with the decline of Western improvisation has been noted by scholars such as Neil Sorrell. Neil Sorrell, “Improvisation,” in *Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought*, vol. 2, eds. John Paynter et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 780.

¹⁵“I don’t think it’s accurate to speak about an improvisation as something different from composition... it’s more accurate to speak of it as opposed to notated music.” Audrey Henkin, “Evan Parker: Solo.”

¹⁶Sorrell argues that “great traditions of improvisation ... continue to flourish better in the smaller gatherings of private homes or clubs than in large concert halls,” and that numerous factors, including “the elevation of the composer to a kind of culture-hero,” were contributing to the decline of improvisation already in the nineteenth century. Sorrell, “Improvisation,” 778.

¹⁷Interactions between the soloists and the audience played a major role in shaping virtuoso improvisations in eighteenth-century Italian opera performances; see Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty*, 96. Ali Jihad Racy provides an interesting account of how a knowledgeable audience inspired him to new creative heights, and how this was perceived by a Western audience, in Ali Jihad Racy, “Improvisation, Ecstasy, and Performance Dynamics in Arabic Music,” in “In the Course of Performance,” ed. Nettl and Russell, 95–96.

¹⁸See Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 8.

The late 1950s and 1960s saw the birth of a number of groups devoted to performing improvisation in an unrestricted style. Classical musicians were inspired by the freedoms of their jazz colleagues and sought to recapture that spontaneity in their own music. Many groups, particularly those with jazz roots, cited John Cage as an important influence. Ironically, Cage himself had an ambivalent and largely dismissive view of the improvisation movement.¹⁹ The main catalyst, however, was likely the mass availability of affordable recording technology. The feedback loop of performing and listening back to the recording allowed groups to become more self-aware of their art and creative practices. Recorded media also made the dissemination of these experiments more efficient, as records and tapes could be distributed easily across the globe.

Although the free improvisation movement began in California, the parallel development of free jazz and the experiments of the New York avant-garde composers make it difficult to pinpoint a single source of the movement. The California movement was distinguished by its emphasis on group creativity. A complete history of free improvisation during this period would be a task of almost unimaginable scope. I have chosen to focus on improvisation in the classical music world, even though a distinction between jazz and nonjazz free improvisation is artificial. Much free jazz is as far removed from conventional jazz as any classical improvisation could be. The principal difference between the jazz and nonjazz groups was simply the sphere in which they operated and the venues where they performed, a difference that has long been rendered obsolete. A full account of improvisation among the New York avant-garde is also problematic; many New York improvisers in all but name refused the “improvisation” label. I have also given scant attention to great swathes of European-based free improvisation in the '60s and '70s, on the grounds that it was largely an extension of free jazz. Some exceptions existed, however; New Phonic Art was a prominent classical improvisation group that premiered Stockhausen's *Aus dem*

¹⁹See Laura Kuhn, “A Few Words about John Cage and Improvisation,” 2–3.

sieben Tagen.

Free Improvisation in the United States

The proliferation of music departments as centers of artistic experimentation—with a resulting collaborative ethos among the faculty and students—resulted in the formation of improvisation groups on campuses across California, and eventually across the United States. Robert Erickson’s biographer Charles Shere cites John Cage and Lou Harrison as predecessors of the group-performance trend in California, during their time in the Bay Area during the late 1930s.²⁰

The Improvisation Chamber Ensemble (ICE), the New Music Ensemble (NME), and an improvisation ensemble consisting of Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, and Loren Rush were founded in the late 1950 or early 1960s. While they were close geographically, the three groups were radically different in their aesthetics, style and in their practice of improvisation. The Improvisation Chamber Ensemble had a strong classical foundation, whereas the New Music Ensemble straddled the classical-jazz divide with members from both camps. The former group gave few concerts in the first few years, instead carefully rehearsing improvisational exercises composed by the group leader, Lukas Foss. In contrast, the New Music Ensemble demonstrated an irrepressible exuberance from the beginning, rehearsing tirelessly, performing regularly and releasing a record of their work all in the first year of its existence.

While these groups proved to be highly influential in the promulgation of free improvisation, the group members used the experience primarily as inspiration for their compositional output. All three groups were short-lived, and of the classical musicians involved, only Pauline Oliveros and Terry Riley made improvisation a major part of their later musi-

²⁰Charles Shere, *Thinking Sound Music: The Life and Work of Robert Erickson* (Berkeley, CA: Fallen Leaf Press), 48.

cal practice. Nevertheless, their methods played an important role in later developments in the free improvisation movement.

Lukas Foss and ICE

The Improvisation Chamber Ensemble was founded at the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1957. Pianist, conductor, and composition faculty member Lukas Foss recruited students Richard Dufallo (clarinet), Charles DeLancey (percussion), Howard Colf (cello), Robert Drasnin (flute), and David Duke (French horn). While Foss was the leader and visionary of the group, the creative process was collective.²¹

The original purpose of the group was to bridge the divide between composers and performers by offering performers the chance to make meaningful compositional decisions.²² In the first few years, the limited range of choice had more in common with the practice of Baroque continuo performance or Classical embellishment than with free improvisation. Foss composed notated graphs that used “guide-tones,” or tonal points of reference, which the performers would use as the basis of their improvisations.²³ Two works remain from this period: the *Concerto for Improvising Instruments and Orchestra* (1960), which ICE performed with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Eugene Ormandy,²⁴ and *Studies in Improvisation* (1961), recorded by ICE and released by RCA. Neither piece strays far from the Neoclassical idiom that was the foundation of Foss’s compositional style. Both remain unpublished, and Foss later dismissed them as “less original and some-

²¹Mary Elizabeth Shea, “The Middle-Period Compositions of Lukas Foss,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1997), 58.

²²See Foss, “Improvisation versus Composition,” 685. An “envy of the jam sessions of jazz musicians” was also an influence. Murray Schumach, “Musical Ad Libbing: Foss Will Demonstrate Improvisations Here,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1962: II, 9.

²³Shea, “The Middle-Period Compositions of Lukas Foss,” 59–60.

²⁴Perone, *Lukas Foss: A Bio-bibliography*, 5.

what academic,” sounding like “music badly remembered.”²⁵

ICE began to explore free improvisation in 1961. During this phase, the creative flow was reversed: instead of using his compositional abilities to structure ICE’s improvisations, Foss allowed his group to influence his compositions. For example, his *Echoi* borrows musical ideas, textures, and unconventional techniques developed in improvisation rehearsal.²⁶ ICE workshopped *Echoi* and performed sections of the piece in concert.²⁷ Improvisation may also have inspired Foss to use serial organization in works such as *Time Cycle* (1960), as he found that giving up some control to serial mechanisms could approximate the random juxtapositions of group improvisation.²⁸

Foss’s professional connections resulted in concerts across the United States, bringing group improvisation to the attention of the mainstream classical world. However, free improvisation was largely confined to the rehearsal studio. In performance, the group relied on Foss’s precomposed works and pre-established formulas. Foss argued that in performance, improvisers would “play safe. This is true of jazz improvisation also; you play what you know, not what you don’t know, not in public. As a result, I think that composition is more adventurous.”²⁹ While Foss originally intended ICE as a model for creative collaboration between composers and performers, he finally concluded that this goal required too much preparation and was not a viable option. He rejected his earlier attempts at open-ended composition, writing: “I am among the most reluctant of composers when it comes to introducing performer-freedom into my composition. Moments of incomplete notation do exist, but only . . . where it is safe.”³⁰ Increasingly dissatisfied with his improvisation

²⁵Quoted in Shea, “The Middle-Period Compositions of Lukas Foss: A Study of Twenty-three Avant-garde Works,” 58, 64.

²⁶Ibid., 59.

²⁷Ibid., 74.

²⁸Ibid., 67. The premiere performance of *Time Cycle* had improvisations by ICE as intermezzi between the movements. Ibid., 70–71.

²⁹Quoted in *ibid.*, 83–84.

³⁰Lukas Foss, “The Changing Composer-Performer Relationship: A Monologue and a Dialogue,” *Perspectives of New Music* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1963): 48.

experiment, he abandoned it entirely when he moved to Buffalo in 1963 for a teaching position at the New York State University of Buffalo and a conducting position at the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra.³¹

Larry Austin and the New Music Ensemble

The New Music Ensemble was founded in 1963 at the University of California in Davis by a group of teachers and students. The members came from both jazz and classical backgrounds.

The group initially consisted of Larry Austin, Stanley Lunetta, John Mizelle, and Arthur Woodbury, although membership fluctuated. Art Woodbury, a faculty member and jazz saxophonist, considered their group improvisations as “an extension of jazz,” although classically oriented.³² Larry Austin, a classically trained composer, was searching for the “almost physical contact with the music” that he found in jazz, “the epitome of social/musical interaction.”³³ They avoided explicit jazz references in their playing, although Lukas Foss remarked to Austin that NME’s recordings had a “jazz flavor” when he first encountered them in 1968.³⁴ During the first two years, they rehearsed nearly every day for up to six hours.³⁵

Austin spent a year in Europe in 1964–65, where he shared the experiments of the New Music Ensemble.³⁶ He was particularly inspired by a meeting with composer

³¹It should be noted, however, that as the codirector of the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Buffalo, Lukas Foss recruited and worked with Carole Plantamura and Vinko Globokar, both of whom were later notable members of the European improvisation scene, as well as Don Ellis, who had already established himself as an avant-garde jazz improviser. Renée Levine Parker, *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 22–23.

³²Quoted in Larry Austin et al., “Larry Austin,” *Source: Music of the Avant-Garde* 2, no. 1 (January 1968): 15.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Larry Austin, interview, in “Forum: Improvisation,” ed. Barney Childs and Christopher Hobbs, *Perspectives of New Music* 21, nos. 1–2 (Autumn 1982–Summer 1983): 30–31.

³⁵Ibid., 30.

³⁶Ibid., 27.

Cornelius Cardew, finding that Cardew's Cage-inspired scores were creating the same musical effects through composition as NME did in their improvisations.³⁷ The perspective of the group shifted following his trip. "In 1965, when I returned," he wrote, "we were thinking more in terms of concerts and preparing ourselves for tours and other appearances. I believe that was the time when we started to be less interesting, musically."³⁸ Out of that consolidation, however, came the periodical *Source: Music of the Avant-Garde*, edited by Austin with students Mizelle and Lunetta. It included improvised compositions by the New Music Ensemble composers as well as scores that Austin had picked up from his European travels, many of which were graphic or text-based.³⁹ Some issues included recordings of works that were discussed or published in the periodical. Allan Bryant of the group *Musica Elettronica Viva* published his graphic work *Pitch Out* in the third issue of *Source*; his recording was included on an LP record included with the following issue.⁴⁰

In 1966–67, David Tudor's residency at UC Davis brought live electronics to NME. The ensemble collaborated with Tudor in performances of live electronic compositions by John Cage, Toshi Ichiyanagi, David Behrman, Mauricio Kagel, and Michael von Biel. Tudor constructed his own electronic instruments from individual components, expanding them into monstrosities so complex that even he probably did not fully understand how they worked. Their impermanence and unpredictability led Austin to postulate electronics and improvisation as two forces that eschewed notation in favor of "instant, nonlasting music."⁴¹

The New Music Ensemble gradually fell apart in the late 1960s and disbanded com-

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 30.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰The recordings from *Source* are available online at "UbuWeb Sound—Source—Music of the Avant-Garde," <http://www.ubu.com/sound/source.html> (accessed August 10, 2012). Also Massimo Ricci, "Pioneers," blog post on "Touching Extremes," September 11, 2009, accessed August 10, 2012, <http://touchingextremes.wordpress.com/2009/09/11/pioneers/>.

⁴¹Larry Austin, interview, in "Forum: Improvisation," ed. Childs and Hobbs, 33.

pletely when Austin accepted a teaching position at the University of South Florida in 1972. In the later stages of the group, he had expressed dissatisfaction with the routine of the rehearsals and found that their improvisations were becoming too structured. He turned back to composition in order to “*dis-organize* the sound, make it closer to chaos, make it closer to what reality is all about, make it human again—not abstract, but corporeal.”⁴²

Pauline Oliveros

In his self-published book on improvisation, Tom Nunn writes that the first glimmer of the modern free improvisation movement was in San Francisco in 1956. Three students of Robert Erickson at San Francisco State University—Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, and Loren Rush—created a soundtrack for a film about Clara Falkenstein, a San Francisco Bay Area sculptor, by recording several free improvisations. Inspired by the experience, the three musicians continued to meet for jam sessions at the local KPFA radio station’s studio.⁴³ They developed their technique through recording, listening back, and discussing their improvisations.⁴⁴ Improvising freely produced the best results; their attempts to use predetermined structures “fell flat.”⁴⁵

Oliveros, Riley, and Rush met Lukas Foss and the Improvisation Chamber Ensemble at the latter ensemble’s performance in San Francisco in 1957. They found it too conservative, however, and were disappointed by Foss’s restrictive scores. Foss, in turn, reacted negatively to their description of their less structured approach, assuring them that the result

⁴²Quoted in Larry Austin et al., “Larry Austin,” *Source: Music of the Avant-Garde* 2, no. 1 (January 1968), 15.

⁴³Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*, vol. 1, 15. A sample of these 1957 recordings can be heard here: <http://archive.org/details/C.1957.XX.XX> (accessed December 22, 2012).

⁴⁴“We all felt that our hearing was expanded by the simple process of: 1) throwing ourselves into spontaneous music making, 2) getting immediate feedback in the form of recording, and 3) discussing the process and results.” Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People: Collected Writings 1963-80* (Baltimore, MD: Smith Publications, 1984), 182.

⁴⁵Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*, vol. 1, 15.

must be “utter chaos.”⁴⁶

The group moved in a new direction when the electronic music center Sonics was established at the San Francisco Conservatory in 1961. Sonics became the San Francisco Tape Music Center and moved to Mills College in 1965. Oliveros became the head of the center after this move.⁴⁷ Her tape music, and that of her colleagues, relied on long improvisational takes with minimal editing. For her first tape piece, *Time Perspectives* (1960), she used a tape recorder at her home, improvising while using cardboard tubes as audio filters and her bathtub for reverberation.⁴⁸

Robert Erickson, Oliveros’s teacher, played an active role in his former students’ experiments. He treated his students as colleagues and collaborators, eschewing a formal teacher-student relationship.⁴⁹ Oliveros and her classmates were encouraged by his enthusiasm for their experiments, an enthusiasm which also manifested itself in his *Chamber Concerto* (1960) and *Concerto for Piano and Seven Instruments* (1963), two works that include improvisation.⁵⁰ When Erickson was invited to take a professorship at the University of California in San Diego (UCSD) in 1967, he viewed it as “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to start a music department, to do it right, no waiting for dead wood to rot away, no factions to appease.”⁵¹ At Erickson’s invitation, Oliveros also joined the UCSD faculty in the same year. In addition to teaching an improvisation class, she studied T’ai Chi and improvised music to accompany the T’ai Chi sessions.⁵²

In 1970, Oliveros started the ♀ Ensemble, an all-female student improvisation group open to both musicians and nonmusicians.⁵³ The group used a creative process that focused

⁴⁶Heidi Gunden, *The Music of Pauline Oliveros* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983), 33.

⁴⁷Ibid., 53.

⁴⁸Martha Mockus, *Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17–19.

⁴⁹Shere, *Thinking Sound Music*, 51.

⁵⁰Ibid., 53.

⁵¹Quoted in *ibid.*, 58.

⁵²Ibid., 38–39.

⁵³Mockus, *Sounding Out*, 40.

on perceiving changes in the sound instead of causing change to happen. Oliveros explained that “rather than manipulating our voices or instruments in a goal-oriented way in order to produce certain effects, we began to *allow* changes to occur involuntarily, or without conscious effort, while sustaining a sound voluntarily.”⁵⁴ Oliveros restricted verbal communication in the rehearsals, and asked the members to write down their thoughts in a diary to be read aloud at a special session.⁵⁵ Her *Sonic Meditations*, a series of improvisation-meditation exercises published in 1974, developed out of these rehearsals. Dedicated to the ♀ Ensemble and Amelia Earhart, the exercises focus on intensive listening and producing long, sustained tones. They are equally accessible to trained and untrained musicians, an attribute that subverted the norms of the musical establishment according to Oliveros.⁵⁶ She wanted to inspire the performers without intruding on their creativity, writing that “instead of composing the content, I was composing the outside form and giving people tools to participate in the creative process. And that felt good to me, and it also sharpened my own tools.”⁵⁷

In 1967, the fledgling UCSD music department recruited the trombonist John Silber, who showed a keen interest in the experimental developments of Oliveros and Erickson and formed his own improvisation group, KIVA, seven years later. Its members focused on listening to the less apparent aspects of a sound profile, which they emphasized through amplification.⁵⁸

A substantial part of the Australian free improvisation movement originated from the activities at UCSD. The Australian pianist and composer Keith Humble was hired as a lecturer in 1969, and the pianists Joan Pollock and Jeff Pressing soon followed in the early

⁵⁴Quoted in *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 41–42.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁷Cole Gagne, “Pauline Oliveros,” in *Soundpieces, Volume 2: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 221.

⁵⁸John Silber, interview, in “Forum: Improvisation,” ed. Childs and Hobbs, 81.

1970s. When the La Trobe University in Melbourne started its music department in 1974, Humble, Pollock, and Pressing were among the first faculty members and formed one of the most important centers for academic improvisation research in the world.⁵⁹ Pollock's work with Silber proved valuable when she helped organize an improvisation program at La Trobe University.⁶⁰ Pressing went on to become a pioneer in cognitive research on improvisation.⁶¹

The music department at USCD continues to be a hub for free improvisation. The improviser, trombonist, and scholar George Lewis was a professor from 1991 to 2004 and advised numerous doctoral students whose theses fell under the umbrella of improvisation research. His computer program, *Voyager*, is an autonomous improviser that can play with live performers. His current tenure at Columbia University is a testament to the prestige of improvisational studies today. Saxophonist David Borgo is currently on the UCSD faculty. His research into the connections between modern science and improvisation has made a seminal contribution through his book, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age*.

⁵⁹“Keith Humble (1927–1995): Represented Artist,” Australian Music Centre, accessed December 22, 2012, <http://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/artist/humble-keith>; Raymond Gill, “Jeff Pressing Dies at 55,” *The Age*, April 30, 2002, accessed December 22, 2012, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/04/29/1019441344176.html>; “Joan Pollock, Lecturer,” University of Melbourne Faculty Biography (cached), accessed December 22, 2012, http://www.zoominfo.com/CachedPage/?archive_id=0&page_id=1547968713&page_url=//www.vca.unimelb.edu.au/Staff.aspx?topicID=17&staffID=102&page_last_updated=2010-01-09T18:48:52&firstName=Joan&lastName=Pollock.

⁶⁰Allan Walker, interview with the author, September 16, 2011. Silber also was a visiting lecturer there. Pat JaCoby, “John J. Silber, Former Department of Music Chair and Del Mar Councilman, Succumbs March 7 in La Jolla,” University of California San Diego press release, March 9, 2005, accessed December 22, 2012, <http://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/newsrel/general/Silber.asp>.

⁶¹Ben Williams, “Encomium for Jeff Pressing,” *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 315–321.

Other Free Improvisation Origins: Free Jazz and the New York Avant-Garde

During the 1950s, avant-garde jazz musicians were breaking from their established idiom to develop a free style of improvisation. The first steps of the free jazz movement took place at the Five Spot Café in New York, which opened in the Bowery district in 1956. Cecil Taylor, a pioneer of the movement, was its inaugural pianist, and the Café's reputation as an avant-garde haven was cemented when Ornette Coleman's quartet performed there for ten weeks in 1959.

In 1965, composer and multi-instrumentalist Muhal Richard Abrams founded the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), with a membership that included the cream of the free jazz movement. It extended its mission beyond that of a mere arts organization, becoming a part of the African-American grassroots social movement. Abrams wanted to highlight the contributions of black musicians and to offer material support in the face of racial disempowerment.⁶² His home on 67th Street became a place for AACM members to congregate and encourage each other's personal development.⁶³ The AACM community remained closely knit by the requirement that its members' bands consist of at least two-thirds AACM members.⁶⁴ Its bands moved away from the chord changes of traditional jazz, using melodic and rhythmic development in ways that transcended any formal constraints and instead aspired to a spiritual plane. The harmonic limitations of conventional jazz became a metaphor for the oppression of blacks in American society.⁶⁵

Nowhere is the history of improvisation more contentious than with the New York

⁶²Muhal Richard Abrams and John Shenoy Jackson, "Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians," *Black World* 23, no. 1 (November 1973–April 1974): 72. See also Ronald M. Rodano, "Jazzin' the Classics: The AACM's Challenge to Mainstream Aesthetics," *Black Music Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 81.

⁶³Rodano, "Jazzin' the Classics," 83.

⁶⁴Ibid., 84.

⁶⁵Ibid., 90.

avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s. While many of the works from this circle of composers allowed—and often required—the performers to improvise, few of the associated musicians accepted that their activities fell under the umbrella of improvisation. Tom Johnson addressed this issue in a *Village Voice* article in 1976.

Gradually “improvisation” has lost most of its original respectability and come to imply a completely uncontrolled sort of messing around, and no one wants to admit that he is improvising, except in jazz quarters where, due to such long traditions, the word has never become a pejorative. But in the meantime, if we could return to the original sense of the word, and realize that most forms of improvisation have actually been forms of highly restricted improvisation, we could say that there is an awful lot of improvising going on these days, and that a number of composers have devised ingenious new ways of doing it.⁶⁶

The rejection of the term “improvisation” resulted in a certain degree of animosity between “improvisers” and “nonimprovisers,” even though the activities of both camps overlap to such an extent that there seems to be no clear distinction. Anthony Braxton argued that the conflation of improvisation with jazz caused white composers to use other terms to place their music racially within a European tradition.⁶⁷ The mainstream historical accounts of this avant-garde music have largely embraced what George Lewis has called the “Eurological” viewpoint at face value, so that only circumstantial evidence—the musical similarities and the close proximity in time and space—remains to connect indeterminacy in the avant-garde with parallel developments in jazz.⁶⁸

New York improvisation in the 1960s and early 1970s focused largely on solo improvisation (Philip Corner, Malcolm Goldstein), or composer-oriented improvisation (Christian Wolff, Earle Brown), and thus was somewhat removed from the group-based initiatives elsewhere. Improvisers such as Terry Riley (after his early involvement with free improvi-

⁶⁶Tom Johnson, *The Voice of New Music*, 120.

⁶⁷George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 22, “Supplement: Best of BMRJ” (2002): 223.

⁶⁸See George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950,” 215–246; and Michael Dessen, “Decolonizing Art Music: Scenes from the Late Twentieth-Century United States” (Ph.D. thesis, University of California San Diego, 2003), 57–58.

sation)⁶⁹ and LaMonte Young were more closely linked with Indian and other non-Western traditions.

Free Improvisation Moves to Europe

The racial tensions that divided the classical avant-garde from the free jazz movement in America were muted in Europe, and jazz and classical improvisation overlapped considerably. During the 1960s, a lull in the jazz scene in America caused a steady stream of musicians to come to Paris, the hub of European free jazz.⁷⁰ While AACM in Chicago made African-American avant-garde music into a symbol of Black empowerment, the radical left in France saw it as symptomatic of the decolonization movements in Africa.⁷¹ The “hot” players such as Albert Ayler and Archie Shepp—noisy, high-energy, and physical—found acceptance quickly, while French critics were suspicious of the more introspective work of the Art Ensemble of Chicago or Anthony Braxton that was closer to “classical” free improvisation.⁷²

Even without the racially charged overtones, many members of the European avant-garde avoided using the term “improvisation” while engaging in improvisational practices. Karlheinz Stockhausen referred to his situational piece *Aus dem sieben Tagen* (1968) as “intuitive music,” instead of “improvised music” because he felt that the latter implied a pre-established style.⁷³ Luciano Berio was commenting on the classical music world when he said that “improvisation has been a haven for dilettantes,” and that “I really don’t believe that a ‘serious’ musician improvising in a concert hall can articulate a discourse

⁶⁹See above, p. 18.

⁷⁰Eric Drott, “Free Jazz and the French Critic,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 542.

⁷¹Ibid., 548.

⁷²Ibid., 544–545.

⁷³Karlheinz Stockhausen, “Questions and Answers on Intuitive Music,” from a discussion at Cambridge University, 1973, accessed 18 December, 2012, http://www.stockhausen.org/intuitive_music.html.

of a complexity and interest comparable to that of a baroque musician or even a jazz musician.”⁷⁴

While the free improvisation groups founded in Europe during the 1960s and '70s were likely influenced by the American groups that preceded them, they applied their practice of improvisation in different ways. Whereas the American groups used their improvisational experiences as compositional material, the Europeans seemed to have greater separation between the practices of improvisation and composition. Many of the musicians involved in the early years of free improvisation in Europe continue to improvise in public, and some of the groups that began in the 1960s are still active today. The social and political ramifications of free improvisation were frequently discussed among these improvisers, who saw their work as a means to challenge the customary divisions between composer, performer, and audience. This resulted in an increased awareness of the importance of the audience in improvisation concerts, as well as audience participation in many cases. The involvement of nonmusicians in the process of musical creation foreshadowed applications of improvisation in education and music therapy.

Rome and *Musica Elettronica Viva*

When Larry Austin from the New Music Ensemble visited Rome in 1964, he brought the ethos of California free improvisation with him. Italian composer Franco Evangelisti, among the first to be converted to the cause of improvisation, founded the experimental improvisation group *Gruppo di improvvisazione da nuova consonanza* (improvisation group of new consonance) or GINC. Austin found the name ironic. “To me, it had no consonance as a group, but perhaps that was what was “new” to the Italians.”⁷⁵ Evangelisti, a committed

⁷⁴Luciano Berio, Rossana Dalmonte, and Bálint Andr  Varga, *Two Interviews*, translated and edited by David Osmond-Smith (New York: M. Boyars, 1985), 81, 84.

⁷⁵Larry Austin, interview, in “Forum: Improvisation,” ed. Childs and Hobbs, 28.

communist, made a connection between the anarchy of improvisation and radical politics early on. He declared that

composition was dead, that the whole “act” of sitting down to contrive a piece of music was decadent. For Franco, this came from a very strong ideological motivation. He was a Communist and, when thinking as a composer, felt totally at odds with himself, his culture and his sociopolitical beliefs. In improvisation he felt that music and ideology could be reconciled.⁷⁶

Musica Elettronica Viva, or MEV, was founded in Rome in 1966 by mostly American expatriates: Allan Bryant, Alvin Curran, Jon Phetteplace, Carol Plantamura, Frederic Rzewski, Richard Teitelbaum, and Ivan Vandor. There was some crossover with GINC as Rzewski and Curran had attended their early concerts and subsequently had joined the group. Austin believed that MEV was influenced indirectly by his recordings of the New Music Ensemble at UC Davis.⁷⁷ Cage and Ornette Coleman were also influences.⁷⁸

The founding members of MEV had previously performed together as a new music ensemble. Rzewski recalls that he would perform the latest European classical music with the others at unconventional venues—“student organizations in European universities, or cultural centers, rock clubs”—for audiences uninitiated in the atonal language of the post-World War II avant-garde. They were confronted by revolutionary students who felt that their music was elitist, a serious challenge for the musicians who regarded themselves as left-leaning. Rzewski said that they “were forced to rethink our whole position regarding the relationship of art to the world around us.”⁷⁹ Free improvisation was their response, as they connected its free and unstructured interactions with a utopian social order. As Rzewski writes, “The great improvised music of the twentieth century may be remembered by future generations as an early abstract model in which new social forms were dimly

⁷⁶Ibid., 27.

⁷⁷Ibid., 29.

⁷⁸According to Richard Teitelbaum. See Curran et al., “Composers’ Notes.”

⁷⁹From an interview with Vivian Perlis (December 2, 1984) as part of an Oral History Project at Yale. Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 182, 184.

conceived.”⁸⁰

In its early days, MEV used audience participation as a source of inspiration and to bolster its ideology of communal values. Rzewski’s series of improvisation guidelines in *Sound Pool* (1969) were realized as massive group improvisations for musicians and nonmusicians.⁸¹ MEV performed this piece across Europe resulting in moments “of unbelievable harmony and intensity,” according to group member Alvin Curran.⁸²

As suggested by the name, MEV used electronics in their improvisations. Richard Teitelbaum played a Moog synthesizer; homemade electronic gadgets were also used.⁸³ At the Festival d’Avignon in 1968, Cornelius Cardew performed with MEV, but not on stage; he chose to play beneath the stage on the supporting steel tubes, amplified with a contact microphone.⁸⁴

During the 1960s, MEV toured Europe as a “floating commune of musicians and nonmusicians, spouses, fans, and camp followers.” It re-formed in the 1970s in New York as a smaller, more “professional” group centered around Frederic Rzewski, Alvin Curran, and Richard Teitelbaum without the audience involvement and experimental electronic music of its early days.⁸⁵ Trombonist Garrett List and saxophonist Steve Lacy played with MEV during this period. Tom Johnson noted the change in MEV’s style in a 1974 review for *Village Voice*.

The MEV musicians have little regard for harmony or formal restrictions, and go for a counterpoint of individual expressions, which are somehow unified simply by their energy. At the peaks such improvisations can become loud protests. But the anger I used to sense in these jam-session protests a few years ago is not so common now. A tone of optimism

⁸⁰Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 64.

⁸¹The score is available at http://improarchive2.brinkster.net/fr_spl.pdf (accessed May 23, 2012).

⁸²David W. Bernstein, “The Spontaneous Music of Musica Elettronica Viva,” in accompanying booklet, “Musica Elettronica Viva: MEV 40 (1967–2007).” New World Records, 80675-2. Compact disc. <http://www.newworldrecords.org/uploads/filesPdmv.pdf>.

⁸³Curran et al., “Composers’ Notes.”

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Ibid.

or confidence seems to have taken its place.⁸⁶

MEV is still semi-active today, playing concerts every few years. David Bernstein wrote, “Today, MEV’s core members pursue their own compositional careers, but have continued to perform together, and have developed into one of the world’s finest free improvisation ensembles.”⁸⁷

The Joseph Holbrooke Trio and Derek Bailey

The Joseph Holbrooke Trio was active in Sheffield, Yorkshire, from 1963 to 1966. Derek Bailey (guitar), Tony Oxley (drums), and Gavin Bryars (bass) met as commercial studio musicians.⁸⁸ As they all worked nights at jazz clubs, they “rehearsed” as an experimental group with regular Saturday afternoon gigs at the Grapes in Trippet Lane, a pub patronized by University of Sheffield students.⁸⁹ Oxley chose the name “Joseph Holbrooke” after an obscure, highly prolific early-twentieth-century English composer, dubbed the “cockney Wagner” by his contemporaries; Bailey wrote that the name “seemed a good cover for our activities.”⁹⁰

According to Bailey, the trio’s gradual move into “free” improvisation was an extension of their improvised work as commercial jazz musicians. While Bryars was the only member with a classical music background, all three found important influences in Webern and Schoenberg that led them to explore a nontonal, nonrhythmic idiom.⁹¹ They closely followed the latest developments of the avant-garde composers. Bryars ordered recordings of John Cage and other Americans by mail from the United States. Unavailable commercially

⁸⁶Tom Johnson, *The Voice of New Music*, 75.

⁸⁷David W. Bernstein, “The Spontaneous Music of Musica Elettronica Viva.”

⁸⁸Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation* (London: Verso, 2004), 52.

⁸⁹Tony Oxley, interview with Ben Watson, September 25, 1997, quoted in Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, 63.

⁹⁰Bailey, *Improvisation*, 86n.

⁹¹Tony Oxley, interview with Ben Watson, September 25, 1997, quoted in *ibid.*, 65–66.

in England, these recordings undoubtedly influenced the trio, although Bailey would later declare that he found Cage “fascinating but not necessary for me.”⁹² After hearing Bryars’s record of Cage’s *First Constructions in Metal*, Oxley struggled to recreate the sound of a gong “glissando,” which he achieved by bending a cymbal after it was struck. Much later he discovered that Cage had achieved the effect by immersing the gong in water.⁹³

The trio’s style might be described as free jazz, although Oxley argued that neither “free” nor “jazz” was really an adequate label. As the group became more experimental, it distanced itself from its jazz roots. Oxley recalls that “the exclusion of the jazz vocabulary was an emotional act,” and that he felt “an enormous liberating force” as they became involved in “a universal language... that carries its own judgements and intentions and is not something simply tagged on to the end of jazz.”⁹⁴ “Free” was perhaps a better description, although this freedom was tempered by the highly structured way in which they explored new techniques. For example, they developed an arhythmic style by practicing highly complex metrical subdivisions, and used three- or four-note pitch sets with common tones as a means to liberate themselves from the strictures of harmony.⁹⁵ These experiences allowed them to anticipate and respond to each other more easily.

We were able to . . . just start and play and not think about anything or talk about anything and pieces would develop their own structures—and that was just down to close listening and reacting. . . . There was that kind of absolute freedom that happens on the moment, but it was on the basis of having done all this stuff for so long that there were a lot of things we could take for granted, a lot of shorthands that you already knew. Also, you were aware that someone wasn’t going to go off the rails, you had a sense of the parameters in which they were likely to play.⁹⁶

The regular audience that came to hear the Joseph Holbrooke Trio when they were

⁹²Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, 52.

⁹³Bailey, *Improvisation*, 88.

⁹⁴Bailey, *Improvisation*, 106–107.

⁹⁵Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, 52, 77.

⁹⁶Gavin Bryars, interview with Ben Watson, October 2, 1997, quoted in *ibid.*, 77–78. Oxley also acknowledged the preparation that made this kind of improvisation possible, saying that “I don’t believe there is such a thing as Free Music.” Oxley, interview with Ben Watson, September 25, 1997, quoted in *ibid.*, 62.

playing conventional jazz stuck with the group as they started branching out and experimenting.⁹⁷ Bryars recalls that “the fact that we had that loyal audience was very reassuring to us. We weren’t just doing it in our front rooms.”⁹⁸

The Joseph Holbrooke Trio split up after three years, when Bryars moved to Northampton and Bailey moved to London.⁹⁹ It might have faded into obscurity like so many short-lived experimental jazz groups of the sixties if Derek Bailey had not become one of the leading advocates for free improvisation. He described his improvisational style as “non-idiomatic” to distinguish it from jazz and other improvisation that identifies with a pre-established aesthetic.¹⁰⁰ Bailey was never involved in a single group for an extended period and was most interested in the early stages of collaboration. He found that groups that stay together for longer will develop a style that is “susceptible to self-analysis, description, and, of course, reproduction . . . At this point the music becomes less relevant to, less dependent upon, improvisation.”¹⁰¹ He was a member of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble from 1966 to 1971 and a member of the Music Improvisation Company from 1968 until 1971. After 1976, Bailey’s improvisation groups fell within the umbrella of his organization “Company,” with no fixed membership and a rule that no rules existed. Company was based around what Bailey referred to as “Company Weeks,” an annual series of free improvised concerts that ran from 1977 until 1994.¹⁰² These festivals would last around five days and featured groups of improvisers that had never worked together before.

⁹⁷Bryars, interview with Ben Watson, October 2, 1997, quoted in *Ibid.*, 78.

⁹⁸Bryars, interview with Ben Watson, October 2, 1997, quoted in *Ibid.*, 81.

⁹⁹According to Bailey, the musical differences that grew among the players, particularly himself and Bryars (who rejected improvisation when he began to focus more on composition) happened only after the split. Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, 102.

¹⁰⁰Bailey, *Improvisation*, xi–xii.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰²Bailey notes that Company Week usually took place in London but occasionally elsewhere, principally New York, and that there were no Company Weeks in 1985 and 1986. *Ibid.*, 134.

AMM, Cornelius Cardew, and the Scratch Orchestra

The group AMM, founded in 1965 and still active today, is perhaps the longest-lived improvisation ensemble. The name “AMM” is an acronym, although what the letters stand for is a well-kept secret.¹⁰³ Its founding members were Edwin Prévost (percussion), Lou Gare (saxophone), and Keith Rowe (guitar).¹⁰⁴ Lawrence Sheaff (cello), Cornelius Cardew (piano), and Christopher Hobbs (percussion) were members at various times during the first ten years.

AMM began as an experimental jazz ensemble “based around late Ellington and Mingus” and gradually shifted to a nonidiomatic type of improvisation.¹⁰⁵ This transition happened in the group’s first few years; by 1966, AMM had already begun to undermine the rhythmic and harmonic regularity of its own jazz idiom.¹⁰⁶ Cardew joined the group during this period. He was the only classically-trained member and had previously worked as an assistant for Karlheinz Stockhausen and had participated in both the GINC and MEV ensembles. Rowe recalls that Cardew “gave [the group] a kind of breadth and authority that we would have had to work for much longer to achieve . . . if Cornelius hadn’t joined.”¹⁰⁷ As Rowe and Sheaff were both working as commercial artists, modernism in the visual arts had an effect on their explorations in music. Cubism could be translated into sound by destroying the “perspective” of the musical canvas, placing elements side-by-side in a nonhierarchical fashion.¹⁰⁸ Rowe recalled that the visual concept of “color-shift”—the colors of an image change while the tone (the amount of gray) remains the same—inspired him to keep the timing constant but “shift” the pitch by freeing it from the chord patterns.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³Keith Rowe, interview with Dan Warburton, January 2001, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/rowe.html>.

¹⁰⁴Eddie Prévost and Keith Rowe, interview, in “Forum: Improvisation,” ed. Childs and Hobbs, 34.

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 36.

¹⁰⁸Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 14–15.

¹⁰⁹Prévost and Rowe, interview, in “Forum: Improvisation,” ed. Childs and Hobbs, 34–35.

The introspective quality of many of their recordings derived from Sheaff and Gare's preoccupation with Buddhism and meditation.¹¹⁰

According to Rowe, the shift from an experimental jazz idiom to a freer type of improvisation was followed by "an optimum period" when they felt able to play and communicate naturally through the music. Their performances required no verbal discussion; "one would travel to a gig in a vehicle for maybe six hours and not discuss the music once, set up and play, then six hours back and still not discuss the music! And never talk about it again, except that someone might feel happy, and someone else might feel not so happy, and that went on literally for years."¹¹¹ Brian Olewnick wrote, "The overall sound of the group, even in 1966, was so different, so idiosyncratic, that it's not at all surprising that both new jazz and contemporary classical audiences were baffled, if not horrified."¹¹²

A rift in the early 1970s saw AMM split up into two factions. Prévost later wrote that Cardew and Rowe wanted to impose a "political analysis and concomitant agenda for AMM," while he and Gare resented what they saw as an encroachment on their freedom of expression. Prévost objected that the only expression allowed was one that conformed with certain ideas of how politics applied to music: "unless there was some identifiable and 'correct' political meaning or consequence, an action was considered useless bourgeois self-indulgence."¹¹³ During this period, he and Gare continued to perform together using the name AMM.¹¹⁴

In 1975, Keith Rowe rejoined the group, and Lou Gare became a part-time collaborator with the group instead of a core member. Rowe and Prévost were joined by John Tilbury in 1981 to form a stable trio until Rowe's departure in 2002. Tilbury and Prévost

¹¹⁰Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 20.

¹¹¹Ibid., 37.

¹¹²Brian Olewnick, AMM album review on AllMusic, accessed December 26, 2012, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/ammmusic-mw000026381>.

¹¹³Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, 21.

¹¹⁴Prévost and Rowe, interview, in "Forum: Improvisation," ed. Childs and Hobbs, 38.

continue to perform as AMM, frequently with guest artists.

Cardew's desire to extend the concepts of AMM to a more general audience resulted in the formation of the Scratch Orchestra, which grew out of a music course that he was teaching at Morley College in London.¹¹⁵ The first meeting was on July 1, 1969; the first concert was in November of that year. Orchestra member Stefan Szczelkun recalled, "A high level of excitement, commitment and an extra-ordinary mixture of skills allowed the orchestra to grow quickly and be putting on almost weekly concerts with 40 to 60 participants within a short while."¹¹⁶ The constitution of the orchestra, inspired by John Cage and the activities of the Fluxus art movement, discussed the types of activities with which the Orchestra would be involved. All members would take turns to direct concerts, in order of age (youngest to oldest), and the Orchestra would rehearse with "rituals," text pieces by Orchestra members that detailed actions or ways of making music but not specific sounds.¹¹⁷

Political wrangling spelled an end for the Orchestra. In 1971, a Marxist group formed around John Tilbury, Keith Rowe, and Cardew that criticized the open playfulness of the Orchestra "as at best flippant and at worst reactionary."¹¹⁸ As in AMM, the differences were less about the core political ideology than how this ideology impacted the music itself. Ultimately, while free improvisation in groups seemed to attract a certain kind of politically radical viewpoint, the leftist critiques of Cardew and others broke down that freedom into a judgmental narrative that undermined what made improvisation worthwhile.

¹¹⁵Stefan Szczelkun, "Exploding Cinema 1992–1999, Culture and Democracy" (Ph.D. Thesis, Royal College of Art, 2002), <http://www.stefan-szczelkun.org.uk/phd102.htm> (accessed June 20, 2012). At its peak, the Orchestra numbered more than 100 members. Kathryn Gleasman Pisaro, "Scratch Orchestra," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed December 26, 2012, ed. Deane L. Root, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

¹¹⁶Szczelkun, "Exploding Cinema."

¹¹⁷Ibid. See also Cornelius Cardew, ed., *Scratch Music* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1974), which includes the Orchestra Constitution and sketches by its members, and a book of the rituals: Cornelius Cardew, ed., *Nature Study Notes: Improvisation Rites* (London: Scratch Orchestra, 1969).

¹¹⁸Szczelkun, "Exploding Cinema."

Free Improvisation Today

While it is possible to trace the origins of free group improvisation in California to its gradual spread across the globe in the 1960s and early '70s, the increasing breadth and eclecticism of the movement by the '80s resulted into its amalgamation into a wider improvisation scene that included musicians from world- and pop-music backgrounds, free jazz, and a new wave of the avant-garde. The musicians that entered the “Downtown” scene in New York from the mid-'70s to the early '80s were consciously influenced by jazz and rock. The improvisation group *Musica Elettronica Viva* was a major part of the bridge between classical and jazz improvisation, and they collaborated with many jazz musicians. During his 1975–77 tenure as music director of the Kitchen, a prominent venue for Downtown experimentalism, MEV member Garrett List invited jazz musicians including Cecil Taylor, Wadada Leo Smith, Don Cherry, Muhal Richard Abrams, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago to perform.¹¹⁹ John Zorn was a pivotal figure influenced by both free jazz and experimental classical music. His game pieces, which he began in 1977 and which culminated in his work *Cobra* in 1984, require the musicians to improvise within a set of rules. The performances of these pieces were “very social,” and Zorn included people from a variety of backgrounds—classical, jazz, and rock—that encouraged a mixing and an awareness of the innovations developing in each tradition.¹²⁰

Improvisers borrowed the festival model from the jazz circuit. Annual festivals based in major cities gave local artists a venue, allowing them to rub shoulders with national and international stars. Derek Bailey’s Company was one of the first free improvisation festivals, beginning in 1976. In the early years, improvisers could piggy-back onto jazz festivals, experimental music festivals, and fringe festivals, but festivals devoted exclusively to improvisation have become more common in the past ten or fifteen years. In the

¹¹⁹Dessen, “Decolonizing Art Music,” 59.

¹²⁰Ibid., 90–92.

United States, the International Society for Improvised Music has had yearly events since 2006, held on university campuses across the country.¹²¹ Other festivals include the Seattle Improvised Music Festival and the IMPfest in Seattle,¹²² the Improvisation Summit in Portland, Oregon,¹²³ the No Idea Festival in Austin,¹²⁴ and the Boise Creative and Improvised Music Festival.¹²⁵ In Europe, Germany is a major center for improvisation, although there are important festivals elsewhere, such as the annual dOek festival in Amsterdam.¹²⁶

Improvisation has followed jazz into academia, reflected by its presence in scholarly writings and music journals. Many of the early participants of the free improvisation movement have written about their experiences and philosophies. The peer-reviewed, open-access, online periodical *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, founded in 2004, covers subjects relating to a variety of disciplines—art, dance, music, drama—as well as the applications of improvisation in sociological and political contexts.¹²⁷ The *Leonardo Music Journal* devoted its 2010 issue to “the role of improvisation in technologically tinged music.”¹²⁸ A collaboration between improvisation researchers of the American Musicological Society, the Society for Ethnomusicology, and the Society for Music Theory resulted in a special session on improvisation at the three organization’s joint meeting in 2012, followed by the publication of six essays representing various approaches to the field in a special issue of *Music Theory Online*.¹²⁹

Laptop orchestras, or electronic music ensembles with multiple players performing

¹²¹<http://www.improvisedmusic.org/> (accessed June 19, 2013).

¹²²<http://seattleimprovisedmusic.us/simf/> (accessed June 19, 2013), <http://improvisedmusicproject.com/> (accessed June 19, 2013).

¹²³www.creativemusicguild.org/improvisation-summit/ (accessed June 19, 2013).

¹²⁴<http://noideafestival.com/> (accessed June 19, 2013).

¹²⁵<http://b-cimf.com/> (accessed June 19, 2013).

¹²⁶<http://www.doekfestival.org/> (accessed June 19, 2013). A list of improvisation festivals, particularly in the German-speaking world, is available at http://www.offeneohren.org/en/networking_festivals.htm (accessed June 19, 2013).

¹²⁷<http://www.criticalimprov.com/> (accessed June 19, 2013).

¹²⁸Nicholas Collins, “Improvisation,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 20, no. 1 (December 2010): 7.

¹²⁹August Sheehy and Paul Steinbeck, “Introduction: Theorizing Improvisation (Musically),” *Music Theory Online*, accessed February 5, 2014, <http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.13.19.2/mto.13.19.2.sheehysteinbeck.php>.

on laptops, have revitalized group improvisation. They have their origins in early collaborative performances of electronic music. David Tudor's electronic works from the 1960s on were performed by groups of musicians, each of whom had a specific musical role. At Mills College in Oakland in the late 1970s, the League of Automatic Music Composers used the newly-available personal computers to create networks in which each computer was programmed to respond to the others. This setup would become the basis for real-time improvisations.¹³⁰ Laptop orchestras followed in this tradition, using patches (instruments) constructed in computer programs such as Max/MSP, Pure Data, or ChuckK. These patches can be combined into larger networks, passing musical ideas from computer to computer. While the amount of freedom in performance varies from work to work, there has been a strong tradition of improvisation in laptop orchestras.¹³¹ Ensembles frequently stake out a meeting point between composition and improvisation. Rehearsals can begin as an exploration of possibilities, and then as the performers become more familiar with the music, their successful experiments gradually coalesce into a semistructure over which continual experimentation is possible.¹³²

For practical reasons such as resources and funding, laptop orchestras are often based on university campuses. The Princeton Laptop Orchestra (PLOrk) was one of the first laptop orchestras, founded in 2004 at Princeton University. While it began as a freshman seminar, membership in the group is now open to any student with a musical background.¹³³

¹³⁰Chris Brown and John Bischoff, "Indigenous to the Net: Early Network Music Bands in the San Francisco Bay Area," on "Crossfade: Sound Travels on the Web," accessed June 20, 2013, <http://crossfade.walkerart.org/brownbischoff/IndigenoustotheNetPrint.html>.

¹³¹For example, a transcript of a rehearsal of David Toop's Unknown Devices ensemble reads like an improvisation rehearsal. Jonathan Milo Taylor, "David Toop's Unknown Devices | The Laptop Orchestra | A View from the Guitarist's Chair," accessed June 17, 2013, <http://suborg.net/david-toops-unknown-devices-the-laptop-orchestra-a-view-from-the-guitarists-chair/>.

¹³²Jeff Albert, "Improvisation as Tool and Intention: Organizational Practices in Laptop Orchestras and Their Effect on Personal Musical Approaches," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 8, no. 1 (2012), accessed June 20, 2013, <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/1558/2685>.

¹³³"Princeton Laptop Orchestra," YouTube video, uploaded by Princeton University, August 13, 2008, accessed June 17, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOsaANAFZcw>.

Ivica Ivo Bukvic founded the Linux Laptop Orchestra (L₂Ork) at Virginia Tech in 2009. In addition to teaching the Laptop Orchestra as a course, he designed the group's software, Pd-L₂Ork, to be accessible for K-12 educational purposes.¹³⁴ Anyone can use the program to design instruments for laptop performance.

Despite the breadth of the free improvisation movement, its ramifications for the classical music world remain largely unexplored. When groups started appearing in the 1960s, the movement was on the fringe of the establishment. Fifty years later, it is still part of the fringe, albeit a much larger one. Improvisation festivals, generally grouped with "experimental music" and "multimedia," remain well under the radar of most classical musicians. While improvisation has become increasingly part of music education and music academia, particularly through laptop orchestras, it has not penetrated into the heart of the conservatory. Nevertheless, its increasing visibility in recent years may be grounds for optimism; its momentum may allow it to find greater appreciation and acceptance in the coming decade.

¹³⁴Ivica Ivo Bukvic, L₂Ork Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/L2Ork/info> (accessed June 17, 2013). The software is available at <http://puredata.info/downloads/Pd-L2Ork> (accessed June 17, 2013).

Chapter 2

Free Improvisation: Spontaneous Discipline

As the free improvisation movement demonstrated, it is possible to create powerful musical experiences without any predetermined structures or stylistic restrictions. At its best, free improvisation is a disciplined musical practice that allows the performers to create new sounds and discover new music at the moment of their performance. By choosing to engage in the process, the musician has a purpose, and this purpose carries with it certain responsibilities to the music. For example, he or she might choose to make an aesthetic or political statement through his art, or to develop new ways to explore his instrument. Each new decision changes the field of possible actions, as he reacts to the environment he helped to create. Further actions can be either helpful or unhelpful to the general line of inquiry. Through the experience, the musician narrows the field of possible musical ideas so that all sounds are no longer equal in value, and gradually develops his own meanings and purpose for his art. This chapter examines some of the philosophies behind free improvisation and how they affect its application in modern Western music.

Defining Improvisation

The term improvisation is hard to define concretely. While few would argue about the meaning of improvisation in theory, there is contention over how the concept translates

into practice. Its transience allows it to adapt to changing circumstances, but also hinders attempts to codify the procedures involved. Derek Bailey argued that the genre is too fluid to pin down: “Any attempt to describe improvisation must be, in some respects, a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of improvisation which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation.”¹

Given these reservations, I will posit a working definition as follows: Improvisation is the creation of something new in the moment of performance. It exists exclusively in the present, both as a creative impulse and as a musical experience; the power of its immediacy cannot be fully captured for future reinterpretation. It can be distinguished temporally from composition and interpretation; composition is about planning for the future and interpretation is about determining the meaning of music created in the past. While nonimprovised interpretation can strive after an “ideal existence” that perfectly captures the original intentions of the composer, improvisation is impermanent, concerned only with the “concrete existence” of each single performance.²

My definition of improvisation is intentionally abstract and does not consider specific activities. In practice, it is typically embedded in a tapestry of compositional and interpretational processes. For example, jazz and Indian classical music preserve their traditions by means of formal guidelines relating to tonality, rhythm, and structure. These guidelines are the fruit of past synthesis and analysis, and endure for future generations. An improvisation that is completely unencumbered by the baggage of the past or considerations for the future would be totally “free” improvisation. Such conceptual purity, however, is probably impossible. Improvisers such as Tony Oxley of the Joseph Holbrooke Trio have argued that

¹Derek Bailey, *Improvisation*, ix.

²Jacqueline Walduck, “Role-Taking in Free Improvisation and Collaborative Composition” (Ph.D. thesis, City University of London, 1997), vol. 1, 25. See also Edwin Prévost, *No Sound Is Innocent: AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention* (Matching Tye, UK: Copula, 1995), 60.

there is no such thing.³

While a strictly theoretical definition may not provide satisfactory answers for how improvisation works in practice, it has many advantages. For example, it simplifies the question of which creative acts contain improvisation—whether a work which is first improvised and then revised is an improvisation, or whether a recording of an improvisation is still improvised. Theoretically speaking, a recorded document, whether visual or auditory, is never “improvisation,” because it is a relic of a past activity; improvisation refers only to the act of spontaneous creation and not to any consequences of that act. Improvisation can only be analyzed indirectly, through considering its remnants, whether electronically recorded or mentally remembered.⁴ Also, it clarifies which elements of an activity are in fact improvisation, and thus are the subject of my research. The replication of a pre-existing idiom is part of almost every improvised activity, yet strictly speaking, it is not part of the actual activity of improvisation. Activities can be placed on a graded scale based on the amount of improvisation involved, relative to the amount of preplanning.⁵

My definition is noncommittal with regard to the intentions of the improvisers; thus both deliberate actions and the unintended consequences of such actions can be considered as improvisation. This has also been the subject of past controversy. In a discussion with David Behrman that followed a 2010 screening of the documentary *David Tudor Bandonéon! A Combine*, there was some contention over whether improvisation was involved in the 1966 premiere performance of Tudor’s first electronic work. Behrman’s role in the premiere was maneuvering audio speakers on wheels around the performance space, responding to the acoustics in real time. When pressed by an audience member, Behrman

³Oxley, interview with Ben Watson, September 25, 1997, quoted in Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, 62.

⁴It can be argued, however, that analysis is a creative process in itself and thus is improvisatory in its own right. See August Sheehy, “Improvisation, Analysis, and Listening Otherwise,” *Music Theory Online* 19, no. 2 (June 2013), accessed February 5, 2014, <http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.13.19.2/mto.13.19.2.sheehy.php>.

⁵See Noam Sivan, “Improvisation in Western Art Music: Its Relevance Today” (DMA dissertation, The Juilliard School, 2010), 11–15, for a scale of sixteen activities categorized in this way.

strenuously denied that he was improvising, insisting that he was merely carrying out instructions and not developing new ideas.⁶ Echoing this viewpoint in a discussion with George Lewis, Alvin Lucier insisted that improvisation was unsuitable for his *Vespers*, a work in which the performers move around a dark enclosed space, using echolocation devices to explore its acoustics and boundaries. When performers used the devices to create rhythmic clicks and patterns instead, he felt that their unwanted “improvisation” ruined the piece.⁷

Behrman and Lucier argued that a creative act requires a certain threshold of autonomy, and that their activities in the examples above did not meet this threshold. Improvisation was excluded because the performers had to work towards a specific goal and were not allowed to act on their own “free will.” In contrast, George Lewis argued that even restricted discretion on the part of the performer constitutes improvisation, and thus Lucier’s *Vespers*, played as the composer intended, would still be considered as such.⁸ Lewis’ broader interpretation of the creative act seems more appropriate in a discussion of the free improvisation movement, given that its practitioners questioned the viability of “free will” as a source for truly original work. They used restrictions and goals in order to be *more* creative.⁹

Because contemporary Western culture has relegated improvisation to a role subservient to composition and interpretation, many improvisers have reacted by declaring their independence from the Western composer-interpreter model. Edwin Prévost of AMM wrote, “There is no happy meeting point between the two forms because ultimately they represent entirely different world views. If its clarity of purpose and practice is misted

⁶The author was present for this discussion.

⁷Lewis recalls this in “George Lewis ‘Conversation on Music and Sound Studies,’ ” Talk at the University of Minnesota School of Music, YouTube video, posted by umncla on April 29, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JM43J4K02KQ&t=12m0s> (accessed September 8, 2012).

⁸Ibid.

⁹See below, p. 47. Many of John Stevens’s improvisation exercises would not be considered improvisatory if using a more restrictive definition. For examples, see below, p. 61.

by opportunistic collusion with the classical mode, the improvisational ethic will waste away.”¹⁰ Evan Parker suggests that “if anyone in the production of a music event is dispensable, it is the score-maker, or the ‘composer’ as he is often called.”¹¹

In practice, the composition-interpretation and improvisation models have proven to be interdependent. Composers and interpreters do improvise, and improvisers frequently use compositional structures. Gavin Bryars, for example, acknowledged that the compositions of the “post-Cage musical world” and the Fluxus movement were asking performers to do things that overlapped with his free improvisational activities:

I saw that area of composed music as also being part of improvised music—and vice versa. . . . If I was doing some relatively free, text-based pieces with Fluxus composers, the same kind of activities would go on—early Christian Wolff, for example, La Monte Young prose pieces, all that sort of stuff.¹²

Despite their different methods, improvisation groups and avant-garde composers in the '60s were united by their aesthetic goals.

Music as Process

Improvisers reacted against the objectification of art. They felt that the mass distribution of music through larger concert halls, outdoor concerts, and broadcasting turned it into a commodity, something to be passively consumed by an audience. Works were given a fixed, intrinsic value independent of their genesis, context, or cultural impact. In the 1960s, many avant-garde composers became disillusioned with a musical museum culture that was more interested in engaging with music from the past rather than the most recent innovations. In an opinion article, Larry Austin noted that instead of facing a “hostile public,” the experimental composer was turning to “a revolutionary sub-culture of his peers

¹⁰Prévost, *No Sound Is Innocent*, 66.

¹¹Bailey, *Improvisation*, 81.

¹²Gavin Bryars, interview with Ben Watson, October 2, 1997, quoted in Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, 96.

to experience and judge his newest works.”¹³ He cited the Fluxus movement as an example of how young artists were countering the trend, refusing to create art as a preserved object.

There’s militancy in [the Fluxus] movement, to the point of self-destruction; i.e., refusing to be included on concerts or put in museums or included in any situation where the fragile thing called an artwork or art experience is subject to being frozen in plastic by success or crushed to oblivion by failure.¹⁴

Since the origins and purpose of improvisation are inseparable from the work itself, improvising was a natural tool for the avant-garde to challenge the status quo.

Free jazz musicians were also motivated to focus on the experience of music making instead of its final result. AACM members wanted to reclaim their art that had been appropriated and commodified by their commercially successful white colleagues. By redefining the noun “jazz” (an object) as a verb (a process), they resisted critical evaluations that rewarded established styles at the expense of experimentation. They held up an “Africanist” ideal of the practice of art merging with the experience of life.¹⁵

There were parallel developments in other creative disciplines. The manifesto of Cobra, a visual art movement active from 1948 to 1951,¹⁶ proclaimed that “the creative act is more important than that which it creates, while the latter will gain in significance the more it reveals the work which brought it into being and the less it appears as a polished end-product.”¹⁷ The acting improviser Chris Johnston noted that theater improvisers had redefined the term “excellence” in the context of their work: “It wasn’t, by the new

¹³Larry Austin, “Music Is Dead—Long Live Music,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1969, D13.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Rodano, “Jazzin’ the Classics,” 89. See also Brown, *Noise Orders*, 49. Christopher Small argues the word music should actually be a verb (“musicking”), and that the meaning of music comes from the relationships not only between the sounds, but between the participants involved and their understanding of broader relationships. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 13.

¹⁶Willemijn Stokvis, “Cobra,” in *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, accessed June 17, 2012, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com>.

¹⁷Constant, “Manifesto,” *Reflex* no. 1 (September-October 1948), trans. Leonard Bright, accessed June 17, 2012, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/manifesto.html>. For a discussion of improvisation in painting, see Smith and Dean, *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945*, 105–113.

creed, a demonstration of extraordinary skill and virtuosity, rather it was evidence of an extraordinary *process*, rooted in communitarian values, which might or might not result in an extraordinary *product*.”¹⁸ This new direction in theater was part of a “drive to grab the essence of the creative process, to de-mystify it and render it accessible to the ordinary person in the street.”¹⁹

Shifting the emphasis from product to process is an important step that gives confidence to new improvisers. Those who want a consistent product will never improvise, because a prepared performance will always be more polished. They must be convinced that there is a real trade-off, that the freedom and flexibility of improvisation is worth the decrease in accuracy. Instead of worrying about how to produce, record, and package their music to perfection for future consumption, they can focus on the experience of the music at the time of its creation. Just as thespian directors will emphasize improvisation’s transience to encourage performers to take greater risks,²⁰ musicians will discover their full potential as improvisers only when they stop worrying about past and future concerns, and concentrate wholly on the power of the present.

Understanding improvisation as a process also helps determine which situations are most favorable for improvised performance. For example, in a participatory event at which everyone (audience and performers) plays an active part, the communal experience can be enhanced through improvisation. In contrast, a Western classical performance at which the audience is expected to sit passively is less ideal, because the success of a performance is determined almost entirely by the quality of the musical product. In this setting, a typical performance allows for only modest spontaneous touches, such as responding to the acoustics and the state of the instruments, modifying small interpretative details, and recovering

¹⁸Chris Johnston, *The Improvisation Game*, 200. Italics in original.

¹⁹Ibid., 199.

²⁰Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 128.

from mistakes.²¹ A situation with a goal independent of the music's qualitative value is often more appropriate for improvisation. For example, improvisation can be used to develop specific skills or to deepen the participants' understanding of the score in practice or rehearsal. Educational or therapy sessions often use directed improvisational exercises to enlighten its members. A multidisciplinary setting can require music that responds to events in other media, and improvisation's flexibility is often more appropriate than a precomposed score.

While an improvised performance can produce a brilliant musical result, there is no guarantee against mediocrity or a lack of inspiration. This limitation can be desirable as it can show integrity and bring music down from an idealized realm. Frederic Rzewski argued that mistakes are an essential part of improvisation.

In improvised music we can't edit out the unwanted things that happen, so we just have to accept them. We have to find a way to make use of them, and if possible to make it seem as if we actually wanted them in the first place. In a way this is true, because if we didn't want these unwanted things to happen, we wouldn't improvise in the first place. That is what improvisation is about.²²

In most performance situations, a combination of preplanning, practice, and improvisation is an effective way to ensure a satisfactory result while retaining the excitement and flexibility of spontaneous creation.

²¹While this is largely accurate, it is nevertheless a simplification that presupposes that the audience is unaffected by the degree to which improvisation is involved and judges a performance by entirely objective criteria. Preliminary research into the mental activities of audience members suggests that improvisation has a positive effect on the audience members' mental stimulation. David Dolan et al., "The Improvisatory Approach to Classical Music Performance: An Empirical Investigation Into its Characteristics and Impact," *Music Performance Research* 6 (2013): 31–32, accessed February 5, 2014, [http://mpr-online.net/Issues/Volume%206%20\[2013\]/MPR0073.pdf](http://mpr-online.net/Issues/Volume%206%20[2013]/MPR0073.pdf).

²²Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 58, 60.

Models of Creative Synthesis: Skill and Perception-Reaction

If improvisation is the creation of something new at the moment of performance, its challenge is to tackle the cognitive constraints imposed by the lack of available time.²³ Summoning musical innovation at the spur of the moment requires not only inspiration but a great deal of cognitive power; all the details that a composer would painstakingly work out before a performance must be dealt with in real time. Understanding the nature of the creative process and making it as efficient as possible is thus at the core of improvisation. Two basic models simplify this process; I refer to them as the skill model and the perception-reaction model. Any creative act uses both models to some degree, although they are functionally and cognitively distinct.²⁴ The skill model is the epitome of “planned” or “idiomatic” improvisation, where the creative act sits on top of a pre-existing structure or musical language. Free improvisation resides primarily within the perception-reaction model, in which the performers stimulate new ideas by observing their environment.

As improvisers discover successful techniques, they build a vocabulary of possibilities and the tools to use them, thus developing their improvisational skill. In his study of the improvising mind, Aaron Berkowitz discusses the various processes involved in improvisation training. These processes can be consolidated into a tripartite model of cognition: automatization, variation, and recombination.²⁵ The performer first develops a “knowledge base,” ideas that are at his or her fingertips and require minimal conscious thought to perform after the initial impulse to do so.²⁶ These basic ideas are then augmented by

²³See Jeff Pressing, “Psychological Constraints on Improvisation,” in *In the Course of Performance*, ed. Nettl, 51.

²⁴This duality in cognitive processing has recently become a hot topic in the pop science circuit. See, for example, Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2005), Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2011), and chapters 2 and 3 of Jonah Lehrer, *Imagine: How Creativity Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012). The last of these books was withdrawn by the publisher for reasons that do not affect the thrust of Lehrer’s argument.

²⁵Berkowitz does not explicitly state this model; it is my own inference from his writings.

²⁶Berkowitz, *The Improvising Mind*, 43–45.

applying a series of variations to them. Thus the performer can use a single element from his or her knowledge base and transform it by using transposition, embellishment, stylistic changes, or other alterations.²⁷ The final element, recombination, involves the actual execution of elements from the knowledge base in their original and varied forms.²⁸ The recombination stage is where improvisation enters the process. The preparation involved in the automatization and variation stages creates mental “clusters” that streamline the creative process. Organizing these building blocks in time can elucidate larger concepts of syntax and structure that in turn become part of the knowledge base.

While the skill model demonstrates how preparation can greatly facilitate the execution of an improvisation, it addresses the actual creation of new material only tangentially. The goal of free improvisation is to find new ideas that do not depend on pre-existing structures. John Cage used improvisation “to find a way of discovering something you don’t know at the time that you improvise—that is to say, the same time you’re doing something that is not written down, or decided upon ahead of time.”²⁹ Cage criticized improvisers for relying on memorized patterns, ironically demonstrating his affinity with many of the free jazz musicians whose work he was criticizing.

In order to create new sounds spontaneously, the improviser needs to stop trying to create new sounds. As George Lewis argues, improvisation is not about “projecting the sound, . . . it’s about paying attention and performing tasks.”³⁰ By “paying attention,” or using different aspects of perception, the improviser broadens the range of stimuli, reacting in creative ways. By “performing tasks,” he or she relinquishes full autonomy over the production of sounds. These two elements coalesce into the perception-reaction

²⁷Ibid., 41–42, 46–50.

²⁸Ibid., 55.

²⁹Quoted in Laura Kuhn, “A Few Words about John Cage and Improvisation,” 4–5.

³⁰“George Lewis ‘Conversation on Music and Sound Studies,’” Talk at the University of Minnesota School of Music, YouTube video, posted by umncla on April 29, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JM43J4K02KQ&t=9m26s> (accessed September 14, 2012).

model of creativity, which engages both external stimuli and the subconscious to search for inspiration.

The limitations of cognitive thought mean that an improviser's "new" idea cannot be wholly dependent on his or her intrinsic abilities and must derive from an outside source. Listening and being open to one's surroundings is crucial.³¹ In his text piece *Aus dem sieben Tagen*, Stockhausen described situations that would allow his performers to create "intuitive music," in which

a player, through a certain meditative concentration, becomes a wonderful instrument and starts resonating. Because I think the music is always there. The more open you are, the more you open yourself to this new music by throwing out all the images, all the automatic brain processes—it always wants to manifest itself.³²

While perception is at the forefront of the improviser's mind, the actual creating of sounds happens largely on a subconscious level. A substantial part of the creative process is instinct—reactions to the perceived environment. While conscious decision-making is also important, relinquishing control allows the improviser to bypass the mental censoring processes that restrict his or her expressivity. Ludwig van Beethoven, one of the greatest improvisers in the history of classical music, scribbled the following note in his sketchbook for the Lied *Sehnsucht*, WoO 134: "One improvises (fantasizes) only when one pays absolutely no attention to what one plays, so that it would be the best and truest to improvise openly, to be unconstrained, [to play] whatever comes to mind."³³

Recent neurological studies corroborate Beethoven's assertion. Neurological studies have shown that the lateral prefrontal regions of the brain, areas in which "goal-directed

³¹"It is an easy fact to verify that most free improvisers consider listening as a major, if not the most important, skill an improviser can have." Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*, vol. 1, 44.

³²Jonathan Cott, *Stockhausen: Conversations with the Composer* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), 43.

³³*Man fantasiert eigentlich nur, wenn man gar nicht acht giebt, was man spielt, so—würde man auch am besten, wahrsten fantasiren öffentlich—sich ungezwungen überlassen, eben was einem einfällt.* Ludwig van Beethoven, Sketchbook for "Sehnsucht," WoO 134, Beethoven-Haus Bonn Digitales Archiv, accessed December 15, 2012, <http://www.beethoven-haus-bonn.de/sixcms/detail.php?id=15201>.

behaviors are consciously monitored, evaluated and corrected,” were deactivated during improvisation by jazz musicians, while they remained active during the performance of nonimprovised music. If active during improvisation, these areas would “pay attention” to the improvisational impulses, reacting critically in order to select the appropriate continuation. The deactivation of these areas suggests that the cognitive load of monitoring these impulses actually impedes split-second decision-making.³⁴

While both the skill model and the perception-reaction model address the central issue of the sheer mental computational power required to invent new music in real time, they use different approaches to make the process more efficient. In perception-reaction, the available brainpower is focused on searching for inspiration in one’s surroundings, while the power of the subconscious is harnessed for the actual execution of the sound. The skill model streamlines this execution through mental clustering, so that improvisers can create music from previously-learned fragments regardless of their surroundings.

These two methods coexist in every improvisation tradition. The perception-reaction model concerns innovation, or how to find something new of which one was not previously aware. The skill model exploits elements that were already learned and prepared. They are interdependent; the discoveries made with perception-reaction will be added to the skill set, while a broader knowledge base for the skill model will allow for deeper and more interesting innovations. In the context of a single performance, however, the performer may choose to focus predominantly on one or the other. The most familiar instances of improvisation within classical music are skill-based; extemporizing concerto cadenzas, fugues, or variations requires extensive preparation within a narrow idiom as well as musicianship

³⁴Limb and Braun, *Neural Substrates of Spontaneous Musical Performance*. Crucially, Limb and Braun note that these uncensored behaviors are “goal-directed.” Brodmann Area 10 in the medial prefrontal cortex was also activated during improvisation, an area that “appears to serve a broad-based integrative function, combining multiple cognitive operations in the pursuit of higher behavioral goals.” Thus the improvisational choices made by the performer will follow any preformed structure, even when the lateral prefrontal regions, the monitoring center, are deactivated. This helps explain why Beethoven felt absolutely unconstrained in his improvisation even while obeying familiar rules of Classical musical syntax and harmony.

skills including ear training, harmonization, and rhythmic discipline. Of course, in free fantasias and preluding, which were also expected of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musicians, innovation receives more emphasis.

The free improvisation movement was primarily oriented toward the perception-reaction model. Stephen Nachmanovitch argued that while skill is important, an overreliance can overshadow the creative act that is at the foundation of improvisation.

The technique can get too solid—we can become so used to knowing how it should be done that we become distanced from the freshness of today’s situation. This is the danger that inheres in the very competence that we acquire in practice.³⁵

A wariness of technical perfection can be found in many areas of the free improvisation movement. Previous improvisation traditions have focused on the thorough training required to gain an understanding of the rules and patterns in a given style. Almost by definition, free improvisation requires less training than idiomatic improvisation, and acquiring improvisational fluency is thus much easier. While discipline in free improvisation can involve preparation and practice, the discipline of performance is essential to the value of the act of free improvisation.

Risk and Responsibility

Considering music as a process instead of a product raises interesting questions about how to evaluate a particular activity or performance. In his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Christopher Small considers this question, writing, “If the meaning of music lies not just in musical works but in the totality of a musical performance, where do we start to look for insights that will unite the work and the event and allow us to understand it?”³⁶ His answer is that we find meaning through the relationships—between sounds within the music, between the people involved in making the music, and

³⁵Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 67.

³⁶Small, *Musicking*, 13.

between the ideas cultivated and communicated through music making. If the advantage of improvisation is its flexibility to adapt to new circumstances, it seems natural that meaning in improvisation can be found through the exploitation of this flexibility to express and enhance the relationships involved in any particular circumstance.

The terms of unrestricted improvisation accept any sound or group of sounds, but the performers and audience will still value some choices above others. A sense of responsibility to the audience, society, and one's own musical persona maintains the integrity of the performance, even without a predefined rubric. This responsibility is expressed by a goal, explicitly stated or otherwise, that raises the possibility of failure. The improviser thus maintains discipline and focus in a medium that is completely open-ended.

In his work with *Musica Elettronica Viva*, Steve Lacy found that after some promising improvisation sessions with untrained musicians, they “turned hostile,” actively ruining the improvisation. “It was like the myth of Prometheus, really. The public will tear you apart if you expose yourself like that. After a while, they no longer appreciate it and they start to destroy everything.”³⁷ Educators have successfully used improvisation as an integral part of music instruction many times since then, but Lacy's experience is a reminder that such experiments do not always achieve the desired result. In the sessions to which Lacy refers, MEV set up a *Lord of the Flies* scenario in which musical “children” were left adrift in a “wilderness” with no rules, among some of new music's most audacious creative thinkers. Nearly any action could be a positive one; however, a vocal minority chose a negative path and destroyed the experiment.

Lacy clearly felt that something was being violated by the others' insensitive playing, something that was not obvious to the untrained musicians who were taking part. They were undermining the unwritten social pact that underlay this communal activity by relinquishing their responsibility for the musical result. Open-ended performance possibilities

³⁷Jason Weiss, ed., *Steve Lacy: Conversations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 70.

can frequently produce unsatisfying results when the participants are not committed to the maintaining the integrity of the musical event, even when trained musicians are involved. When they feel little responsibility or desire for the success of the endeavor, only a sense of decorum would prevent them from active sabotage, and it usually only takes a few to destroy the performance. One of the most infamous such events was the 1958 premiere of John Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*, when the ensemble played corny blues riffs and a tuba ostinato from the *Rite of Spring*, and audience members tried to disrupt the performance with sarcastic applause near the end.³⁸

Improvisers will often have specific goals which they try to achieve through their playing. AMM member Edwin Prévost strives to explore the possibilities of sound, music, and discourse through a process which he calls "meta-music." He describes his practice of improvisation through two concepts: heurism and dialogue. Heurism involves looking for meaning in music, and solving problems of meaning through perception. Dialogue involves the meeting and coalescing of separate elements, ideas, and persons.³⁹ Through this process, he finds a reason to improvise and a specific way of improvising that allows him to feel that he is moving forward with the improvisation. By maintaining an artistic focus, he keeps the improvisation relevant for himself.

Improvisers have spoken of "risk," or ways in which a performance might fail. The jazz pianist Alex von Schlippenbach argued that a mistake in free improvisation is "missing a chance."⁴⁰ One's musical environment suggests new possibilities, and a lack of attention or courage results in missed opportunities that prevent an improvisation from achieving

³⁸Isaac Schankler, "Cage = 100: Tudor and the Performance Practice of Concert for Piano and Orchestra," *New Music Box*, September 5, 2012, accessed June 26, 2013, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/cage-tudor-concert-for-piano-and-orchestra/>.

³⁹Prévost, *No Sound Is Innocent*, 3, 172.

⁴⁰Schlippenbach attributed the idea of "missing the chance" to Evan Parker in "George Lewis—Artspeaks," panel discussion with Alex von Schlippenbach, George Lewis, and Arnold I. Davidson. YouTube video, uploaded by UChicago on March 2, 2011, accessed September 1, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9r2JrwsGXFY&t=22m44s>.

its potential. Evan Parker posited three risks that improvisers face: stagnation, insanity, and completion.⁴¹ Stagnation occurs when improvisers remain stuck in one musical area. The insanity risk happens when improvisers overextend and cannot find a way to tie the disparate elements of the piece together in a convincing way. The risk of completion is like the paradoxical risk of success: once they find a way to make their improvisation language “complete,” they resist further innovations and thus kill their own creative spark.

Through improvisation, musicians can create or replicate positive human interactions. Arnold Davidson argued that “being responsive to someone is the beginning of social responsibility.”⁴² Social responsibility is manifested by giving other players room to have their say, by responding empathetically, and by guiding them when they are struggling.

The sense of community and common cause that develops through this nonverbal medium can give its practitioners a strong sense of meaning and purpose. George Lewis recalled an improvisation concert he played with Steve Lacy shortly before the latter’s death from liver cancer in 2004.

We saw that Steve was in pain. The reason why we knew he was in pain was... he was playing the music in a funny way. Steve... would never make any mistakes... and he started to make little mistakes in the music. So what we’d do to him is we’d play a little bit louder, or try to direct sound to him in ways that would allow him to feel supported. It was totally nonverbal, and you can do this in many different ways. ... At the end of the gig, Steve came back to the hotel. He said, “I just want to thank you guys for making my life worth living.”⁴³

Embedded in this communal spirit are moral or social imperatives. Cornelius Cardew listed seven virtues of improvisation, traits to cultivate to produce worthwhile music: simplicity, integrity, selflessness, forbearance, preparedness, identification with nature, and

⁴¹John Corbett, “Ephemera Underscored: Writing Around Free Improvisation,” in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 223.

⁴²“George Lewis—Artspeaks,” panel discussion with Alex von Schlippenbach, George Lewis, and Arnold I. Davidson. YouTube video, uploaded by UChicago on March 2, 2011, accessed September 6, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9r2JrwsGXFY&t=36m26s>.

⁴³“George Lewis ‘Conversation on Music and Sound Studies,’ ” talk at the University of Minnesota School of Music, YouTube video, posted by umncla on April 29, 2009, accessed September 8, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JM43J4K02KQ&t=8m6s>.

acceptance of death.⁴⁴ These virtues apply not only to improvisation but to every context of human relations. Improvisation thus becomes a metaphor for the act of living, as the way in which we conduct ourselves musically affects relationships that extend beyond the boundaries of our music making. Christopher Small argues that music, like all art, not only represents our relationships with our surroundings, but also actively changes them.⁴⁵ Finding positive ways to react to others' contributions becomes not only an artistic challenge, but a life lesson.

⁴⁴Cardew, *Treatise Handbook*, xx.

⁴⁵Small, *Musicking*, 140.

Chapter 3

Group Improvisation: Practical Issues

Free improvisation has endured since its straggly beginnings in the 1950s and '60s because of the power of group creativity and collectivism. The connections between people—both performers and audience—give meaning to the circumstances that result from unscripted interactions. Derek Bailey wrote, “There are some very fine solo improvisers, very good players who have produced good music; but there’s so much of improvisation that’s missing, that’s not possible in solo performance.”¹

While solo free improvisation is still alive and well, group improvisation is central to many facets of the free improvisation movement. Of particular relevance for classical musicians with little or no improvising experience, group improvisation typically requires less preparation than solo improvisation to be successful, as interesting and unexpected things happen through the untested interactions that occur spontaneously. Group performance is also less intimidating and provides an entry point for nonimprovisers or even nonmusicians to participate in the creative process.

The challenges of initiating and organizing a group overlap with the challenges inherent in forming any musical group, from a chamber group to an orchestra. However, the unique nature of free improvisation can result in a few surprises for even a seasoned collaborative musician.

¹Derek Bailey, interview, in “Forum: Improvisation,” ed. Childs and Hobbs, 50.

Leadership

The anarchic political views of many early improvisers influenced the social makeup of groups that embraced a leaderless cooperative model. For example, both MEV and the Scratch Orchestra had no clearly-defined leader position, and the Scratch Orchestra made a point of reversing the expected pecking order by giving its youngest members precedence in organizing group performances.²

Improvisation groups in an educational setting, however, had a more traditional leadership model in nearly every scenario. Students in the classroom can feel that their social status or musical reputation is at stake. They are reluctant to speak out and expose their weaknesses, and they need a leader to stimulate classroom activity.³ At universities, groups were often formed as part of a course requirement, with students joining for credit and with a teacher taking the role of a leader. Many groups had a leader who participated in the improvisation, although this was not universal. In the case of the Cincinnati-based RealTime Composers, the coordinator, Alan Bern, took on a nonplaying advisory role. According to some members, this gave him a degree of impartiality when making judgement calls.⁴

In *The Improv Handbook*, Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White argue that fledgling theater improvisation companies benefit from a leadership position.

You can either establish a democracy or a benign dictatorship. We would recommend the latter. Democracy is a great way to run a country, but rarely produces great art. That's why theaters employ directors and producers rather than just hiring a group of actors, giving them a copy of the play and letting them work it out.⁵

A good leader can delegate responsibility, thus encouraging full participation from all members; at the same time, having one person as the ultimate artistic authority simplifies

²See above, p. 33.

³Composer, improviser, and pianist Joel Hoffman suggested to me that the academic environment was not conducive to the kind of anarchic music making of MEV. Students expect a more structured learning experience. See interview transcript below, p. 146.

⁴See interview transcript below, p. 148.

⁵Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 303.

issues such as argument resolution, thus increasing efficiency. It avoids giving too much power to group members who are uncommitted or unable to work well with the others.

A potential disadvantage of the dictatorship model is that the flow of creativity that results from a community of musicians pooling their ideas can be replaced by a more stultified atmosphere in which individuals bring their artistic gifts to the altar of a single musical priest. In a group with a leader, delegation can be a step toward creating an autonomous group in which a leader is no longer essential. John Stevens, one of the first free improvisation teachers,⁶ said, "I've had to try and avoid a situation where they relied on me to come in and set the whole thing up." He encouraged his students to play together before he arrived, and to invite newcomers to join in on their own initiative. He recalled, "... that took a long time to initiate but now there are always people playing together. And now it provides me with a great lift."⁷

Rehearsals

In the early stages of a group, a leader is necessary largely for organizational tasks such as recruiting players and finding times and venues for rehearsals. Stating clear objectives for the group can help to build and maintain a consistent membership. An objective could simply be to successfully complete one or more scheduled performances. Planning and guiding rehearsals also requires leadership at the beginning, although this can gradually be phased out as the other group members take increasing responsibility. Rehearsal sessions can include free improvisation, group exercises, group discussions, and preparation for recitals that may include open-ended compositions or structured improvisations.

Listening is at least as important as playing in rehearsal. Recording the sessions gives the players valuable perspective on the group sound and their role within it. Setting aside

⁶Bailey, *Improvisation*, 118.

⁷Quoted in *ibid.*, 121.

time in rehearsal to go through the recordings together makes the listening experience communal and allows ideas to be discussed and disputed, and common goals to be articulated. Recordings of other improvisation groups and experimental ensembles can provide inspiration as well. The pianist and free improviser Leo Svirsky argued that listening and discussing these recordings helps the players understand the history and the development of free improvisation as well as to assimilate the techniques used.⁸

Exercises

Broadly speaking, the wide variety of improvisation exercises falls into two camps: additive and limiting. Additive exercises build from a simple starting point with minimal freedom for the performer. Textbooks on improvisation from the classical music tradition often use this model, gradually introducing increasingly complex examples of how the concepts of rhythm, melody, counterpoint, and form are realized in music from the common practice era. Students are expected to familiarize themselves step by step with the rules and syntax of classical music, allowing them to compose their own examples and to internalize the idiom to the extent that they can improvise within it.⁹ The goal of these textbooks is to give students the skills, if not the inspiration, to assimilate the idioms of the past masters in spontaneous performance. Maurice Lieberman writes in the preface to *Keyboard Harmony*

⁸See interview transcript below, p. 176. A good starting point is the YouTube videos listed on <http://freeimprovisationexperimentalmusic.blogspot.com/> (accessed July 4, 2013), or the website <http://ubu.com>, which has a wide selection of experimental music recordings including concept pieces by Alison Knowles (accessed July 4, 2013, http://ubu.com/sound/knowles_alison.html), Pauline Oliveros, (accessed July 4, 2013, <http://www.ubu.com/sound/oliveros.html>) and the recordings distributed by the periodical *Source: Music of the Avant-Garde* (accessed July 4, 2013, <http://www.ubu.com/sound/source.html>).

⁹See Frank Joseph Sawyer, *Extemporization* (New York: Novello, 1893). Developing harmonic fluency in improvisation is at the foundation of André Grétry, *Méthode simple pour apprendre à préluder* (New York: Broude Brothers, 1968), and Maurice Lieberman, *Keyboard Harmony and Improvisation* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1957). As organists are the only classically trained instrumentalists who are still expected to improvise in a common practice idiom, numerous treatises have been written to drill them in the techniques necessary. See, for example, Reginald Hunt, *Extemporization for Music Students* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), which was written to train organ students to fulfill the requirements of the extemporization exams in the English diploma system.

and Improvisation, “The teacher cannot infuse talent into students of ordinary musical gifts; but with adequate organization and clarity, they can be trained to produce a fluent and competent improvisation.”¹⁰ The classical pianist Friedrich Gulda taught himself to improvise by composing pedagogical jazz pieces. In his *Play Piano Play*, a set of ten exercises, a musician with no improvising experience can begin with a fully-notated score and continue by working through pieces that leave progressively more room to improvise.¹¹

In contrast, limiting methods restrict an otherwise free improvisation. The limits are creative tools; they can inspire players to explore new areas, or they can serve as a means to allow the unrestricted parameters to flourish. Encapsulating the principle, Nachmanovitch wrote that “if you have all the colors available, you are sometimes almost too free. With one dimension constrained, play becomes freer in other dimensions.”¹² He suggested creating short improvisations of no more than a minute with a clear beginning, middle, and end, or using a visual image as a model.¹³ Nunn includes seven solo and nine group exercises in an appendix to his book *Wisdom of the Impulse*.¹⁴ Both the solo and group sets begin with totally free improvisations; the other exercises indicate general goals without prescribing specific means. There is little to distinguish many limiting exercises from open-ended compositions; many simpler compositions such as *Sound Pool* by Frederic Rzewski or *Microexercises* by Christian Wolff can be used as exercises.¹⁵

Additive and limiting exercises can be used for similar purposes. For example, Nunn’s “Group Exercise #5: Grooves and Transitions” instructs performers to establish a “groove” (a consistent accompaniment pattern), and then to transition to a new one. This process is

¹⁰Lieberman, *Keyboard Harmony and Improvisation*, xii.

¹¹See Friedrich Gulda, “Vorbemerkung,” in *Klavier-Kompositionen* (Vienna: Papageno, 1971), n.p.

¹²Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 85.

¹³*Ibid.*, 83, 85.

¹⁴Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*, vol. 2, 48–57.

¹⁵Frederic Rzewski, *Sound Pool* (1969), accessed May 23, 2012, http://improarchive2.brinkster.net/fr_spl.pdf. Christian Wolff, *Microexercises* (New York: C. F. Peters, 2006); Christian Wolff, *Grete: Microexercises 23–36* (New York: C. F. Peters, 2008).

repeated several times. While Nunn has constructed a limiting exercise, a few modifications would make it an additive one. Nunn restricts one aspect of the improvisation—the structure—leaving other aspects entirely to the discretion of the performer. He suggests a number of variables, such as the presence of a lead voice, the existence of a common meter or a polyrhythmic texture, the type of transition used, and whether the tempo remains constant throughout.¹⁶ By using a descriptive tone to enumerate the options, he signals a limiting approach; changing to a prescriptive tone would result in an additive exercise. This additive version would specify the way in which the structural goal of grooves and transitions would be achieved. The function of the exercise would also change from searching for innovative solutions to mastering certain skills.

Additive exercises typically work in progressive steps; eliminating this learning process can result in a limiting exercise. Similarly, practicing a limiting exercise in parts is an additive exercise in itself. For example, “Grooves and Transitions” can be practiced by first experimenting with just the grooves. The players could take turns initiating a groove, beginning with a solo over which the others gradually enter. Different styles of groove (static, rhythmic, polyrhythmic, atonal) could be attempted in isolation. The group could also explore various types of transitions using a similar step-by-step process. The starting points of minimal freedom (additive) or maximal freedom (limiting) are the simplest to execute; the difficulty increases as rules that either extend or restrict the improvisation are added.

Additive exercises are essential in the early stages of a group. Practicing the process of skill-building will give the group a foundation that will simplify the task of learning further necessary techniques. In addition, working together to achieve a set objective builds group unity. Limiting exercises are more useful at a later stage in the group’s development; their open-ended objectives mean that the success of a particular interpretation is often a

¹⁶Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*, vol. 2, 55.

matter of taste.

In a free improvisation group, the field of potential exercises is vast and depends on the skill sets of the members as well as the techniques they feel will best suit their goals. They may decide to create their own exercises as needed, experimenting with techniques to expand their improvisational vocabulary. The RealTime Composers would find specific techniques which they wanted to develop—for example, the ability to have naturally occurring pauses in which no one plays—and create exercises to address those techniques.¹⁷ There are also published collections of group improvisation exercises, which can provide a valuable starting point for a fledgling group. These collections deal with some of the typical hurdles faced by an inexperienced group.

One of the best sources for improvisation exercises is *Search & Reflect* by the percussionist John Stevens, a London-based free improviser who taught in workshops for both musicians and nonmusicians.¹⁸ In this handbook, he isolates and develops rhythmic, aural, and group performance skills, always beginning from a simple premise and progressively increasing the difficulty. In the eponymous exercise “Search & Reflect,” for example, a group of players take turns playing “clicks,” or “the shortest, most precise sound . . . within the environment.”¹⁹ This simple foundation becomes the basis of an extensive series of variations in nine stages that develop imitative, rhythmic, and interactive skills.

Listening ability is developed through exercises such as “Free Space,” in which Stevens asks players to listen to the sounds naturally present in the environment, and then to interact with them softly so that they can still be heard. This exercise also trains the musicians to maintain a sound balance.²⁰ In “Silence,” only one person is allowed to play at a time. The others listen and can enter when that player stops, but if two people accidentally

¹⁷See interview transcript below, p. 152.

¹⁸John Stevens, *Search & Reflect: Concepts and Pieces* (London: Community Music, 1985). Another excellent source is Tom Hall, *Free Improvisation: A Practical Guide* (Boston: Bee Boy Press, 2009).

¹⁹Ibid., 69.

²⁰Ibid., 61.

play together they must both stop.²¹

Self-consciousness can paralyze improvisers who become too afraid to let themselves be creative. Stevens responded with exercises such as “Beckett (Sam),” in which players breathe slowly and play only at the end of a long exhalation, stopping when they need to inhale again. Stevens wrote, “The demands of the piece lead to an unselfconscious way of playing. When stretched to the physical limit, it is impossible to concentrate on or control the music while being so involved with the breathing.”²² In “Triangle,” three players face each other and play continuously. Each player focuses only on the sounds made by the other two musicians.²³ They each play for one purpose: to be heard by the others.

Imitation exercises are also important. Stevens used imitation in many of his exercises; for example, “Ghost” has one player improvising freely while the other players try to imitate him as closely as possible at exactly the same time.²⁴ The RealTime Composers used a single imitation exercise in its first two years. Dubbed the “calibration exercise,” the players sat in a circle, and a motif would go around the group in a type of musical Chinese whispers. One player would start with a simple gesture lasting no more than four or five seconds, the next player would imitate that gesture to the best of his ability, the third player would imitate the second player, and so on around the circle. The next stage introduced variation: each player still tried to imitate the person who came before, but this time would try to change the theme by ten percent. The group discussed what constituted a change of ten percent, and brainstormed ways the elements of the gesture could be modified. After the ten-percent exercise, the group would continue with the same exercise with a twenty-percent change, or a fifty-percent change, or a 100-percent change—an exercise in which each player tries to find the “opposite” of what the previous player did.²⁵

²¹Ibid., 85–86.

²²Ibid., 103.

²³Ibid., 78.

²⁴Ibid., 88.

²⁵See interview transcript below, p. 147.

Training a group through exercises builds not only skills but also teamwork. While they are simple on the surface, executing these pieces accurately is challenging even for professional-level musicians. Mistakes are inevitable and welcome, since the humanity of failure breaks down barriers of communication and ego.²⁶ The composer and pianist Joel Hoffman, an observer and guest collaborator with the RealTime Composers, noted that their exercises were “designed to get everyone to lose their inhibitions.”²⁷

Stevens warns of a “temptation to rush through the stages” of an exercise, considering it “much better to . . . rehearse each stage in a relaxed but concentrated manner.”²⁸ Even at the most basic level, each exercise can inspire real creativity and powerful music making, and the consequences of the choices made by individuals or the collective can be the subject of a full rehearsal’s worth of scrutiny. For this reason, two short or one longer exercise is enough for a single rehearsal session, and each one can be reprised a few times as the group matures.

Provoking the Unexpected

Once a group has established a collective mindset through skill-building additive exercises, limiting exercises can expand the group’s horizons. Whereas additive exercises prepare one for challenges by incrementally increasing the difficulty, limiting exercises are the equivalent of being thrown off the deep end and struggling to stay afloat. Limiting exercises can be a means to create an unfamiliar situation, challenging the players to innovate. As a consequence of the perception-reaction model, unexpected perceptions will likely result in new musical directions.

We are creatures of habit. When facing a situation encountered previously, we are

²⁶See Stevens, *Search & Reflect*, 2.

²⁷See interview transcript below, p. 143.

²⁸Stevens, *Search & Reflect*, 3.

more likely to proceed in a manner that we already know is reasonably successful. Acquiring a skill set for improvisation can thus be achieved simply through experience, but it also means that performers will tend to “play safe” instead of trying new things. Unexpected happenings can force players out of their routine, and reacting to the new circumstances will provoke new ideas.

The “Improvisation Rites,” composed and published by members of the Scratch Orchestra, create unexpected happenings through instructions that change the environment of the performance. In “Tender Glances” by Cornelius Cardew, the musicians play according to expressions in each other’s eyes.²⁹ Howard Skempton’s “Improvisation Rite No. 2” is still more enigmatic; its single sentence instructs the performer, “When you’re not playing, look for a girl in red stockings.”³⁰ These limiting exercises require certain actions, although they do not restrict the actual musical sound.

Other methods can be used to create unexpected circumstances. Some find performance opportunities for which they are intentionally unprepared. Derek Bailey, who founded the group *Company* to experiment with “semi *ad hoc*” ensemble playing, felt that the best results came from unrehearsed ensembles. Once they become a formal band, “a deterioration sets in.”³¹

New or altered instruments and experimental ways of producing sound can have the same effect, as performers are forced to reinvent their technique. Tom Nunn writes, “[Experimental or original] instruments provide relatively unexplored fields of play. New playing techniques can be discovered over a period of years while old techniques are polished, thus retaining a certain ‘freshness’ about the playing experience.”³² John Cage took this to an extreme in a series of improvisatory works from the 1970s, including *Child*

²⁹*Nature Study Notes*, 4.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 3.

³¹Derek Bailey, interview, in “Forum: Improvisation,” ed. Childs and Hobbs, 52.

³²Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*, vol. 2, 27.

of Tree (Improvisation I) (1975) and *Inlets (Improvisation III)* (1977) which used cacti and water-filled conch shells as instruments. His goal was to eliminate any semblance of control that the performer might have over the resulting sound, searching for “improvisation using instruments in which there is a discontinuity between cause and effect.”³³

Experienced improvisers are quick to exploit accidents in performance, which occur naturally and are usually unexpected. The violinist Mary Oliver found that these moments greatly enhanced her performances: “Some of the most creative moments in an improvisation happen when there are ‘accidents.’ . . . For a split second, I am completely in the present. . . . In improvised activity, this ‘failure’ might be the opening for opportunity—for a change in the plan.”³⁴ In most cases, the response will make the unintentional occurrence sound intentional. Rzewski goes further, arguing that unifying accidents is the essence of the genre: “Improvisation is the art of making connections between unplanned events in such a way as to make it seem as if they had to happen.”³⁵ Solo performers, lacking interaction with other players, typically make use of imperfections in their own playing as a way to interact with themselves. The violinist Malcolm Goldstein was a major proponent of this technique, as noted by Tom Johnson.

Many kinds of accidents can happen to any violinist, and usually do. The tone can get a little off, or attacks can be noisy, or an odd overtone can sneak in unwanted, and usually we just have to pretend we don’t hear such things. Goldstein, however, followed up on his accidents. I won’t say he actually looked for squeals and scratches and such, but when he came across them, he played them for all they were worth, and often they turned out to be worth a lot. Some of my favorite sections were ones that developed when Goldstein ran across some fluke, repeated it, focused on it, and let it evolve.³⁶

The unexpected can also come through new ways of perceiving familiar situations. Many improvisers will distance themselves from the sound by focusing on the physical act of playing instead of the aural consequence. The jazz pianist Vijay Iyer noted the

³³Laura Kuhn, “A Few Words about John Cage and Improvisation,” 4.

³⁴Oliver, “Constellations in Play,” 14–15.

³⁵Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 100.

³⁶Tom Johnson, *The Voice of New Music*, 163.

connection between a player's movements and expressive qualities in the sound.³⁷ The saxophonist Evan Parker, famous for his virtuosic and highly textured performances full of harmonics, multiphonics, and unconventional effects, remarked that the physical act of playing produces sounds on its own: "The circular breathing is a way of starting the engine, but at a certain speed all kinds of things happen which I'm not consciously controlling. They just come out."³⁸ Pauline Oliveros has used the physical sensation of sound and her mental state to determine the direction of her music. In performances of her "Rose Mountain" series, she improvised on the accordion by going against her instincts, remaining static when she wanted change and shifting sonority only when she felt content leaving the music static.³⁹

Observation: Building Foundations

Improvisation is a process of discovery not only when playing but also in discussion and analysis after the performance. Observing one's choices and behavior from a detached perspective allows a more objective evaluation of the various aspects of the improvisation. Elements that are judged to be more successful enter the improvisers' repertory of possibilities, while exploring alternative methods may help correct perceived flaws. In this way, an improvisation group can build a foundation of common experience and expectation that can then be challenged, abandoned, or further developed into set improvisational models.

The development of affordable recording technology in the 1960s greatly aided the improvisation movement and made it more self-aware. Nearly every improvisation group went through a phase of recording, discussing, and modifying their improvisation practice. The Improvisation Chamber Ensemble used their recordings to build a structured impro-

³⁷Iyer, "Embodied Mind," 392, 410–411.

³⁸Cited in Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 51.

³⁹See Tom Johnson's review in Johnson, *The Voice of New Music*, 174.

visitation from scratch. “The group would improvise on some basic scheme and record the results. They would then listen to their recording. In their next version they would eliminate the ineffective aspects and incorporate additional ideas. By repeating this process, they improved the piece until it was no longer improvised; then, they gave it up.”⁴⁰ The ICE used their rehearsal recordings not only as a reference, but as a background over which they improvised in their concerts.⁴¹

This recursive formula has remained a common way for groups to rehearse. Nick Hwang’s piece *WTFreq* for laptops controlled by Nintendo Wiimotes achieved its final form through rehearsal with the Laptop Orchestra of Louisiana.

Early rehearsals varied widely, but as the ensemble learned the piece and became comfortable with the Wiimote, outcomes became more uniform and consistent. We found the “usual way” to perform the piece through improvisation, maintaining the organic performance that Hwang desired in combination with a consistent performance practice that preserved the identity of the piece.⁴²

When aspects of the performance are worked out beforehand, the piece acquires a nonimprovised foundation. Some groups found that their improvisations became increasingly restrained. To prevent such stagnation, the Improvisation Chamber Ensemble would periodically abandon the structural foundations they had developed and start from scratch. The KIVA ensemble at USCD kept their playing fresh by listening back to their recordings without discussing them. They found that using words for analysis would lock their own perceptions into facets that they had already verbalized. Trombonist John Silber felt that this method let them

assess the situation in a few days, months, or years, for revelation is not always fast. It became clear to us that the creative mentality and the problem solving mentality are different phenomena even though they cross paths. If you cast your thoughts into a well, into “What am I doing? where is it going? what is happening?” then you are building a

⁴⁰Perone, *Lukas Foss: A Bio-bibliography*, 74.

⁴¹Murray Schumach, “Musical Ad Libbing: Foss Will Demonstrate Improvisations Here,” *New York Times*, March 4, 1962, II, 9.

⁴²Albert, “Improvisation as Tool and Intention.”

fence. So we listened, absorbing the bad with the good while the psyche was being formed and to know later how it got that way.⁴³

However, having predetermined elements does not preclude a freely improvised performance, nor does it necessarily mean that the performance will be “less” improvised. The saxophonist Steve Lacy, an experimental jazz musician and member of *Musica Elettronica Viva*, felt that planning allowed him to improvise at a higher level.

It is something to do with the ‘edge.’ Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go on out there, you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means, but it is a leap into the unknown. . . . What I write is to take you to the edge safely, so that you can go on out there and find this other stuff.⁴⁴

In the skill model of creative improvisation, a methodical system of preparation reduced the cognitive burden by making some tasks automatic and by generalizing these tasks to include a wide range of potential applications. Observing and responding to one’s own playing and the playing of others results in a much looser framework of concepts and associations. Over time, the accumulation of experiences and observations can solidify into a recognizable idiom, or a specific concept of an open-ended composition. This foundation can be a useful way to build complexity and refinement, but it can also compromise the spontaneity of the improvisation.

Roles

The plurality of voices in group improvisation over solo improvisation can be a catalyst for creativity. Each player has a vision of the final work, casting him- or herself in specific roles to fulfill that vision. His or her role within the group is flexible and changes as the music’s character changes.

⁴³John Silber, interview, in “Forum: Improvisation,” ed. Childs and Hobbs, 96.

⁴⁴Lacy, *Conversations*, 51.

Roles are typically defined in terms of their place in the texture and how they relate to the prevailing musical character. The British percussionist Jacqueline Walduck enumerated seven functional roles: solo, background, heckle, punctuation, counterpart, contrapart, and block. The first two are self-explanatory, relating to functions within the texture. The heckle and punctuation roles refer to short interjections; heckles challenge the prevailing mood or texture, while punctuations help to clarify the phrase structure. A good jazz pianist might take on a punctuation role while comping during a short break in another player's solo. Counterparts go along with the other players; contraparts go against them. A solo or background role can be either "counter" or "contra"—for example, a *contrasolo* is a prominent antagonistic role. A block is a disrupting event; Walduck recalled that "the most extreme block [she] ever experienced was when a player began to throw chairs around the rehearsal space. This also caused everyone to stop playing."⁴⁵

The Bay Area improviser Tom Nunn defines a similar group of seven "relational functions": solo, support, ground, dialogue, catalyst, sound mass, and interpolation.⁴⁶ Nunn, however, focuses only on textural considerations, not musical character. Whereas Walduck has only two basic levels (solo and background), Nunn has three (solo, support, and ground). In his model, the foreground material can be played by one or more performers (solo or dialogue), backed by a secondary layer of activity (support). Walduck's punctuation role could be a support, catalyst, or interpolation in Nunn's system, and her blocking role is subsumed into the broader category of catalyst.

Through her analysis of group improvisations, Walduck shows that these roles are often ambiguous in practice, and a player will frequently change roles with every note or gesture, or sometimes even within a single note, depending on the actions of the other

⁴⁵Walduck, "Role-Taking in Free Improvisation and Composition, 39–41.

⁴⁶Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*, vol. 1, 26–27.

musicians.⁴⁷ In addition, the perception of roles is subjective, so that one player might imagine himself in a different role from what the others perceive. Despite these limitations, analyzing and discussing roles can help groups identify how players are relating to each other and can diversify the range of interactive possibilities.⁴⁸

As in any collaborative enterprise, the personalities involved often resolve into “default” roles—certain people end up leading while others follow. Assigning roles can help address this by placing people in unfamiliar positions—for example, a natural leader might be relegated to the background for one exercise. In inexperienced groups, many players will gravitate toward a single role, so that all players will drift into an unchanging background position, or else will tear the improvisation in multiple directions as too many players try to take a solo.

Many group exercises are designed to address this issue. For example, Nunn’s “Group Exercise #7: Interaction” involves players taking on as many roles as possible within a single improvisation. The group can agree on a series of roles for each player beforehand or let the roles be decided on the spur of the moment. In both cases, maintaining a clearly defined position among the various activities of the other players requires adaptive listening. In “Group Exercise #8: Interpolation,” the group is divided into two subgroups, one of which maintains a consistent character while the other interpolates short bursts of contrasting material.⁴⁹ This exercise requires players *not* to adapt to each other in order to maintain a consistent role.

In *Free Improvisation: A Practical Guide*, Tom Hall suggests practicing “relationships,” or the ways in which two people can interact. He develops a series of exercises in which two group members perform an improvisation and the others listen to the relationship

⁴⁷See her analysis of the improvisation transcriptions in Walduck, “Role-Taking in Improvisation and Collaborative Composition,” vol. 2.

⁴⁸See Chapter 4, Analysis of “Toccatango,” for an example of how a typically passive player who gravitated toward supporting roles took a lead role.

⁴⁹Nunn, *Wisdom of the Impulse*, vol. 2, 55–56.

between them. For example, in “Exercise 20: Choose Before Playing 1,” the two players agree on a specific relationship before the improvisation. In the next exercise, each player decides on the relationship independently without telling the other, potentially creating a conflict between the two intended relationships.⁵⁰ Hall does not restrict himself to a prescribed list of relationships, allowing for roles, technical descriptions, or metaphors (“He was chasing me, I was running away”) to be their defining quality.⁵¹

Another challenge for new groups is maintaining heterogeneity and conflict. Initially, players tend either to imitate or ignore each other. The former results in a mass of counterparts, where no one plays against the dominant texture, and the latter can result in such mutual indifference that coherence becomes almost unachievable. A more confident group can sustain a number of contrasting ideas and challenge each other by taking the music in unexpected directions. Hugh Davies, an electronics player with the Music Improvisation Company, recounts an experience playing in the group alongside saxophonist Evan Parker. When Parker began a series of very high, fast passages on his soprano sax, Davies

waited until he had very nearly given up for lack of response, before suddenly taking up his invitation [by playing in the same register], which meant that he then had to continue, for longer than he had “intended” when he started out. . . I [Davies] took this decision for purely musical reasons, without verbally rationalizing it for myself, as it created a musical tension that developed out of Evan’s initial gesture that seemed to me to be appropriate.⁵²

Dynamic situations in which a number of different ideas are in open conflict seem to happen more frequently among free jazz musicians, where everyone is often playing at once and rhetoric is outpaced by pure sonic effect. Misha Mengelberg said such improvising requires a “survival strategy” for times when the actions of other people can force a player into new and unforeseen roles.

You have. . . all your expectations and plans *destroyed* the moment you play with other people. They all have their own ideas of how the musical world at that moment should be.

⁵⁰Tom Hall, *Free Improvisation: A Practical Guide* (Boston: Bee Boy Press, 2009), 32.

⁵¹Hall, *Free Improvisation*, 30.

⁵²Cited in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 95.

So there are two, three, five, six composers there at the same time destroying each other's ideas, pieces.⁵³

Bailey refers to this kind of interaction as “mutual subversion.”⁵⁴

Criticism

The free improvisation movement's refusal to objectify art brought it outside of the purview of the received values on which music criticism was based. Improvisers likened their art to nature in its innocence of aesthetic values. Violinist Malcolm Goldstein asked rhetorically, “Why do we judge concerts/pieces of music? Tell me please, do you judge each tree so critically?”⁵⁵

In a group context, however, open criticism and diverging viewpoints can be vital. Sociology experiments have shown that when debate is encouraged, groups produce more and better ideas, and the individuals in the group will be stimulated to innovate further after the discussion. Criticism is beneficial even when it ultimately proves to be invalid.⁵⁶ If concerns within the group are not verbalized, players can withdraw into themselves, unengaged with musical results that they feel do not reflect their own wishes. Others in the group may detect this “silent criticism” and become self-conscious of their own contribution.⁵⁷

In groups with inexperienced or timid players, discussion without criticism may be the best approach. Working with Multicultural Education and Counseling for the Arts (MECA) Improvisation Ensemble, a workshop in Austin, Texas for public school stu-

⁵³Cited in Corbett, “Writing Around Free Improvisation,” 236.

⁵⁴Bailey, *Improvisation*, 95.

⁵⁵Malcolm Goldstein, “The Politics of Improvisation,” in “Forum: Improvisation,” ed. Childs and Hobbs, 81.

⁵⁶See Charlan J. Nemeth et al., “The Liberating Role of Conflict in Group Creativity: A Study in Two Countries,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 34 (2004): 365–374.

⁵⁷Evaluation apprehension is a primary stumbling-block in the creative output of group brainstorming sessions; see *ibid.*, 365.

dents, David Dove found that nonjudgmental analysis was an effective teaching strategy. The students responded enthusiastically when everything was accepted and they could be themselves.⁵⁸ More experienced groups can benefit from criticism, however. The RealTime Composers, for example, picked apart their free improvisations in rehearsal in order to find specific areas to be improved.⁵⁹

The role of criticism in free improvisation is a contentious issue. While critical discussion may inspire improvisers to new heights of creativity, any specific critical remark is of questionable validity because of the amorphous quality of improvised music as well as its non-repeatability. As many improvisers react against the Western tendency to objectify art, they would reject the separation of the observed performance from the observer that would allow objective criticism. Referring to his work with MEV, Rzewski wrote, “One of the goals is: to rob the listener of the ability to judge. This is also what I want when I listen: to be robbed.”⁶⁰

Recording technology that allowed improvisations to be preserved was an important factor in the blossoming of the free improvisation movement. Improvisations could thus be subject to more rigorous analysis and criticism, inspiring some musicians to evaluate improvisations in the same manner as written music. Noam Sivan argues, “My basic point of departure for evaluating improvisations is that in spite of their spontaneity, they represent structured music making. The criteria should, therefore, be the same as for written music.”⁶¹ Sivan’s criteria consist of musical attributes that represent aesthetic values generally accepted across genres and cultures: “repetition and change, unity, continuity, balance, diversity, and avoidance of boredom.”⁶² In listening back to their recorded improvisations,

⁵⁸Barbara Rose Lange, “Teaching the Ethics of Free Improvisation,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 7, no. 2 (2011), accessed December 28, 2012, <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/964/2307>.

⁵⁹See interview transcript below, p. 152.

⁶⁰Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 278.

⁶¹Sivan, “Improvisation in Western Art Music,” 90.

⁶²Ibid.

groups conduct aesthetic evaluations based on their own criteria and can modify their methods as a result. However, such evaluations can be influenced by the performers' inside perspective in the creative process. Evaluation by outsiders may be more objective in terms of the aesthetic criteria applied, but they can fail to take into account the specific circumstances of the performance, in which functional considerations are often dominant. For example, improvisation's purpose can be to reveal musical tendencies and methods of cooperation, to incite certain reactions from an audience, to explore a particular musical style, to brainstorm, or to use improvisation as music therapy.⁶³

Critical discussion of free improvisation has often focused on the way in which a group interacts or fails to interact. In his reviews for the *Village Voice*, Tom Johnson often singled out the ensemble playing in improvisations for comment. In a performance of John Zorn's *Jai Alai*, he recognized that the "musicians have clearly worked together a lot and developed a very similar concept of playing,"⁶⁴ but he was less complimentary toward a flute and electronic duo that lacked mutual engagement, writing: "There's nothing wrong with that, but I prefer the idea that an improvising group, or any musical group for that matter, should strive for something greater than the sum of its parts."⁶⁵ Constructive criticism in rehearsal can help to achieve this group unity.

Changing Membership

Improvisation groups are uniquely adaptable to changes in personnel. Unlike a classical chamber ensemble, concerts can be organized and programs worked out even before a stable roster has been established. Whereas many string quartets are renowned for their

⁶³For a comprehensive discussion of the use of improvisation in music therapy, see Tony Wigram, *Improvisation: Methods and Techniques for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (New York: J. Kingsley Publishers, 2004).

⁶⁴Johnson, *The Voice of New Music*, 253.

⁶⁵Ibid.

longevity, an active span of two or three years is normal in free improvisation. Well-known quartets attract regular concerts and recording contracts, but there is little financial incentive for a improvisation group to stick together once it outlives its creative usefulness. AMM, active for almost fifty years, has managed to stay together because they “didn’t play together very much,” according to member Edwin Prévost.⁶⁶ Prévost’s flippant remark hints at the distinct advantages of both long-term and intermittent collaboration. AMM has developed a musical philosophy and a unique approach to sound that has been enhanced by their longevity, while maintaining a fresh outlook through a relaxed performing schedule that allows for outside projects and collaborations with many other improvising artists.

Sociological studies have shown that creative teams are most effective when a clique of closely connected people joins forces with outsiders.⁶⁷ The theater director Chris Johnston found that a relatively stable membership is important for developing a vocabulary of ideas and encouraging teamwork unsullied by excessive ego problems.⁶⁸ An inexperienced group can end up blocking each other’s ideas by misinterpreting cues or desires for a change of direction. Rehearsing and discussing a piece gives the players insight into each other’s views. On the other hand, a completely inflexible lineup can be as much a curse as it is a blessing. “Continuity of personnel can lead to an artistic stasis where the group just grows stale.”⁶⁹ The ideal is to have a group that works together regularly, with some outside influences that inject new ideas. Guest performers can join a group, even if only for a single rehearsal. Pursuing outside improvisation projects should also be encouraged.

Welcoming new members can be a challenge, however, if a routine and a style have been established. In his London workshops, John Stevens found that a group that works together for three weeks can already develop its own style, but that it is important for

⁶⁶Chris Johnston, *The Improvisation Game*, 137.

⁶⁷See Uzzi and Spiro, “Collaboration and Creativity: The Small World Problem,” *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 2 (September 2005): 464.

⁶⁸Johnston, *The Improvisation Game*, 139.

⁶⁹Ibid.

the players to let go of pre-established elements if new members move the group in other directions.⁷⁰ The percussionist Jacqueline Walduck noted that a guest oboist in one of her group's improvisation sessions completely changed the normal roles of the members and encouraged new types of interactions.⁷¹ If the goal of free improvisation is to perform without pre-defined assumptions, new members can highlight assumptions of which the others had not been aware.

⁷⁰Bailey, *Improvisation*, 121.

⁷¹Walduck, "Role-Taking in Free Improvisation and Collaborative Composition," vol. 1, 89–92.

Chapter 4

The AIR Improviser Experience

In January 2012, I organized an improvisation ensemble, the AIR Improvisers,¹ at the College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) in Cincinnati in order to have some practical experience for this dissertation. Weekly meetings ran from the end of January until April, with two further meetings in May and one performance, a lunchtime concert in the CCM atrium on April 19. The group had six members in total: Lindsey Jacob (alto saxophone), Jennifer Jolley (piano and celesta), Stephanie Neeman (piano), Ty Niemeyer (percussion), Josh Ulrich (violin), and myself (piano, celesta, and keyboard). No more than four were active in the group at any one time. In the first few months, the group consisted of Lindsey, Jennifer, Ty, and myself; in April and May, we mostly rehearsed as a trio of Lindsey, Stephanie, and myself. Josh joined us on two occasions and performed with us on April 19.

The challenges of organizing a group confirmed many of the practical points covered in the previous chapter. Because I declined to take a leading role in my own group, our early rehearsals lacked focus. An initial plan for rehearsals would have helped us get a better start. While I recorded nearly all the rehearsals, I mostly listened to them myself, only occasionally making them available online for the others to hear. Much later, I realized

¹For most of its existence, the group was unnamed; AIR Improvisers was suggested by Lindsey Jacob shortly before our performance on April 14. There was no relation with the Asian Improv aRts, a San Francisco-based group directed by Francis Wong. <http://www.asianimprov.org/> (accessed July 9, 2013).

that listening back together as a group is a valuable tool for generating discussion and developing a group identity.

Even with our hit-or-miss sessions, the high level of musicianship among players resulted in several very promising takes. The best of these highlight the advantages of group improvisation. Taking advantage of the joint creative process, we allowed our various ideas to intermingle and conflict, creating an energetic dialogue that would have been very difficult to achieve any other way. Our classically trained ears allowed us to respond quickly and sensitively to each other's pitch choices, rhythmic cues, and mood changes. We developed an instinct for what roles were required within the group, supporting other players' ideas or initiating a transition when necessary. The communal experience of creating music spontaneously and live was inspiring in itself, even when the musical result sounded insipid when listening to the recording afterward.

The following analyses of selected recorded portions of our rehearsals and performances consider how the nature of group improvisation and rehearsal strategies influenced the aesthetic qualities of the musical result. They take into account aesthetic considerations, but also the intentions of the improvisers and the functional value of rehearsal takes for the development of the group's abilities. The fact that I participated in the group improvisation undoubtedly has had a strong influence on how I find meaning and purpose in specific events and gestures. However, the fact that our improvisations were "free" in the sense that they did not have any predefined idiomatic boundaries would make it hard, if not impossible, for an outsider to analyze these takes in a similar level of detail. I have provided links to the recordings of all of the analyzed takes in the footnotes so that readers can draw their own conclusions.

Analysis of “Tocatango”

The final take from our rehearsal on March 3 produced one of the most musically interesting results. Three of us—Jennifer (piano), Ty (vibraphone), and myself (celesta and fork against metal music stand)—participated in our only attempt of my text piece, *Tango Exercise No. 3, “Tocatango.”*² Following our first rehearsal, I had written three “Tango Exercises” that were designed to address some imbalances that I perceived in the group. I wanted to encourage musical parameters that I felt we were neglecting, including strong meter, harmonic center, layering, and emotional playing.

At this stage, I had not yet made a distinction between additive and limiting exercises. My exercises naturally took a limiting form because I wanted to preserve the autonomy of free improvisation while offering a few stylistic and structural guidelines. In retrospect, a more rigorous series of additive exercises might have had a better result, as my musical suggestions proved impossibly difficult to achieve without preparation.

The instructions for this exercises are as follows:

- This is a rhythmic exercise. One player is responsible for keeping the 2/4 meter and tempo throughout in whatever way he/she sees fit. There are four essential rhythmic points within the 2/4 meter: on the first and fourth 16th notes of the first beat, and on the first and third 16th notes of the second beat (making the traditional habanera rhythm). At the beginning, each player chooses just one of these rhythmic points and articulates only that point every measure (each point should be articulated by at least one player).
- Gradually, the players begin to add other articulations. They should try to retain the 16th note-pulse. At its peak, the combination of all the players should result in a continuous 16th note-rhythm. It’s possible that one or more players may be moved to stray off of the 16th-note pulse in the heat of the moment.
- After the peak, the density of the rhythms should gradually calm down until each player is playing only one of the essential rhythmic points per measure (and all the rhythmic points should be articulated). Each player should be playing at a different rhythmic point than before. The previous two steps are repeated (the build-up, peak, and denouement) until each player has played on each of the four essential rhythmic points at the low points between the peaks.³

²A complete mp3 recording of this take is available at <http://edwardneeman.com/tocatango.mp3>.

³See Appendix A for the full score of the *Three Tango Exercises*, p. 137.

A number of factors contributed to the value of this take. It is relatively short; in a rehearsal in which three of the other four group takes drifted aimlessly for over ten minutes, the five-minute Tocotango was a model of compact development. The rhythmic pattern that underlay the piece seemed to make us more efficient; it also inspired Ty, typically a passive presence, to take a leading role as a percussionist. Whereas many of the other takes sounded disjointed, in this one we seemed comfortable developing ideas and passing them between players.

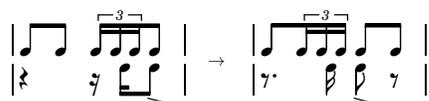
Its “success” on a musical level came despite our failure to fulfill the criteria of the exercise. Achieving even the initial rhythmic pattern was a challenge, and it took a full thirty seconds before the rhythms combined correctly. Even though two waves of textural density can be clearly perceived with peaks at 1:00 and 3:20, rhythmic instability persisted, with the position of the downbeat shifting multiple times. None of us felt positive about this take immediately afterward; listening to the recording, however, gave me a new perspective. Our teamwork gave the music coherence and purpose, despite many shaky moments. If I had taken the responsibility of preparing and presenting recording selections from our sessions, this would have been an encouraging example and could have allowed us to take the group to a much higher level.

Two factors kept us from a consistent metrical anchor: Our sense of the tempo diverged quite dramatically in some places, and unusual subdivisions of the beat obscured the sixteenth-note pulse underlying the rhythm. We got off to a bad start. In the aggregate rhythm ($\frac{2}{4}$ )¹, I played the first note, Jennifer played the second, and Ty played the third. My tempo was initially much faster than Ty’s, with Jennifer caught in the middle. As I was arriving too early on the downbeats, the rhythm shifted to a 3/8 meter ($\frac{3}{8}$ )². At the time, I was unaware of my mistake; instead I heard the rhythm as a faster 2/4 ($\frac{2}{4}$ )³ and wondered why the others were lagging so far behind.

My faster rhythm eventually won out when Ty caught on to the discrepancy and

followed me. I began adding sixteenth notes at 0:19, eventually playing even sixteenths in every first beat by 0:33 ($\frac{2}{4}$ ♩ $\overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \rightarrow \text{♩} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \rightarrow \text{♩} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}}$). Ty began playing with me on the downbeat at 0:25, and expanded to the full tango rhythm ($\frac{2}{4}$ ♩ $\overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}}$) by 0:38. He then elaborated this rhythm further with a flourish on the second beat ($\text{♩} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}}$) that seemed to follow naturally from the earlier passages. At this point, Ty effectively took the lead and Jennifer and I snapped into place to follow him.

The position of the downbeat shifted by an eighth note at 1:56 and by a quarter note at 3:00. In the first of these shifts, Ty forced the new placement through heavy accents. The example below shows the aggregate rhythm above Ty's rhythm, before and after the shift.

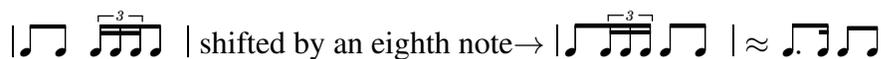


It is unclear whether Ty intended to shift the beat or place an offbeat accent, or whether his internal sense of meter was aligned differently from mine. However, our response to his accents effectively cemented the shift. I changed the accents of my two eighth notes so that the new downbeat was emphasized instead of the old one ($\text{♩} \rightarrow \text{♩} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}}$). Jennifer moved her rhythm so that her gestures began on the second beat both before and after the shift.

Before the shift: $\frac{2}{4}$ ♩ $\overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}}$ | (1:46) or ♩ ♩ | (1:55)

After the shift: $\frac{2}{4}$ ♩ $\overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}}$ | ♩ (1:59) or ♩ $\overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}} \overset{\frown}{\text{♩}}$ (2:04)

The new downbeat placement retroactively brought our rhythm more in line with the tango pattern.



While our playing feels rhythmic throughout, the pulse is actually quite elastic. This flexibility allowed us to explore expressive rhythmic subtleties but prevented us from maintaining a consistent sense of meter.

Ty, 3:36–4:45

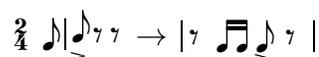
The beginning of this transcription of Ty’s playing shows the tail end of a series of imaginative rhythmic variations. Ty had settled into a basic melodic and rhythm groove while Jennifer and I kept a steady beat behind him. He gradually changed the rhythmic placement of his gesture, slowing down the quick upbeat flourish and gradually delaying the final two notes. For the most part, he retained the sixteenth-note subdivisions of the beat, although the transcription fails to accurately depict the way the attacks almost imperceptibly shifted between the rhythmic points.

Toward the end of the above example, an ambiguity of the rhythm between the players causes rhythm variation through a shift of metrical emphasis. In the final line of the example above, Ty’s chords fall once per measure. Initially, they fall on the final sixteenth note of the measure as an upbeat to my celesta chords on the downbeat. This was established through repetition; fifteen measures (including the 5x and 8x repeated measures at the end of the second line) follow this pattern. In the final line, the vibraphone upbeat and the celesta chords move apart amid a general easing of the tempo, until they are separated by an eighth note. In the new rhythmic pattern, the perceived downbeat falls on the vibraphone note, not with the celesta:

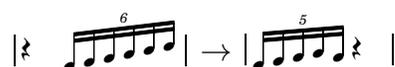
It is unlikely that this shift was intentional. It could even be an artifact of my analysis due to the unsteady rhythm, although I double-checked this passage with a few other

musicians, who all tapped on the downbeats exactly where I heard them. The fact that I perceived it in this way could be the result of our kinesthetic and perceptual activities in improvisation. A slight adjustment in the rhythm of our attacks—perhaps accidental—shifted our perception of the composite rhythm, which created a positive feedback loop when we used our modified interpretation to influence our playing.

Despite these rhythmic difficulties, we demonstrated strong ensemble playing, responding quickly and sensitively to each other. For example, at 2:05, I moved my gesture so that it landed on the second beat instead of the first.



Prior to this, Jennifer and I had been alternating beats—I would play on the first beat and she would cover the second. She responded by shifting her flourishes from the second beat to the first, thus maintaining the alteration (2:13).



Ty showed that he was in tune with the needs of the group by providing a solid rhythmic foundation when we were struggling, and then by becoming more flexible once the meter had become established. From 0:38 when he unified our disparate rhythms, Ty was the “backbone” of the tango. Around 2:40, when Jennifer and I had established a reasonably consistent beat, he allowed himself to relax his own regularity, experimenting with pitch and gestural patterns. After around fifteen seconds, our rhythmic foundation was becoming increasingly precarious, inciting Ty to return to a more rigorous rhythmic pattern by 3:00.

In the aftermath of this take, none of us felt good about our playing. I commented that we could have had more melodic interest. Jennifer felt that the rules were not specific enough, and that we should have determined beforehand whether we would stick to articulations on the sixteenth-note pulse or allow freer rhythmic elaborations.

However, when I listened to the recording later, I had a much more positive impression, which was reinforced when I analyzed our playing in more detail. I recanted my view that we needed more melodic interest when I found a great deal of gestural interplay that I had missed while I was playing. Despite our difficulties with even the most basic aspects of the exercise, we had banded together to create a dialogue of real musical substance by grappling with these rhythmic challenges. We achieved a balance between foreground and background materials and maintained a rhythmic pattern that adapted fluidly to changes by one player. Whereas Ty had assumed a passive role in previous takes, he actively helped us when Jennifer and myself were struggling.

One of the lessons of the free improvisation movement is that the experience of performing and listening in the moment is more relevant than analysis. Even though analyzing the recording afterward convinced me that our improvisation was a promising step forward, we failed to translate it into progress for the group. Jennifer and Ty did not come to any rehearsals after March 3, and both left the group shortly thereafter. Had I made group listening part of our regular rehearsal experience, our sessions would undoubtedly have been more productive. Listening is the most important part of improvising, and recording technology was instrumental in giving improvisation groups the confidence and technique needed to disseminate their music.⁴

A more structured rehearsal strategy would also have helped. Instead of diving straight into “Tocatango,” we should have begun with shorter and simpler rhythmic exercises, practicing with only one player active at a time. We could have developed some imitation and variation games based on the tango rhythm. By breaking down “Tocatango” into components, we would have been more attuned to its challenges and possibilities. For example, one player could play the tango rhythm in the background while another player took a “solo,” starting from only one attack per measure and increasing the complexity from there.

⁴See above, pp. 48 and 66.

The confusion in the first thirty seconds would not have happened if we had practiced just the opening rhythmic state as a separate exercise, with no increase in complexity.

Framework No. 1

Analyzing the recording of “Tocatango” shows how the dynamic nature of group improvisation can find creative solutions and means in difficult situations, even without careful rehearsal. A focused rehearsal strategy broadens the prospective range of an improvisation, as a wide variety of ideas are explored and tested. Detailed practice of specific components in rehearsal improves execution, confidence, and coordination between players. The AIR Improvisers’s rehearsals of Lindsey Jacob’s work, *Framework No. 1*, confirmed these benefits. In addition to being a group member, Lindsey was the only composition major to perform in the April 19 performance for which she contributed this work. Scored for three singers or players of unspecified instruments, the piece is structured around small improvised musical gestures that are passed between the musicians. The timing is controlled by stopwatches; a new “event” consisting of text instructions to one or more players occurs every ten or twenty seconds across its six-minute duration.

The piece’s restrictions meant that it required far more preparation than the other, freer numbers in our recital. It surfaced in four of the six rehearsals from April 2 to April 18, with multiple takes taking up the majority of each session. Initially, we found the time constraints difficult to follow accurately. We drifted during long stretches of performing a single task and struggled to keep up when the texture changed every ten seconds. We also had different views on interpretation, and our discussions only partially narrowed the gap.

Nearly a year after our initial performance, Lindsey and I reconvened with clarinetist Elisha Willinger to reprise the piece for Lindsey’s composition recital on March 29, 2013. During the intervening period, I had listened to and compared the numerous recorded

rehearsal takes with our performance. Interviews with Lindsey and Stephanie about our experience improvising together included their reactions when I played two of these takes.⁵ Our familiarity with the work, along with a better understanding of the necessary skills, resulted in a much more efficient and effective rehearsal experience. Comparing an early rehearsal take with this later performance shows how rehearsal, discussion, and analysis enhanced our understanding and ability to execute an indeterminate composition, and how improvisation can be an efficient way to explore the rich variety of potential interpretations.

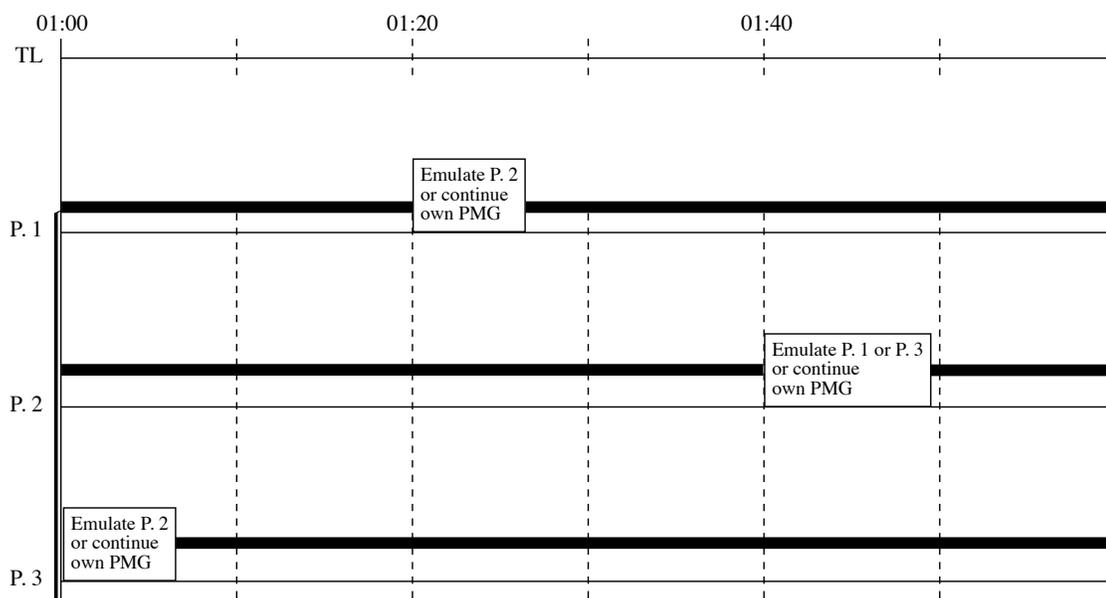


Figure 4.1: *Framework No. 1* (2012) by Lindsey Jacob, 1:00–2:00

The layout of the score is relatively conventional; the three parts are vertically aligned in each music system with a number at the top that represents the time elapsed. There are barlines every ten seconds, and each of the six systems lasts a minute. Text boxes with instructions take the place of the staff; the boxes mark the beginning of a new event and each has a thick horizontal line that extends to the end of the event (see Figure 4.1). The players follow the score with synchronized stopwatches. In the performance notes, Lindsey

⁵Both interview transcripts are in Appendix B.

asks each player to choose a single gesture (a Personalized Musical Gesture or PMG) which they could either improvise on the spot or prepare beforehand. They should last “a relatively short length of time, approximately the length of one phrase,” and “quotations of other musical works should be avoided, as well as allusions to other musical works.”⁶

The structure of the piece approximates a sonata form, with the PMGs functioning as overlapping, contrasting themes (see Table 4.2). At the beginning of the piece, the three players enter one by one at 20-second intervals, playing their PMG repeatedly. Each iteration of the PMG can vary slightly without disturbing its character. As Lindsey specifies in her instructions, “Alterations should be made to a performer’s PMG throughout the performance. Generally, the overall gesture should not be altered in a way that makes it unrecognizable from the original.”⁷

Time	Section Name	Description
0:00–1:00	Exposition	The three PMGs are introduced
1:00–2:40		The players begin emulating each other
2:40–3:00	Solo section	Player 2 Solo with alternating PMGs
3:00–3:40		“Development”: Overlapping twenty-second solos
3:40–5:40		Recapulation
5:40–6:00		Players can return to their original ideas from the exposition Player 3 Solo with alternating PMGs

Table 4.2: Structure of *Framework No. 1*

In the second and third minutes of the piece, the players are allowed either to continue playing their own PMG or to emulate someone else’s. Players 1 and 3 can emulate Player 2 beginning at 1:00 and 1:20 respectively; Player 2 can emulate either of the other players from 1:40. The third minute finishes with a twenty-second solo for Player 2 in which he or she alternates between any of the available PMGs.

The 40 seconds from 3:00 to 3:40 make up a self-contained section with overlapping solos that are based either on emulation of the previous player or altered forms of the

⁶Lindsey Jacob, *Framework No. 1* (2012).

⁷Ibid.

PMGs. This solo section is followed by a recapitulation of the opening ideas, with staggered entrances as before. Player 3 enters alone at 3:40, joined by Players 2 and 1 at 4:00 and 4:20, respectively. The players can return to their original PMGs here, or they can continue emulating the player who entered before them. The eventual return of the original PMGs is likely but not necessary, meaning that this final section does not need to sound like a recapitulation at all if the players so desire. In the sixth and final minute, Players 1 and 2 gradually fade out, leaving Player 3 to conclude with a twenty-second solo at 5:40–6:00 that recapitulates the instructions for Player 2’s solo at 1:40–2:00.

While following the instructions was not difficult, we had trouble finding a unified conception of the piece. Stephanie’s musical instincts rebelled against the idea of repeating the same gesture for a minute or more with little or no variation. She used themes that were often long and hard to imitate, altering them to the point at which the original idea was virtually absent. I struggled with the time flow of the piece, feeling that sections would be forced to end before we were ready to move on. Lindsey’s expectations were based on her experiences performing a similar piece, *Choice*, that she had written and workshopped with two groups of nonimprovisers several years earlier. Those groups planned out their PMGs in advance, sharing them with each other to simplify the listening and emulating process. They were also tentative and reluctant to stray far from their original PMGs. When we demonstrated the opposite tendency, her natural inclination was to allow us to do as we liked; she saw our rehearsals as an opportunity to “workshop” the piece and wanted to see the potential ramifications of different interpretative strategies. Her only suggestion was to choose PMGs that were sufficiently contrasting so that they could be more clearly distinguished. In other cases, she refrained from comment, even when we went against her written instructions. For example, Stephanie borrowed frequently from existing musical sources, feeling that the familiarity would make the piece more accessible to the audience. The performance notes explicitly ruled out such quotations, but in rehearsal Lindsey did

not object.⁸

An analysis of our rehearsal takes show an increasing confidence in dealing with the work's parameters. We mostly ran through the piece, branching out into exercises on occasion. For example, I noted that the solo section always seemed rocky, so we practiced it in isolation a few times. We also discussed limiting the amount of variation within a PMG in order to keep the parts more distinct and help bring the process of emulation to the fore.

Analysis of a Rehearsal Take

When interviewing Lindsey and Stephanie several months after the recital, I asked them for their reactions to two rehearsal takes of this piece.⁹ The first of these takes was from our second rehearsal of this piece when we were just getting familiar with its possibilities. The themes were never too clear and quickly became jumbled together. Stephanie remarked, "I don't think it's that great, ... because it starts as one really abstract mess." She felt that we extended our respective gestures too far from their original statements.¹⁰ Lindsey did not make any value judgements, although it seemed that she had expected us to restrict our variations to smaller touches. She remarked that she would like to compose similar works in the future that vary the amount of performer control over PMG alterations.¹¹

In this take, Lindsey was Player 1. Stephanie was Player 2 on piano, while I took the role of Player 3, switching between the celesta and the treble range of Stephanie's instrument. For her PMG, Stephanie borrowed the ubiquitous Nokia tune. Her gesture consisted of this theme in combination with octave displacement, rhythmic interruption,

⁸As a result of our experiences performing the work, Lindsey clarified the statement about quotations to read, "Fragments of these [quotations, scales, or other warm-up exercises] may be incorporated into the PMG, but should not be the sole material." Email correspondence with the author, March 10, 2014.

⁹The recordings of these takes are available at <http://edwardneeman.com/Framework1.mp3> (first take) and <http://edwardneeman.com/Framework2.m4a> (second take).

¹⁰See interview transcript below, p. 172.

¹¹Email correspondence with the author, March 19, 2014.

and fragmentation.

Stephanie, first two PMG iterations, 0:00–0:17

Although Lindsey did not intend for quotations to be used, the familiarity of the theme made it recognizable even when Stephanie subjected her PMG to rapid development. Lindsey also contributed variations on Stephanie’s PMG. In her solo at 3:00, she took its rhythm, added an extra beat, and applied it to a new melody.

Lindsey, 3:02–3:21

In the solo section (3:00–3:40), Lindsey’s altered version of Stephanie’s PMG became the *de facto* PMG for all of us, as we continued developing this idea until it seemed to lose its tenuous connection to Stephanie’s original utterance.

Edward, 3:10–3:23

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled 'Stephanie, 3:20-3:40'. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a treble and bass staff. The second system has a grand staff (treble, middle, and bass). The music is in 3/8 time and features a descending melodic line in the treble staff. The grand staff system includes dynamic markings such as *f* and *sfz*, and performance instructions like *8va* and *8sub*.

Stephanie, 3:20–3:40

Ambiguous PMGs were largely responsible for the weaknesses in this take. Our PMGs were too similar; all three were slow, and my PMG borrowed the descending sequence idea from Stephanie's.

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled 'Edward, 0:21-0:49'. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a treble and bass staff. The second system has a grand staff (treble, middle, and bass). The music is in 3/8 time and features a descending melodic line in the treble staff. The grand staff system includes a tempo marking of *Slower* and a measure number '8'.

Edward, 0:21–0:49

We abandoned our PMGs too early at the beginning, moving on to other melodic material or emulating each other. By the third iteration of my PMG (m. 8 of the above transcription), I had already abandoned my original melodic outline. Stephanie played only four iterations of her PMG, freely improvising from 0:41. The score specifies that as Player 2 she should stick with her own PMG until at least 1:40. She later emulated my playing (0:53) and Lindsey's (1:07) in the opening section.

Lindsey's rhythmically free PMG was the only one to get extended playing time in the beginning of the piece, without interruption or significant variation. She stuck with it

from her entrance at 0:48 until 2:15.



Lindsey, 0:48–1:35

However, her PMG gradually became focused around trills and tremolos instead of its initial melodic contour. In the transcription above, her first PMG statement concludes with a series of repeated notes, ornamented by an upper-neighbor grace note. By the end of the transcribed passage, these grace notes had smoothed out into a slow, even alternation between two pitches. Stephanie transformed this idea into a slow octave tremolo (1:50–1:54), closely followed by my tremolos in the upper registers of the piano (1:53–1:55 and 1:57–2:00). At 2:02, Stephanie turned the first four notes of Lindsey's PMG into a kind of tremolo.



The tremolo idea reached an apex in the recapitulation section, drowning out the other PMGs when all of us played tremolos exclusively for more than twenty seconds (4:37–5:00). Lindsey returned to her original PMG at 5:01, followed by Stephanie at 5:09. I continued with tremolos until the last five seconds of my concluding solo. This fixation with a single idea destroyed the heterogeneity and dialogue between different PMGs that gives *Framework No. 1* its improvisatory potential.

In this early take, our greatest strength is our ability to respond to each other; ideas are passed rapidly between players and everyone shows that they can take a leading role and move the music in a new direction when required. However, we had not yet come to terms with the structure and restrictions of the piece. Because we were too quick to vary

our PMGs and to imitate other players, there was insufficient contrast between parts to make the form of the work clear. There were also balance issues; having two pianists made it hard to maintain a timbral differentiation, and the celesta was too soft to be heard over Stephanie's piano in the louder sections.

Framework No. 1: A Reprise

In the following rehearsals with the AIR Improvisers, we gradually developed more confidence and flexibility in our interpretations. We learned to use our PMGs as a communicative tool, avoiding a reliance on tremolos or other simple devices to spin out the improvisation. Our most successful performance, however, took place nearly a year after the AIR improvisers concert, when Lindsey and I performed the piece again at her graduation recital.¹²

In this performance, I was Player 2 (piano), she was Player 3 (baritone saxophone), and she recruited clarinetist Elisha Willinger to be Player 1. With three distinct timbres, it was easier to maintain separation between parts. We had only two rehearsals before the performance, but our previous experiences enabled us to be more efficient. Exercises that focused on specific skills took up a major part of our rehearsal time. For example, we practiced repeating and developing our PMGs independently. We then played our PMGs simultaneously, as in the beginning of *Framework* after all players have entered. By practicing our PMGs without emulation, we developed a strong foundation and an understanding of the basic texture of the piece, making it easier to remain consistent when emulation was introduced. We practiced emulation separately through a version of the calibration exercise (see above, p. 62). Exercises in which people played alone proved to be the most productive, because the exposed soloist would listen to themselves more carefully and the others would gain insight into their colleagues' playing styles. As we had done in our rehearsals with

¹²The recording is available at <http://edwardneeman.com/Framework3.mp3>.

Stephanie, we practiced the section of solos from 3:00 to 3:40 in isolation.

Unlike in our previous rehearsals, we listened back to our playing immediately after each take so that we could get a fresh perspective on what we had just done. We noted highlights and parts that seemed dull or less cohesive. We discussed the nature of a PMG; I suggested that its character is determined by how it is emulated rather than how its originator intended it to go. PMGs are simplified through the emulation process, as the other players pick up on discrete elements—a motif, a gesture, a rhythm—and base their emulation on that.

The recording from the 2013 concert is a much more confident version of *Framework*. Our PMGs were more clearly defined, and we proved more adept at emulating each other and maintaining consistency within the PMGs. The result was a clearer musical trajectory, more potential variety within a single PMG, and the ability to imitate other players without necessarily emulating their PMG.

Through our exercises, we had learned to develop and maintain contrasting PMGs. I began with a PMG of ascending leaps, occasionally adding small stepwise flourishes at the end. I played relatively loudly, at a fast tempo. I initially used a swing rhythm, although that wore off over the course of the piece.

Edward, 0:01–0:24

Lindsey chose a slow and melodic PMG to maximize the differences between our two parts. Her rubato and dynamic swells set her apart from my rhythmic and loud, accented style.

Lindsey, 0:24–0:54

To compensate for the fact that his PMG had to be recognizable over the sound of two other players, Elisha chose a simple and short one: repeated notes, followed by a single chromatic step.

Elisha, 0:41–1:01

While both Elisha and I played fast, accented gestures, the narrow range and softer dynamic of his PMG made him stand apart. When I began to expand my gesture into longer phrases,

Elisha pushed for even greater contrast by fragmenting his already fragmentary PMG.

The distinctiveness of our PMGs translated into a clearer structure. Instead of amorphous tremolos propelling us to a climax through sheer density and dynamic, each of the three motifs took on its own role and the structure seemed to follow naturally. The result was a kind of sonata form, with my PMG and Elisha's PMG functioning as a first and second theme respectively. My louder dynamic and faster tempo put me in the foreground from the beginning until 1:49, when I began to emulate Elisha's repeated notes.



Edward, 1:49–2:08

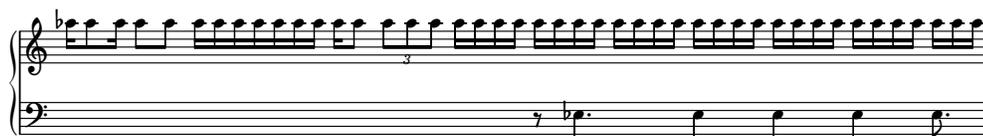
The shift at 1:49 marks a division between the first and second thematic areas of the “sonata form.” Lindsey and Elisha supported me by emulating my PMG from 1:25, and then by following my repeated notes after I shifted to Elisha's PMG.

The recapitulation began at 4:08 when I returned to my PMG. I played tentatively at first, then gradually built up the tempo and dynamic.



Edward, 4:08–4:21

At 5:07, I reprised the second theme, switching over to Elisha's PMG. I continued with the repeated note pattern until I stopped playing at 5:42.



Edward, 5:07–5:14

As before, both Elisha and Lindsey emulated my repeated notes.

Lindsey's PMG flowed quietly in the background until 2:38, when it became the central theme in the development section (2:38–3:48). She had established it before emulating my PMG (1:28–1:39), and then Elisha's (1:53–2:17). At 2:17, the first two notes of her PMG, G-F in the low saxophone register, started a chain reaction that catapulted her motif into prominence.



Lindsey, 2:17–2:22

I responded at 2:28, emulating the contour of the first three notes of her PMG. This became the subject of my solo at 2:38. I switched from largely monophonic playing to playing a melody line with chordal accompaniment.



Edward, 2:38–3:02

As in the previous take, the series of solos from 3:00 to 3:40 gradually drifted further and further from any concrete PMG reference. Elisha and Lindsey responded more to the changed mood of my solo than Lindsey's PMG on which it was based.



Elisha, 3:01–3:21



Lindsey, 3:13–3:32

When I returned at 3:21, I shifted to a Romantic idiom, with the melody in octaves ac-

accompanied by arpeggiated chords. I emulated the melodic patterns of the others, but in a manner that took us even further away from any suggestion of Lindsey's original PMG.

Edward, 3:21–3:47

However, this thematic distance worked to our advantage, as Lindsey took the last three notes of my solo at her entrance at 3:47 and connected them retroactively to the contour of her original PMG.

Lindsey, 3:47–4:12

She began by taking the three melody notes from the end of my solo (A \flat -C-B) and adding an A \natural before the last note. In her final solo at 5:42, the notes A \flat -C-A \natural -B \flat , derived from her entrance at 3:47, are transformed through intervallic expansion into a skeletal version of her opening PMG, G-E \flat -B \flat -D.

Lindsey, 5:42–6:03

In the early rehearsals, we favored emulation over extended iterations of our PMGs. For example, in the early take analyzed previously, Stephanie quickly tired of her Nokia-tune PMG and began imitating other people. In this take, we demonstrated that responding

through imitation does not necessarily entail switching PMGs. This allowed us to interact fluidly while retaining each PMG's character. For example, after Elisha first introduced his repeated note PMG at 0:41, I began to incorporate repeated notes in my PMG, beginning at 0:49.



Edward, 0:49–0:56

In this context, my repeated notes responded to Elisha's without intruding on his PMG. I did not copy the stepwise resolution at the end of his motif and incorporated the repeated notes into my more irregular rhythmic patterns. Similarly, Lindsey responded to my entrance at 4:08 by extending her PMG to imitate my widely spaced playing. In terms of both mood and context, Lindsey remained within the boundary of her own PMG while borrowing something from mine.



Lindsey, 4:14–4:36

The PMGs were flexible enough so that one PMG could accommodate considerable variety. For example, all three of us were playing some version of my PMG at 1:28 while maintaining different musical characters. I was experimenting with ascending and descending patterns, using some of the repeated notes that I borrowed from Elisha previously.



Edward, 1:27–1:36

Lindsey reacted with two rapid ascending gestures, followed by two gestures that ascend

and descend, following my lead. Whereas I played with a clear articulation, Lindsey's version was more visceral and so quick that it can be impossible to hear distinct notes in the rush of sound. She also spaced her gestures out, with a few seconds between each one.



Lindsey, 1:28–1:36

Elisha borrowed my PMG in a more analytical manner. He played an ascending gesture, but at a slower pace and moving by step instead of by leap. By grouping the notes in two-note slurs, he recalled the swing feel that I had used at the beginning but since abandoned. He then borrowed the two-note descending flourish which I had occasionally used at the tail end of my gestures (see m. 2 of my example on page 95), and elaborated it by extending it to three and then four notes.



Elisha, 1:25–1:36

Through focused rehearsals, we prepared a successful and confident improvised performance with only two sessions. Skill-building exercises along with listening and discussion allowed us to develop a more robust understanding of the piece than before, even though we had only half the rehearsal time compared to our preparation the previous year. As with any performance, however, there were areas for improvement. For example, Lindsey spent much of the piece confined to the background, possibly because she was concerned about a saxophone's potential to be overpowering. Also, there were several parts throughout the piece during which one or more players drifted away from the PMGs, and perhaps we should have been more rigorous in conforming to some of the written rules. In the last couple of minutes, all three of us returned to our PMGs but no one reprised the

“original” PMG exactly, as it had been introduced the first time. My Romantic playing in the middle section could be another concern. It felt a little out of place, and perhaps we needed to restrict our emulations to the actual shape of the gesture rather than its style or mood.

In addition, many potential avenues for interpretation were left unexplored. While emulation is essential to the spirit of the work, there is no specific point where it is required. All performers are always permitted to stick to their own PMGs and can return to them at any time. The various paths of emulation or nonemulation can be tried in rehearsal. For example, the group could isolate the second minute of the piece (Figure 4.1, page 86) and predetermine each player’s choices—Players 1 and 3 might emulate Player 2 from 1:20, sticking with Player 2’s PMG even when he moves on to emulate Player 1’s original PMG at 1:40. In nearly every rehearsal take, the solo section from 3:00 to 3:40 consists of a series of emulations. We could have tried a different approach; the instructions also allow players to develop an “altered version” of their own PMG during this section. Discussing and trying different ways of performing the piece could have deepened our interpretive abilities.

AIR Improvisers: A Conclusion

The experience of organizing an improvisation ensemble fundamentally changed my perception of free improvisation. I discovered that group leadership and a structured rehearsal plan were far more important than I had previously thought. The true beauty of improvisation seemed to come from the unexpected and the accidental, when everything somehow aligns correctly and produces something awe-inspiring. Preparation is not an end in itself, but rather provides the basis from which inspiration can take the music in new directions.

Indeterminate composed scores present a unique challenge to improvisation groups. As classically trained musicians, we are accustomed to having the composer bear the

majority of the responsibility for the outcome of their composition, as the expectations of the composer are explicitly written down. In many indeterminate works, the performers can abuse the creative license provided by the composer and the audience will be none the wiser, even if they are familiar with the composition in question. Much of the creative result depends on the performers' intentions and discipline, factors that cannot be easily distinguished from the composer's input by the audience. A passive, uninspired approach to interpretation can thus reflect poorly on the performers, the composer, and on the unique type of interaction between the two that such scores instigate. The goal of a group leader is to move performers away from an attitude of passivity. Exercises and listening together to recordings are ways to encourage players to try to put the group result first and to move beyond simply following instructions. Working at the building blocks of the musical structure enables the musicians to find their way more easily around the composition's restrictions, building confidence and broadening the range of possibilities.

Chapter 5

Interpreting Graphic Scores

The techniques developed by the free improvisation movement are versatile and can be applied to numerous open-ended compositions. Many of these are text pieces in which the scores consist only of prose instructions, or works using unconventional notation accompanied by written instructions.¹ “Tocatango” and *Framework No. 1* are examples of these types of works. Some composers, notably Frederic Rzewski, have included opportunities for improvisation within otherwise conventionally notated scores.

Indeterminate graphic scores use unconventional notation that leaves musical decisions to the discretion of the performer. Many contain no instructions at all, offering improvisers a nominally limitless range of possible interpretations. This autonomy comes with responsibility, however. The practice of improvisation provides an efficient method of realization, with the additional challenges of performance practice familiar to trained classical musicians.

A Survey of Graphic Scores

Unconventional graphic notation began to appear in Western music in the 1950s, when the exactitude of notational convention would have been counterproductive in the music

¹For a full discussion of text pieces and their implications, see John Lely and James Saunders, *Word Events: Perspectives on Verbal Notation* (London: Continuum, 2012).

of many composers. Neumatic notation had evolved since the eleventh century to notate pitch and rhythm in a way that emphasized the relationship between discrete sounds in time. Music that was oriented toward other musical concepts required new representational methods.²

The New York avant-garde composers were among the first to use graphic scores. Inspired by avant-garde playwright Antonin Artaud's novel conception of theater that broke down the structures of communication between performers and the audience, John Cage and Morton Feldman sought to liberate sound from the conventions of musical discourse using familiar timbres but avoiding connections between them that would communicate specific ideas or emotions.³ Graphic notations that indicated pitch and rhythm in nonspecific ways were used in Feldman's *Projections* and *Intersections* series and numerous Cage works, reaching a pinnacle in his *Piano Concerto* (1957–58).⁴

These two composers eventually distanced themselves from graphic scores that ended up liberating the performers, not the sounds. Cage wanted his music to be purely focused on sounds that were free from human interference, even his own: "I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer. I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall."⁵ He found that performers would impose their own creative control on the sound when improvising interpretations to his graphic scores, a practice which was opposed to this philosophy. Most of Cage's graphic scores were intended to be realized and practiced without improvisation at all. Feldman expressed similar reservations, writing, "I was not only allowing the sounds

²Smigel, "Alchemy of the Avant-Garde," 58.

³Ibid., 60. For Artaud and his connection with the musical avant-garde, see also *ibid.*, 43–44.

⁴Isaac Schankler, "Cage = 100: Tudor and the Performance Practice of Concert for Piano and Orchestra," *New Music Box*, September 5, 2012, accessed December 30, 2012, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/cage-tudor-concert-for-piano-and-orchestra/>.

⁵Jeff Goldberg, "John Cage Interview," *Soho Weekly News*, September 12, 1974. Quoted in Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 16.

to be free ... I was also liberating the performer.”⁶ Their New York colleagues Earle Brown and Christian Wolff used graphic scores more broadly, embracing the possibility of improvisation. Brown was inspired by the mobiles of Alexander Calder, which shifted shape while retaining their identity.⁷ In works such as *Folio* (1952–53), a set of single-page works using various notational techniques, he wanted to bridge the gap between the intangible composition in the mind of the composer and its realization in notated form.

The writing of music involves an aspect of projection, I would say, projecting your imagination into a situation you are not going to be present in, and in that sense it's not so strange for me to try to project one stage further, which is to project the conditions that I hope, with good will, the musicians will enter into.⁸

Christian Wolff has continued to use graphic notation in scores such as *Microexercises* Nos. 23 and 28 from *Grete (microexercises 23–36)*. Composed in 2007 for the Relâche ensemble, these improvisational exercises can be combined and superimposed with minimal limitations. Graphic notation allows the performer free choice. In *Microexercise* No. 23, only the positions of attacks in time and their dynamic level are predetermined; *Microexercise* No. 28 specifies the order of attack and release points between four players.

The concurrent use of graphic scores in Europe came from a different aesthetic. Admiring the dramatic potency of visual images, many European composers used them to construct gestural compositions that invite theatrical and dramatic interpretations with unconventional sounds. They often found the freedom of graphic scores more effective than highly detailed conventional notation designed to achieve a similar effect. One of the earliest gestural graphic composers was Anestis Logothetis, who wrote exclusively graphic scores beginning with *Struktur-Textur-Spiegel-Spiel* in 1959 until his death in 1994.⁹ He

⁶Morton Feldman, “Liner Notes,” in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B. H. Friedman (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2000), 5–6.

⁷Bailey, *Improvisation*, 60.

⁸Quoted in *ibid.*, 62.

⁹See Logothetis’ list of works, “Catalogue of Works—Anestis Logothetis,” accessed December 30, 2012, http://anestislogothetis.musicportal.gr/works_chronologically/?lang=en.

had become dissatisfied with conventional notation because of its difficulties with the new sounds and techniques of the avant-garde. He wanted to write music that would always sound fresh and that could be dramatically reinterpreted at every performance.¹⁰ Other gestural graphic composers include Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, Franco Donatoni, and Sylvano Bussotti.¹¹

While many scores include a key or performance instructions to explain the unconventional visual elements, others contain nothing but the music itself and are often artworks in their own right. Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise* (1963–1967), for example, is a testament to his skill as a draftsman. He intended “that it should stand entirely on its own, without any form of introduction or instruction to mislead prospective performers into the slavish practice of ‘doing what they are told.’”¹² He rejected any notion that there is any definite meaning to the notation, insisting that he did not know how it should be performed.¹³ In New York, composers close to the Fluxus art movement also composed music notated as art. Examples include William Hellerman's three-dimensional sculptural scores,¹⁴ Philip Corner's *Mississippi River South of Memphis* (1954),¹⁵ and Alison Knowles's blueprint of shoelaces.¹⁶

¹⁰Anestis Logothetis, “Kurze Musikalische Spurenkunde: Eine Darstellung des Klanges,” *Melos* 37 (1970): 39–43. Quoted in Maria Baveli and Anastasia Georgaki, “The Polymorphism of Logothetis's Notation,” accessed December 30, 2012, http://anestislogothetis.musicportal.gr/the_graphic_notation/?lang=en.

¹¹Roman Haubenstock-Ramati is discussed in more detail below; see p. 112. Graphic scores were a much smaller portion of the compositional output of Donatoni and Bussotti, who, like many European composers at the time, dabbled with various experimental techniques early in their careers. Examples of their graphic works include *Babai* for harpsichord (1963) and *Black and White II: Esercizi per le dieci dita* for keyboard instruments (1968) by Donatoni, and *The Rara Requiem* for vocal soloists, choir, and ensemble (1969) and *Novelletta* for piano (1973) by Bussotti.

¹²Cardew, *Treatise Handbook*, i.

¹³*Ibid.*, ix.

¹⁴For example, see *Music Sweeps Up* (1984), accessed December 30, 2012, <http://dbprng00iokc2j.cloudfront.net/work/image/73001/qg7swq/hellermann1.jpg>.

¹⁵Accessed December 30, 2012, http://www.diagonalthoughts.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/order_philipcorner_mississippiriver.jpg.

¹⁶Tom Johnson reviewed a concert in which her work, a large sheet of vellum with the printed image of two worn shoelaces (no title is specified), was realized in an improvisation by Malcolm Goldstein. Johnson, *The Voice of New Music*, 180.

Composers who provide no instructions forfeit control over any realization for which they are not present and thus risk unsatisfactory performances. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of these composers distanced themselves from potential interpretations. Haubenstock-Ramati professed indifference whether or not his scores would be performed. Dieter Schnebel requested that his *Musik zum Lesen* (Music to Read) (1969) be performed only in the privacy of the reader's imagination.

Graphic diagrams can be a sketch that is used as a framework to generate a more determinate score. David Cope produced such a diagram for a cello concerto in 1982 which he later abandoned, with multiple staves that indicate texture, range, relative motion, and other parameters as they change in time. In the absence of a finished composition, he considered his sketch as a potential starting point for an improvisation.¹⁷ Other composers intend improvisation to be used only during preparation. Stuart Saunders Smith left his graphic score *Transitions and Leaps* (1993) open to almost any activity in any of the performing arts. He expected the performers to improvise, but only during the rehearsal process. He intended these initial improvisations to be experiments that would eventually result in a definite, repeatable form that the performers would determine and subsequently perform.¹⁸

Some graphic scores, created by improvisers, are mnemonic guides that provide a structure for improvised performance. These scores will often suggest the outlines or certain key elements of the composition. This technique of incomplete notation is used by the jazz pianist Cecil Taylor.¹⁹

While graphic scores can be indeterminate, they also found use in situations that required a very high degree of accuracy. Electronic or tape compositions were translated into visual representations to secure copyright, to function as study scores, or to enable

¹⁷Sauer, *Notations* 21, 57.

¹⁸Ibid., 229.

¹⁹See examples of his notation in Felver, *All the Notes*.

live performers to follow a prerecorded accompaniment.²⁰ Ethnomusicologists have used the melograph, a graphic system of notating monophonic music, in order to preserve microtonal and rhythmic inflections accurately.²¹ Graphic scores have also been created from pure audio using computer algorithms.²²

Two anthologies document the early graphic scores from the 1950s and 1960s: *Notation in New Music: A Critical Guide to Interpretation and Realisation* (1972) by Erhard Karkoschka, a volume that also contains a lexicon of symbols used in these scores; and *Notations* (1969), compiled and edited by John Cage and Alison Knowles. A revitalization of interest in graphic notation in recent years has been documented in *Notations 21* (2009), a compilation by Theresa Sauer inspired by Cage and Knowles's earlier volume, as well as a volume of the *Leonardo Music Journal* devoted to unconventional notation.²³

Graphic Scores and Improvisation

While composers were reaching out to improvisers with open-ended compositions, many improvisation groups found that their art could be enhanced by compositional input. Gavin Bryars, for example, composed for the Joseph Holbrooke Trio using a nonspecific graphic notation that was based on the styles and techniques they used when freely improvising.²⁴ *Source* magazine, published by the New Music Ensemble, included graphic and text scores by NME members as well as from other groups such as MEV.

Classically trained musicians who improvise are uniquely placed to interpret such

²⁰Geoffrey Chew and Richard Rastall, "Notation, §3, 6: 'Non-mensural and Specialist Notations,'" *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed December 30, 2012, ed. Deane L. Root, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

²¹Dalia Cohen and Ruth Katz, "Melograph," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, accessed December 30, 2012, ed. Deane L. Root, <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

²²See, for example, "HighC—A bit of Context," accessed December 29, 2012, <http://highc.org/history.html>.

²³*Leonardo Music Journal* (2011): "Beyond Notation: Communicating Music."

²⁴Gavin Bryars, interview with Ben Watson, October 2, 1997, quoted in Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation*, 79.

scores, on account of their familiarity with the hermeneutical process of divining the music behind the image on the page. The graphic scores of the 1960s have already aged for fifty years with a history of performances, recordings, and writings that have given them musical and historical context. A score written in New York during this period belongs to a different historical context from one written in San Francisco a decade later. In principle, reinterpreting the music in an appropriate, informed manner is not far removed from playing Bach or Beethoven in a historically informed style.

For example, the score of James Tenney's *Three Pages in the Form of a Pear* for piano (or...)²⁵ is insufficient to produce a good performance in isolation. Written in celebration of Eric Satie in 1995, Tenney's piece consists of three pages, each of which presents a picture of a pear from a different angle, reduced to large black pixels in white space. Tenney provides few instructions; he specifies only that time runs from left to right and pitch from low to high. He indicates that the degree of focus—how accurately these dimensions are translated into sound—is left to the discretion of the performer.²⁶

A knowledge of Tenney's musical aesthetic is indispensable when preparing a performance of this work. Tenney's fascination with sound in itself was developed through his studies with Edgar Varèse, who impressed upon him the importance of acoustics and instrumentation.²⁷ A number of his works are purely conceptual pieces that deal with single aspects of sound.²⁸ He described his music as closer to philosophy or mathematics than entertainment,²⁹ stating "I write [my pieces] because I want to know what they sound like. . . . It's not self-expression, as far as I'm concerned. It's not communication either."³⁰

²⁵With regard to the instrumentation, Tenney writes, "for piano (or...)," implying that another solo instrument—or possibly an ensemble—could perform the work.

²⁶James Tenney, *Three Pieces in the Shape of a Pear* (Lebanon, NH: Frog Peak Music, 1995), 1.

²⁷James Tenney, "James Tenney as a Compositional Instructor," YouTube video, ArtistsHouseMusic, accessed July 27, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPXnXMm4THg>.

²⁸One of the best examples of this is his collection, *Postal Pieces* (1971).

²⁹Belet and Tenney, "An Interview With James Tenney," 460.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 459.

He dismissed the “old assumptions about how the form of the piece needs to be full of surprising, unexpected changes, [and] keep you on the edge of your seat,” saying that “That sense of musical discourse no longer interests me, at least not in my own music. . . . I’m interested in something that’s more monolithic: like, ‘Okay, let’s do this one thing and do it completely, and be totally dedicated to just that, and pull out of that everything that we can.’”³¹ Not wanting the listener to be “made to feel a particular emotion by a manipulative compositional process,”³² he sought the intrinsic beauty of sound rather than evocative affect.

Tenney’s musical outlook provides valuable clues for interpreting *Three Pages*. A realization by an improvising group may be problematic; his music eschews the dialogue and conflict that provide much of the musical interest in spontaneous collaborative performance. While it would be theoretically permitted given the semi-open instrumentation, an ensemble would require extensive rehearsal to work out strategies for a “monolithic” sound instead of dynamic interplay, and improvising under such conditions would be less efficient in rehearsal than devising a solo version.³³ Tenney’s affinity with philosophy and mathematics suggests to me that the piece may be intended to test certain ideas about the nature of perception and the relationship between sound and image. These considerations therefore become an important part of a potential realization. Because the dots on the page are far too numerous and widely-spaced for a pianist to play accurately at sight, and the close vertical positioning is impossible to render consistently without either a microtonal instrument or a pitch range that extends into inaudibility, the interpretation of the image is subjective. The performer can group the dots into overlapping “clouds” of events—chords,

³¹Dennehy and Tenney, “Interview with James Tenney,” 83.

³²Ibid., 85.

³³The AIR Improvisers attempted *Three Pages* in rehearsal on May 14, 2012. We found that the nature of the score made it very difficult to use as the basis for an effective improvisation, even when we assigned certain contours of the piece to specific players. In contrast, I had little difficulty finding interesting interpretive ideas when I tried improvising alone.

lines, and gestures. Thus visual stimuli are spontaneously transformed into sound, a process that the listener experiences in reverse as he or she searches for a pear shape in the resulting sonic image, assuming he or she has some knowledge of the piece in advance.

On the other hand, “authenticity” in open-ended compositions may be defunct in a style of music whose primary focus is originality. AMM percussionist Edwin Prévost noted that despite the wishes of some open-form composers, interpreters tend to stick to “approved” versions of their works. He argued that the uniqueness of the open-form work “becomes all the more apparent in later performances especially when they are removed, as it were, from the creative site of the composer.”³⁴ The composer has given the performers his blessing to do with the score as they please, and there is no reason for the performers to accept this with horizons narrowed by the choices of their predecessors.

Maybe their freedom of spirit ought to be an example to further generations. However, to systematize particular received responses would in effect negate the creative meaning of such works. The whole point is that musicians must invest themselves thoroughly in this activity. They should resist any closing down of meaning in this work. I suspect that any adverse criticism of what they may do from those who are familiar with the original renditions of indeterminate scores will be a sure indication that they have in fact kept potential meanings open.³⁵

Because improvisation is volatile, it is easy to veer off the prescribed path of a graphic score. Fortunately, improvised performances are unrepeatable, and there is always a chance that the “incorrect” version will be more interesting. The clarinetist Anthony Pay recalls that during the recording of Stockhausen’s indeterminate piece *Ylem* (1972) under the supervision of the composer, Stockhausen preferred a take in which the trumpet player “had a brainstorm” and improvised with complete disregard for the instructions. When Pay questioned him, pointing out how much they had rehearsed to follow the score according to his intentions, Stockhausen reportedly replied, “Yes, oh yes, but it was very

³⁴Prévost, *Minute Particulars*, 70.

³⁵Ibid., 72.

interesting.”³⁶ Given that composers who embrace improvisation will almost certainly be open-minded enough to forgive or even welcome mistakes from well-intentioned and diligent improvisers, having the confidence to err is a valuable trait.

Roman Haubenstock-Ramati

The graphic scores of Roman Haubenstock-Ramati are ideal templates for an improvisation group for many reasons. Haubenstock-Ramati foresaw and welcomed the possibility of improvised interpretations, and many of his scores are deliberately open-ended to allow the performers to follow their inspiration. Nevertheless, an analysis of his work reveals many aspects that are easily translated into musical terms, with repetition, variation, and transformation visually evident.

Of Polish-Jewish descent, Haubenstock-Ramati was born in Kraków in 1919. His composition teachers were Artur Malawski and Józef Koffler at the universities in Kraków and Lwów, where he also studied musicology and philosophy.³⁷ After the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, he was arrested and banished a number of times, attempted and failed to join the Polish Free Army, and eventually escaped to Palestine via Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. In 1957, after his avant-garde music found little sympathy in either the newly established state of Israel or in Poland, he eventually settled in Vienna, working for the Universal Edition publishing house. He was appointed to the faculty of the Vienna Academy of Music in 1973.³⁸

An early European champion of unconventional notation, Haubenstock-Ramati or-

³⁶Cited in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 72.

³⁷Monica Lichtenfeld and Reinhard Kager, “Haubenstock-Ramati, Roman,” *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, accessed May 24, 2012, ed. Deane L. Root, www.grovemusic.com.

³⁸“Roman Haubenstock-Ramati—Biography—Universal Edition,” n.d., accessed May 24, 2012, <http://www.universaledition.com/Roman-Haubenstock-Ramati/composers-and-works/composer/291/biography>.

ganized the first exhibition of graphic scores in Donaueschingen in 1959.³⁹ He began composing graphic scores around the same time; his *Mobiles* series from 1957–1958 includes *Interpolation* for flutes, *Liaisons* for vibraphone or vibraphone and marimba, *Petit musique de nuit* for orchestra, and *Mobile für Shakespeare* for soprano, piano, celesta, vibraphone, and three percussionists.⁴⁰ These scores are each a single page long with separate instructions and are divided into separate musical “compartments,” the order of which is not strictly determined. Within these compartments, Haubenstock-Ramati combined conventional staff notation with gestural graphic notation. In places, he retained the staff lines but used time-space notation instead of rhythmic notation. Some compartments omit note stems, indicating dynamic by the size of the note heads and melodic motion by connecting lines.

With *Decisions* (1959–1961) for unspecified sound sources, Haubenstock-Ramati began to explore “pure” graphic writing. This piece is essentially abstract art that can be interpreted as a score; Haubenstock-Ramati provides no instructions as to how that interpretation might take place. He produced a substantial body of graphic scores over the course of the next two decades, along with conventionally-notated music in a European avant-garde style. In 1980, Haubenstock-Ramati moved away from graphic notation and toward a leaner musical aesthetic. He died in Vienna in 1994.

Haubenstock-Ramati’s writings provide valuable clues for prospective performers. He felt that musical interpretations of visual art had vast untapped potential and was “personally astounded that even today one does not play Kandinsky or Miró, even though it would be so simple and easy to do so.”⁴¹ As his own graphic scores were already fully-realized artworks in themselves, he was ambivalent about their realization. His advice for

³⁹Monica Lichtenfeld and Reinhard Kager, “Haubenstock-Ramati, Roman,” *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online, accessed May 24, 2012, ed. Deane L. Root, www.grovemusic.com.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, “Notation—Material and Form,” trans. Katharine M. Freeman, *Perspectives of New Music* 4, no. 1 (Autumn–Winter 1965): 39.

would-be interpreters was “To perform? To realize? If in doubt, never!”⁴² He wrote that the aural realization of a composition has little consequence to the composition itself: “The whole so-called ‘consequence’ [performance] is only a thought experiment, a game of the same solitaire. I have the greatest sympathy for the ‘unperformable.’ ”⁴³ However, he wrote several articles that include general guidelines for interpreting his graphic works, showing that he intended them to be performed according to certain principles.

His writings on improvisation are contradictory. He wrote that “there is no improvisation, there is only interpretation. The only thing that could be called ‘improvisation’ is the composition: the writing of a new music.”⁴⁴ For him, the compositional process involved taking a “timeless” idea and capturing it on paper; using graphic notation allowed him to represent this idea in its purest form at the moment it occurred to him, “in flagrante”.⁴⁵ The immediacy of his compositional process made him liken it to improvisation, whereas the interpretational process did not require improvisation because the work’s basic “idea” had already been determined before the performers enter the picture. However, he defended graphic scores on the grounds that they are “a provocation to improvisation that has again brought to life in our time something musically true and unique.”⁴⁶ He notes that improvisers consider notation “an unnecessary, interfering factor” unless it allows them to roam freely, inspired rather than restrained by the printed page. The “free and ambiguous manner of notation” in graphic scores allows improvisers to use them “as a means of stimulation” without being stifled by a system of rules and conventions.⁴⁷ He praised spontaneity in

⁴²“Aufführen? Realisieren? Im Zweifel, nie!” Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, *Musik-Grafik: Pre-Texte* (Vienna: Ariadne, 1980), 9.

⁴³“Die ganze sogenannte „Konsequenz“ ist nur ein Gedankenspiel, dem Ablese einer Patience ähnlich. Meine größte Zuneigung gilt dem „Unaufführbaren.“” Ibid., 5.

⁴⁴“Es gibt keine Improvisation; es gibt nur Interpretation. Das einzige was man als „Improvisation“ bezeichnen könnte ist die Komposition: die Niederschrift einer neuen Musik.” Haubenstock-Ramati, *Musik-Grafik: Pre-Texte*, 9.

⁴⁵Haubenstock-Ramati, *Musik-Grafik: Pre-Texte*, 5.

⁴⁶Haubenstock-Ramati, “Notation—Material and Form,” 41.

⁴⁷Ibid., 39.

both performance and composition, writing that “the essential innovation of our age, the spontaneity of art, tends to result in a work of art that connects directly with the idea.”⁴⁸ He intended all his works, even the traditionally notated ones, to be played as if they were being conceived anew at the moment of performance.⁴⁹

Visual Elements in *Decisions*

Because the score of *Decisions* (1959–1961) is published as sixteen numbered loose pages with no instructions, the performer has a theoretically unlimited scope, a freedom so vast musicians uninitiated in Haubenstock-Ramati’s artistic idiom may struggle to find a starting point for their interpretations. Fortunately, suggestions from the composer can be gleaned from his writings and the performance instructions for his other scores. The booklet that accompanied his art exhibition “Konstellationen” (Constellations) at the Galerie Ariadne in Vienna is a particularly valuable source. “Konstellationen” consisted of twenty-five etchings, many of which were derived from *Decisions*.⁵⁰

Haubenstock-Ramati wrote that music is freed from extramusical association through abstract graphic notation. The vertical axis represents pitch (up = higher, down = lower); the horizontal axis represents time—horizontal distance corresponds to temporal distance. However, this axis is not equivalent to elapsed time; the performer can read from left to right or right to left, and can even “scrub” back and forth.⁵¹

His [the musician’s] eye wanders from one object (sound structure) to the other. Certain objects (forms) have a directional tendency and lead automatically to another sound structure. The self-contained forms, on the other hand, can be left behind only by leaping or

⁴⁸“Das grundsätzlich Neue unserer Epoche, die Spontaneität der Kunst, tendiert zum Resultat: das Kunstwerk direkt mit der Idee zu verbinden.” *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁹Carol Morgan, “RHR,” email correspondence, April 27, 2013.

⁵⁰The text from this booklet was later republished as “Musik und abstrakte Malerei” (Music and Abstract Painting), which serves as a preface to *Decisions* in *Music-Grafik: Pre-Texte*, an anthology of Haubenstock-Ramati’s graphic scores published in 1980.

⁵¹Haubenstock-Ramati, *Konstellationen*, n.p.

skipping away quickly or slowly, after a shorter or longer pause. The eye can thus wander across the page in continuous motion or in jumps, from left to right and from right to left. It may leave out some objects not consciously perceived and look at others several times, each time in a new light.⁵²

Objects that resemble conventional musical notation are interpreted conventionally, whereas the interpretation of other objects is left to the performers. These new objects are either linked to other objects by association (the relationship or similarity between visual objects is reimagined musically), or by elimination and selection (a new shape represents a new sound). Small variations in the size of objects translate to changes in dynamic; a disproportionately large object represents the focal point of a group of objects. A line suggests continuity. A horizontal line connected to an object shows the relative duration of the event. A thickening line implies a crescendo; a tapering line a decrescendo. A curving line can mean a glissando. A vertical line can be interpreted in a number of ways: it can connect simultaneous pitches or can imply a formal division in the structure. If attached to a circle (or another shape, presumably) it can modify articulation or the manner of playing the corresponding sound event.⁵³

He listed four parameters that the performer should consider: pitch, color, articulation, and dynamics. A fifth parameter, density, applies to broader areas of the score. A section that is denser has a more dynamic character, thus requiring more intensity from the performers. Thinner textures on the page can translate into a static sonic environment.⁵⁴

The written instructions that Haubenstock-Ramati included with some of his other works from the 1960s and 1970s suggest that he imagined some degree of flexibility in his scores. He liked his works to have a variety of possible interpretations, writing, “The most elegant puzzles are those with multiple solutions: One can always say that any solution

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

is (not) correct.”⁵⁵ Discrepancies among the various sets of instructions suggest that the meaning of the elements can change depending on the instrumentation. For example, in *Shapes 1* for organ (1973), he defined circles as single tones for which size determines dynamic and white and black centers represent different (unspecified) tone colors. Rectangles are clusters (height = pitch range, width = duration, color = tone-color).⁵⁶ In contrast, *Catch 2*, for one or two pianos (1968), has both circles and rectangles representing a cluster of pitches; rectangles indicate that these pitches are played simultaneously, and circles indicate a sequential execution of the pitches in any order. Black centers are *forte* and white centers are *piano*. The *Catch 2* notation does not show a differentiation in tone color as in *Shapes 1*, presumably because the piano cannot produce as wide a color palette for single tones and chords as the organ can.⁵⁷

In his *Multiple* series for unspecified brass, woodwind, and string instruments (1965–1969), the size of an object determines dynamic; shape and color determine how the sound is generated. In a string part, a black circle is a sound produced normally, a white circle is played *sul ponticello*, an X is *col legno battuto*, small white triangles and rectangles indicate which string is to be played, and large white or black rectangles are “noise-like actions.” *Chordophonie 2* for clavichord (1976) uses three types of circle: black, white, and striped. The performer interprets only one type of circle and ignores the others; a different type can be chosen on a repetition of that passage. The circles of any one type thus represent the way in which a short event evolves according to the circles’ placement and size.

In general, the structure of these works is mobile, so that the performer can choose the order of events to some degree. However, the total duration is usually specified, either approximately or as a range. A performance of *Chordophone 2* should be between 12 and

⁵⁵“Am schönsten sind die Rätsel die verschiedene Lösungen zulassen: Man kann immer sagen, daß die Lösung (nicht) stimmt.” Haubenstock-Ramati, *Musik-Grafik: Pre-Texte*, 4.

⁵⁶Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, *Shapes 1* (Frankfurt: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 1976), performance instructions.

⁵⁷Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, *Catch 2* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1968), performance instructions.

15 minutes, although duration of the individual sections is at the performer's discretion. In *Catch 2*, the ten pages can be interpreted in order beginning with any page. Each page can be played multiple times in a row, with each iteration containing any subset of the available objects on the page and lasting 40–60 seconds. The whole piece lasts about 12 minutes; in order to achieve the target duration, the performer (or performers) must decide beforehand how many times each page will be played.

Haubenstock-Ramati also encouraged the use of amplification and electronic sound modification in these pieces. In many cases, he also suggests that the live performance can be combined with a prerecorded version “as a means to accentuate the formal variability of the work.”⁵⁸

Structure of *Decisions*

The graphics on pages 1, 3, and 15 of the score are the three themes from which the piece is constructed. I have designated them as themes A, B, and C respectively. A single horizontal line that goes through the center of each theme seems to provide a reference point for pitch. Although there are occasionally gaps in the line, its vertical placement remains constant. Common motifs provide links between the themes; themes A and B (but not C) include clouds of small objects, themes A and C (but not B) use hollow shapes with white centers in addition to solid black shapes, and themes B and C (but not A) have dense clusters of vertical lines. Despite these similar motifs, each theme is visually distinct.

Theme A is the most “melodic”; lines connect most of the larger objects on the page (Figure 5.1). It begins with a series of expanding circles connected by a horizontal line. Two “clouds” of small shapes bulge vertically in the center and are characterized by their use of white shapes—white circles in the first (left-most) cloud and white rectangles in the

⁵⁸Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, *Chordophonie 2* (Frankfurt: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 1977), performance note.

second. Small isosceles triangles are ubiquitous and are unique to this theme.

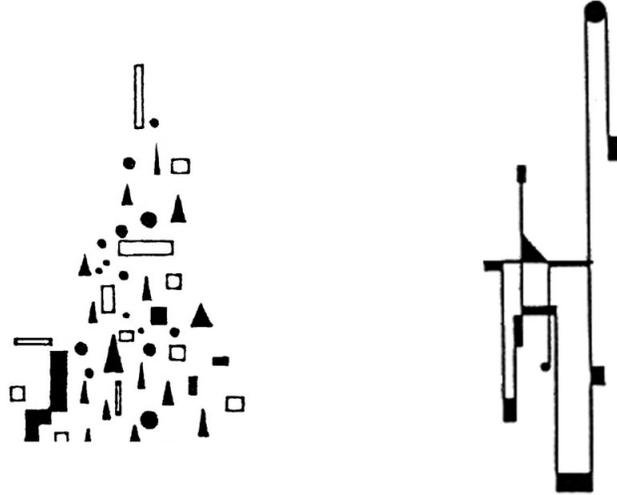


Figure 5.1: Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, *Decisions* (1959-1961), sample shapes from Theme A, 1.

Theme B is the least connected of the themes. The horizontal reference line is almost entirely absent; it makes only three fragmentary appearances. This theme is characterized by dense clusters of vertical lines overlaying rectangle-like shapes, and clouds of circles (Figure 5.2). This theme is the only one to use noncircular curves, and is also the only theme that is presented in inverted (vertically flipped) form (on pp. 9, 10, 13, and 14).

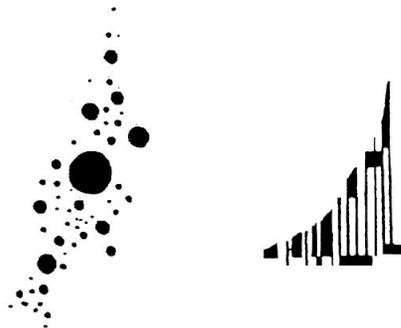


Figure 5.2: Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, *Decisions* (1959-1961), sample shapes from Theme B, 3.

Theme C, the most unified of the themes, consists almost entirely of small circles

and rectangles attached to long vertical stems (Figure 5.3). While these shapes are not connected to each other, the horizontal reference line is unbroken and provides a sense of continuity that is missing in Theme B. Theme C also contains a few unusual objects, which do not appear elsewhere, such as long hollow triangles resembling crescendo hairpins and circles within circles.

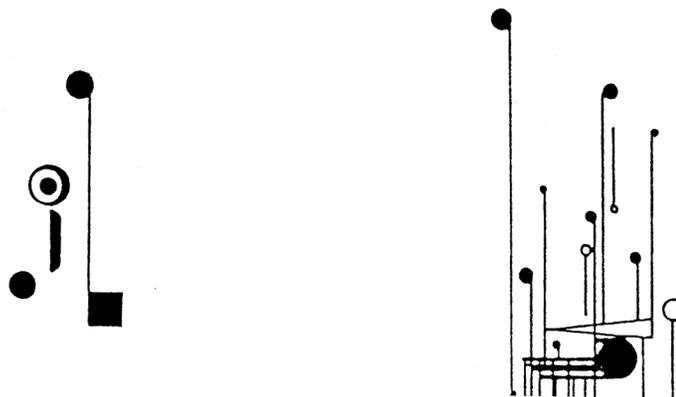


Figure 5.3: Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, *Decisions* (1959-1961), sample shapes from Theme C, 15.

The variation of motifs provides each theme with a sense of identity. For example, the three clouds of circles in Theme B are three different iterations of a single motif; while related, they are distinct in size, shape, density, and focus (Figure 5.4). The first and third clouds (reading from left to right) are tall and narrow compared to the second, which is broad and clearly triangular (the shapes of the others are more ambiguous). The first cloud is the least dense and the third cloud is the densest. As Haubenstock-Ramati suggested in his article “Musik und abstrakte Malerei,” the focal point of a local area is determined by a disproportionately large object. Each of the clouds is dominated by a single circle substantially larger than the rest: in the center of the first cloud, at the bottom left of the second cloud, and at the center left of the third. As Theme B is the only theme to use clouds consisting entirely of circles, this variation within unity helps to define the character of this theme.

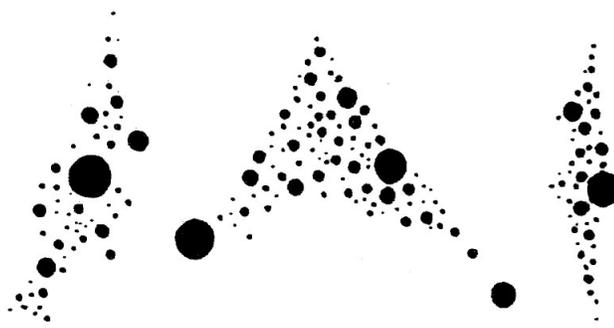


Figure 5.4: Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, *Decisions* (1959-1961), three clouds of circles from Theme B (page 3).

Development takes place not only within themes but also on a broader structural level as the themes are fragmented, transformed, and juxtaposed. Figure 5.5 shows an analysis of the odd-numbered pages of the score. Each even-numbered page is a retrograde (horizontal flip) of the preceding page. The second column indicates which themes are used in their entirety on any given page; themes listed in the third column are only partially used. The functions R and I indicate retrograde (horizontal flip) and inversion (vertical flip).

Page	Theme	Fragments
1	A	
3	B	
5	C over B	
7	R(A) over R(C)	
9	R(A)	B on left, IR(B) on right
11	R(C)	R(B)
13	R(A), I(B) on right	R(C)
15	C	

Table 5.5: Thematic relationships in *Decisions*

When Haubenstock-Ramati combines two entire themes, he either stacks them vertically (pp. 7 and 9) or joins them horizontally (p. 13). The pages with two themes vertically stacked have two horizontal reference lines. On the other pages, thematic fragments are always placed at the same pitch (vertical position) as in the original theme (inverted frag-

ments are inverted with respect to the horizontal reference line). These fragments range from the nearly insignificant (just two elements from Theme C on p. 13) to large portions of the theme (almost half of Theme B in retrograde inversion on p. 9).

The work as a whole demonstrates an arch form, with relatively simple pages at both ends and the most complex pages in the center. The first four pages deal with single themes in isolation. Pages 5–8 combine two themes vertically. Pages 9–12 serve as a development in which Themes A and C are combined with fragments of Theme B. Pages 13 and 14 are the climax of the piece, where elements from all three themes are present. Finally, the last two pages return to where the piece started, with a single theme.

Each time a theme is repeated, it is varied in subtle ways. A few objects are added or subtracted; hollow objects are filled in or filled objects become hollow. Striped objects (an example of which is shown in Figure 5.3) appear only on pages 7 and 8. On page 13, the single diagonal line from Theme B (Figure 5.6) is “completed” with an opposing diagonal line to form a hollow isosceles triangle, an object that previously existed only in Theme C. These adjustments, however small, play a vital role in the further development of the motives that define the three themes.



Figure 5.6: Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, *Decisions* (1959-1961).
The fragment from Theme B (left, page 3) is “completed” on
page 13 (right), making a triangle.

Recorded Interpretations of Haubenstock-Ramati’s Graphic Scores

The small but impressive discography of Haubenstock-Ramati’s graphic scores provides a reference point for performers of his music. It is impossible to know how much improvisa-

tion actually took place in these recordings; however, the choices made by these performers, many of whom worked directly with the composer, can be valuable when planning an improvised version. In his interpretation of *Alone 2* (1969), Kazimierz Pyzik translated a single-page collage of scribbles, shapes, and cut-outs from an American newspaper into a virtuosic dialogue between prerecorded synthesized sounds and double bass.⁵⁹ Synthesized loops and snippets of tonal melody are “found objects” that Pyzik subjected to filters, stretching, and sudden interruptions of noise, chaos, and stark gestures. Haubenstock-Ramati designates the instrumentation of *Alone 2* as “Sprechstimme,” which Pyzik realized as spoken words subjected to electronic manipulation. The text in the score has been removed from any meaningful context—the snippets come from speech bubbles cut from comic strips, clues from crossword puzzles, and an unintelligible fragment of a bridge column. A comment in the CD booklet implies that Pyzik mistakenly found a nonexistent train timetable in the score (presumably he mistook the football scores for an hourly schedule), and towards the end of his performance he introduced trainlike noise as another found object. Pyzik avoided a literal interpretation of the quasiconventional notation included on the score—objects from Haubenstock-Ramati’s own *Mobile* series of compositions (*Liaisons*, *Mobile für Shakespeare*).

The score of *Alone 1* (1965), for unspecified low instruments, is also a single page with no instructions, consisting of arrows, designs made with repeated letters and symbols in typeface, and patches of texture (possibly impressions from fabric). The recording by Eberhard Blum (bass flute), Iven Hausmann (bass trombone), and Jan Williams (prepared bass drum) seems to be a relatively rigorous interpretation of the figures on the page, even though it is impossible to determine exactly what symbols are being considered at any given point.⁶⁰ The flute and trombone make single notes into arrow-like sounds through a

⁵⁹From *Ensemble MW2 Plays New Music*, CD recording, Vienna Modern Masters 2024, p1997.

⁶⁰From *Roman Haubenstock-Ramati: Graphic Music*, CD recording, Hat Hut Records, p1997.

strong directional thrust—either with a small glissando, with dynamics (soft to loud), or with sound quality (breathy to robust). Repeated static sounds recall the repeated typeface, and the intermittent background noise from the drum could be the patches of texture. The long zigzag trombone glissandi resemble the large colored “A” and “D” letters both in terms of visible contour and in the way that they stand out from the rest of the soundscape.

Carol Morgan defied expectations in her recording of *Pour piano* for keyboard instruments (1973).⁶¹ The score implies uncompromising gestural drama with torrents of oblique lines, blacked-out areas, and antlike blobs that crawl in multitudes across the single page. She seemed to treat the lines as the strings of the piano, gently vibrating as various objects move across them, touching, scraping, tapping, and shaking. Only the inside of the piano is used in her five-minute rendition, accompanied tastefully with the harpsichord and celesta clusters.⁶²

These highlights from the commercial discography of Haubenstock-Ramati’s undefined graphic scores display the huge range of potential variety, given sufficient boldness on the part of the performers. What is not audible in these recordings is the process that resulted in these interpretations, a process that would be essential to determine the extent of any of improvised components.⁶³ It is possible that some of these performances were created using a premade, fully realized score. However, it is more likely that only some basic aspects of the interpretation were worked out, creating a structural foundation and establishing clear links between the visual image and aural consequence. Using improvisation allows fluctuating perspectives, conflicts, patterns, and exceptions to coalesce, forming

⁶¹*Roman Haubenstock-Ramati: Pour Piano*, Hat Hut Recordings, p1997.

⁶²The instrumentation of this recording was disclosed in Carol Morgan, “RHR,” email correspondence, April 27, 2013.

⁶³Carol Morgan was the only performer mentioned above to respond to my email inquires. She indicated that she was improvising. Before performing, she decided “if it is going to be a quiet, perhaps reflective reading, or a more vigorous, energetic one; . . . [and] the sort of palette of colors and gestures I will use, or start off with. . . . I [determine] whether I start in the middle of the picture, or [the] top, or lower down; and then think [of how] one grouping will lead into another.” Ibid.

a constantly evolving reflection of the work itself as filtered through the predetermined elements of the interpretation. The objective value of any one perspective is drowned out in the tumult of new ideas, new connections, and new possibilities.

Improvisation in *Decisions*

A few suggestions will serve as starting points for an improvisational exploration of *Decisions*. This work of graphic art is successful on its own terms; Haubenstock-Ramati brilliantly illustrates the development of musical ideas through a notation that manages to combine a clarity of formal logic with implications of tangible musical sounds. He makes it clear that the translation of his scores into sound is beyond his control and it is not his primary concern. The fact that the score itself demonstrates its aesthetic value even to a nonmusician liberates the performers. They are no longer the only medium through which the score can be appreciated; their potential failure will not diminish the music's visual beauty. A performance of *Decisions* is really an opportunity for the performers and the audience to experience and appreciate the music together, in the moment, free of any concern for future interpretations or criticisms.

As Haubenstock-Ramati indicates in "Musik und abstrakte Malerei," one purpose of a graphic score is to eliminate extra-musical associations. He intended the realization of this piece to be as abstract as the symbols with which he builds his graphic structures. He would likely expect interpreters to eschew clear references to tonality, other styles of music, or overtly emotional content, a "style" of music that is frequently encountered in the European avant-garde idiom of the post-World War II era. An improvisation in this style fluctuates rapidly, moving between a broad palette of timbres, articulations, and gestures. Repetition is avoided; the improvisers consider how a group of musical sounds or gestures relate to each other and then strive to add a further dimension to that relationship with different

sounds and gestures. As Haubenstock-Ramati writes, there are two ways to interpret any new event: either by association (how it relates to previous events) or by exception (the new event is different from anything that preceded it).

Many of the subtler points, particularly the transformations of the themes involving the addition or alteration of single objects, are not easy to communicate when reacting spontaneously. The performers can try to highlight these variations by repeating and altering key objects while allowing others to pass by unseen. Alternatively, they can let these subtleties slip under their conscious radar, rationalizing that they are really more beautiful on the page than in the air. Given that any single gesture has a very broad range of possible realizations, differentiating small variations is only one of many ways to bring out the craftsmanship of Haubenstock-Ramati's score.

Distinguishing the character of the three themes can help to clarify the structure. As a preparatory exercise, the improvisation group can rehearse the original versions of each theme (pp. 1, 3, and 15) separately and discuss how to make the different character of each theme audible. Such practice will be useful when interpreting the pages with combined themes, which are much easier to parse if the components have been studied separately.

In Theme A, the vertical lines seem to fulfill a connective function, suggesting a legato melody. The different shapes within the clouds of small objects should be sharply contrasting. On a string instrument, these shapes could be played on different strings or using different techniques (*sul ponticello*, *col legno*, *pizzicato*). A pianist could see some shapes as an indication for unconventional methods of playing the keys (with a fist, the back of the hand, or an arm), for using the inside of the piano (muting, preparing, or plucking strings), or for vocalizing sounds. The physical difficulty of rapidly switching between such techniques is in itself a valuable tool that creates the impression of virtuosity, forces the mind and body to explore new territory, and can provoke fortuitous accidents. Small isosceles triangles pointing upward are unique to this theme, and could suggest sharp

attacks; a contrasting timbre would also be effective. In the piano piece *Catch 2*, such triangles would represent a rapid series of ascending minor-second dyads.

Theme B is dominated by white space. The theme takes up substantially less horizontal and vertical space on the page than the other themes, and there are wide gaps between its constituent parts. Nevertheless, it is easy to gravitate toward the density and complexity of a few small areas and play too much for too long. To prevent this, the total duration of the page could be fixed; a performer could thus choose to repeat it multiple times, but he or she would be obliged to pause between repetitions in proportion to the total length of the page. The vertical lines seem too dense to imply melodic connections and might be interpreted as a series of abrupt events instead, whether gestural, percussive, or theatrical.

The tiny circles and rectangles connected to long stems in Theme C seem to ask for some unusual interpretation to distinguish this theme from the others; they could be harmonics, multiphonics, or rapid arpeggiations. The long, white-centered triangles could represent a series of repeated notes or chords that accelerate or decelerate depending on the triangle's direction. In the context of the entire piece, these triangles play a structural role. Pages 13 and 14 are pivotal because they include elements from all three themes; Theme C is represented by a rectangle with a white triangle attached to a stem. Although the white triangle was previously unique to Theme C, these two pages contain an altered element from Theme B on the opposite side of the page that forms another such triangle (see Figure 5.6). While the subtle connection between these two themes on these pages will likely be inaudible in performance, the performers' awareness of its relevance to the arch structure of the entire piece may influence their interpretation.

The AIR Improvisers and *Decisions*

We performed *Decisions* in the AIR Improvisers recital on April 12, 2012. Our experience working with the piece led us to adopt certain strategies for improvisation. In general, we found that flexible rules that allowed the players to act independently of one another made improvising easier and facilitated musical dialogue. In contrast, an overly restrictive plan can detract from the improvised nature of the work. Our initial attempts at this piece involved only the first page, which we analyzed in detail, working out sounds and dividing events among players. Our rehearsal takes lacked any sense of musical dialogue; the only coordination between parts occurred at designated cues.

Weeks later, we prepared a fifteen-minute quartet version of this piece for our recital. Limited rehearsal time compelled us to change our performance strategy. Open-ended and flexible rules enabled us to translate markings between sound sources more easily, so that a solo saxophone was as capable of playing a single page as a solo performer on a synthesizer. A greater degree of flexibility in interpretation allowed more spontaneity. Our group discussion focused on how to maintain a vibrant texture instead of the ramifications of a particular method of interpreting symbols. For example, we discovered a tendency for everyone to cluster around a single type of sound, instead of bringing the various gestures into relief and allowing them to intermingle. We then stipulated that if two people were playing the same type of gesture, the others should create contrast.

We gave a separate page to each musician instead of interpreting a single page as a group. A single-line instrument could interpret a whole page satisfactorily by ignoring events that happen simultaneously (in the same horizontal position), or by playing the page with multiple passes over that horizontal point. Our earlier experiments had led us to conclude that this method allowed far more flexibility than having multiple musicians collaborate on a single page. The discrepancy of pitch range, timbre, and volume made it

hard to treat a jointly-realized page uniformly without predetermining the instrumentation of specific sections. By treating each page as an uncoordinated independent part, we followed in the spirit of Haubenstock-Ramati's mobile structures in works such as *Catch 2* and *Mobile für Shakespeare*.⁶⁴

The results of our new strategy were immediately encouraging. Instead of struggling to get a single good take, we could produce several in a row, seemingly effortlessly. Our natural improvisational talent proved most effective when given free reign. With more time to rehearse, we might have initially used structured exercises to polish our skills before moving on to a freer realization. Although the connection between the score and the resulting sound was tenuous in the recital, the score's presence influenced our performance greatly. While we retained the back-and-forth musical dialogue typical of a free improvisation, we also used visual inspiration to come up with ideas that were not necessarily related to our aural surroundings. As a result, the overuse of imitation that dogged many of our free improvisations was replaced by a richer texture of interwoven ideas.

In the recital, we set up two stands in the front of the performing area several paces apart, facing the audience. The piece began with all sixteen pages of the score on the music stand on stage right—we were in an open atrium, so any interested audience member or passerby was able to approach and study the score. Each of us walked up to the stand, took a single sheet of the score, walked back to his or her place, and interpreted the page. We found that a page took about three minutes in a “natural” interpretation, but longer or shorter interpretations were encouraged as well.⁶⁵ After a performer finished with his or her page, he or she placed it on the music stand on stage left and crossed over to stage

⁶⁴In the two-piano version of *Catch 2*, both pianists play from the full score but their parts are uncoordinated. In *Mobile für Shakespeare*, the musicians are divided into three uncoordinated groups with separate structures represented on the single-page score; the conductor's score contains no music, only a bar graph of the instrumentation with cues written in time-space notation for the musicians' entrances and exits.

⁶⁵In his instructions for other graphic works, Haubenstock-Ramati allows no more than 60 seconds per page, although a single page can be played several times in succession.

right to take the next page. The piece lasted until all the pages had been deposited on the music stand on stage left. We aimed for a performance time of approximately 15 minutes. Allowing the audience to see the score gave them an appreciation of its original visual form.⁶⁶ An invitation to join in was taken up by one audience member, who took a page from the score and interpreted it freely using sound effects on his Android tablet.

Despite our generally free approach, we tried to maintain a certain level of uniformity in the interpretation of symbols, and we agreed to treat the horizontal axis of each page as a timeline, reading from left to right; we also stipulated that the aggregate effect should take precedence over a strict relationship between the order of events. We tried to make the arch structure audible by separating the pages with physical and temporal space; each instrument had a distinctive space and sound so that the different pages could be clearly distinguished even when heard simultaneously, and the process of changing pages involved physical movement taking at least 20 or 30 seconds. In this way, we created an audible and visible boundary between any two pages that a single player would perform.

Ultimately, an improvisation group has to produce a successful performance, a performance that engages the audience and fulfills the aesthetic values of the group. In our realization, Haubenstock-Ramati's compositional decisions were glossed over because we had not studied the score's structure or symbols in any detail. However, we realized Haubenstock-Ramati's goal of having his music stimulate "musically true and unique" improvisations.⁶⁷ We rehearsed this piece as we rehearsed any other improvisation piece, listening to each

⁶⁶We are not alone in sharing Haubenstock-Ramati's scores with the audience; there is a segment of a performance of *Decisions* where the score is projected onto a large screen: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpB9vVsB8II> (accessed May 30, 2012), and this video displays the score to the viewer directly: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpbxxbQccIY> (accessed June 4, 2012). While I have found that giving the audience access to the score can draw them into the performance, Haubenstock-Ramati does not mention such an approach. Displaying graphic scores is not standard practice; the pianist Carol Morgan worked with Haubenstock-Ramati and has never displayed scores during her performances, as she feels that would risk turning the concert into "a curiosity shop or an academic exercise which I am not comfortable with." Carol Morgan, "RHR," Email correspondence with the author, March 13, 2014.

⁶⁷See above, p. 114.

other perform and making decisions based on our impressions of previous run-throughs. To aid this process, we recorded ourselves, using it as feedback to critique ourselves productively. As Haubenstock-Ramati himself wrote, notation for improvisers is not restrictive; rather it is an expedient and a means of stimulation.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Performing Improvisation

Free group improvisation is a valuable, if underused, tool that can illuminate the role of creativity and interaction in music making. Engaging with nonidiomatic improvisation focuses attention on the act of discovering new ideas in music, allowing the creative process to take precedence over developing fluency in a particular style. It is thus a natural starting point for nonimprovisers to explore improvisation, and in a group setting the interaction between players can result in a highly engaging musical dialogue.

The techniques for stimulating creativity that were developed by free improvisation groups and educators train skills that can be applied to the performance of contemporary indeterminate works, including scores that make use of graphic notation. Exploring these works involves the use of classical musicians' traditional tools for developing an interpretation of an existing score, including analysis and historical awareness.

During my research on free improvisation, I gave two recitals that included improvisation. One of them, the AIR Improvisers' recital in the CCM Atrium, had both free improvisation and a realization of the graphic score *Decisions* by Roman Haubenstock-Ramati. The other was a lecture recital that included solo improvisations on Haubenstock-Ramati's graphic scores for piano. In both cases, I found the practice of improvising in performance to be liberating and highly satisfying artistically. The process of preparation—developing strategies and techniques, trying them, and listening back to the result—was

also both enjoyable and instructive.

However, I found that performing improvisation involved challenges that I had not previously considered. In a traditional Western classical concert setting, the audience does not interact with the performers while the music is being played; listeners receive the music passively and do not offer any feedback until after the music has finished, in the form of applause, post-concert discussion or written review. Immediate feedback, such as walking out or talking audibly, is generally seen as a breach of etiquette. Audience interaction is often present in improvisation traditions, from Hindustani music to eighteenth-century Italian opera to jazz. The immediate feedback lets the performers adjust their performance accordingly, taking advantage of improvisation's flexibility and adaptability. It also engages the audience with the performance. Contexts that include improvisation without audience interaction often make use of a musical language that creates a mutual understanding among knowledgeable audience members. The fortepianist Robert Levin, who regularly improvises Mozart cadenzas in performance, has internalized "an extraordinary amount of statistical information" on the usage and frequency of musical elements in Mozart's compositional style in order to be as faithful to the composer's musical language as possible.¹ Free improvisation in a concert setting requires the performers to deal with the issue of the audience. How will the audience engage with a non-interactive performance with no pre-defined language?

It is possible to view a musical performance as simply the experience of sounds, not as a form of expression or interaction. John Cage and other avant-garde composers embraced the idea of letting "sounds be themselves," and this would certainly be a valid response to the problem of engaging the audience. This philosophy can be combined with alternative performance scenarios in which the audience can walk around freely, leave, or

¹Noam Sivan, Interview with Robert Levin, August 2008, quoted in Sivan, "Improvisation in Western Art Music," 95.

even lie down. Alternatively, multidisciplinary performances or exhibits let the audience freely change their focus from one medium to another. Eliminating the rigidity of the concert ritual may make audience members more receptive to music that seeks only to represent pure sound, without familiar expressive or narrative traits. We used this approach in the AIR Improvisers recital, held in an open atrium where passersby could stop and listen. We also displayed the score of *Decisions*, adding a visual component.

Another option is audience participation. As the interactions between players is a key area of interest in group improvisation, adding in the possibility of interactions with the audience can increase the dynamism and variability of a performance. Even limited interaction can have a positive result. We invited audience participation in the AIR Improvisers's recital as well.

A final possibility is to educate the audience so that they have at least a basic understanding of the processes at work. This can take the form of program notes, a verbal introduction, or an extended presentation. In the case of completely free improvisation, the motivations for attempting such a performance or experiences relating to the preparatory stages may be of interest. In a structured improvisation, the parameters could be revealed to the audience. A realization of a indeterminate composition could be accompanied by a description of the interpretative methods used. I took this approach in my lecture recital.

Interpreting indeterminate scores in a classical music environment raises the contentious issue of the nature of a musical composition. Since the Romantic era and the development of a historical musical canon, a musical work has generally been considered as an musical object that is complete in itself.² In this model, the performer only presents what the composer has already wholly created, and the ideal performance in one in which the performer's personality remains entirely subservient to the composer's vision.³ As I

²See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 246–7.

³Ibid., 1.

discovered when discussing graphic scores with my classical music colleagues, the majority of classical musicians would subscribe to the idea that a score and a realization of that score should be linked by a consistent correspondence between sound and visual element, what Lydia Goehr refers to as the “retrievability test.”⁴

My own view is that a composition changes depending on what is done with it and who is listening. As creative artists, we respond to the work of our peers by relating their contribution to our own artistic experience, thus giving it personal relevance. We answer the “big” questions, “What is music?” or “What is meaning in music?” through “getting our hands dirty” with the practical issues of our own discipline, not through abstract philosophizing.

In one of my Juilliard classes, my advisor Joel Sachs recounted how he was teaching a general class on twentieth-century music at Juilliard to both music and dance students. He found it curious that the dancers’ response to the more provocative avant-garde works was to consider how they would choreograph the music. As nonmusicians, they were less concerned with the issues of defining music or the role of the composer, issues that challenge the preconceptions of any musician encountering this music for the first time. When asked about the definition or purpose of music, these dancers might find meaning through their own ability to convert the sound into physical movement. This view is not necessarily less valuable than that of a seasoned composer.

A composer friend recently assured me that drawing diagrams from which performers could improvise was “not composition.” Having a high regard for him, I accepted his view as legitimate; as a composer, he had acquired a certain perspective of the purpose of composition through practice, and I felt that he was entitled to consider which of his purported compositional colleagues were really peers.

As I approach these scores from the perspective of a performer and an interpreter

⁴Ibid., 23–24. See also *ibid.*, 31–32.

of others' compositions, my main concern is how to make the music relevant to my own artistic experience. I dare say that my own views on the practice of performing music are conservative in many respects. For example, I feel that performers have a responsibility to the composer to reflect the latter's wishes in their interpretations. One of the works that I discuss in Chapter 5, *Three Pages in the Shape of a Pear* by James Tenney,⁵ has only vague instructions that require an understanding of Tenney's other work in order to create an interpretation that adequately addresses the perceptual ideas behind the score. I feel that interpreters of this work have a responsibility to study the aesthetic views of this fascinating composer.

I also feel that discipline is essential to the art of performance, a view that seems to be near-universal in a field in which six hours of daily practice is not unusual. Writing this dissertation pushed me to consider exactly what discipline meant for me. I concluded that goal-oriented methods were the foundation of discipline. Performers begin by trying to achieve certain goals that related to their practice, goals that may be aesthetic, technical, or perceptual. These goals can change as they develop their craft, finding certain methods to be either productive (assisting their goals) or nonproductive. Through their pursuit of their own vision of an ideal, they demonstrate discipline in their field.

Ultimately, I remain convinced that graphic scores are an important product of our musical culture today. They demonstrate new and interesting connections between sound and image, and they offer performers the opportunity to realize them in innovative ways. Regardless of the abstract compositional value of open-ended scores, I contend that the possibilities of free improvisation show that from a performer's perspective, they have real potential.

⁵See above, p. 109.

Appendix A: Three Tango Exercises

Three Tango Exercises

1. Malagreña

- Everyone plays together. If the music becomes more (or less) passionate, everyone should follow along. There are no solos.
- One person (playing a chordal or bass instrument) is the rhythm and bass (wo)man. That person lays down a 8-measure 2/4 pattern. In this pattern, the first 4 measures are free harmonically. Measures 5-6 are on the dominant chord, and measures 7-8 are on the tonic (minor). The piece begins in an agreed-upon key, but after a while the rhythm and bass (wo)man can modulate and everyone else should try to follow.
- Everyone else is playing melodies. “Tango-style” is not a priority, but unrestrained heart-on-sleeve Latin music making is definitely preferred. Try playing with someone else in spontaneous parallel thirds or sixths! Soupy triplet rhythms are good.

2. Niña del fuego

- This is a quick-fire solo improv exercise. There is a leader. The leader signals whose turn it is to improvise with a spoken/gestural/musical cue. That player improvises freely until the leader switches to another player. The new improviser is responsible for making the transition as seamless as possible.
- This exercise can also be a contest, where the leader can eliminate players if they fail to make a convincing connection to what came before them, or if they run out of ideas in the middle of their improvisation. There is an agreed-upon cue that the leader uses to eliminate the player currently playing.

3. Tocatango

- This is a rhythmic exercise. One player is responsible for keeping the 2/4 meter and tempo throughout in whatever way he/she sees fit. There are four essential rhythmic points within the 2/4 meter: on the first and fourth 16th notes of the first beat, and on the first and third 16th notes of the second beat (making the traditional habanera rhythm). At the beginning, each player chooses just one of these rhythmic points and articulates only that point every measure (each point should be articulated by at least one player).

- Gradually, the players begin to add other articulations. They should try to retain the 16th note-pulse. At its peak, the combination of all the players should result in a continuous 16th note-rhythm. It's possible that one or more players may be moved to stray off of the 16th-note pulse in the heat of the moment.
- After the peak, the density of the rhythms should gradually calm down until each player is playing only one of the essential rhythmic points per measure (and all the rhythmic points should be articulated). Each player should be playing at a different rhythmic point than before. The previous two steps are repeated (the build-up, peak, and denouement) until each player has played on each of the four essential rhythmic points at the low points between the peaks.

Appendix B: Interviews

Interview with Joel Hoffman, July 9, 2012

Joel Hoffman is Professor of Composition at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music. His works draw from such diverse sources as Eastern European folk musics and bebop, and are pervaded by a sense of lyricism and rhythmic vitality. (<http://www.joelhoffman.net/>)

Edward Neeman: ... I had to decide exactly what I wanted to talk about in terms of improvisation. I wanted to focus on things that don't normally occur in classical music. One thing I wanted to focus on was working creatively as a group, beyond what you'd do in chamber music—how to make decisions as a group and decide what you're going to do in different places, establishing roles within the group, and learning how to criticize effectively. I also wanted to focus on the process of creativity. I think that if you end up going for an improvisational rather than a compositional route for a piece, you're going to end up looking at the way that things happen, and how fortuitous situations can influence the creative process.

Joel Hoffman: To study the idea of improvisation, it's first necessary to sort out what the differences are—the advantages and disadvantages—between improvisation and composed (written) music. I think it would be very helpful for you—especially since you've done a lot of reading, and I'm sure you've gotten a lot of ideas already—to write out a detailed account about the distinctions between these two activities. There's a lot that can be said, and it's important to get that clear. You could take a concept, like fortuitous opportunities, and examine that—first, in terms of composed music, and secondly, in terms of improvisation. You could also take concepts like harmonic restrictions or periodic structure—there are all kinds of ways of framing it—and then look at each one in terms of the two activities. Pretty soon you'll find that there are some interesting parallels and some really interesting differences. One example of that would be coordination. That's a really important one, because one of the chief strengths of written composition is that you create opportunities for coordination that would be difficult, and in some cases impossible, in an improvised situation. But then there are other kinds of coordination that you can create in an improvised setting that would be difficult if not impossible to create in a written setting. In other words, all of these things have their place, and when I write music, because I got so involved in improvising, I ask a simple question: “Can this piece be better realized as an

improvisation?” If the answer is yes, I don’t write it. Because why should I, if the piece can be more easily, more effectively, and more musically realized as an improvisation?

Maybe because nobody else could realize it as improvisation?

But I could. Let me give you a provocative example of something. In February of this year I did a recital at CCM. One of the pieces in that recital was a piece for ten cellos, which I conducted. I also had a recital the year before and I tried to put together ten cellists for that recital, but I only found one cellist, so the piece obviously couldn’t be performed. But the piece had already been performed a month or two before that in Chicago, and a friend suggested to me, “Why don’t you just play a recording of that performance in the concert?” Without thinking about it, I said, “That’s stupid. You don’t do that. You don’t play a recording of an acoustic piece in a concert if you can’t find the people to play it.” And my friend said, “Why? What’s wrong with that?” And I said, “Well, it’s just obvious. You don’t do that.” And my friend said, “It’s not obvious to me. Why don’t you explain why it’s obvious and why it’s something you shouldn’t do?” The more I started thinking about it, the more I had no explanation for all that. When you play a piano recital, if you don’t feel ready to play one of the pieces, but you played it in a recital the month before and recorded it, and it’s a great recording, why don’t you just play a recording of that piece instead of canceling it or playing something else? You would never do that!

Of course not.

But try to explain why to someone who’s not a musician. Try to explain why it’s a bad idea.

It’s pretty hard. I guess it feels like cheating somehow.

It is cheating, it’s a cop out. But the person who is asking you the question has no concept of that being cheating at all. That person wants to hear some music on a concert, and seems quite indifferent whether it’s a live performance or a recorded performance.

If I went to a concert and heard a recorded performance, I’d want there to be some kind of reason behind it. I feel that going to a concert is about experiencing the music making. I expect to hear a live performance, that’s why I wouldn’t play a recorded performance in my own recital.

Then you have to ask yourself, “What is it that makes you want to hear the live performance?” Unfortunately, the obvious reason is quite superficial: that’s just how it’s done. We go to a concert and we want to hear people play. When you look a little further into it, you find out that the reason people want to hear a live performance is because they want to see risks being taken. A risk isn’t a risk unless there’s a possibility of failure. Normally, people don’t want to see failure, but the risk of failure has to be real, otherwise the opportunity to see something live and be stimulated by that isn’t there. If we go to the circus and see someone walking a tightrope, it’s much more thrilling if there’s no safety net underneath.

And yet we don't want him to die!

So I think that when you look at the differences between improvisation and composition, you have to look at the motivations that are deeply underneath the surface and ask the question, "What do we really want out of improvisation?" Some of the answer to that has to do with taking advantage of fortuitous circumstances. Then there are these crazy hybrids, like the Morton Feldman idea of "turning the page." I got the idea from Frederic Rzewski, and he got it from Morton Feldman. It's an exercise for composers, and it's a fascinating merging of an improvisatory technique and a writing technique. You take a piece of music paper, and you write some music—it works better if it's a single instrument or a small ensemble—and when you get to the end of the page, you simply turn the page and continue writing, and you never look back. In other words, you create a situation where you have to rely on your very imperfect memory in order to create some kind of satisfying musical structure.

Didn't Feldman normally compose in a similar way?

Yes, that's how he composed.

I also heard that he composed with a pen so that he couldn't erase what he wrote. It's interesting that Rzewski got it from Feldman. Rzewski talks in a number of his articles about translating ideas from improvisation to composition.

That's right, and that's what he does all the time. I really think that the best thing that you can do—not only to make your thesis the best that it can be, but also to get deeply beyond the surface of this whole activity—is to spend time with Alan Bern and with Frederic. I'm sure there are other people, but these are the two people I know who are the smartest, best musicians that spend a lot of time considering improvisation. They're both incredibly good improvisers, but in addition to that, they have spent a lot of time teaching improvisation in Alan's case, or confronting the question of how to take the best things about improvisation and incorporate them into written music, which Frederic does all the time. I would say that most of Frederic's written solo piano pieces have at least one, if not multiple, improvisation opportunities. Think about how risky that is for the composer as well as the pianist, because the success of the piece—or the performance of the piece—cannot be measured in terms of "well, the written part sounded good but the improvisation part was lousy." Because it's supposed to be all one, it's supposed to be integrated. Hundreds and hundreds of pianists have played *The People United*, and there are improvisation opportunities in that piece that very few people take.

Well, in that piece, it's less of a risk, because the improvisation comes so close to the end so that people have plenty of opportunity to assess the compositional part before the improvisation.

They do, but the improvisation opportunity in that piece is an optional thing. So Frederic

had to find a way so that the piece will survive with no improvisation, and it will survive a bad improvisation. Actually, you could even say that it would survive a good improvisation or a great improvisation, because if the pianist improvised something that towered over the rest of the piece, that could be a different kind of problem.

Composers of graphic scores often have no control over how their pieces are interpreted, whether it's improvised or planned out beforehand to any degree. You could have any number of completely contrasting performances of the piece, and a lot of composers ended up distancing themselves from performance. Roman Haubenstock-Ramati, who I wrote about in a section of my thesis, was often dismissive of even the possibility of performing his pieces. It's not that he didn't want them to be performed, he liked them to be performed, but he heard the music in his mind, and then he translated that into a visual representation. For him, that was enough, that was the piece.

Now you're talking about something that's the intersection between mid-twentieth-century visual art and a timeline. In the world of visual art, the whole idea of a painting or a sculpture or installation as a provocative concept far more than as a satisfying work of art became the norm, and it became something that composers and sound artists were interested in emulating, and Haubenstock-Ramati is an example of that. Alan Bern and Frederic are not at all in that world. They care only about how music sounds. Another composer who I'm sure you came across is Sylvano Bussotti. Bussotti was also very eager to emphasize the visual elements of his score, and they are very dreamy. I have a score that we did in MusicX called Music for a Satellite. It looks like what a Paul Klee score would look like if Paul Klee wrote musical scores—he practically did anyway, his paintings often look like musical scores. I'm sure you've seen several Earle Brown scores. Earle Brown is another composer who visually is fascinating, but you get the sense that that music is meant to be seen at least as much as heard. So there's a split that in the last couple decades of the twentieth century got healed up, and I think composers and improvising musicians got off that and started finding once again that music is really about sound and not about the way it looks. There are very few composers nowadays that are still interested in the way a score looks, even in the way that George Crumb did.

I guess there was a certain break between composers and the musicians who would learn these scores.

There was, because performing musicians are highly trained people—they are trained to take the notation of a composer as some sort of holy script, and it gets very confusing when the composer has no intention of it being treated that way. Whenever there's loss of face involved, or the potential of loss of face, it can get really serious.

I suppose you've made it seem that I'm treading on thin ice with my whole project, because I feel that the composers who wrote these scores might have had some intentions for them, but I don't necessarily know what they are, and I don't speak their language, especially not

in the case of Haubenstock-Ramati.

I really think that Alan Bern and Frederic are the keys to your freedom. Frederic was a member for many years of a group called Musica Elettronica Viva in Rome which did nothing but improvisation. They were the vanguard of improvised music in those days, and they did all kinds of music by all the people that you're interested in. They did a lot of these graphic scores from the '60s. They were composer-performers; they did their own music as well as music by others. They were fearless, they were fun, they were funny, and they were extraordinarily talented and they were a great group. They very, very occasionally still do a concert. To talk to Frederic about that would be wonderful, because he has a great memory, he's very interested in all that, even though he has at this point lost some of his enthusiasm for some of the things they did that were in the end not all that exciting, but they were exciting at the time when they were pioneering these things.

I have looked into MEV, but first of all, it's hard to find recordings, and second of all, recordings don't really tell you that much, because it's really all about being there and seeing what happens in real time, seeing the spontaneous creation of music.

What I've been talking to you about in the past, and also this time, is not so much the spontaneity of improvisation, but the organization of improvisation. The spontaneity is the opportunity to take advantage of fortuitous things. Naturally that's something that improvisers thrive upon, but what's not so clear, because you don't see it if you're not doing it yourself, is how much those fortuitous circumstances are set up in advance through very intelligent organization. That's why I was hoping that you would have a chance to learn from Alan some of the fascinating techniques that he's developed over the years for achieving both sides of the equation—that people are improvising together and they really are empowered to do what they want to do. They really feel like they're improvising, they're not following someone else's instructions, and yet they are doing this in a way that facilitates their creativity, because there are just enough rules that everyone has agreed to follow—just the perfect amount of control so that the musicians don't feel that control, but they're taking advantage of it.

I gave you one example, the calibration exercise. The calibration exercise is the first thing that you do with an improvisation group. It's designed to do two things—it's designed to get everyone to hear together, and it's designed to get everyone to lose their inhibitions. I didn't make this up, this is Alan's. Let's say it's just you and me, we've both decided we want to improvise together but we've never done it before, and you think I'm a good improviser and I think you're a good improviser so we have all the best intentions. But we're nervous. So the idea is this: we agree that I play a little riff. It can be literally anything, the only requirement is that it's very short, maybe it doesn't take more than four or five seconds, and it should also be pretty simple. All you do after I play it is you play it back to me as close as possible to exactly the way I play. Now here there are two things at play. One is that you feel on the spot to perfectly reproduce what I play, and to the extent that you cannot do

that, it shows that you're not fully competent—or at least, that's what you're worried it will show. But that's not the point of the exercise. The point is not to show off how great your ear is, it's to find out what you are capable of in terms of precisely reproducing what your partner plays, and if that's not perfect to your satisfaction, that's fine. That's the benchmark, that's the calibration. For example, if you have perfect pitch, and I play a C and you don't see that I'm playing a C but you play a C on the other piano and that's fine, we can work with that. But if I don't have perfect pitch and you play an F and I play something that I hope sounds like your note but turns out to be a G, we work with that. It means that I can come close, but should not be relied upon to reproduce the same note. That's fine as long as we are correctly calibrated. If you have a group of ten people, person one plays five seconds of something, person two tries to match that, person three tries to match not what person one did but what person two did, and so on so that person ten, in attempting to reproduce what person nine did, may actually play something quite different from person one.

That's the first calibration exercise. The second calibration exercise: say you have a group of ten people, and person one plays another five second riff, and person two is going to try to play something that's ten percent different from that, and so on around the circle. Now we understand what ten percent means for everybody. Typically what happens is that people will exaggerate, and the leader of the group will say, "If that's ten percent, what's going to happen when I ask for fifty percent?" So you make subtle changes, and typically because musicians are trained to think in notes and rhythms, person five trying to do a ten percent variation on person four will maybe just play one note differently. So the leader will say, "Notes and rhythms are very important, but we have other things. We have timbre. We have timing. We have gesture. Person four played the first note as if it were a downbeat, why don't you try playing it as an upbeat? There are many ways in which you can transform something in a subtle way, so let's rethink ten percent both in terms of degree and also the various tools available to us." Then you do it again, and then you try it with twenty percent. By the time you've finished about five or six of these, you understand what the basic potential of the group is. Everybody realizes that not only is nobody perfect, but that everyone is at a different level of imperfection, and then you get to be comfortable with that.

None of this is written down, but the fact is that when you're doing this calibration exercise, there are many really important unwritten rules that are being cemented into everyone's mind. Once you start improvising from that, like you say, "Now we're going to do a simple rondo structure where person one plays the basic theme, person two will move off into something else, person three will return to the theme, person four will move off in a different direction, etc. Now, because of the calibration exercise, everyone has a sense of where departing from a basic idea is intentional and where it's not intentional, where somebody did something that—well we won't call it a mistake but we'll say it wasn't intentionally changed. Then your fortuitous opportunities take on a whole different light because you're seeing them not as taking advantage of somebody else's blunder, but somebody else's intentional shifting the course of the theme. This is just one example

among countless examples of the way Alan has learned to work with groups of people so that they never lose their excitement about spontaneously creating, but they also don't have inhibitions and they understand that if there is just a little bit of structure in place, everybody can do miraculous things. I could play you improvisations that I've done in our classes that you'd be amazed by, you would say, "You mean you didn't write that down? How did you do that?" We were just working with these simple games. It's really remarkable.

So what would your goal be in these kinds of structured improvisations?

The simplest articulation of the goal is that you produce a thoroughly satisfying musical composition that could never have been notated. The notation would either be unreasonably cumbersome, or so that even thinking of such a thing would be unimaginable.

You should speak to Alan about these exercises and compare them to how MEV works—much of what MEV did I can't put into words because I wasn't there, but I have a strong feeling that much of it was very similar to what Alan does except that it was arrived at in a thoroughly intuitive way. The reason I think this is true is because what Alan has done over the years is to work with a variety of musicians who are really excited about improvising but they are not really composers and they don't think creatively, they have to be led into it, or pushed into it. They are also people who have various degrees of preparation and talent. Whereas MEV was something else—this was a small group of really talented composers who didn't need to talk that much, they just needed to set things in motion. I think that a lot of the kinds of things that Alan taught to his groups MEV just did without teaching.

That's interesting. What happened with our improv group is we didn't start with basic exercises, but we discovered pretty quickly what the problems with the group would be.

What are they?

It depended on the lineup. With Ty and Jen and Lindsey, one of the main problems was that I was the leader but I didn't want to be a leader. I read about groups like MEV that worked together from the start using a democratic approach, and there was a certain amount of political ideology, and they didn't want to have leaders. That was an essential part of their makeup.

Exactly right.

And I found in this case that it didn't work. People would show up and want to know what we would be doing. They didn't come up with anything on their own, they wanted me to tell them.

Let's take that apart. Why do you think that happened spontaneously, instead of what happened with MEV?

I think that's what people expected when they came into the group.

But why should they expect that? Why should there be a basic understanding that was so different from MEV?

Maybe it's because I organized the group myself, without the help of the others.

I don't think it had anything to do with you. I'm only able to guess, of course. I think a clue is what you already said, that with MEV there were ideological elements. In so many examples of human relationships, the details of the personalities are important, but the structure, the situation that they find themselves in has such an enormous impact on how their minds and their actions are channelled. I cannot help but think that as long as Ty and Jen and Lindsey and you were doing this in an academic environment, there was an unspoken belief that this is another iteration of a school activity. The whole concept of traditional school is that there is a hierarchy. MEV did not meet in a school. They met as a group of young, ideologically excited and eager musicians who wanted to do something out of the ordinary. They didn't want a leader, and there was no intrinsic structural setup for a leader. But your situation was not like that.

Interview with Michael Ippolito, July 12, 2012

Michael Ippolito is a versatile composer and performer who has collaborated with classical, folk, and jazz musicians in performances ranging from experimental improvisation to traditional Klezmer music. Also active as an educator, he is Associate Artistic Director for the New York Youth Symphony's Composition Program. (<http://www.michaelippolito.com/>)

Edward Neeman: I talked to Joel Hoffman the other day because I know he's done a lot of work with improv groups. My thesis is not necessarily about improv groups per se, it's about graphic scores and how one could use improvisation techniques to play some of these pieces. So it's a topic that's open-ended and lets me talk about whatever I want to. And when I talk to Joel Hoffman, he keeps talking about the group that Alan Bern had here which you were a part of and which involved a lot of improvisation exercises which really helped the group work together well. I had a group here and we did a lot of fun things but I can't say that we had a methodical way of increasing group coordination or anything like that. We basically did it on the fly and whatever worked, worked. He told me that Alan Bern had a "calibration exercise," which was basically a listening game where you go around a circle and everyone imitates the previous person. Then you gradually introduce different amounts of variation. So you say, "This time we're going around the circle and I want you to imitate the previous person but change it by ten percent."

Michael Ippolito: Right. I'd describe in general the theory behind it. The first problem is that classical musicians are not taught to improvise, to express themselves spontaneously. Our entire training is based around reading the score and then figuring out how to interpret

that. So in general, we require the notes and the rhythms to begin the process of expressing ourselves. So the first exercise is kind of a take-off on a meditation exercise. You play a single note, over and over again, attempting to make no variation at all—same dynamic, same rhythm, same articulation. You play middle C on the piano over and over again exactly the same. That's the equivalent of speaking a mantra, if you're doing a Buddhist prayer or something like that. It's meant to focus the mind because it gives you something to do. It activates that part of your mind. And then, based on that, you notice your "impulses." This is the best word that we came up with for when you have an "impulse" to do something else other than repeat that C over and over again. And then, for that there are different approaches. You either notice the impulse but you don't do anything, you notice the impulse and you take the first impulse—you are as impulsive as possible—or you notice your impulses and you choose which impulse you want to do. That's the preliminary exercise because you're training yourself to be unafraid to do an impulse to play, and you're training yourself to check your impulses—not to always go with the first thing you think of when the second thing or the third thing is really where the musical value is.

Do you do this exercise as a group?

One person at a time would do it and we would all listen. I think that's really important if you're trying to develop a group dynamic.

How long would each person play for?

It's really uncomfortably long. When I was teaching this to younger students, I would make a point of making this go on for much longer than what they expected. They were all really talented young musicians that never did anything like this before, and they felt very awkward repeating the same note over and over again. I think that also helps break down self-consciousness within the group. I would say several minutes at least of really trying to repeat the same thing over and over again, everybody doing that. It's also interesting for the person listening to notice their impulses, like when they want the person they're listening to to do something different. It's still about analyzing our tendencies from a very basic level in a very controlled environment. You start to notice your own tendencies, the tendencies of the people that you're playing with, you notice how you deal with their playing. That's like "precalibration," if Joel refers to that imitation exercise as "calibration." With calibration, somebody does a gesture, and you repeat exactly what they do. Of course this is infinitely easier for people who have perfect pitch, but you do your best. But actually, I think even exact repetition is a spectrum. There's more flexibility. The way that Joel talks about it is literally exact repetition. Of course, you try to do that, but "exact", or the intention of being exact, is a wider spectrum.

If you're playing different instruments, "exact" has a different meaning.

Absolutely. Imagine that you play a big eight-note chord on the piano and the clarinetist has to respond to that. And then you intentionally turn the dial away from "exact." What does it

mean to be a little bit different, or very different, or (this begins to get very interesting) what does it mean to try to do the opposite of something? There's not actually an "opposite" to most musical gestures. That opens up to the next level, which is continuous duo exercises. When I was playing, there were six or seven of us at various points, and we did the stuff that I'm describing, the calibration exercises, for months. There was no free improvisation, or jam sessions. We were doing this kind of stuff for months.

Wow. How often were you meeting?

This was for a couple hours at a time, and we were meeting twice a week if I remember correctly.

That's pretty intense, that's like a full university class!

Actually, like an ensemble, the same way that you might get together with a piano quartet and start digging into Brahms. That was, I think, the most interesting part for all of us, because we had all done at various points things like jam sessions or just goofing off and enjoyed it a lot, which is why we were interested in improvisation. And we would show up and it's nothing like that, it's very methodical. If there was anything that we accomplished while we were doing this, it was based on this unusual approach, the fact that it wasn't treated as "do whatever you want," it was something that you find a pedagogy for.

You did this with Alan Bern, so Alan Bern was leading these exercises, and then you also did this with younger kids?

That's right. So there are two parts that I'm describing. With Alan, he was leading the class; he never played. It was really important to have a separate set of ears to try to be objective, and he helped as best as he could to give us the perspective from outside the group. He would also give us the rehearsal plan, he would be the one who said, "We should do some calibration exercises, our goal is to make it from zero to fifty percent," or something like that. After a couple of years at that, in the Preparatory Division at CCM they were hoping to start an improvisation ensemble. I think Alan had done some short workshops with them over the summer, and he couldn't do it one summer so they asked me if I would do it. That developed into doing a miniature ensemble of really talented high school students. I think we met once a week. I was interested in expanding a little bit from what Alan did. I used a lot of these preliminary exercises, but we did branch out; for example, we did a performance of *In C*, I showed them some graphic scores from *Scratch Music* by Cornelius Cardew, and we talked about how we could apply some of these things to reading it. They were kids, so at various moments they seemed to take these strange things more seriously than at other moments. But they had a framework for what to do, and I was often very impressed with how they talked about what they intended after the fact.

So basically, with Alan you were just doing lots and lots of preparatory exercises. But you performed as well, right?

After about two years of playing together, we did a public performance.

Wow, that's a long time!

I wouldn't say that we intended the class to turn into a performing ensemble from the beginning. We started off as just being interested in exploring this, and probably somewhere into the second year we were thinking, "We're really making some interesting music," we felt like we were growing, and it was after two years that we finally did some local performances. There was a period of about a year when we were performing a lot, and then we all went our separate ways for reasons totally unrelated to the group.

What pieces did you play when you did a concert?

If I could just explain one more exercise, that might give you an idea of what we were doing—

Sure.

"Continuous duos" was a last step, and we did duos for probably a full year. We had six or seven people in the class at a time, and you can't just have everybody playing all the time. One of the big challenges in jam sessions is that people tend to pile on. I don't know if you found that when you were improvising.

We had the opposite problem. People would not contribute. I found that people seemed not to want to contribute, or they would just follow the leader, so there were long spans of time when nobody was doing anything. I guess part of the problem was that we had a bunch of composers and not performers.

Actually, we had a similar problem of following or confirming. When one person has a strong idea, everyone else goes with it until it peters out. Anyway, the continuous duo is about breaking these habits, because the rule that is set from the beginning is that no more than two people can play at a time. Then there are rules from how to change from one duo to another. In one version, you can only wait for someone to drop out. When someone drops out, someone else needs to jump in as soon as possible to take their place. This also helps to bypass the questions "What do I play? Do I really want to play? Do I now have something to do?" If the music is moving really quickly and somebody drops, then the group has to have that instinct of who's going to jump in, who's feeling it. Maybe I'm sitting next to the bassist, and I feel that the bassist really is ready and I'm not quite ready, so I let him jump in. Or you could have interruptions, so that the two who are playing have to keep playing until somebody interrupts them, and then one of them has to drop out. Sometimes they both drop out and then another person has to come in. It adds an element of something to keep your mind active. There have to be two people playing all the time.

That actually became one of our repertory items. Even when we were playing in a jam

session, we would set that up as a rule, and it really helped focus things. We would say that the first five minutes would be duos, and then we could let that transition into a free improvisation because we would have tons of material and a whole dynamic for the music by that point. We also developed other kinds of structures or games that we would play which you would call pieces. There was one where three people would start at the same time playing three different things, and everybody would have to listen to each of those three gestures or patterns. Then the structure of the improvisation would be that each of those things has to dominate one section. For example, if we start with ideas A, B, and C, where A is trills, B is loud chords, and C is scales running up and down the piano, we would do that all together for a while, and then we'd do a whole section on trills, a whole section on chords, and a whole section on scales.

Toward the end of our time together, in fact even after we had gone our separate ways, we merged again at a few points to play some concerts. We had one member who was a composer and flutist, and he wrote a kind of concerto grosso for chamber ensemble and us. There was a portion that was notated, a transition into some free improvisation stuff, and then the notated music came back in. That was a lot of fun. We joined Joel on one of his recitals and played as his "band." That was actually our first concert, and I don't think we were quite ready. Part of it was that Joel had his own style and way of doing things. A lot of it was very compatible, but I think that it confirmed for us that there needs to be a time when you figure things out before you go public, and that the dynamic you're creating is actually more important than the techniques.

That's pretty cool. I guess a lot of the research I've been doing has focused on groups that just get tossed together and make music. I don't know if you've looked into Derek Bailey and his group Company—he was very interested in groups that had never played together before. He would get a bunch of people and have epic five-day jam sessions where any group could form on the spot. He just wanted to see would happen when a bunch of people got thrown together. So you've given me a completely new perspective on group improvisation.

Yes, I get the sense that Alan is the only one who has ever done anything quite this focused. It's really a shame he's never written a book; I think he could.

The preliminary exercises that you talked about—up to the Continuous Duo exercise—these were all devised by Alan. But the other structures came from group members, right?

That's right. Also, we would find problems. If we found that we were doing a lot of arrhythmic music, we might try a game where we had to keep a continuous pulse going, or one where you need a strong rhythmic sense but the other players don't have to necessarily confirm that, they can create funky cross-rhythms. It encourages people to have a more confident rhythmic sense. I think this might be a classical musician thing, always adding a little rubato and you don't get that kind of driving rhythm. The bass player in the group

was a jazz bassist, and he was infinitely fascinating in these sessions. He loved playing with the group because it was totally different from the stuff that he would normally do. He didn't face any of the problems that we faced in terms of what to play, being uncomfortable playing rhythmic stuff, or any of that. He came with a different set of problems and a different set of skills. Checking in with Steve was always fascinating—what is he hearing, what can we do here?

So the group in general hadn't had much experience with improvisation?

Everyone had done the kind of thing that you were talking about where you just get together and jam, or they improvised by themselves. All the composers in the group improvised on their own, but that's very different.

Improvising on our own is definitely different from improvising in a group.

One thing that I did discover was the connection with conversation theory. This is actually very similar to what we were doing in the group. We were trying in real time to develop dynamic and coherent communication between different members of the group. In conversation theory, there are these fascinating models for how you would generate a meaningful conversation. All this is happening in real time, nobody has planned out what's going to happen, but we take cues. It's a little more awkward over the phone, especially a cell phone. If someone makes a little noise, do they have a thought? Should I stop? Should I give them space? Can I take a break? Do you jump in?

Conversation theory—I hadn't thought of that connection yet.

You're actually meaningfully communicating between groups—and I think that's why these preliminary exercises are so valuable, because they set up this whole vocabulary of what it means to do something similar, to contrast, to confirm what somebody is doing, or to do something completely different.

I already asked this question, but we went back—what pieces were you playing in your concerts?

Mostly we were playing at a cafe, and we would do a set. We would talk a little before and decide maybe to start with duos, and then do a down tempo thing—very broad descriptions to give some kind of shape to the evening.

Would you play continuously, or did you have separate numbers?

There would definitely be separate numbers. I would say, on average, they would go for five or ten minutes. This was a big part of the underlying philosophy, that we became fascinated with trying to improvise structures that seemed less improvised. We aspired to the things that we admired about composed structures, and we were really pushing the limits as to what we could do in terms of formal coherence and spontaneity. There are a lot of things

we take for granted in composed music, like stopping at the same time, or taking a grand pause and coming in together. We became very frustrated that we never heard any of these sorts of things in a group improvisation setting. We set it as a challenge: how much can we make what we do sound like somebody wrote it out?

So how would you coordinate a grand pause?

That would all be in terms of context. A pause would emerge, and maybe just two or three people would have eye contact and would jump in together in the same way that you would cue the beginning of notated music. Everything that we had in our repertoire was something that at some point we had done an exercise about. Probably we had a session—I don't remember this, but I would not doubt it happened—where we were playing, and we were like, "It's so awkward every time somebody stops, and then one person comes in, but it's never really a confident idea. Let's work on that. We have thirty minutes, let's do a game where every thirty seconds, there has to be a pause. Everybody stops, and then everybody has to come back in." We would do it over and over again and just see what happens, see if we could negotiate ways of listening to each other and ways of communicating. A lot of it was picking up on problems. Before we started playing concerts, we would end or begin sessions with a free improvisation that would last for maybe ten minutes, and then we would ask, what sucked about that? What was awful?

We did that a lot. The trouble was that we disagreed on what the problems were.

Yes. Actually, this is where having Alan outside the group was helpful. When I taught the younger group, I never played with them. It's not like he's saying, "You're wrong, this is what was bad about it." It's just to have an extra set of ears. He can say, "I see what you mean, but from my perspective, this is what I heard." That's really valuable, because when you're playing, you often have no sense of time and exactly what the effect of what you're doing is. One other thing I did—I had a recital where I wrote out music that was meant to imitate certain aspects of the kind of games we would play. It was an evening concert of five different movements. A couple of them were text-based pieces that were giving instructions. One of them was solos; everyone in the group has to take a solo at some point and they can't play until they take their solo, so that the solo is the introduction for each member of the group. Then I would also have "lead sheets" where I would write out the beginning of something, or I'd write out some material to be used and explain the general character of the piece. So we did everything from mostly notated to free improv. I don't think we ever did graphic scores with this group—we looked at graphic scores, we talked about them, but I don't think we ever actually did them in performance. We did some text-based pieces, both in exercises and in concert, and then some free improv, either based on an exercise or just completely free.

Now that I've actually had the experience of organizing a free improv group, it's interesting to hear about how someone experienced like Alan goes about it. It sounds like he already

knew what the problems would be and jumped right in and tried to fix them before they happened.

Yes, but I would say that this was definitely an experiment for him. He had never done anything like this, certainly not with the luxury of two years to work with us. He hasn't had a chance to replicate it either. I think that's one of the reasons that he's nervous about publishing any of these results.

Interview with Lindsey Jacob, September 25, 2012

Lindsey Jacob is a composer and saxophonist whose musical output is an eclectic blend of elements from many traditions. Many of her pieces include theatrical elements, improvisation, and pop culture references. Lindsey is currently an active member of a newly formed contemporary music ensemble, Fringe Logic. (<http://www.lindseyjacob.com/>)

Edward Neeman: What do you feel you get out of free improvising? Why do you enjoy doing it?

Lindsey Jacob: One thing I like about it is that you have to be really in the moment when you're improvising. You can change your mind about things in the moment too. Obviously, when you're playing something that's notated down specifically, you have to be in the moment as well, but the difference is that you're limited on some of the decisions you make because of the music being notated. I do like being able to decide at a moment's notice that I want to go in a different direction.

So it's being flexible.

And the other thing, too, when you're playing with people, letting what they're doing take you in a different direction is always interesting too.

Right. And that would be something you couldn't do when you're composing. But then there are also limitations. Because you don't have a plan you end up doing the same things over and over again.

That is true. There are certain tendencies. The more I've improvised, the more I learn about my certain tendencies.

You improvised in this group, but you also improvised before, right?

Yes.

For example, you played in your own improvisation piece.

I played in it before, and I've not played in it before. It's been performed a couple times, and I've played it with a group before and the group played without me. *Choice* is the predecessor of *Framework No. 1*. The idea behind that piece was I was giving all the performers the option of communicating with the other musicians or to not communicate. I don't know if I necessarily specified that in *Framework*. *Framework* went in a slightly different direction. The way I set it up is the entire time, each musician could decide to just keep doing what they wanted. They didn't have to pay any attention to the other musicians, if they decided to do that. Obviously, when they decided that they wanted to communicate with the other musicians, it was more interesting. That was kind of the whole point.

That was for six people, right?

It was for six people.

And did you improvise before that? I know you probably improvise when you're composing.

I improvise during precomposition. That's how I started when I was really little, because I didn't know how to notate anything.

So you would just figure it out on the piano.

That's right, so I played the piano when I first started composing when I was younger, messing around, and if I liked something, I'd keep doing it. I've also played some free improv with computer musicians, in CiCLOP—that's the Cincinnati Composers' Laptop Orchestra Project. I was also in another group when I was in Louisiana, the Laptop Orchestra of Louisiana at Louisiana State University. There was a piece that a few of us composed. There was a live acoustic musician that would be paired with someone on a computer—we changed it to iPad as well. We went up to 6 players—three acoustic musicians and three computer musicians. Any more than six made it sound like a jumbled mess.

And you would be improvising with your partner without planning with them beforehand, right?

Yes. So it was the interaction between the acoustic musicians and the computer musicians. All the acoustic musicians were playing into mics, so the computer musicians could add on effects in real time, or the computer musicians could take snippets of the audio, record a section, save those, put effects on those, and play those back at any point in time.

So you could develop a vocabulary depending on what your acoustic player did.

That's right, somebody could take a bit of audio from something that happened earlier and bring it back.

That was completely improvised, that was the whole scenario, and you improvised on top of that.

Right.

So with the improv in our group, we were the only players who were there from when we started until the concert in April. First it was with Ty and Jen, and then it was with Stephanie, and Josh joined us for a little while. How did you feel about how the group interacted?

That's the interesting thing about improv—it's so much about knowing the other musicians and the interaction between musicians. It's always very different. When Stephanie came in, it was a different feel—Stephanie is a different type of musician from Ty, not that anyone's better than the other.

I felt that you always had a conciliatory position in the group. When we worked with Ty and Jen, they had already worked on improv with Joel Hoffman, and as I found out later, Joel Hoffman has a very specific way of doing improv—much more prepared. The improv group that was here before us, the Real-time Composers, had someone who was in charge, Alan Bern, who wasn't playing. He was telling them what they would do, and they spent two years doing exercises. . . . I, on the other hand, had been reading about the free improv groups from the '60s, that were more relaxed. They brought in people who had never played music before, didn't rehearse, and were often politically motivated as well. So I didn't want to make any rules, but I felt that they felt that there needed to be rules.

I don't know. I think [being conciliatory is] my personality, too. I always find that. That's my role in the saxophone quartet I'm in now. There are two saxophonists in there that always have the opposite opinion of how something should be done. I'm the person who has to try to bring them together.

It's a good thing you're there.

I think that's just how my personality is.

So now that all that's past, how do you feel about this idea of rules in improvisation?

I think it depends on the musician. I think for some people, it's good. They're able to get ideas that are more satisfying to listen to, they're able to organize their ideas so that the piece has some kind of shape. But I think there are other people who may not be so good with that. I can see both ways, and I think they're both valid.

The other time I thought you took a conciliatory role was with Stephanie and me when we were playing Haubenstock-Ramati and Josh joined us. Stephanie and I were playing as we thought avant-garde European music sounds like on the piano, and then Josh comes in as a Romantic violinist, with long beautiful lines, and everything is nice and smooth. I felt that in the concert you were mediating between us and him.

I guess I was doing that, connecting to try to make sense out of these bits of style. I guess

if we came into it saying that everybody is doing a different style, that's one way of doing it.

I guess the difference between this and your saxophone quartet is that it doesn't matter if it's connected. That fact that you're there makes a great contribution, because the music makes sense together. But if you weren't there and it was a failure, that wouldn't be terrible, as it would with the saxophone quartet.

Especially since it's established pieces [with the quartet]. It depends. There have been artistic endeavors before where the point is to have two things happening at the same time that are not connected. But for the most part I like things to have some type of connection. I do care that there are people listening, and that there is some way for the audience to be able to understand what's going on and connect with things throughout the whole improv.

One thing that I wish we'd done more in the improv group is listen back to our playing as a group. So I thought maybe we should listen to some of the stuff. Is that OK?

Yes, that's fine.

I'd like to listen to some takes of your piece. One thing I found was that when we were doing something like that, it took us longer to make sense of the music than if we were playing free. You'd think that having rules would clarify things, but I found that just interpreting took some practice. I think we reached a point where we "got it." I don't know what it was like with your other group [that played Choice], but personally when I looked at the score, I thought it would sound simpler. Everybody has a separate melody and can hear exactly what's going on. And when we played, it tended to mush—

It melded together.

Probably more than your other group.

It definitely did, more than my other group. They were musicians who were not particularly used to improvising, who hadn't really done that before. So they needed extra direction. I've done it with a vocal group and with an instrumental group. I think the instrumental group was more successful. With the vocal group, most of them were way outside of their element. They asked, "What do we do to change the melody up?" I was like, "Add some notes? Take some away?" [I gave them the] basics of how you vary a motive, but they'd never really done it.

Okay, I'll play a couple versions of this piece. [plays 03 Framework from 04/11/2012] That was an early version.

I thought it was really interesting to listen to actually. I think the nature of the piece is that you can hear the structure better when the gestures are totally different, and because we were influenced by—that was Stephanie who played first, right?

Right.

I think we were influenced by what she did, in the creation of our gestures.

So that we all ended up with soft gestures.

Right, and the pace of them was kind of the same. The flow of the gestures and the styles were very similar, I think. And so as we were going, we were morphing the whole time.

When you started your gesture I bet you didn't think it would end up as a trill, right?

Right. And later, I took Stephanie's rhythm—just the rhythm and took the pitch out and just did it on one note. But then she took that in some other direction, a style of piano playing that reminded me of Rachmaninoff! Then it was funny when we were all doing tremolos, and I brought my gesture back in with a tremolo at the end. Listening to it, I'm thinking of some decisions I would make, and they're similar to the ones I made!

One other thing about this particular take is that we were reacting more to you than in some of the other ones. I think that was part of having three people with two of them on the one instrument; Stephanie and I were playing off each other a lot, and it was only the last section of the piece—we were treating the section after the solos as a dramatic point—so before that section it would be us and you, and in that section we would mix a little more. In that one, we were mixing earlier, although maybe not entirely in a good way. I remember noticing that, and we tried having you play the Player No. 2 part once, because Players 1 and 3 relate to Player 2. If Player 2 is imitating someone else, then you can move around a bit between parts, but otherwise everybody's going to start focusing on Player 2's part at some point.

Yes, that's how the piece is structured.

I don't know whether you would have done it this way, but I thought we should put you as Player 2 so that Stephanie and I would respond to you more.

Yes, I may change it.

So it didn't bother you?

Well, I guess that's something about having a similar instrument . . .

Let's listen to another one. [plays 04 Framework, 4/18/12] What was your reaction?

It's a very interesting combination. I found it interesting to listen to too, honestly. Your gesture is very aggressive, disjunct, and Stephanie's was ornamental and florid.

I think this was the rehearsal where you suggested that we try for more contrast between the gestures.

Well, there definitely was! It makes an interesting pairing, when we're taking different elements from each other. The end is what's surprising, because it's so aggressive, and all of a sudden we're back in a dream world. We're in reality, it's crazy, and then it's "dream world"—that's the imagery I get from listening to it.

This is one of the takes when we basically ignored your theme until the end, when we take up your sliding gesture as best we can on the piano. You weren't expecting something like this when you wrote the piece, were you?

The piece has it built in that a lot of options are [possible]. But yes, the way it's written, the way of emulating each other is apparent. In any of the times we played that piece you still get that idea out of it—emulation of gesture. But honestly, that's what improvising musicians do.

One important limitation is that everyone has one theme.

And we didn't keep it.

We moved away quite quickly, I guess. I can't remember if it was before or after this rehearsal, but at some point Stephanie and I sat down and worked just with the two of us, trying to get more uniformity of gesture. Especially with two people on the piano, when things change so fast, it can be hard to follow.

Definitely.

Stephanie was very resistant to that idea, and eventually we sort of compromised.

It's something I built in originally—when you stay closer to a gesture that's created, a shorter one, it does have a different feel. It has more of a feel like you're walking through the hall where the practice rooms are. Where everyone is practicing different pieces, but they're working on one thing. That's more of the feel you get when you stick closer to the gesture. With the next piece I write I might think about that.

You might think of ways that would restrict how somebody could move?

Either direction. I might do something that's more open or more restrictive and see how that works.

Can I ask you—a lot of my paper is on Haubenstock-Ramati, so how did you find working with that piece?

It's interesting. How does a musician interpret images? That's what we do when we play any kind of music, looking at symbols. How do you interpret that as sound? How does that represent sound? It depends on the instrument you play, obviously. The concept of the sounds that you physically can make on your instrument changes how you look at a piece

of notation.

On the saxophone, what do you do when you have a page where you have a lot of things that are happening simultaneously?

If I decide to do it from left to right, are those representative of multiphonics? Which I can do, but maybe there are better ways than multiphonics the whole way through.

If you have different textures at the same time, you can't do that with multiphonics.

Right. Obviously, if we're viewing this as events happening in time, from left to right, I can't do all of it.

When we did it as a group, when everyone had their own page, how were you reacting to the other people? Did the page enter into it in a meaningful way?

If I heard something that sounded similar to what something looked like, . . . I might play off of part of that when I got to that on the page. I would try to take some pitches sometimes; if there was a really strong chord somewhere, I would take a pitch from that. A lot of it is just feeding off the energy, too.

How much difference do you think it made to have a page like this in front of you when you're in a free improvisation? If we just said, improvise in a European avant-garde style without the graphic score, would it be different?

I think so, because when you're doing that, all you're doing is listening and trying to figure out how you can fit in that or not fit in that. When you have a page in front of you, there's another layer. I'm not just listening to you guys, I have something in front of me that I'm trying to interpret at the same time. So there's more of a balancing act that's going on when you have the music in front of you.

So it forces you to a certain extent not just to play with everybody else.

Right. Because if right here I have a really big circle, it looks like a big moment. So at that point, to me, that's the most important thing. At that point, you should be listening to me. As opposed to if I see something that looks more like background stuff, then I feel that my role in the ensemble is more of a background.

So the stuff on the page is dictating your place in the ensemble?

Yes, definitely. It depends what we're defining though. The tendency is that when you see something bigger, it's more important. But we could have said, no, that's not the case.

When I got the score, I had no idea what his [Haubenstock-Ramati's] intentions were at all. After I started working on my thesis, I found that when he did make definitions, he was

picking the most obvious solutions, the ones that we thought of—up and down, left and right, and so on. When we started out, we were doing it differently. Everyone had the same page, and we were reading it together. When I went back and listened to that, I found that what wasn't happening was the kind of ensemble playing that we were just talking about. Everybody knows what they're doing, they're in their role, and they don't have to react to other people.

I definitely agree. It felt more like a traditional piece of music, honestly. There was some playing off each other, but it was more thinking of it linearly. Things happen one after another.

Theoretically it could work that way, right?

Yes, definitely. But I think it probably sounds better when we're not doing it that way. But I don't know, I'd have to listen. I think that would take a lot of rehearsal time to make it sound fluid.

We rehearsed together for a few months. What would you say would be the next step? What do you wish we had done?

Something that might be interesting would be if we did something to connect different mediums. We were using visuals (graphic scores). Another step to explore would be working with different artists that improv live in different mediums.

Did you do that with a laptop orchestra?

No, that was just with computers. But I thought that might be interesting, working with people who are interested in improv live, like painting live, dance live. Maybe not on such a big scale, just adding one other artist. I really do think “learning” the musician is really important, so I would assume that would be the same with a dancer or with a painter. If you're just doing it, I think it's going to feel like people doing different things at the same time, as opposed to if you were working with a dancer a lot—they know what you're doing, you know what they're doing, you have time to rehearse.

On the other hand, when you start as a group, you don't really know what other people are doing, so you have some initial excitement, bouncing off people. Do you think we got more cohesive as a group when we worked? We didn't have a lot of time to work—

Right. I think it would probably take a little longer. I thought we learned a little bit of what to expect from each other, although I think it might take some more time before we feel that we really understand what we're doing.

I guess that's the point of doing improv exercises, to try to unify people's ideas of what they're doing.

I was interested in developing some more Framework pieces, seeing what the results would be by making it more or less restrictive. [I'm also interested in] learning more [about] the tendencies, and knowing how to control those more—to actually know what we're each doing, and saying I'm going to make a conscious decision to do something different or something similar.

That's interesting that you try to figure out how people react, you compose these ideas in such a way that you're not telling people what to do, but you're trying to do things in a way that eventually will influence them without taking control.

It's like letting the musician come up with the material. The idea is that the end result is—the pacing of the whole work is going to be the same. I'm trying to make the structure evident when someone is listening.

So that's what you do when you compose, but do you do that when you improvise too? Are you thinking about how you might eventually influence somebody else, or are you just trying to make things work?

I go in with a little idea of, “Okay, I feel like doing this.” And then, I do like to take things from different people. So I go in knowing that I'm going to take something from what you're doing, or what Stephanie's doing, or whoever we're playing with.

Sometimes I would feel that I didn't like what one person was doing and I would try to influence that. I remember in the first rehearsal, I felt that Ty was someone who didn't want to mess with what anyone else was doing, he was passive, so I tried to think of exercises that would force him to do stuff. I had a game where he had two signs, one was a crotale and one was a gong, and one meant yes and one meant no. And then we did another exercise where everybody was leading a different section, and I was leading and he was supposed to take over the next section, but his signal was so weak that I didn't know if he was trying to take the lead.

Yes, maybe that's a percussionist thing, they're always background. “Somebody else can take the lead, I'll just do the atmosphere.”

That was really in the first rehearsal, I think he did change a certain amount. I tried a similar idea later when it was you and me and Stephanie. Then there was one of us who was not playing and who was verbally leading the whole group.

Yes, that felt weird being in that position. You're controlling everything, there wasn't a give-and-take feeling. It felt strange to me.

That's really funny that you felt there was no give-and-take. I felt that I would tell somebody to do something, and they would do something, but it wasn't what I wanted them to do. I would think, “Is that okay? Or should I try to push them somewhere, or what?”

I felt weird—I'm calling the shots! All the time—that's what felt weird. There are points in the music where I take more of an assertive role, but then I like to not be there the whole time. I don't think I would be a very good lead singer. They're always the most important thing going on when they're doing something. I like to be more in between. Sometimes I like to be the most important thing going on, and sometimes I want somebody else to [take charge].

So you felt leading for five minutes was uncomfortable.

Yes, unless we knew going into it it was going to be a 45-minute thing. If we're doing something for 45 minutes, five minutes is a small chunk of time. So I do think about the shape of things over time, and knowing [in advance] how long we anticipate going at it does change the amount of time I would spend on something—a certain gesture. That might be my composer [self], always trying to control time.

So when you work with people and they do something wrong or you want something different, you have to tell them that, right? But that feels different from composing?

It feels different. I guess I try to acquire certain results through indirect means. I'm most comfortable when I can have various levels of control. In the music I compose, I'm constantly thinking about the end result or effect I want to create. Then I decide how much control I should notate into the score to achieve the desired result. The amount of control that I assert is definitely dependent on the idea of the piece and changes from one work to another. How a performer interprets the work is out of my hands. Sometimes I have input if I'm directly working with a performer, but I often take a less aggressive approach and am interested in hearing the different types of interpretations. I think in this instance [leading a five-minute improvisation], I was uncomfortable because the control felt unbalanced.

You try to make everything work without getting in anyone's way.

Exactly.

It's like Cage. I was reading about George Brecht—he was a Fluxus artist, and he took a composition class with John Cage. He had a piece where there were three lights and there were three musicians. Whenever your light came on, you started playing, and when your light went off you stopped playing. Cage said "I never felt so controlled in my life!" For Cage, that was the worst thing possible.

Because it has to do with time. He's not controlling the time at all. If the light turns on, you have to play, and when the light turns off... You can't control the length, unless it was predetermined. Was the length predetermined?

No, there was someone pushing buttons. There was one guy calling the shots.

Being that person to do the lights, I don't know if I would like doing that. Although it is

nice if you don't really like what they're doing. . . It's an interesting thing to think about. I like putting myself in [improvising] situations. It's a different way of thinking. It's all similar, and I'm doing similar things, the thought processes are [similar], but I think it's different from performing stuff that's fully notated, and different from sitting down and notating something. You're figuring out things like, "How do you interpret this? That's so broad!" and "How do you make decisions that are musically satisfying on the spot?"

How do you make decisions that are musically satisfying on the spot?

Well, you try something. . . Part of it is just experiencing doing it. Trial and error. Hearing what happens to other musicians in certain situations.

What if you had to do the same thing but in a solo situation? Would that be different? Would it be harder?

The difference is that you have create that play by yourself, because you're not bouncing off anybody else. I did have a solo saxophone piece that had improv in it. I would have a section, and then later in the piece, there would be improv off the ideas that were in that section. The material is there, you just have to improv off of that. The relationships that happen are built into the piece. If it's a solo situation, you have to play off something. Otherwise it will just sound like rambling.

Could be.

Especially for an instrument that's monophonic, it's hard to create to create interest within solo pieces, because you have to have some sense of drama, some sense of movement.

It's all you, so either you work it out in advance, or you're just very good at getting up there and doing stuff spontaneously.

Yes.

So in a group, mostly you react to other people. Or with a piece like the Haubenstock-Ramati, you have the score.

Right. You have another layer, you're reacting to the musicians and what's in front of you at the same time. I mean, that's how I did it.

Do you think these things take your mind away from the question of how do you create something new?

I don't know if we're totally creating something new. I think we're taking from what we've experienced before. Maybe the way we've put it together might be slightly different, I don't know if you can call it new. I think there's something in the way we hear it or experience it that reminds us of something else that's happened.

Also, when you compose, it has to derive from something, because there's something of the past that's in your mind. Do you think there's something that you can do that's more original when you compose that you can't do when you're improvising?

I don't think so. I think that the better I get at improvising, the closer it would get to my composed pieces. But then again, there are certain things that I do with pieces I've written that are just different—the way they're structured—than anything that could be improvised, although sometimes the textures that I create are quite similar.

You mean things that aren't synchronized with one another?

Right.

Or things on a single instrument?

On multiple instruments.

Interview with Stephanie Neeman, October 10, 2012

Indonesian pianist Stephanie Neeman has performed across three continents as a soloist. She received her DMA degree from the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati. Improvisation has always been a part of her musical training. (<http://stephaniepianist.com/>)

Edward Neeman: Why do you like playing improvisation?

Stephanie Neeman: It's free. It's nice to be able to play without thinking, to just create music. In the case of improvising with other people, it's nice to collaborate with them and react to them.

When you say you're improvising without thinking, or playing without thinking, what do you mean?

It means I'm not restricted by a score or a rule, and I can just play as I feel. It's never a mistake. Nothing is a mistake. Even if you don't intend for something to happen, you can still make that "mistake" into something else, and make it work.

So anything can work for improvisation?

That's right.

For you, what makes a meaningful improvisation?

Are we talking about solo, or group?

Both. Start with solo.

What do you mean by meaningful? Do you mean satisfying?

Well, what would you look for in an improvisation?

I guess it's nice to create a music where you don't have to write or think about the form. I do actually think about the form when I improvise, but it's nice to just sit and fool around at the piano and go as time goes. I go with the music and see what I feel like doing at that time instead of planning too much ahead.

Is that when you're performing improvisation, or when you're improvising by yourself?

It could be both, really.

What would you consider a successful improvisation?

It's really hard to say successful, because the product is an artwork. It's subjective—somebody might like it, somebody might not like it.

Well, what criteria would you personally judge an improvisation on?

It varies, because it depends on how—in a sense, improvising is a composing skill. You compose but you don't actually write it out, you just do it. There are a lot of ways to improvise. I like sometimes to keep one motif and have motivic development or return to the same motif over and over again. Other people like it more through-composed. So I really don't know what I think would be successful. I think successful would be if there's a product at the end that makes you feel, "Oh, it actually sounds pretty good." Actually, in the improvisation practice that we did, a lot—actually most of it—I didn't think would sound that well until I listened to the recording and it actually sounds pretty good. While I'm improvising I don't think I can actually notice if I'm doing that great or not.

Suppose you're improvising by yourself. Do you feel afterwards that it's successful or not, or is it just an experience?

I think it's always more like an experience than thinking about whether it was good or not.

Do you think it's important to improvise?

I think it's very important to improvise, yes.

When did you start improvising?

When I was about six or seven. I was selected to do a program called Junior Original Concert, sponsored by Yamaha in Indonesia. They usually take three or four people each year, kids under fourteen years old. Every week we'd go to lessons, and we would compose

and improvise. The teacher would give us a theme and we would harmonize it, or the teacher would give us a harmonic structure and we would do melodies on top of it. It was in a group setting. There were four people in a class, and we heard each other's compositions at the end of the day. It was inspiring, and for me at that time, it was a kind of competition between me and my friends. You also have thirty-minute private lessons where you work on a larger composition for the end of the year. The group classes are shorter compositions—we improvise in sixteen measures or thirty-two measures—but we were also working on something bigger, a ten- to fifteen-page piece. We would have some idea of what we wanted to do, and sometimes the teacher would play something on the piano and say, "It would probably go better this way." We would have a tape recorder with us at all times, and we would go home and try to copy what the teacher did, or combine it with what we like. Every six or eight months, we would have a concert, and everyone would play their own piece. At the end of the concert, an audience member would give us a theme that we would improvise as a group.

On four separate pianos?

It was not all pianos. Some pianists had to play on the Electone. We also had a form—we always worked out the form, no matter what the theme is going to be. And no matter what the key is going to be, we are always going to go back to a key we already decided on. When I was ten, the whole Junior Original Concert played for President Suharto, and then President Suharto gave us five notes to improvise on and we did that as well. I quit the Junior Original Concert because of the riots in Indonesia in 1998, and I had to leave to America.

How long did you do the Junior Original Concert?

About four or five years.

Have you had any other experience performing improvisation?

Not really. In school, we would do plays as a project, and someone would ask me to improvise sound effects on the piano. I would improvise a movie-ish soundtrack.

How old were you then?

Starting from fifth grade until eighth grade or so. It wasn't constant, but every now and then I would do that. But I don't know what you mean by improvising—if you consider improvising as in having a melody and you improvise on it, in church I would play a piece and improvise an intro or a coda. Sometimes the priest would talk or there would be a meditation, and I would have to improvise something soft.

So you improvised in a lot of different contexts—you improvised in a group, you improvised at school and at church. So you already knew how to improvise when we started working

in AIR Improvisers. We were doing a different kind of improvisation in a style that you had not done before. This was the first time you improvised in a style that was not tonal, and not rhythmic, right?

Right, I guess so.

Would you say that the skills that you learned improvising before carried over to the AIR Improvisers?

I'm not sure, actually. Back then, I didn't have the technique that I have now, and I wasn't aware of the range of music that I know now. The scope back then was more limited. I have learned so much music in the past few years of studying in America, and I think it changed my perspective of how to improvise. But I think the fact that I had the experience of creating the music helps, and contributes to my improvising now, even though it's a completely different kind of improvisation.

In our improvisation group, we basically only had people who created music before. A lot of them were composers. But they didn't feel comfortable improvising in the same way that you did.

Although I don't think my earlier improvising really impacted my playing—it's a totally different type of improvisation—I think the fact that I did it before makes it much more comfortable to improvise now. The fact that I did sit at the piano and fool around in front of people makes me more comfortable. When I make a mistake, I can't go back, I have to think ahead and be like, "This note is wrong, but I can use it as a passing tone, I can make up something."

So it is possible to make a mistake in tonal improvisation, you can hit a note that's not tonal.

That's right.

Then you have to work out how to solve that. If you didn't solve it correctly and just let it stick out, it would be a mistake.

Good point. I would add that you can also emphasize the mistake and make it seem intentional. For example, it could lead to a new section.

Then the question is, in free improvisation, what counts as a mistake? Do you think mistakes are important in improvisation?

I don't know if it is important. I would say it's inevitable, because you have to think so fast. You always will do something that you didn't think that you would like or that you didn't want to do—accidents.

So it's unavoidable.

It's unavoidable.

So you think that if you're an improviser you have to be able to—

Cover it. Not only cover it, but to take advantage of it. I think that's an important skill to have, to not freak out and to make that mistake as if it were part of your own idea.

With our group, we started working at the end of March, and then we had three weeks until the concert in April. How did you feel about the rehearsals that we had then?

They were good. They were really fun.

I remember that after the first session, you wanted to try more tonal things, you wanted to try more rhythmic things.

Right. I think it's really good to try a lot of different things. But not only that—I think that for the concert, it has to be a little accessible for the audience. If you only do completely free improvisation, that doesn't have something that you can grab, it's hard to absorb. If you do something tonal, then the audience would think, "They can actually do something like this." Or something rhythmic, they can relate to it, it's exciting and driving. If you do abstract things from the beginning to the end for an hour, it's not going to get as great a response.

Well, we did an hour concert and there wasn't that much tonal stuff in it.

Yes, but we did some.

We each had a solo, and your solo was supposed to be more tonal. My solo was supposed to be more free. But actually, when we listened back to it, mine isn't really atonal and yours isn't really tonal. Should we listen to it? [Plays the solo improvisations from the April 19, 2012 concert] What did you think?

It's kind of interesting, each of us has different things to offer.

How would you characterize your solo?

My solo had a lot of parallel chords, it was dramatic in the way I used the different registers. I also used the strings, especially the lower strings which I strummed when I was playing something else.

Things happened that we didn't plan or take into account. For example, Lindsey wasn't in front of a stopwatch. We had a stopwatch on the piano, but because Lindsey was moving around, she didn't have her stopwatch with her. So she didn't actually know where we were within the improvisation, and it was worked out with specific time limits, 3 minutes and 20

seconds for each person. She just assumed when I had a dramatic pause that it was time for her to come in, so she came in about a minute too early. Then, at the end of her solo, before it was your turn you were strumming on the strings, and she—

sort of stopped.

sort of stopped, and I made a gesture to encourage her to keep going. How do you think that impacted the improvisation?

Well, there are two ways of doing this kind of thing with solos. It could be a clear-cut move from one thing to the other, or it could be more of a collage, with things overlapping.

Well, we intended it to be separate, but it wasn't really that separate.

I think when Lindsey was playing and I was strumming on the strings, it's more like a response to Lindsey's thing. It felt like I needed to do it. I don't think it actually disrupted that much. When Lindsey was playing, I was strumming very softly. It was more of an effect.

How do you think it affected the improvisation?

I think it was nice. It created this bridge between her and me.

That's what you were thinking at the time, that you were going to strum the strings?

I actually didn't plan that.

You just reacted spontaneously.

That's right.

Let's listen to another recording. [Plays free improvisation, April 2, 2012]

It's good! It's a different style.

Do you think we were responding well to each other?

Yes, don't you think so?

Sometimes one person had a motive and then another person took it up...

I guess another point is that a musician should have a good ear, as well as having a good technique. They need it to be able to communicate. If they don't have ear-training experience, even if they can play their instrument, it's hard for them to react.

Well, they can still react, but not with the exact pitches, right?

Yes, but it helps to have gone through some kind of training.

You think you have to go through training before you can improvise?

You can improvise without training, but it will come much easier with it.

On the other hand, training can limit the ways that you respond to people. Ear-training exercises could influence them to respond to more concrete things like pitch and rhythm, instead of more abstract ideas of sound or style.

That's true. It's always good to have training, though, no matter what. Whether it's limited depends completely on the improviser. If they want to make it limited, they can, or they can do absolutely different things, unrelated to the other players.

A lot of improvisers have felt that classical musicians in particular are restrained in their techniques because they aren't trained to improvise. They're scared of improvising, and when they improvise—

I'm not sure I agree with this statement. You're a classical pianist, but you improvise, and for you, improvising is not that hard, right? It's not a constant battle. And for me, it's the same thing. For me, it has to do with the experiences I had when I was little. But I don't know about you. Did you do that?

Well, yes, but I also know a lot of classical musicians who just don't improvise.

Did you ask them if they don't improvise because they hadn't improvised before? Why don't they want to improvise?

I think a lot of them are embarrassed to improvise, because they're trained to prepare everything in advance, and they're trained that that's a good thing, to have lots of preparation.

That's true, but it's liberating when you can just do it like that [improvise].

I suppose they would do that by themselves, but when it comes to a public situation. . .

Again, I suspect that those people did not have much improvising experience in the past.

And many of them are good musicians, and I ask them if they want to come improvise with us, and they say, "That's too hard, I can't do that." Do you think it has something to do with their training as a musician?

Yes, I think so. I think everybody from a very young age should not just train to play their instrument, but also to develop their improvising.

What's the value of improvising as a group?

I think it's very important. For me, improvising in a group is less intimidating than improvising solo. Like you said, it's less limited. You can respond, you can play on your own, you can be the accompaniment. It's more liberating.

Because you're not in the spotlight all the time?

Yes, and because you have more to respond to.

What about listening back to yourself, to a recording like this? What do you think?

It's pretty amazing, I don't remember anything I did! It's not so long ago. It's not bad, it's interesting because when you are improvising you are so focused on how you want to create it, and you think really fast, but then when you're listening back you hear it differently. You hear the whole music as a single part, instead of trying to figure out what to do with the second note.

So you're saying that when you're improvising you have to be concerned about your part, and you can listen to more when you're listening back?

Yes, that's correct.

What do you think of listening to it in context like that?

Some things make sense, and some don't. You can definitely see successful and unsuccessful things.

What are the kinds of things that you think worked?

Well, stylistic things are not smooth between players sometimes. I think sometimes the music shows a connection between players, but not all the time. Some of my accompaniment I thought was distracting, it was not really in context.

Which accompaniment was distracting?

The scale patterns in the higher registers, for example. I probably didn't think about it at that time, it was more a "doing" thing.

Does that mean that if you were improvising it again, you wouldn't do that?

Well, I might still do that in different situations.

How do you decide what you're going to do at any given time?

I would listen more when I improvise. I have to make a note that I don't have to always come in. I can just be quiet.

We didn't listen all the way from the beginning. We started in the middle somewhere. That was the first rehearsal we did together as a group. That was when you joined the group. Lindsey and I had played together before, but this was the first time with the three of us.

Really! I think the concert was much better, it was more unified as a group. Even though we were doing our own thing, it was more unified.

Let's listen to some takes of Lindsey's piece. [Plays Framework 03, April 11, 2012] What did you think?

I don't know. I don't think it's that great.

Why not?

Because it starts as one really abstract mess.

What do you mean? We don't stick to the same themes?

Yes. It's not wrong, but I think *Framework* is supposed to be based on the original thematic ideas.

So we probably moved too far, we should have stayed closer to the original theme.

Right.

In the later versions, we stuck a little closer to our themes. Lindsey said that the trouble with this one was that we chose themes that were similar, they were all slow.

That could be true. In the beginning, they were different, but later on they became more similar.

Let's listen to another Framework take. [Plays Framework 04 from April 18, 2012] What do you think?

It was better than the first one. I guess Lindsey was right with the contrast. This one has more contrast between the players.

Do you think we drifted too much from our themes?

Kind of. It depends. I felt that *Framework* was too limited for me sometimes. I wanted it to be more free. It could be a little artificial. I think *Framework* would work better if you said when someone would come in, without having a restriction on what they would do. Lindsey's stuff is a little too strict in that sense.

But we didn't treat it strictly at all.

Even then, psychologically you feel restricted. It doesn't sound as good as free improvisation.

What kind of rules do you think would make a better improvisation?

Just saying when people would come in.

So you think that the particular rules in this piece were too strict to make a good improvisation?

It was constantly hard, because sometimes you just figure something out and then you have to change already. It was frustrating.

But that would also happen even if you just limited when people were playing, without limiting the motives, right?

That's right, but that's just one thing. When you add on the motives, that's more to worry about.

What if you limited the motives, but you made it work with a system of cues so that there wasn't a time limit for each section?

That could probably work better, also because you have to listen to each other instead of having specific cut points.

Interview with Leo Svirsky, October 11, 2012

Pianist and composer Leo Svirsky has performed everywhere from concert halls, to galleries and squats. He is at home interpreting a diverse range of music, from Beethoven to Stockhausen, as well as premiering new works. His own works range from instrumental composition to installation and performance art. (<http://www.leosvirsky.com/>)

Leo Svirsky: [I am] running a weekly improv series.

Edward Neeman: Where is that?

In The Hague. There are—I don't even know how many—four or five in Amsterdam, so there's no need for somebody to do that there. But here, there's not so much. Do you know what an infoshop is? It's an anarchist bookstore. It's in this barn that was squatted as a bar, so it's called the Autonomous Center—Den Autonoom Centrum Den Haag. They also have film screenings and talks by traveling anarchist writers. They occasionally have a punk band playing there, but since our real concert space got evicted—this Italian guy had set up these weekly sessions that had gotten off the ground [before] we got evicted, so I talked to

the guys and set something up on Fridays. It's interesting, because there have been people coming when I haven't been promoting it aggressively. It's cool that it's engraved into the local psyche. Friday night: cheap booze and improv!

So you get people who show up and listen and maybe also join the group?

Yes. We've done one programmed concert which [featured] a great group from Norway called SAKA and an Amsterdam band called Cactus Truck. Both do this aggressive, super-notey European free jazz. SAKA is a bit more refined and Cactus Truck is more edgy.

... I was dealing with people who come from a more traditional background. There's a teacher here, Joel Hoffman, who has taught a lot of the students here how to improvise. He focuses a lot on certain techniques—you learn how to improvise by imitating other people, or by doing variations on what other people do, by honing your improvisation skills, and the idea is that eventually you can improvise.

What kind of techniques would these be? Like, "Here's a pentatonic scale" at the beginning, and then onward, or...

For example, you sit in a circle, and one person starts by playing a short motive and you go around the circle and everyone tries to imitate what the previous person did. Then you try to do the same thing, but you introduce a little bit of variation, so the second person will try to change what the first person did by ten percent.

That's cool.

Yes, it's a good exercise. When I started the group, I was just going for free improvisation, so the first thing we did was free improvisation. Then I was like, we have some problems in the group: some people who don't seem to be participating, they feel reluctant to contribute, and they just go along with what's happening. So I tried to have exercises that encourage people to lead the group, and to take different roles. It was hard, I didn't really know what I was doing, and I didn't anticipate taking a leadership role. How does your group work? Do you have someone who runs the show?

Well, Friday's not a professional group. I don't even play in it, actually. I did initially think about doing it as a workshop, but I think that's totally unnecessary. I don't know a lot of people who were improvising in a school setting, or learned how to do it [in school] and have become serious or interesting improvisers. Which isn't to say that there aren't a few, or that it isn't possible.

It's a little unnatural, right?

It depends on the teacher. It's always been an informal music, and one of the most absurd things is a degree program in it. I can see that there is enough material to learn in it, but the idea that you're getting a degree in something that has so little financial...

Hey, we're getting degrees in music, that's just one step away.

But it's a very big step, from being able to teach piano somewhere in the Midwest and work your way up, to "I'm an improviser, and I teach improvising."

There seems to be more of an attempt to make that into a legitimate career. George Lewis has all kinds of positions—he's a professor in New York [Columbia]. . .

But he's also a really great musicologist, so he has an academic career, which is not necessarily incumbent on his musical career.

I guess you're right. But having someone in that position makes it more possible for somebody to say improvisation is a viable career path. It was important for composers as well—composers weren't in academia, composers who were at universities were teaching theory or something for a long time.

That's also a mixed blessing. That was at a time when academia was expanding, and now it's in brutal contraction. Composers are getting kicked out, and there's no room for improvisers. And is that where music should be? I can sum this up more practically. What happens on Friday—my model is Derek Bailey's Company—is sink or swim. In some contexts, this would not work, but it's small enough and people are musical enough—though not necessarily versed in improvisation—that if you just let people play entirely voluntarily in groups they want, when they want to, with an audience, and with people who comment, not even in an enforced critical discussion, but just while having a drink, I've seen people learn a lot in just a few sessions. There's absolutely no educational [academic context]. The key is that the groups are small, and that the people are motivated and have some basic musical knowledge to begin with.

I found that one of the problems with the group that I had was that people didn't have similar ideas of what would be a successful improvisation. And also we were rehearsing without an audience, so we didn't get that kind of feedback.

Yes, because the first and foremost thing is that this is not something like piano playing—of course, there's a craft to it, but there aren't any objective criteria to measure an improvisation. It's really just this collaborative thing.

One thing that I did, for example, is after the first session, I made improvisation pieces that had basic instructions of how you might improvise. Looking back at it, the instructions were almost intentionally too complicated so that it was bound to fail at some level. You would try to follow the instructions, and you would do some cool stuff, but. . . if you leave the instructions open-ended, and there are a lot of possibilities, or if you have an instruction which is not "improvisational"—for example, if you had an ABA form, you could never make the second A section the same as the first A section, right? So if you have some instructions that are vague but difficult to follow, and then you have an improvisation based

on that, you have the possibility of a really great improvisation, even if it doesn't conform to what you wrote down. When I was listening back to some of those improvisations, I thought, "Hey, that's really cool." But at the time, in the group, I got the sense that people were regarding it as a failure, because we couldn't follow the instructions.

You know, Cecil Taylor will rehearse his groups one way, and then do something entirely different in the performance situation. It really pisses some people off, but it makes some interesting music.

I remember watching a documentary about him and how he rehearsed his groups, and his scores are completely nuts. They had some images of the diagrams from which he worked. . . . So this current group is "sink or swim," but did you ever try group exercises or something else?

I think for it to work, everybody has to be equal in the process and the ensemble, and no amount of rules will make a free improvisation work. There are a lot of musically interesting things that happen in big messes, but I think, in general, feeling that you need to do exercises is a warning sign about the group. If you feel that you need to do exercises to make improvisations work, that means that there's [a problem]. That's how I would think about it as a performing group, if the objective is not necessarily to present something but to learn how to do it. A lot of it involves listening to and discussing other people who have done it. It's totally ridiculous to reinvent the wheel. People have done so much in this music already. I've done a bunch of improv workshops, and the only one I found that was actually useful was with Tristan Honsinger, and that was using entirely composed material, or it was using composed material and playing cueing games. So it was much more—it wasn't like an etude to get to free improvisation, it was a different thing that used improvisation as an out and developed improvisational skills.

So it was like a composed piece but then there was room for improvisation in it somewhere.

Yes.

And that was a useful workshop because it developed improvisation skills and the pieces were cool, or. . .

Well, it was useful because it was close to a working environment. It was a mixed group, so there were a few really experienced improvisers in it, and there were a few visual artists—it's a long story why this happened, a lot [of them] left but there were some in the ensemble, so it was an interesting mix. So we built these cueing systems around text or dramaturgy. Maybe as a piece, some things were a bit dubious, but it was a really interesting thing to work on because we were basically in the same position as the improvisers that he would take into his groups to do these things. [It worked] basically because he didn't have this approach of students doing exercises, because whenever you have an excuse to not make good music, usually people will use it. Unfortunately.

I recently got the John Stevens book which has a lot of exercises he did with his improvisation groups.

Oh, the John Stevens ones are great though.

When I looked at those exercises, I thought that the point of these exercises is to build an improvisation “team”, so that everyone is on the same page. I found when I did my improvisation pieces, sometimes we got good results and sometimes we didn’t get good results, but we didn’t always agree on what we wanted. I guess I could have said, “This group is not working as a group,” and tried to start over again. but I was wondering if I had tried to say, “Let’s work on these simpler exercises and see if we can develop a group feeling...”

Actually, [there was] another thing I found helpful for a very specific group that was specializing in reductionist improvisation, very quiet with a lot of silences. For this [group], I think a big part of it was learning how to listen. One of the things that really helped was to interpret experimental pieces, like James Tenney’s *Swell Piece*, some Robert Ashley things, Sam Sfirri. . .

What’s the James Tenney Swell Piece?

It’s very simple, it’s just “Sustaining instruments make swelling sounds.” I mean, incredibly simple stuff.

So you did these conceptual pieces as a way to learn to listen?

Yes. Also I’m interested in making an ensemble that performs both improvisations and that kind of composition.

Yes, we tried to do that. We did a few experimental pieces. We did a Haubenstock-Ramati score, Decisions, which was a graphic score. Then we did a conceptual piece by Mayazumi, Metamusic.

What’s in that piece?

It’s mostly silent gestures, for piano, saxophone, violin, and conductor, which happened to be a perfect ensemble for us. It’s about making gestures and thinking about how you move physically when you play, and the piece is uncoordinated. There are just a few gestures where you get sounds. It’s a very quiet piece.

Interesting. I actually don’t find graphic scores useful. I find verbal scores are interesting to work with, but not graphic scores, because they involve your private relationship with the symbol rather than your relationship to a collective sound.

Well, when we were playing the Haubenstock-Ramati score—it’s sixteen pages of graphic

scores and there are no instructions—we started out by taking one page and working out who would make what sounds, and we found that that was really tedious. The next thing we did was to give everyone a page of the score, and we said, “Interpret it how you like and try to respond to what everyone else is doing.” That worked really well and was a catalyst for some fun free improvisation. If you have a free improvisation where everyone is responding to each other, sometimes it gets a little too cozy—people end up all doing the same thing—and having a piece of paper in front of you is a way to respond to something other than the group. I think we got a lot of really good improvisations out of it, although you could never look at the score and determine how we arrived at the result.

Well, yes. That’s not a sure sign of quality, how easily it’s scored.

I was reading some things that Haubenstock-Ramati wrote about his scores, and he was saying that a lot of his scores ask the performer to record themselves in rehearsal and then play the recording while they are improvising, or to mix the pages up—to make it basically impossible to work out what symbol means what sound, so that the visual score is not quite as literally interpreted into sound as you might think. We also had somebody who wrote a piece [Framework 1] for the group. Everyone has their own gesture and there are ways to trade gestures with other people. When you had a group, did you have people who composed for it?

I was in one group which I don’t feel was particularly good as an improvising group. It was all very good classical instrumentalists. There was a harpist who was doing a master’s thesis on it, and I wrote a piece for the group that went really well, but I don’t think it was very strong as an improvising group.

The piece was improvised?

Very vaguely. It was a collection of chords with certain dynamics, and you can go backwards through the score so it could last a theoretically infinite [amount of time], there is no set time for when any of the events happen. Everyone starts at the same point, and there is a very precise series of events, but the order and the timing is optional. . . There’s a really cool Joe Morris book about improvisation that’s also super-practical. He teaches at NEC. I haven’t read it yet, but some of my friends are interviewed in it.

Interview with Jennifer Jolley, October 28, 2012

Urban environments, city sounds, and nostalgia influence Jennifer Jolley’s compositions and sound installations. She is the co-founder of North American New Opera Workshop (NANOWorks Opera), an Assistant Professor of Music (Composition and Theory) at Ohio Wesleyan University. (<http://www.jenniferjolley.com/>)

Edward Neeman: The main things I wanted to ask you about are your background in improvisation, and how you felt we worked together as a group, your perceptions of the group, and what you would have done differently.

Jennifer Jolley: My background in improvisation started when I attended a music program in Croatia with Joel Hoffman in 2006. I think Joel Hoffman's specialization in improvisation was factored into some of the workshops that he had, and so with our ad hoc group that summer he had us do some improvisational exercises.

He told me he only accepts people who both compose and perform.

I think that's a logistics issue because there aren't any other musicians there to play the composers' works, so he's trying to be economical with who he accepts into the program. I did study improvisation with Joel Hoffman as an independent study in 2010, and I had my friend Rebecca Danard playing clarinet and Nick Naegele playing violin.

So it was a group that was coached by Joel Hoffman?

That's right, but it was part of my independent study.

In this situation, how did he work with you?

He was basing his exercises off what he learned with Alan Bern. You probably have more information about that than I do.

I talked with Michael Ippolito about working with Alan Bern. It was very interesting for me, because when I was starting the improv group here I was reading about all the politically-motivated improv groups in the sixties, like Rzewski and MEV, who were very much just going ahead and doing improv, and Alan Bern was completely the opposite. He spend two years of doing exercises to train his musicians. I'm really curious to hear how Joel Hoffman worked with your group. How did these exercises work?

They're very structured. I don't remember all the names of the exercises. They varied from exercises where you work in pairs, where you go around a circle and a couple people improvise [at a time], having some kind of structure with who's doing what. I remember in Croatia we did something where we would [split] a phrase [among] five people and if you were last or next-to-last, you would have to create a music gesture that would almost end the phrase or go into a cadence of some sort.

So you would take turns and make a complete phrase.

That's one of [the exercises].

Was there was a specific amount of time that each person plays for?

Yes, in Croatia he did say something like, “Think of two measures that would happen.” He didn’t give us a time signature or anything, it wasn’t terribly constructed, but it was still pretty constructed. With the independent study, he did not go into too much [depth] with the exercises; for the first few weeks he had a few of these exercises, and I wish I remember what all of them were, but then we were talking about us as this trio, what our strengths and what our weaknesses were, and then we developed exercises from that.

So you guys played for him on a weekly basis?

Yes.

And then you rehearsed separately?

I’m trying to remember if we did rehearse separately. If we did, it was probably once or twice, it wasn’t that often just because it was hard for our schedules to align.

Because of the Croatia thing, you had improvised in a group before and you were familiar with the way Joel Hoffman did things. What about the others? Were they just being introduced to the concepts?

I’m not really sure what their backgrounds are in improvisation. What I knew is that they liked doing it and they were very good at it.

What kinds of things did you think these exercises helped you with as a group?

Structure. I think that as you noticed there are different variations of how much structure can happen in an improvisation group. I think the more people you have involved, the more some kind of decision making needs to happen in the form of structure. Someone says, “This is what we’re going to give you as an outline,” and therefore you can follow it. Could you have a free improvisation? Yes, but I think it would be a little more successful if people were a little more experienced in improvisation, because I think the more experienced someone is in improvisation, the more they realize that this is indeed live composing and in composing you have to make decisions about what to do.

Do you think that having rules facilitates decision making because it narrows the choices?

Yes. It’s a little bit easier and you can get more creative in that regard. It really depends on the experience of the improviser. What I’ve noticed in high school or early college kids [is that when] you tell them to improvise, they freak out because they are so used to being told what to do, and so you have to give them exercises to coax them into making these decisions. To trick them, in a way.

I know what you mean. When I was listening back to the recordings that we did, I thought in general the free improvisations were more interesting, but doing exercises was like doing scales, it was something that trains you to play better when you are doing free

improvisation.

It's a nice creative warm-up. It doesn't hurt to warm up, and then you get going. It also reminds me about what Joel Hoffman says: when you improvise, what you want to do with the first thing that comes into your mind is just forget about it, and do the second thing. I think the warm-ups force some of that junk out. Get rid of your first improvisational ideas, and then you get to the good stuff.

That's a good quote. Actually Michael Ippolito said something about an exercise that they did with Alan Bern where they were just playing a single note over and over and over again. It was an exercise about learning to judge your impulses, and that was a way to get the students out of the mindset of "Oh my god, I have to improvise." So they played a single note over again, and then you would be aware of your impulses to change that, and obviously you would get very bored very quickly. At first you just watch the impulses that go past. Then you react to the very first impulse that comes to mind. Then you add a filter, so that you wait until you come to an impulse that you like and then take that path.

... I had a little independent study with Joel Hoffman, but that was only a quarter long, and I'd love to learn a little bit more [about improvisation], but who do you find as a teacher?

I was talking to a friend of mine about this who's an improviser in The Hague. He said that at least if you're training to be a musician, you can get a job teaching in the Midwest somewhere, but if you're training to be an improviser, you're never going to get a job in improvisation.

That's true. You have to sneak it in somehow.

So you had these two experiences, the summer camp in Croatia and the independent study with Joel Hoffman as background before we worked together.

Actually there's one more experience—Mara Helmuth wrote a graphic score that we were trying to improvise with a laptop ensemble.

That's an improvisation that you actually performed, right? What about in the other groups, did you have performances?

Well, I do have improvisational pieces, but [I didn't perform improvisation] in any other groups per se.

Did you perform any of your improvisation pieces?

I performed the bass clarinet piece *Sounds from the Graveyard 2.0* with Rebecca Danard [and myself on laptop]. The way this piece works out is that there's a structure—if you want me to send you the score later, I can do that—there are these cells [of pitches], and she got to play [with] a cell from her previous improvisations, so it was like her improvisation with

herself. My computer would act as a trigger, kind of like an intricate playback device in a way where I had 40 improvisation snippets that she did a while ago, so when we did this piece live, she would improvise over something she had recorded in the past. I think she liked the idea of knowing what buttons I was going to [press]. What ended up happening is the last couple of times she performed it, she had control, over both herself and the keyboard, and I think she gave herself a plan of what she wanted to improvise with, but that's her choice, I never said she can't do that. This is me relinquishing composer control. I found that fascinating, when I was like, "She has a pattern. I'm not going to call her on it. She's totally allowed to do that."

So from your perspective, it sounded the same, more or less, whether she improvised or not?

For this particular piece, yes. I ended up writing a different piece that was based on the same concept but for clarinet choir. There were two groups of live improvisers and no computer, and that sounded completely different. So even though it was the same structure—I called it *Sounds from the Graveyard 2.11*, and I still consider it improvisation in that I allowed other people to control what they were playing to a certain degree—it sounded completely different. I say it's like a different piece—if I were to play the two, you would say they sound different.

Even though the material is basically the same?

The material—the structure is the same, but the instrumentation is different.

Just to clarify, the other groups—the trio which was an independent study and the group in Croatia—never performed improvisation; they were just workshops to see how composers worked with improvising.

Yes.

So when we worked together as an improv group. . .

Because we were an ensemble, I think that what probably would have helped is a rehearsal strategy. The equivalent [would be] if a conductor came in and didn't have a [rehearsal strategy] for an orchestra. I think if we had a tiny bit more structure—not necessarily in the improvisations themselves, but [knowing] what we're going to work on. Especially with the graphic scores—I felt that one meeting we got a lot done, and it was awesome. What I found interesting is that we had a lot of composers in the group, so we started making decisions. I think there was a gradation of who was making more decisions, but that was fine because that was kind of an improvisation in itself. But then we didn't go to it the next week and I didn't know how much we'd retained from the compositional decisions that we made.

Yes, I remember that. [The necessity of a rehearsal strategy] was one of the first conclusions I came to, and when I did the group later, I decided that I'm going to be the leader. In the first group, I didn't realize it was going to be necessary. I wanted it to be like those free groups from the sixties, but having had the experience of not having a leader, I decided we needed a leader.

I understand where you're coming from philosophically but it ultimately depends on what type of people you recruit. It could also be the mentality of the sixties, just [doing] it more democratically. You might want to talk to Joel Matthys about how he did CiCLOP and their improvisations too, because I think he's more of the less structured type. However, when I first started participating in the CiCLOP ensemble, he actually gave us these structured improvisational exercises to get used to the computer. Some of them were similar to what Joel Hoffman had me do.

So he'd give you a program—

Yes, something that he'd coded and he'd say, let's go in pairs. I don't know if he'd consulted with Joel Hoffman, but it was very similar. Back to our improvisation group: I think that once we figured out what we would do in the rehearsal, we came up with some pretty cool stuff.

It's interesting that you remember the Haubenstock-Ramati. After working on that piece and listening back to it, I came up with a different strategy for doing the Haubenstock-Ramati. I really liked the decisions we were making, but I found that it was not allowing us to communicate as well as I would like. The great thing about improv, I found, is that you can be flexible with what's going on and we were destroying that a little bit by making all these decisions.

I would slightly agree with that. I felt that there was a little too much decision making going on. If I remember correctly, we even decided which notes we were playing. I just didn't know if that was the intention. But it wasn't my job to be like, "I disagree with picking notes." I didn't want to be that person, nor did I care. I was like, this is an improvised get-together to begin with, so in the spirit of it, we can make note decisions, there is nothing in the score that says that we cannot, so I was just going to see how that worked out.

I don't know whether he intended the score to be improvised at all. There are some realizations which are not improvised, and at the same time, he said that improvisation is fine.

He's relinquished that control, which I kind of like. One thing I liked about the improv pieces I was doing was that they allowed a performer to put their intellectual creativity into it. Then you could create something that's even better than what just a single composer or a single performer could come up with, which is this mutually creative process that I find liberating.

Did you [compose] in that way by creating open-ended scores? I know you worked with Rebecca in that way.

Actually, the *Graveyard* piece I was talking about came from a percussion improvisation by a guy named Kevin Lewis from a live computer music class, the composer practicum for that quarter. Our realization was a little more free. We came up with this procedure: I recorded his entire percussion setup, so the sounds that I had in my computer sounded exactly the same as what he had until I processed them. He said, "I'll play something, you make the decision of playing either the same instrument as I did or something else," and then he would do a stick change so he would change the timbre of it. It was kind of a back-and-forth. I wish I had a recording of it, because that turned out really well.

That was a piece that you wrote?

We came up with this together, it was kind of a mutual conceptualization. I programmed my computer, I recorded his sounds. The sounds are still on my computer (thank you, Kevin Lewis, for providing the sounds), and since then, I reworked it for four percussionists and I added some more parameters so that it would not be as free.

I see. But he wasn't improvising live. He was improvising, and you recorded it, and then you improvised.

He improvised, I recorded it, and then we also did a second layer of improvisation for the performance. I think we set a time frame of five minutes, we didn't want it to last forever.

In our group, we did a couple other exercises. We did this Christian Wolff exercise where you have two notes that you can only play eleven times. I thought that had some interesting results too. I thought of that as a warm-up exercise.

I agree. If I remember correctly, he had a list of improvisational exercises.

That's right, it's a set of exercises called microexercises. Then I had a couple exercises that I wrote for the group. I tried to write exercises in ways that would provoke us to improvise in ways that we weren't improvising in at first. I wanted to move into more tonal and rhythmic stuff. I don't know if you remember those exercises. I wrote those exercises in ways so that you couldn't just sit down and improvise on them. Do you remember those?

I do remember you had some kind of dance-style exercises—

Yes, it was called Tango Exercises.

There was a lot of structure [in the Tango Exercises]. I think the fine line of these improvisational exercises is that if you want to do something tonal, then tonality has to function in a certain way and have a finite number of trajectories. You have to have some kind of hierarchy, and with tonality you have a hierarchy in place. It's a matter of, will everybody

choose the same “Choose Your Own Adventure” harmonic pattern, or do you get rid of that freedom? Do you put in some kind of control? Doing both rhythmic and harmonic trajectories might be too limiting.

When I wrote the instructions, I didn't intend it to be so limiting. There were a lot of instructions but they were kind of vague. In one of the exercises you have a modular rhythm pattern and I don't specify how you vary it, although you're supposed to vary it, and we ended up moving up into triplets and quintuplets and all kinds of funny rhythms. We never agreed whether we were going to do that or stick to sixteenth notes. The interesting thing, listening back to it, I thought that was a great example of how you can have rules that go completely wrong and still have a successful improvisation, but I remember that it didn't feel that good in that rehearsal.

Yes, there was too much confusion. I would also say that your exercises probably depend on how many people are in the group. The more people involved, the more you have to be clear. With less people you can have a little more freedom. But if the exercise turned out okay, then ultimately it isn't a bad exercise if you got good stuff from it.

I was wondering, is this a bad exercise? In a sense it failed, but we still got a good improvisation. Suppose you had an improv group and you had to make exercises to make people play more successful improvisations. How would you do it?

I would probably separate rhythm from tonal stuff. I would start with rhythm first, and then slowly bring in notes, and I mean single notes. I wouldn't do a progression per se. If you had something rhythmically complicated, I would do maybe one or two notes because you can do a lot with octave displacement. Again, it depends on how many people you have, it depends on what their level is.

So you would start with something that was very simple and focus on one parameter, and gradually increase the complexity.

It depends on whether they've warmed up or not. It would probably be a multistep exercise where it accumulates into something. A group you might want to check out—they recently visited Ohio Wesleyan [University]—is called Classical Jam. They were working with the college students and they had a very structured way of how to improvise. Eventually they had an end product where they wanted people to improvise on a Mixolydian scale with this rhythm. But they started with the rhythm—they had them alternate two bars at a time. Then they added another rhythm, and put that aside. Then they worked with playing one or two notes of the scale with something rhythmically complicated based on what they had done previously, and they built it up from there.

I find myself torn between those two approaches. I supposed what we're talking about now is a skill-building approach, so you start from something simple and build a skill. But often in improvisation, what happens by accident is what's really exciting.

I do think that's dependent on the experience of the improviser. I really think if you have novice improvisers, you're not going to get as good material just by having something free. I don't think it takes a lot of development to become a seasoned improviser. With these undergrads, if you just [said], "Let's improvise," they wouldn't have the listening skills and they won't have the fully-formed improvisational musical skills. Whereas if Nick and Rebecca and I were to get together, I think we could come up with something pretty good without too many parameters because we performed as a group before. But from what I understand, when Carrie Magin and Ben Wallace worked with Joel Hoffman, they had parameters. For Carrie's recital they had a plan. It was a very loose plan, but in a concert setting. I think when Joel Hoffman improvised with Michael Ippolito, they had a tiny bit of a plan. I think the more experience you have, the less of that plan you need. It's an inverse relationship.

I talked to Michael about the concert that the RealTime Composers did with Joel Hoffman, and he said that it was their first concert, and he felt that they weren't yet ready to perform with Joel Hoffman because they hadn't rehearsed enough. And I thought that was interesting because they had been rehearsing exercises for two years, and then they threw Joel Hoffman in the mix and that was chaos!

Well, because it was an external factor. It's a game changer.

Something I discovered was really helpful: when we listened back to what we did together and critiqued it, that ended up being something that really unified the group. We didn't do that when you were part of the group. Did recording and listening back with your improvisers in the Sounds from the Graveyard pieces change the way they played?

Not really. I remember during some of the outtakes with Rebecca, there were some little snippets when she said, "Don't use that one," so I didn't, I respected her. You have to warm up with improvising, and there were some that she thought were better than others. I used the ones that she liked, and I played them back for her to make sure she was happy with the final product.

... *How did you like working with the [Haubenstock-Ramati] graphic score?*

I find graphic scores fun. I probably tend to gravitate toward structure. For me, if I were to see a graphic score, I would treat it like a music [score], just a graphic realization of it. I found it interesting how we were making lots of decisions, I kind of just let that happen. I'd like to see a group of experienced improvisers just going at it to see how that worked, because it forces communication among players. You would get musical and probably visual cues [when you] do that.

I find people often have a very wide range of responses to graphic scores, from feeling that it's a complete joke to feeling that it's inspiration.

It also depends on how the composer feels. I feel like composers who write graphic scores kind of have to let it happen, because they did not make the [full] amount of decisions. There's an article where Boulez slams John Cage. The reason why he slams him is because he doesn't make any decisions, and that doesn't make [him] a composer. Even though those *I-Ching* pieces are rather structured too. It really depends, and I think that also translates into how people interpret music, nonimprovised scores, how much decision-making is being made.

So you think that what makes it musically valuable is the decision-making, whether it's the composer or otherwise?

I think that's ultimately what makes a piece of music. With the improviser, they're not playing everything at once, it's physically impossible to do, but they're making a decision of what they want to contribute that musically fits. I don't know if Mara Helmuth got the results she wanted when we did her graphic score. You might need to ask her how she felt about the performance that we took to Indy. I think she was trying to coach us and say that we need more space. It was a color graphic score—the green line was one part, the red line was another part. It was just a matter of six people interpreting their own colors. There was space in the graphic score—I don't know if there was enough space, I'm not the composer. I was just trying to interpret my line and to listen to other people. I think eventually someone said, "We should have some kind of climax point," and I think she agreed with that.

Was she there at all the rehearsals?

Correct.

There were no instructions?

I think the instructions were, "You have a color and that's your part. It's for up to six players." Other than that, no.

But then she was making decisions in the rehearsal.

I wouldn't say decisions, I think it was more like she was trying to coach us not to play all the time. You can't have that in a really good improv; you have to really listen and have some space. To give her credit, the score wasn't a whole page of color; there were lots of white spaces. We all had our different laptop programs; we were allowed to make whatever sounds we wanted.

I found that when classical musicians improvise, there's always a lot of space. When jazz musicians improvise, they're all playing the whole time.

I think one person in the ensemble had a jazz background, so he was playing a lot. The way I reacted to that is, "He's playing a lot, that's cool," and I would play when my part told me to play, or when I thought it was [telling me to play]. Again, in a graphic score, you can

figure it out, but you also can't. It's hard to tell exactly where you are. But I think that's kind of fun, trying to figure it out during the piece. You get a lot of good stuff from that.

You take a noncommittal stance on this. You have a great time doing graphic scores, but—

Yes, noncommittal but wanting some structure.

When I was talking to Joel Hoffman about the Haubenstock-Ramati score, he said that basically these people are just doing graphic art, they are not really interested in the music. That's not what composers are interested in anymore, they don't care how a score looks anymore. And Haubenstock-Ramati was very open about it, he said that people should be interpreting Kandinsky's scores, we should be interpreting Miró paintings.

I say, why not? It's an inspiration, it's a more direct inspiration than a composer saying, "I was inspired by this painting, here's a piece of music." It's "I'm inspired by this painting, let's use it as music."

How are your activities as an improviser and composer connected?

I think they're similar, and still different. It's a matter of how much control [you have] or [how many] decisions you make with it. I would like to get back into improvising, and I would also like to teach a class on it, because I think it would help my student composers with their ideas. I bet Joel Hoffman said to you [that] ever since he started improvising, he approached composition differently [by saying] if this music can be improvised, why write it down? I don't know if I feel the same way or as strongly as he does, but I think it exercises a compositional thought process—whether you decide to improvise as your creative output or write it down as a creative output. In that regard they're similar. They are dissimilar in that in [composition] you can really refine your musical ideas, whereas with improvisation, you leave it up to chance. You can still refine it—I think that depends on how experienced you are as a performer and as an improviser.

When you improvise, do you feel that the process is the same as in composition except that you don't have that refining step? When you compose, do you use that same improvisational style?

With nonimprovised composition I have more of a chance to refine what I've done. It's a question of how much of a filter you have. When I compose, I sometimes do improvise on the piano to see what I come up with based on a concept that I have. With improvisation, you don't necessarily have a concept, you have parameters. Then you just go with that and see what happens.

Another distinction that some people make—I'm wondering if you agree with this—is that in improvisation, it's really about the experience there and now, it's the reaction to the music, it's the creative process in a nutshell. Composition is more about creating the structures

for the future performances.

I have to think about that.

So improvisation is just a process in the moment, you're not trying to create a product in the same way as when you have a composition.

I would agree with that. When I improvise, I still think that I am creating a product, but I can't have as much refinement. But I still try. When I improvise in a group, I think of who's playing what, what's going on, and how we can shape the sound. I still think in that [way], but I can't refine it as much, nor can anyone else play what I just played. Ever. Which is cool, I think that's cool too.

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