he'll make you scream

misha glouberman

BY DAVID McCALLUM

"**W**elcome to my birthday."
Misha Glouberman, tall, affable, smiling through his beard, and wearing a suit, leads a group of several dozen people in perhaps the strangest birthday party any of them have yet experienced. He will spend the rest of his birthday night leading the crowd in buzzing, shushing, hissing, screaming, and wandering through a great hall.

"Why?" you ask?

I wondered that too.

Glouberman is a man hard to avoid in Toronto. He is the de facto host of events of many kinds: conferences on copyright reform; Trampoline Hall, a lecture series by non-experts; his various classes under the auspices of the Misha Glouberman School of Learning (complete with stock-photography-laden, official-looking Web site) such as How to be Really Good at Playing Charades and Terrible Noises for Beautiful People, his mass sound-improv classes.

His series of mass sound-improv experiments have become legendary in Toronto. This man somehow manages to guide large groups of non-musicians and musicians alike in exercises in interaction through vocal soundmaking.

ON THE CD: *Terrible Noises for Beautiful People* (excerpts)

His background is not sound, nor music of any kind. He holds a degree in philosophy from Harvard, worked as a computer programmer, and has a history in theatre improv. So why's he leading people in sound improv? Glouberman is interested in what happens when he convinces a room of people to squawk, shriek, hiss, and run around like children. To Glouberman, the sound is a medium for exploring modes of human interaction that he didn't find in theatrical improv. As he explained to me, "In theatre you really only have one person communicating at a time. With sound you can be both listener and communicator. You can have four people making sounds at the same time, something you can't really do in theatre."

Over coffee, I asked him whether what he did was actually music, or whether the music was incidental, only a tool for exploring social interactions. Here's what he had to say.

MISHA GLOUBERMAN: It's worth addressing the question of whether what I do is music at all. The way I see it—what a lot of art music for the past hundred years or so has done is to try providing different answers to the question of what kinds of things, sounds, or activities can be considered to be music. I see my own project as that kind of experiment—as a kind of music that keeps some familiar components of the musical experience but discards some components and plays around with others.

At its most basic: I want these events to provide people with an aesthetic experience that's largely related to sounds and how they are organized. I want people to listen to these sounds, to hear them in different ways, to find interest in the relations between them. My thought is that if you're trying to make people experience beauty by listening to ordered sounds, you're pursuing the goals of music.

Now the thing is, of course, I'm pursuing the goals of music through means that are a bit unconventional. For a number of reasons, I avoid a lot of the more traditional elements of music—no scales, no meter, not a lot of measurable pitch, etc. This has been a pretty familiar idea for the past hundred years or so, though I think my motives may be different. I also do a lot of transformation of the relation between the audience and the performer–composer. In most of my stuff, the audience is the performer and (improvising) composer in a structured (or not-so-structured) improvisation.

> "**My work is about explicitly exploring the social dimension of music**

So, just as lots of people have proposed anything from one-off projects to entire careers to investigating specific questions about what's musically possible, I see my project as

people to encounter those social components. It is exciting for people to learn that sounds can be more beautiful when you are the one making them with other people.

At a slightly more complicated level, I'm interested in weaving the social and musical together. At my birthday, we played a game of mine where the participants are instructed to create a soundscape of disparate sounds and then collectively move toward a unison, where everyone is making the same sound. The piece moves back and forth, converging toward a unison, and then moving back out toward increased difference, then moving back in again toward convergence.

The challenge of this piece is initially social: how can a large group of people collectively choose a single sound to make? It's a hard thing do. It calls into question all kinds of things about leadership, compromise, listening, individuality. Much as it's a social experiment, I've always understood it primarily as a musical piece. It's specifically a way of playing the musical idea of tension and resolution as an organizing structure, within the experiment I'm interested in conducting. So instead of having resolution tied to a harmonic structure and occurring as consonance, it happens as a social phenomenon and occurs as agreement. It's the same idea through different means. And since the piece is meant to be listened to by the people who are playing the game, when you hear the sonic component of the tension or resolution, you are also experiencing the social level. I think those two levels of experience—social and musical—affect each other, and I think the connection between them has something to say about music.

The stuff I do is primarily about that: looking at the idea of music as social—made by people together, in the same place. What kinds of aesthetic pleasure arise from making sounds, and what kinds of sounds can arise from different social structures? The connections between the social and musical levels are complicated and overlapping, and work in more than one direction at once. I also think they're more than a little mysterious, which is part of what makes them so much fun to me.

David McCallum is the editor of Musicworks. *His latest projects have been the knitting of artifical life patterns and creating New Year's Eve clocks that tell time badly. He lost his voice at Glouberman's birthday party.*

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exploring this question: what sorts of aesthetically interesting experiences can you give to an audience by having them choose and make sounds together, rather than by having them listen to sounds chosen and made by someone else?

I don't think the question is whether the work I do is social *or* musical. My work is about explicitly exploring the social dimension of music. For the past hundred years or so, music has become a much less social experience for many people. Music used to be, much more commonly, something you made with the people around you. Now, for many people, it's something made by professionals you have never met, that you listen to as a largely passive audience, often at a substantial spatial and temporal distance from the performance. Don't get me wrong, I love the present-day mediascape, and I'm not calling

for a return to the good old days. But I do think the present focus on music as a received commodity opens up some exciting ground for re-exploration of the idea of music as social.

At a super-simple level, I'm really pleased that, in a lot of cases, people are able to derive a lot of aesthetic pleasure from the very simplest group exercises. That, for instance, just being in a room full of people holding a vowel sound at once, can be very beautiful and interesting. Sounding an unpitched drone with other people can be more aesthetically compelling to many people than a perfectly produced recording of very skilled musicians performing very well-written music. There are a lot of explanations for this, I suppose, but the one I'm most interested in is that there are potential social components of musical enjoyment that aren't present in the recorded music, and that it's exciting for