

This article was written on the background of my presentation at the symposium "Flirting with Uncertainty. Improvisation in Performance", University of Exeter, England, March 2010. It is going to appear in the online magazine Music and Arts in Action, but it could be late 2012 or later, so till then, here is a pre-print.

Some concepts around free improvisation in music

ABSTRACT

This is a presentation of some keywords concerning free improvised music and its recent developments. The background is a permanently ongoing bibliographical research. General themes of pluralism, basic attitudes of musicians, and a new approach to musical analysis based specifically on the properties of this music and also are featured with selected quotations and some comments. According to the author's thesis statements in the concluding part, concepts like these allow us to discern some essential characteristics of this music form.

Some concepts around free improvisation in music

This article was written on the background of Thisauthor (2002ff) which represent a still ongoing cumulative bibliographical research into writings about free improvisation and other related topics. The purpose of this work was not just to list titles, but also to convey knowledge and overview of the content of the writings. Therefore, in many cases entries are annotated with extensive summaries. Writings about free improvisation now have quite a history, beginning in the nineteen seventies. During the nineties it began to attract more academic interest. But even before that time, many musicians contributed with documentation as well as with their thoughts on what they were doing.

In the following I will present some keywords that have emerged for me in this literature research which especially characterises free improvisation.

1) PLURALISM (OF IDIOMS/MUSIC STYLES AND MUSICIANS' BACKGROUNDS)

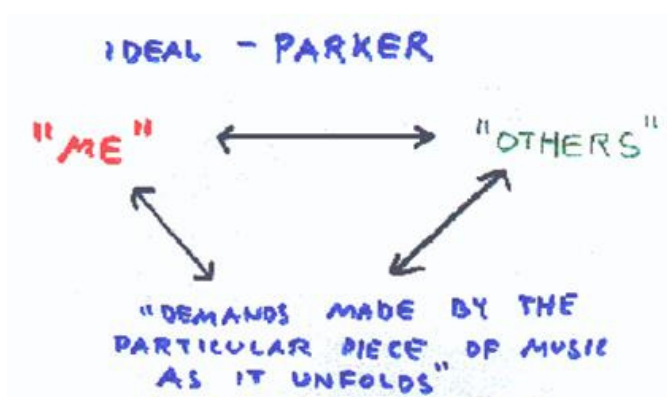
Musicians can mix in free improvisation as they like to do, and, inevitably, their backgrounds differ and so their musical preferences and playing. It is especially noticeable that some musicians see this not only as a basic condition, but as a productive tension. Globokar speaks of an “*unmediated mixture*”, and Parker moves further with coining the metaphor of the desirable “*cheese and pickle sandwich*” containing such a mixture, to which he ascribes an aesthetic value. He views this state as a middle way between “total heterogenisation” and “total homogenisation” and argues against both extremes, especially against the latter.

<p>UNMEDIATED MIXTURE: "It is too much of a simplification to state that this way of free improvisation is only the last consequence of a development within post-serial music. [...] If, by incidence, someone appears in the group who has played only jazz or Indian music, the result changes fundamentally. It becomes a peculiar and unmediated mixture of two worlds. I would like to add immediately that this unmediatedness is not necessarily a negative factor". Vinko Globokar (1972).</p>	<p>A KIND OF TENSION TO BE MAINTAINED (= CHEESE AND PICKLE SANDWICH): "There is a kind of tension to be maintained between total heterogeneity (where there is no cheese and pickle sandwich) and total homogenization where all identity markers are flattened out and we arrive at a kind of filtered 'new age-world music' pap. (Like a cheese and pickle sandwich in the blender!) The aim as I see it is to initiate and to respond to the initiatives of others in proportion to a sense of demands made by the particular piece of music as it unfolds." Evan Parker, quoted from Stanyek (1999).</p>
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Cheese and pickle sandwich – Parker’s metaphor for healthy co-existence...

In the figure below, I have sought to illustrate the playing situation as Parker describes it in a triangular pattern. Players are seen as independent forces, between which “initialising” and “responding” takes place, and the third interacting force is the music language.



Concepts from Parker, as in the quotation above from Stanyek (1999)

Parker describes different levels of the musical language in an interesting way here which will be discussed in more detail later.

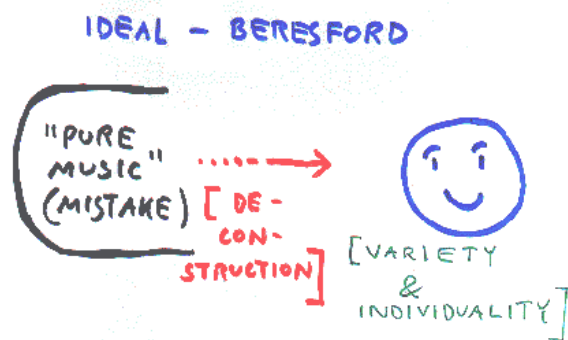
CONFLICTS TO BE VALUED, NOT AVOIDED

Given such views stressing the positive aspects of pluralism and difference, it is only natural that one must reflect on the role of conflict itself. Beresford maintains vigorously that without acceptance of conflicts, there will be an unhealthy and not genuine situation:

AGAINST "PURE MUSIC":

The improvised music performances which don't work for me are those which are exactly trying to project an image of pure music which doesn't have the same problems that most music has and that most life has".

Steve Beresford, quoted from Cusack (1978)



Taking Beresford's terminology slightly further, one could speak of his ideal as a deconstruction act done to the mistakenly "pure music", a deconstruction that clarifies the situation and which may be acting in a liberating way as well as to restore variety and individuality.

IDIOMS

The notion of idiom also illuminates how free improvisation has developed pluralistically. When Bailey coined his classical term of "non-idiomatic", there still existed a need to distinguish between traditional styles and genres and the way they were made relative in the new pluralist context. In later developments, this relativity of styles and genres have become increasingly a matter of course.

IDIOMS AS PREREQUISITES:

"Idiomatic improvisation... is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom – such as jazz, flamenco or baroque – and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom. Non-idiomatic improvisation... is most usually found in so-called 'free' improvisation and, while it can be highly stylised, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity...".

Derek Bailey (1992) *p. xi f*

"Single idioms are no longer regarded as *prerequisites* for the music making but as *tools* which can in every moment be used or not used".

From Munthe (1992)

"Free improvisation takes place on top of everything else the musician in question has dealt with".

From Rizzi (2000)

2) MUSICIANS' ATTITUDES TO THE COMMUNICATIVE CONTEXT OF PLAYING

Stephen Chase unfolds in his PhD a view of two clearly opposite and even sometimes opposed views of improvised music making. In the quotations provided here, musicians from both sides place a high value on communication, but they do so differently. From the performance-driven side, a context of both tradition and of the audience with their needs and expectations has been especially considered, from the play-driven side rather the playing context.

PERFORMANCE-DRIVEN

"The meta-musician looks for meaning, and for music with meaning, and looks to invest as much meaning as possible in the music. The intention is to transcend all previous experience of music production and music consumption. The intention is making music, and listening to it as if for the first time."

Eddie Prévost (1995), p.3

"...if you're going to contribute, make sure that it's something that's worthwhile. I mean, people have got out of bed to come and hear you play ... and not only that, some of them have paid for it... there's quite a responsibility. It's not just amusement, it's deadly serious, especially as we [AMM] have ... dedicated most of [our] lives to improvising and making music... (Interview with John Tilbury).

Chase (2006), p. 101

PLAY-DRIVEN

"Giving his reasons for being an improvising musician, he states, "I think the answer is I enjoy doing it. I enjoy that interplay of working with other people..." ...

"It's that word *play*. You know one of the things I talk to the students here a lot about is, you know, 'What do you do? You say you play music, what does *play* mean?' You know, I think most people actually *work* music...." (Interview with Hugh Nankivell).

Chase (2006), p.104

Because of the openness of free improvisation to initiatives and to interaction in music, the play element assumes a special importance. At the same time we encounter here a seemingly opposite attitude. However, as also the author Chase states, they do not at all shut each other out. It could well be that Nankivell is not speaking of other free improvisors when referring to rather to "work" music than to "play music". The play-driven attitude is concerned with a special characteristic of the genre, while the performance-driven one is strongly influenced by the grand concert tradition and views improvised music as a valuable outgrowth of it.

3) WHAT HAPPENS IN AND AROUND THE MUSIC WHEN IMPROVISING

Besides being born out of a multi-cultural situation, recent trends to examine music in its social context¹ have emerged partly as an extension of ongoing research in the sociology of music since the nineteenth century, partly as a reaction against traditional musicology which, during much of the nineteenth century, has often treated the discipline of musical analysis in an objectivistic way. If one applies an “either-or” view, one can pursue interests to study the music text, to obtain a fuller and more complete perception of its sounding details and how they function together. Or one may engage in philosophical speculations about the overall meaning in music and maybe other art forms. Another possible form of specialising in semantics would be to practise hermeneutic and phenomenological studies departing from individual listening experiences. And lastly, one could work to renew sociological studies, in order to give people and their musical and cultural behaviour their deserved place in the field of studies.

But we do not have to accept the dilemma of choosing between these levels. Indeed, music *is* very often worth getting to know closer and more precisely, we *do* indeed ascribe meaning to it, and all this *is* also connected to our behaviour. And will not musicians usually engage in some ways in all three levels?

Applying a semiologic perspective², we can talk of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects that are vividly interrelated and see them as levels of one and the same sign system. This takes place just as naturally as “language” appears on all three levels in everyday life. The examples cited below of analytical views all illuminate, in different ways, how some aspects of behaviour are related to syntactical phenomena.

The syntactical level, recalling Evan Parker’s beautiful statement above, is the place from which musicians gather “a sense of demands made by the particular piece of music as it unfolds” while, on the behavioural and pragmatic level, musicians “initiate and ... respond to the initiatives of others”. They are mutually dependent on each other on this level. An entity results in which these levels are interrelated and appear “in proportion to” each other. Clearly, musicians in question strongly influence which kind of language is created in free improvisation, and clearly some expectations and ideas of what to play or not to play stem from the music they hear.

The first analytical system, Couldry’s distinction between “*parallel voices*” and “*group voices*” approaches to improvisation target characteristically different ways of improvising in an ensemble. Both approaches can be said to create polyphonic structures. It is not difficult to find examples of them both in the CD literature (and references abound in his book). It might be thought-provoking to contemplate how completely different channels of communication these musical languages or meta-languages form, and how differently they treat individuality and the way ensemble members inspire each other.

<p>PARALLEL VOICES</p>	<p>GROUP VOICE APPROACH</p>
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¹ - concerning periodicals, thinking especially of the present one, and of Critical Studies in Improvisation

² I use the European word semiological rather than the Anglo-Saxon semiotic here. Traditions are different – while the latter concentrate on how language refers to reality, writers like Guiraud (1972) take a more integrative approach. The underlying inspiration comes from Jakobson who formulated his model 1960 – see Jakobson (1971)

<p style="text-align: center;">APPROACH</p> <p>"Parallel voices approach, whose preference is for each instrumental voice to be... an unmistakable and more or less continuous direction of its own..."</p> <p>Couldry (1995), p. 9</p>	<p>"... <i>Group voice</i> approach. As gestures succeed or overlap each other, the aim is to achieve a completely natural flow <i>without</i> relying on one or more players appearing to drive it forward individually..."</p> <p><i>Couldry (1995), p.9-10.</i></p>
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Lutz' system is a concise classification of possible communication forms within improvised music which may be at the basis for negotiating and agreeing on the music to play. It is interesting to note the similarity between "communication 2" and Nunn's "catalyst" element – indeed a characteristic feature of free improvisation³. Some of Nunn's other notions, such as "identities", "feature overlap" and more, may combine well with and extend traditional analytical terms centered around motivic work, thematic dualism etc. Classicist and Romantic concert music developed such thematic processes. The differentiated processes we cultivate in free improvisation seem, however, less centered around isolated "motifs" etc. but rather work in a more holistic way, and Nunn's basic notion of "identity" takes due account for this⁴.

<p style="text-align: center;">SYSTEM OF LUTZ (complete)</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>COMMUNICATION 1: between two or more individuals, as concrete musical dialogue</p> </div> <div style="background-color: #f4a460; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>COMMUNICATION 2: between individual and the whole ensemble, as a common musical reaction to an individual idea</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>COMMUNICATION 3: Implicit communication which does not manifest itself in concrete dialogue nor in concrete reactions but, for example, as mutual agreement on musical aspects such as expression, dynamics, distribution of roles</p> </div> <p><i>From Lutz (1999)</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">SYSTEM OF NUNN (a few examples)</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>IDENTITIES: anything... that identifies or draws perceptual attention to itself in some way and maintains identity within the music for some time [roughly=section]</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>IDENTIFICATIONAL PROCESSES – Creating Identities (establishment)</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>CONTINUITY PROCESSES – maintaining identities (extension/development)</p> </div> <div style="background-color: #f4a460; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>CATALYST – an action to stimulate change in the musical character.</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <p>SOUND MASS – a collective complex</p> </div>
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³ In Thisauthor (2002) I have named it "spontaneous agreement".

⁴ The notion of "identity" is a general one calling for further specification of how identities differ. Descriptions according to musical parameters may be applied. I have used such a system in Thisauthor (2006)

	sound made up of a number of "voices" that are roughly equal in contribution
	SUDDEN/UNEXPECTED SEGUE – unprepared, immediate change with unexpected continuation
	FEATURE CHANGE – gradual change of one feature that redirects the Flow (usually subtly)
	FEATURE OVERLAP – one feature of antecedent section is sustained and becomes part of the consequent section
	FRAGMENTATION – gradual breaking up, or fragmenting, of the general texture and/or rhythm.

SOME CONCLUSIONS IN THESIS FORM:

- free improvisation may easily lead to pluralist situations. They arise out of direct encounters between musicians. One could name this a direct form of polyphony – as different from the well-known polyphony concept within Western classical music so far, in which the polyphony is pre-imagined by one person.
- free improvisation can be characterised by a peculiar element of play, compared to more fixed kind of music, and this may be mixed in different proportions with the element of performance.
- just like language, music can be studied as a sign system. In this way one can avoid to leave out important levels and take an integrative approach.
- Creating and interacting in the moment entails certain typical structures in the music. They may in turn influence the communication it is possible to make. The common/parallel voice approaches (Couldry, referring to two kinds of polyphonic structure) and systems like those by Lutz and Nunn (the latter referring to both communication, material and form) may be used to describe and further understand such typical structures.

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