

Soundweaving

Soundweaving:
Writings on Improvisation

Edited by

Franziska Schroeder and Mícheál Ó hAodha

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS

P U B L I S H I N G

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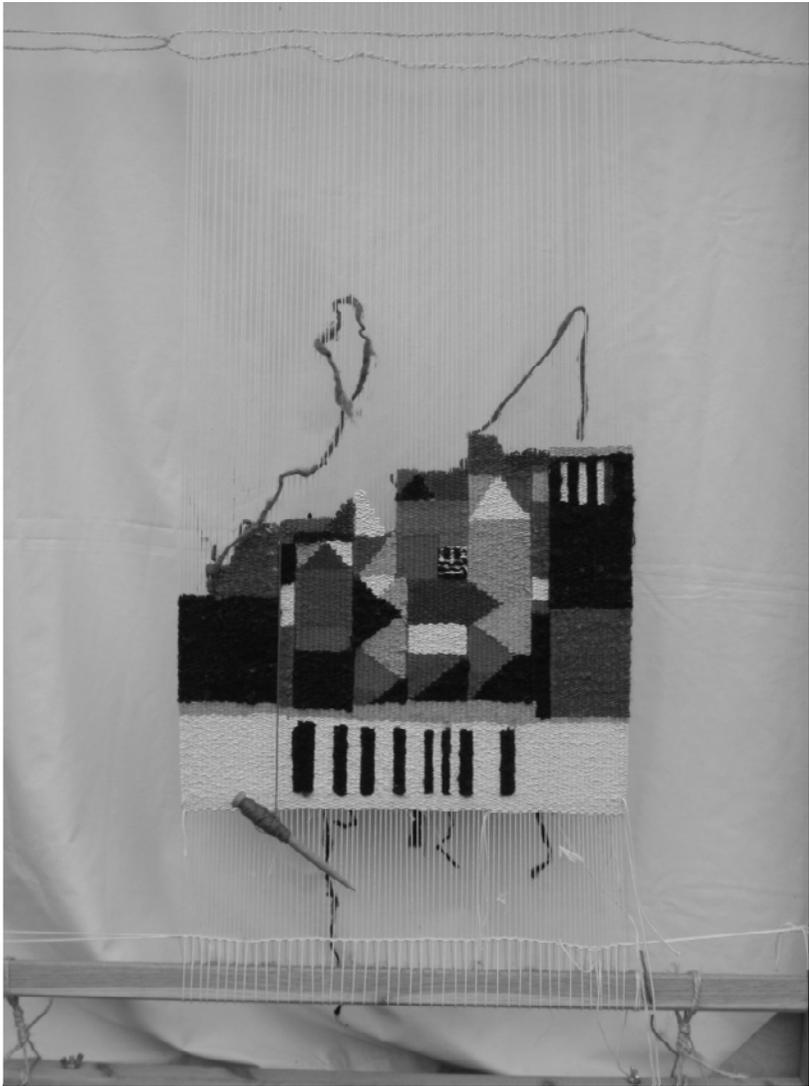
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With loving help from Imogene Newland, whom I thank immensely for supporting me in writing this extended, woven editorial.

For the three most important boys: Pedro, Lukas and Max.

Cover and book images by artist and tapestry weaver
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Weaving in progress. Artist and Tapestry Weaver Ingrid Parker Heil

CONTENTS

<i>Editorial</i>	ix
Performing Improvisation: Weaving Fabrics of Social Systems Franziska Schroeder	
Introduction	1
Evan Parker	
<i>Editorial</i>	9
Steps to an Ecology of Improvisation.....	15
Marcel Cobussen	
<i>Editorial</i>	29
What the Music Wants.....	33
David Borgo	
<i>Editorial</i>	53
Encountering Musical Objects: Object Oriented Philosophy, Improvisation and an Ethics of Listening	57
Adam Parkinson	
<i>Editorial</i>	75
Free Improvisation and the Uncertainty Principle	79
Justin Yang	
The Molecular Imagination: John Stevens, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble and Free Group Improvisation	95
Richard Scott	
<i>Editorial</i>	111

Breath and Improvisation	115
Jeff R. Warren	
Indeterminacy and Game-Mediated Participation in Network Music Performance.....	131
Felipe Hickmann and Pedro Rebelo	
<i>Editorial</i>	151
Improvisation and the Self: To Listen to the Other.....	153
Henrik Frisk	
<i>Editorial</i>	171
Bibliography to Editorial	173
Contributors.....	179

PERFORMING IMPROVISATION: WEAVING FABRICS OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS

FRANZISKA SCHROEDER

This book consists of eight chapters with writings on improvisation by practising musicians and theorists, and an introduction by one of the most inspiring improvisers of our generation – Evan Parker. The initial discussions for this book were carried out during the “Two Thousand + TEN” symposium, which took place on the 6th of November 2010 at the Sonic Arts Research Centre in Belfast. The symposium’s theme was ‘improvisation’. Prof Georgina Born and Prof David Borgo gave keynote addresses, alongside many other excellent speakers, of whom several are included in this book. Information on the symposium can be found here <http://twothousand.wordpress.com>, or www.sonorities.org.uk/symposium.

It seems hardly worth mentioning that there is and has been a surge and burgeoning interest in the theme of improvisation. Inquiries come from musical as well as non-musical fields in the arts, sciences and humanities. Improvisation is studied in diverse scholarly writings, including in Western and non-Western musics. It is discussed in jazz (Berliner 1994; Monson 1994); in Indian and Iranian music (Nooshin 2006); in Classical music (Collins et al. 2001); in Computer Music (Eigenfeldt 2007), but also as a symbol or metaphor. Improvisation in culture (Solis and Nettle 2009) has also been dissected at length.

A further book on the theme will be published possibly very close to this volume appearing. I am referring to the edited volume by George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, ‘The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies’ (forthcoming at Oxford University Press), for which the reader can sample several contributions already (see MTO 2013). Many writers suggest that the term improvisation might be too broad and ask that a different or slightly more nuanced taxonomy be found that better describes the specifics of improvisation. Particularly, the simplistic conceptualisation of improvisation as something unforeseen, eschewing all law, convention, structure or form has been criticised for some time (Lewis 1996 / 2004).

It is worth recalling that many writers emphasise that ‘improvisation’ (as a term and as a concept) must be understood as tricky, complicated and ill-defined; a term and concept that is highly contested and loaded with signification (Bailey 1992, Heble 2000, Borge 2002, Lewis 2004, Ramshaw 2006, Hogg 2010).

Some of those writers entangle improvisation with concepts of personal and cultural identity, memory, gender and race as well as with notions of performativity, law, risk and ethical responsibility. Seeing improvisation within the context of identity formation, as a social and dialogic process, Heble pushes the idea as far as to suggest that improvisation can “facilitate new kinds of global and intercultural conversations, [...] new models of human relationship, [and] alternative kinds of pedagogical practice” (Heble 2005: 1). Recent scholarship tends to emphasise improvisation as a form of social practice (Fischlin and Heble, 2004) and seeks to understand it in terms of the *dynamics of communication* (Landgraf 2009: 12), rather than conceiving of improvisation as being musical interactions between communities of people aiming for a certain musical consensus. Improvisation in Heble’s and Waterman’s views constitutes “a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action” (Heble and Waterman 2007). Further extending the point of identity formation in improvisatory practices, Paul Stapleton understands improvisation as an “opportunity to both challenge and further develop our personal and cultural identities” (Stapleton 2013: 7).

Why yet another book on this theme one might ask? To me this book with the nine contributions by writers and performers in the field of improvisation is rather timely, since it does not focus on more attempts to define, to delineate or to analyse improvisatory practices. Rather – and this I see as unique – the writings are all of an interdisciplinary critical nature and thus shed light on the admittedly vast field of improvisation from many different angles, offering radically diversifying contexts to improvisation studies. The writers explore improvisation as contentious, moving away from objects and outcomes towards the processes involved. All writers in this volume forge exciting new links between a great variety of critical theoretical discourses. George Lewis in his recent article (2013) on theorising improvisation poignantly asks what we as musicians can offer the field of critical improvisation studies and music scholarship. More importantly, though, he asks what we can contribute to a wider intellectual discourse, one not necessarily related to music and improvisation studies.

In the 1990s Derek Bailey (1992) found the way free improvisation was evaluated to be inadequate, since it used formal technical analyses unsuited to the field of free improvisation. One can argue that we have come a long way in discussing improvisation. It is indeed a rather unique moment where this volume of writings – all inspired by the field of (free) improvisation and written by practising improvisers – can appear and augment not only current music scholarship, but since these writings all draw on a wider critical theoretical discourse, this volume is perfectly suited to contribute to a wider intellectual debate, one that is distanced from the discussions currently on-going in improvisation studies.

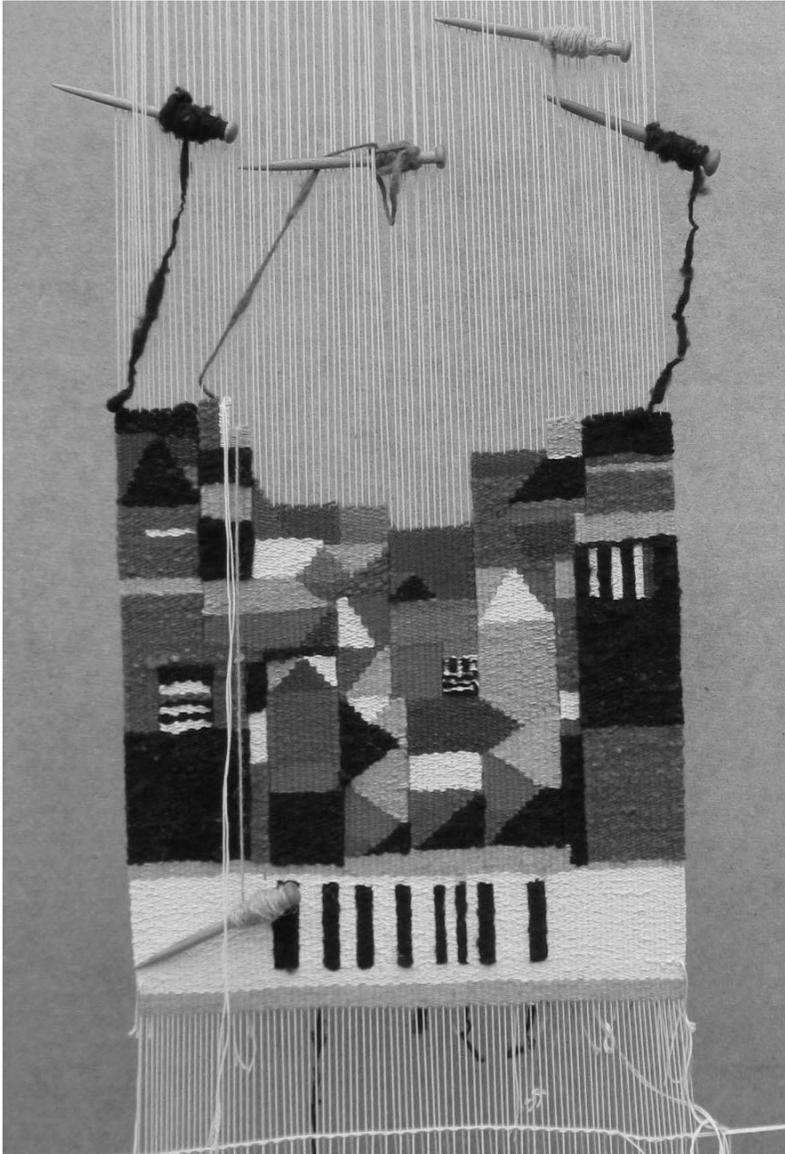
The book also contains my own contribution, what I like to think of as a ‘tactile text’: a text not literally textured, smooth, soft, rough, hard or slippery to the touch, but a text that I have attempted to ‘weave’, like a tactile fabric or a woven cloth, amongst the various chapters. I will explain the reason for this below and illuminate further why the notion of weaving is of great interest to me here. First, however, I present a list of terms, concepts and ideas, which I have encountered during the research for this book¹.

This list provides a contextual framework for the following chapters, and it seems fitting to open the book with these terms, as I believe that they poignantly describe the current thinking around the theme of (free) improvisation. The reader will find that these terms recur in an improvisatory fashion – like headlines, full stops or exclamation marks – throughout the book.

¹ I assume it is evident that this is not a comprehensive list describing the discourse of ‘improvisation’; but these terms seemed to me the most poignant and striking ones that I encountered throughout my research.

Agency	Improvisers tell stories
Attention	Indeterminacy
Autonomy	Interconnectedness of
Awareness	relations
Chance	Leads to inner change
Choice	Listening
Coaction	Modification of the past
Collectivity	Opposed to instruction
Commitment	Questioning of self
Community	Response to the moment
Complexity	Responsibility
Context	Self-reflection
Culture	Self-reliance
Deliberate statements	Sensual
Dialogue	Silence
Discovery	Social systems
Dynamic interplay	Social obligation
Ecological milieu	Sonically communicated
Egalitarian	intentions
Emerges out of human	Sense of immediacy
encounters	(temporal and sensual)
Emergent complexity	Spontaneity
Ethical dimension	Tactile
Exploration	Temporal
Extended mind	Trust
(externalised and	Uncertainty
collectivised cognitive	Ubiquitous practice of
process)	everyday life
Human condition	

Sensual



Weaving in progress. Artist and Tapestry Weaver Ingrid Parker Heil

As said above, my own contribution is a ‘tactile text’: a text not literally textured, smooth or rough to the touch, but something that I ‘weave’, like a tactile cloth, amongst the chapters. When editing the individual works, I realised that my contribution was more than solely to edit, cut, suggest or recommend alterations to each text, but also – and maybe more importantly – to weave my own words, inspired by the contributors’ ideas, into yet another layer of text that would sit within the chapters. The reader will find that in my writing I specifically refer to the field of free collaborative improvisation, since it is the focus of this book and aligns with my current interest and musical expertise².

With this ‘tactile text’ I attempt to weave a tactile dimension among the excellent writings of the nine contributors. One reason for this is that as a musician whose concern lies very much in the tactile and in the embodied engagement with her tools, I continue to ask myself how a text might be read in more tactile ways. I ponder how a text – while being a critical enunciation of one’s thinking processes – could become sensual at the same time. My contribution therefore weaves text into and among the critical ideas of the nine authors in ways one might weave a tactile fabric. In doing so, I recall the often-assumed division between tactility and criticality. Anne Hamlyn in “Freud, Fabric, Fetish” (2003) points to this division where in academic/critical circles one tends to “either occupy the world of knowledge and insight, commanding language and representation, both of which are grounded in the psychic register that Lacan calls *Symbolic*”, or one is “embedded in the seductive world of the sensual, distracted by surfaces and illusions, a narcissistic mode of experience that Lacan associates with the *Imaginary*” (Ibid: 11). Hamlyn suggests that fabrics subversively occupy either or both of these seemingly incompatible fields and argues that much theory has failed to address the relationship between these two stances. If fabrics subversively occupy either or both of what Hamlyn refers to as seemingly incompatible fields – the ‘world of knowledge and insight’, i.e. the *Symbolic*, or the seductive world of sensual materials, i.e. the *Imaginary* – then improvisation is an excellent mediator, able to address these two stances. A consideration should be given to this space that sits in-between – the threshold space between the ‘*Symbolic*’ and the ‘*Imaginary*’. I consider improvisation an ideal practice for occupying this marginalised seam between knowledge and insight and

² This type of improvisation should not disguise the many other schools of improvisation that exist even within free improvisation, including conducted, text, graphic-based or signal-led free improvisations, and evidently many improvisers are involved in all of these at some stage or even in a combination of these types during the same improvisation.

the sensual and seductive³. Improvisation is a type of musicking that is evidently marked by a very sensual, tactile engagement with one's tools on one hand – it specifically brings into being the body and instrument relation to the playing musician as a highly tactile and intimate relation marked by constraint and resistance⁴. On the other hand, the improviser constantly questions, probes and critically (re-) examines her craft, often struggling with technique and the 'world of knowledge' – and by struggling I mean that the improviser often aims to let go of this knowledge. Although improvisation allows for freedom, for ignoring, for letting-go and for disregarding, every improvising musician knows that indeed the letting-go, the forgetting and ignoring are undeniably the most challenging aspects to develop. Many improvisers that I have worked with over the years aim to achieve a state where during an improvisation they constantly aim to forget: they want to forget previous sounds, engrained patterns or melodies; they want to forget specific instrumental approaches to their tools. In short, they aim to forget, if at all possible, stored musical memories, previous experiences and consciously and unconsciously embodied acts and approaches to their materials⁵ – all in order to achieve true spontaneity during the improvisation and to attain 'in-the-moment-action', or as Evan Parker so poignantly put it: improvisers have "the freedom to behave in accordance with their response to the situations" (in Corbett 1994: 203).

³ Much of my thinking on the threshold space is indebted to the writings of Richard Coyne (2005, 2010). My own past writing on performance and the threshold (Schroeder 2009) celebrates this marginalised space within performance – a space known to be occupied by the mythological trickster figure that is forever going between hemispheres and categories, being "at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. [...] He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being" (Radin 1956: xxiii).

⁴ I have elsewhere defined this intimate performer–instrument relation as an auto-erotic one; as an 'itching and scratching of a quasi-incestuous object' (Schroeder 2005), and I have more recently examined notions of resistance in network performances (Schroeder 2013).

⁵ Free improviser Ornette Coleman is known to have aimed to break with such habits, attempting to short-circuit his habitual way of playing the saxophone. In order for Coleman to respond as spontaneously as possible – without memory of the actual physical act of playing the saxophone – he would equipped himself with an entire new tool, a new instrument, such as a violin for example.

Weaving - a tactile piece of critical fabric

The metaphor of weaving is essential for my thinking here and the book's main thread – the main thread being known to weavers as the warp (or the longitudinal thread) – is the theme of improvisation. This warp becomes interwoven with the lateral threads (which weavers refer to as the weft or filling threads), in order to make the final piece of cloth. These lateral threads are represented by the yarns of the contributors who have delivered intricate pieces of writing on the theme of improvisation⁶. Before returning in detail to the notion of weaving, I will let the main thread of this book become interwoven with the first of the lateral threads – the introductory remarks, reflections and historical insights by improviser Evan Parker. Parker reminds us of the improviser's potential for being in the moment, for experiencing the performance as “what can be, rather than what ought to be”. He poignantly emphasises the fact that much of free improvisation pre-dates academic writing on the subject, and that we therefore must take into account the rich historical contexts of this praxis, which, so Parker suggests, would have to involve cataloguing and archiving the London improvisation scene of the late 1960s and early 70s. Parker's argument that George Lewis has set the standard with his epic work on the AACM – and that we now require equally diligent scholarship work for the UK scene – is surely worthwhile reflecting and acting upon.

Trust

⁶One could be tempted to see the loom, the device that holds the yarns in place and allows the final cloth to be produced, in the book itself, the physical structure that contains the final pieces of writing.

INTRODUCTION

EVAN PARKER

My "music of the future" is played by groups of musicians who choose one another's company and who improvise freely in relation to the precise emotional, acoustic, psychological and other less tangible atmospheric conditions in effect at the time the music is played.

Before this music of the future can be accepted certain prejudices have to be overcome. The idea is often voiced that improvised music can only be "mood-kitsch" as Kontarsky (1) puts it; that it is without discipline; that it is in the end less creative than indeterminate music because, as Ben Johnston would have it, "Habit, especially quoting others and oneself, is an enemy of creative action" (2). With all respect, habit is a working material that can itself be put to creative ends. The unfortunate assumption that underlies all these criticisms is the old hierarchical one. Naturally the composer is reluctant to retire. In fact, I don't really want that, I want him to dirty his hands in live sound a bit more.

These two excerpts from my contribution to a forum on "Music in the Future" organised by the SPNM in the summer of 1973 seem to still say something I can identify with forty years later.

At some point between 1973 and 1992 I realised that the antithesis so frequently assumed between composition and improvisation was a false one based on a category error. I had come to think that the somewhat clearer distinction, between notation and improvisation, might at least begin to compare ways of "composing", that is, putting together, music. By 1992 my tone had become less strident and as part of the symposium "MAN & MACHINE" at the Zaal de Unie Rotterdam, in a text which formed part of my piece "De Motu" for Buschi Niebergall¹, I wrote:

In this way the false antithesis in which improvisation is talked about as an activity distinct from that of composition was avoided. After all, whether music is played directly on an instrument, read or learnt from notes made on paper beforehand or constructed from algorithms or game

¹ This work can be found on: www.efi.group.shef.ac.uk/fulltext/demotu.html

rules operating directly on the sound sources or controlling the players, the outcome is music which in any given performance has a fixed form. A form which, inter alia, reflects the procedure used to produce it. But that this is only part of the story is clearly illustrated by the fact that Boulez can title a strictly notated work "Improvisation sur Mallarme", or that Ferneyhough can write such complex notation that he knows the resulting performances will deviate substantially from what's written, or that a group improvisation by the SME can be called "Webernesque", or my solo improvisations can be compared with the work of a process composer like Steve Reich.

This false antithesis continues to create confusion even today and by ignoring the "in the moment" decisions made by interpreters of very complex notation or pieces using chance operations in performance, the shared aesthetic of the "real-existing music/sound world" with that of many free improvisers is given less significance than it deserves.

A key figure in clarifying this confusion will be Richard Barrett who creates music of exquisite freshness both in his notated works and in his improvisations with FURT and many other combinations.

My text for "*De Motu*" continued:

Since music works with the variables sound and time (I might well have added "place"), the idea of creating a piece which has one single set of interpretive possibilities regardless of historical and social context would seem at least partially to negate the existential significance of these fundamentals: the flow of time and the meaning of sound in time seem to require that each piece of music should be unique and should at least in part reflect the particular social and historical context for which it is made.

Social and historical context affects not only the interpretation of notated composition, but also how the instrumental techniques are extended and how new instruments are built.

Even the distinction between notated and improvised composition is rendered problematic by the issues of memorisation, material effectively embodied in each particular instrument. The clear development of personal vocabularies, styles or modes of operation by individual improvisers or by established groups led to a phase in the late 60s in which composers composed works around particular techniques and for specific performers.

For example Bruno Bartolozzi wrote various pieces for extended techniques developed in his *New Sounds for Woodwind* (OUP 1967), Bernard Rands with his work *Memo 1* for improvising bassist Barry Guy and Wilfrid Mellers with his piece *Yeibishai - for coloratura soprano, scat singer, jazz trio, orchestra and tape*, allowing the Howard Riley Trio to

improvise much of their parts. Quite soon this practice tailed off as the instrumentalists developed “compositional” strategies of their own.

When bassist Barre Phillips came through London on his way to Belgium (and eventually the South of France, where he has been ever since) he had already experienced the close relationship between the two approaches and was already dealing with the territory between notational and improvisational composition. (He stayed long enough to play more than a few gigs with John Stevens' *Spontaneous Music Ensemble*, at that point a trio with John and me). Barre had made a solo record called *Journal Violone*, the recording engineer/producer was Bob Woolford (who incidentally also recorded the first record I made under my own name, *The Topography of the Lungs*). The recordings were initially made for Max Schubel, a composer friend of Barre's who wanted to cut up, layer and resequence the material to make a composition of his own. Given the evolution of live processing technologies, in the meantime such work can be done live in real time. The pieces on *Journal Violone1* are the first documents of solo bass improvisation and among the earliest such documents on any instrument.

When *MEV* played in London on their way to live in Rome, Frederic Rzewski was playing a sheet of glass with a contact microphone, Richard Teitelbaum was playing a synthesiser the size of a small wardrobe. The co-evolution of instrument design and musical practice is an interesting study with much food for thought as the tendency to look for sounds only available through so-called extended techniques approaches a limit, the next step is to modify the instrument - or even abandon the instrument - I'm also thinking here of decisions like those taken by pianist David Tudor or guitarist Keith Rowe. Should this be done in a way that makes playing material conventional to that instrument's existing repertoire more difficult or even impossible? In the meantime there have been many varying responses to this dilemma. Could such responses be seen as a response to the social and historical particularity already outlined?

And of course hybrid musical forms in which notated elements are combined with improvised elements are also very common. The whole notion of chance procedures, aleatoric structuring or sequencing of otherwise fixed elements and the tradition of text-based works, whether from the Fluxus direction or from Stockhausens' intuitive music, occupies a place that is philosophically distinct from what we might call, without irony, the “mainstream” of free improvisation. The various schools of conducted or signal-led improvisation are also in a sense philosophically distinct, but in practice many performers see practical and even aesthetic

connections between these approaches and are often involved in the performance of concerts using, say, texts, conventional notation and free improvising perhaps even in the same piece.

Back in my early days the fore-runner of the Music Improvisation Company was a group with the slightly less dynamic name: Instrumental and Electronic Improvisation, in which Gavin Bryars, who had recently returned to England after his studies with John Cage, had the rest of us playing various pieces involving chance. I remember a Cage work for radios and a George Brecht piece for toy pianos – or was it the other way round? The relationship of The Scratch Orchestra to AMM also had some of the members involved with free improvisation in one concert and text, or otherwise conceptually pre-determined pieces, in the next. A programme from a concert at the West of England College of Art on 20th March 1969 has Electronic and Instrumental Music, a concert by Gavin Bryars, Derek Bailey, Jamie Muir, Evan Parker and John Tilbury playing *Mr. Sunshine* by Gavin for Piano and Tapes, *Candlepiece for Radios* by George Brecht played by “all of us or all of us minus one”, *For One, Two or Three People* by Christian Wolff, *Quarter of Zyklus* by Derek Bailey, *Film from Water Yam* by John Gosling, *Octet 61 for Jasper Johns* by Cornelius Cardew, *Water Music* by John Cage and *Tilbury* by Christian Wolff played by Bailey and Bryars – was there any improvising? I leave that to your imagination.

Gavin said somewhere that his aim in these concerts was to leave as little time for improvising as possible having been persuaded that the Cage approach was right.

Around the same time Yoko Ono was living in London and had just performed with Ornette Coleman at the Albert Hall. We had met at Olympic Studios during the recording of *Karyobin* with the SME. She invited John Stevens, Derek Bailey and me to rehearse with her and then play at the original Arts Lab in Drury Lane. Her text pieces were used as the basis for playing and their method was not a thousand light years from Stockhausen's *Aus den Sieben Tage*, but were coming out of the Fluxus school.

I remember playing in a piece called *Distance* by Toshi Ichianagi at the Little Theatre Club. It was written - or was it just arranged that way? - for sine-wave generators. The only real mistake you could make was to play an audible glissando while changing frequencies. I made that mistake.

Around this time Hugh Davies came back from Cologne where he had been an assistant to Stockhausen, working on *Hymnen*, I think. He was immediately invited to join the group, which became the Music Improvisation Company. Gavin had lost interest in improvising and was

converted to the Cage idea of chance operations; positions were starting to firm up. Derek Bailey organised a concert at the Purcell Room titled *You Can't Always Wait for a Composer to Write the Music You Want to Play*, in which John Tilbury was to improvise in public for the first time. In the event he played a gestural piece by Giuseppe Chiari, demonstrating a magnificent indifference to the theme of the concert. Perhaps that decision was paradoxically a great improvisation?

Cornelius Cardew, also a former Stockhausen assistant, famously denounced Stockhausen with his book *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (Latimer 1974). His Maoist political views also made him, or perhaps required him, to renounce his own apolitical music as well. He was concentrating on writing songs for the Peoples Liberation Orchestra denouncing US Imperialism and composing variations on Irish rebel songs, and so on. Gradually it became clear that he was being offered far fewer concerts, while occasional requests were still coming in for AMM. To complicate affairs still further, at this point AMM had split into two halves. The politicised half was Cornelius with Keith Rowe and the apolitical half was Eddie Prevost and saxophonist Lou Gare. The wolf was at the door and Cornelius, needing to earn some money, decided that he would accept an offer to play an AMM concert with a mixed programme including, at the promoter's request, a partial performance of his monumental graphic score *Treatise*. In Cornelius' own words this is, "*a 200 page so-called 'graphic score' composed 1963-67 as an attempt to escape from the performance rigidities of serial music and encourage improvisation amongst avant garde musicians.*" I was hired to act as a surrogate Lou Gare and the drummer Dennis Smith was chosen to replace Eddie Prevost. There was a rehearsal at Cornelius' house in North London and I raised the question as to how we were going to interpret the large dense black circle on one of the chosen pages. Cornelius, at this point having renounced all such abstractions as without social meaning, said, "Keith's very good at this stuff. What do you think Keith?" The concert went quite well regardless of the multiple contradictions.

My own experiences with live electronics began with the very funky contact microphones and foot pedals that were available in the late 1960s. Gradually the analogue equipment got better, such that it was feasible to bring portable battery powered cassette recorders to concerts. In fact the first "sampling" that I was involved in was in the duo with Paul Lytton, where we routinely used recordings of earlier sections of the same concert and then even recordings from other concerts. The tape recorder in playback mode would be sent spinning and swinging on a rope from left to

right across the stage introducing strange Doppler effects and spatialisations on a very low budget.

Around the same time, early 1970s, George Lewis was working on computer music long before personal computing was generally available, before the PC or Mac had come into play, and way before there were any affordable digital instruments to generate the sounds. The improviser always has the edge in situations where the performance concerns itself with what can be, rather than what ought to be.

In the intervening years various schools have come into being which are assumed from the outside to have dogmatic endorsement or rejection of this or that approach - "not too loud", "not too fast" or proscribing by turns: tonality; atonality; metric elements; overt expressionism; reductionism; "lower case" and perhaps therefore "upper case"; a knowledge of, and overt reference to, the jazz tradition; a knowledge of and refusal to acknowledge the jazz tradition; no reference to because no knowledge of the jazz tradition; computers; no computers... and so on. A cursory browse through the Peter Stublely web-site will turn up thousands of published recordings illustrating each of these tendencies and more. Attempts at sub-genre defining terms have perhaps reached a peak with "death ambient". Many adherents of one faith are found sleeping with the enemy as individuals migrate from country to country, from faith to faith. I find this apparent theoretical incoherence illuminating, even enjoyable. There can be no better proof of the core strengths of improvisation than a willingness to proceed in the face of apparent contradictions.

The recent surge of academic interest in improvisation is most gratifying to one who has been convinced of its merits and applicability for the period I have briefly surveyed.

Great work is now being done in many distinct fields from philosophy all the way to AI, with sociology, anthropology, technology, critical studies and all the inter-disciplinary interstices en route.

We now need a history department that rescues, documents, archives and analyses the work done prior to the recent academic respectability - dusty work but somebody has to do it. George Lewis has set the standard with his epic work on the AACM. Now we need equally diligent scholarship to be brought to bear on other parts of that formative period: Victor Schonfield's Music Now, the Musicians' Co-operative, the London Musicians Collective, the musician edited magazine MUSICS, Incus, Emanem, Quartz/Mirliton, CAW, Acta, The Contemporary Music Network, Nondo, then the Berlin-Wuppertal axis, SüdWest Funk's Free Jazz Workshops, the Total Music Meetings in Berlin and on and on.

The exchanges of musical ideas and materials between performers, composers and composer/performers will be increasingly symbiotic.

Improvisation remains central to my vision for the future of new music.

Exploration

EDITORIAL

Weaving – A Tactile Piece of Critical Fabric (continued)

My weaving of text on improvisation aims to subversively insert into this seam between tactility and criticality a tactile piece of critical fabric, which I see as a text that is interlaced, like a woven cloth, amongst the various ‘filling threads’ of the contributing authors. I aspire to weave a tactile dimension among the writings while hoping that by doing so, the printed text might be read in more tactile ways. For the purpose of this book the etymology of the word ‘text’ and the link to the art form of weaving is particularly apt. The word ‘text’ etymologically comes from the notion of weaving, literally meaning a ‘woven thing’. In Latin a text is a “thing woven, from the past participle stem of *texere*”, which means ‘to weave’ and from the PIE (Proto-Indo-European: see Mallory and Adams 2006) root of ‘*tek* = make’. Text relates to the Latin word ‘*textura*’, and the word texture is also understood as a “web, structure, coming from the stem of *texere* = to weave” (Harper 2013). In this way, as it is linked to the notion of weaving, text already occupies a highly tactile dimension, and the contributors in this book use words to weave thoughts into a meaningful structure. This tactile dimension, enabled here in the form of what I consider a tactile piece of critical fabric becomes interwoven among the chapters and ultimately recalls the intimate physical engagement of musicians with their instruments. Such tactile commitment between performers and tools is clearly a highly relevant aspect in playing any style of music, and many writers have theorised this tactile engagement of musicians and their instruments¹. Brandon LaBelle for instance conceives of the integral union of instrument and body as a single entity driven by movement, energy, precision and improvisation. Describing his work ‘Museum of instruments’ he states that the

¹ Steven Connor refers to an ‘umbilical continuity’, that characterises the tactile relation between sounds and their produced source (Connor 2004b). In Connor’s discussion of sound and touch the skin is the ‘milieu of tactility’ through which we form ‘sense-impressions’ of the world around us, which in turn explores the ‘[...] border between self and non-self’ (Connor 2004a: 231).

musical instrument initiates a dynamic exchange between the body and material objects: an instrument functions as a partner in the unfolding of musical expression, where an individual and object are integrated, becoming a single body driven by choreography of movement and energy, precision and improvisation, skill and its reciprocal gestures. The body moves differently when incorporating the musical instrument, while the instrument implies the body, presupposing the individual by its very design, where arms and legs are given new fittings, and the imagination is driven by the material potential of strings and their harmonics, objects and their textures (LaBelle 2005).

I am conscious that an attempt at breaking a linear type of writing is also a way of disrupting a linear type of reading, one that might lead the reader through a different course other than a straight route such as from A to Z. Any reader familiar with the writings of French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1988) will find strong influences of their philosophies on my thinking, specifically since their rhizome metaphor urges one to reconsider solely linear ways of reading a text. More poignantly Deleuze and Guattari had questioned the book itself. Their seminal work of 1988 set out to conceive of the work not as a book composed of chapters with points of culmination and termination, but a “book composed of plateaus², of continuous, self-vibrating regions of intensities” (1988: 22). In this sense, there is no orientation towards a specific culmination or a definite external end.

Temporal

Many other authors have questioned the linearity of the book and attempted to disseminate or disperse the idea of a unity, and I am specifically thinking here of the experimentation with form and structure in the works of writers, such as James Joyce and Stéphane Mallarmé. For instance, Mallarmé’s poem of 1897 ‘Le Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard’ (A throw of the dice will never abolish chance) combined free verse and an unusual typographic layout, inserting several blank spaces within the poem and thus experimenting with the spatiality of the text. Mallarmé wanted the phrases to be closer to the action described; that is,

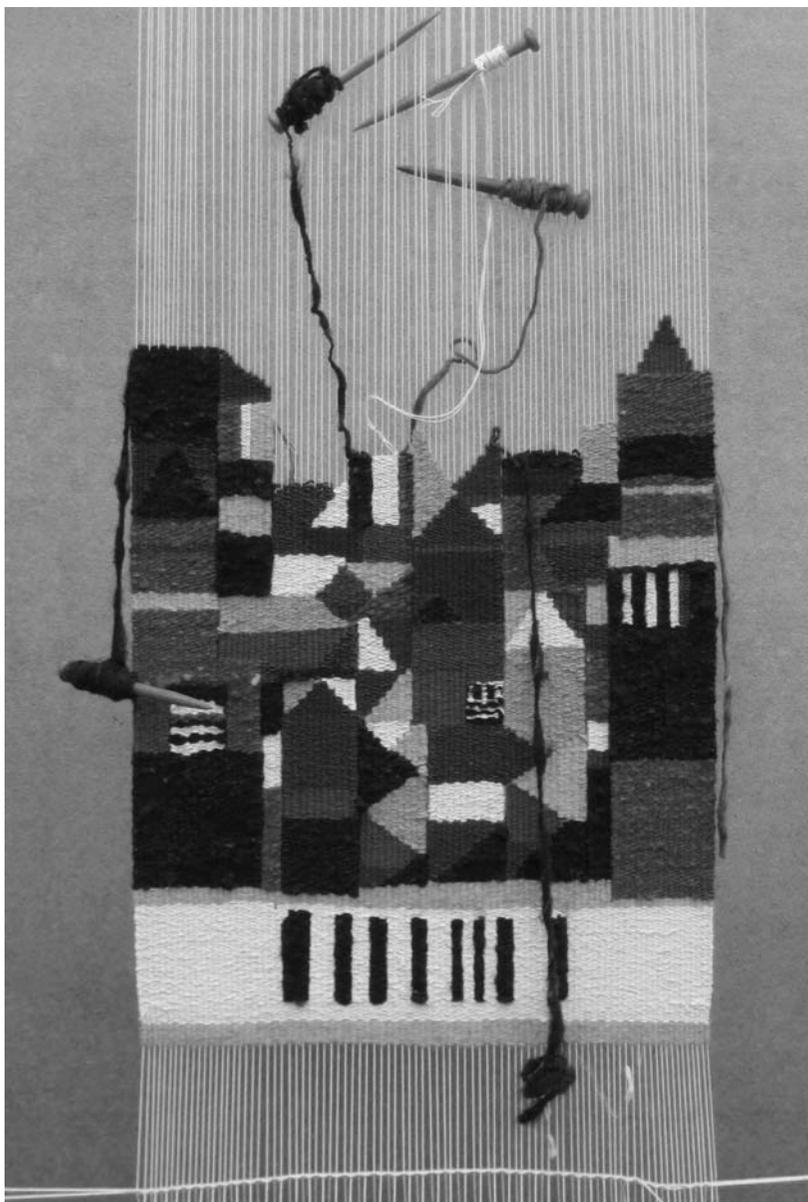
² Deleuze and Guattari’s view, which in turn was inspired by Gregory Bateson’s 1972 idea on the notion of the plateau, posited a plateau as a “multiplicity connected to other multiplicities” (1988: 22), and as such avoided any orientation towards an external end.

the rhythm of a phrase had to be the action itself, giving a literal reference to the original sound image. Mallarmé's text was intended to come closer to a musical score. He writes:

This copied distance which mentally separates groups of words or words between themselves, seems to be now to speed along and now again to slow down the motion, scanning it, even imitating it according to some simultaneous version of the Page. From this naked use of thought, retreating, prolonging, fleeing, or from its very design, there results for the person reading it aloud, a musical score (Mallarmé 1982: 105-6).

Deleuze and Guattari intended their work to have a circular form (but remember, “just for laughs!” as they stated). They affirmed that they were unable to achieve such an envisaged rhizomatic book³. Their book was meant as a rhizome, composed of plateaus, thought of as the ‘weed between the grass’. It is worth noting that my text is less a questioning of form or a regurgitating of the French rhizomatic book idea – an attempt to disseminate or disperse a unity – but more so, it is a weaving together of individual threads by each of the authors and indeed a way of re-connecting and possibly re-aligning, or even re-appropriating, these threads under my fingertips.

³ As a model of ‘real’ rhizomatic writing they offer the reader Armand Farrachi’s book on the Fourth Crusade ‘La dislocation’ (1974), where sentences are spaced out and dispersed as well as ‘The Diaries of Franz Kafka’ (Brod 1948).



Weaving in progress. Artist and Tapestry Weaver Ingrid Parker Heil

Responsibility

With this in mind I will let the main thread of this book become interwoven with one of the lateral threads – the writings of Marcel Cobussen. In this excellent text entitled ‘Steps to an Ecology of Improvisation’ Cobussen digs into the reading of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Cobussen repositions improvisation not as a separable part of musicking next to composing, performing, mixing or recording; but rather, he argues that there is no musicking without some improvisation. In Cobussen’s words, ‘acts of musical improvisation cannot be restricted to playing improvised music’. He elucidates his argument by asking not what improvisation is but how it works. In this process of shifting the focus towards context, away from the content or from specific definitions, Cobussen is able to point to the dynamic interplay of sounds, space, technology, history and the people engaging in improvisation. Cobussen’s work examines the complex relationships and activities that improvisation entails, arguing that improvisation includes many other layers other than those of the human performers themselves, given that it also involves listeners, technologies, spaces and the entire socio-cultural setting. The reader will find that Cobussen acknowledges different degrees of improvisation and asks that these differences be respected.

Listening

