

Panel: Listening, Ethics, Errors

Chair: Karl Coulthard (School of English and Theater Studies, University of Guelph)

Marcel Cobussen and Henrik Frisk

Abstract

Improvisation and Ethics

In our opinion, one of the most interesting and relevant questions with regard to music is what role, function, or position it has in contemporary society. Implied in this question is the idea that music exceeds the mere aesthetic realm: it also contributes to our thinking on social, religious, economic, political, and even ethical issues.

In our presentation – a combination of text and improvised computer music – we will shed light on the relation between musical improvisation and ethics. This will be done through one of the most critical features in the process of improvisation: listening. In improvised music the ability to listen carefully is pivotal as to whether a specific musical event is picked up on and developed (or disregarded). Extraordinary aural attention is required in order to react immediately and creatively to changing musical events. In other words, the constant process of decision-making that takes place during an improvisation is for a large part based on the listening attitude of the musicians involved (Monson 43).

In contrast to Italian philosopher Gemma Corrida Fiumara, who in *The Other Side of Language* refers to listening in a passive sense, a kind of reticence, silent and reserved, musicians often regard listening in a primarily active sense, that is, as being able to respond to and participate in musical opportunities. Attentive listening to the ongoing improvisations acts as a stimulus to the other players involved in a performance, while the latter can spur the improvisers on to new inventions. (Arnold; Bailey) Listening means being able to respond to and participate in musical opportunities. 'It assumes the responsibility [the response-ability, MC] of taking its place in the interplay of desire,' Roland Barthes writes. (Barthes, 259) Improvising musicians cannot listen without taking into themselves the sounds that they hear. Their listening always operates on both sides of the active-passive or productive-receptive dichotomy. (Connor 163) Listening means participating; it is a prerequisite for any significant musical action and contribution. However, cautious and attentive listening does not guarantee complaisance. It may induce oppositional reactions as well: rejection and destruction of proposed and already launched material.

Oddly enough, listening is largely absent as a research topic in musical discourses. Because of its utmost importance in improvisation, the question

needs to be addressed as to what (attentive) listening is and how it works. Proceeding from this, the question emerges if and how listening (and thus improvising) can be related to a (poststructuralist) notion of ethics? Listening seems to refer to openness, to some kind of readiness to welcome the unknown, the uncanny, and the other. (Benson; Fiumara) This welcoming of the other and otherness is precisely that which poststructuralist philosophers are inclined to describe as an ethical relation (Derrida; Levinas; Bauman). Is improvisation (therefore) ethical?

Biographies

Marcel Cobussen studied jazz piano at the Conservatory of Rotterdam and Art and Cultural Studies at Erasmus University, Rotterdam. He currently teaches music philosophy and cultural theory at Leiden University (the Netherlands) and the Orpheus Institute in Ghent (Belgium). Cobussen is author of the book *Thresholds. Rethinking Spirituality Through Music* (Ashgate, 2008), and co-author of *Dionysos danst weer. Essays over hedendaagse muziekbeleving* (Kok Agora, 1996). He is contributing editor of two special issues of *the Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, one on music and ethics (AUP, 2002) and one on artistic research (AUP, 2007), and edited a special issue of *New Sound* on improvisation (Belgrade, 2009). His PhD dissertation *Deconstruction in Music* (2002) was presented as an online website located at www.cobussen.com.

Henrik Frisk is an active performer (saxophones and laptop) of improvised and contemporary music and composer of acoustic and computer music in Sweden and abroad. With a special interest in interactivity, most of the projects he engages in explore that topic in one way or another. Though his education from the Rhythmic Conservatory in Copenhagen, Denmark, is in music he also works with software development within the framework of his artistic practice. His artistic PhD Dissertation *Improvisation, Computers, and Interaction* was presented at Lund University, Malmö Academy of Music in October 2008. Websites: www.cobussen.com
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Patrick Boyle

Abstract

Improvisation and the Politics of Error

Negotiating error is a critical component to improvisation, and life at large. Error and failure are unfairly identified as 'surprises.' Shifting this mindset is imperative. It would involve viewing errors in the course of performance [i.e. life] as "transient flaws that will make sense as events unfold" (Weick 1995). Errors ought to be observed as experiments that will lead us to new solutions. I posit that errors may become accepted as an "inevitable property" of

improvisation, if we can reframe its aesthetic qualities and reduce some of the stigma that goes along with making them.

In this paper, I will present an original approach to jazz education that is holistic and inclusive. I contend that more responsible educational practices regarding error and improvisation will create a culture of confidence in which students should be able to:

- a) engage complex organizational problems with versatility and poise
- b) consider alternative responses during moments of extreme tension
- c) assuage fear of unknown variables, both musical and non-musical
- d) cultivate and sustain a sympathetic practice in collaborative situations.

I constantly field questions from younger improvisers that stem from preoccupations of sounding 'right' – "What is the 'right' way to swing eighth notes? Which scale will 'work' over a particular chord? Why is my time so 'bad'? Can you just write down what I'm 'supposed' to play?" I feel that students will only make meaningful creative musical statements by abandoning the need to sound 'right' all the time. In order to truly master musical improvisation, students must engage the reflexivity that exists in collaborative performance. In particular, they must acknowledge that negotiating uncertainty, whether it is manifested within themselves and their own abilities or created by the entire group over the course of performance, is the ideal situation. I will also articulate my theory that a jazz performance is essentially a reflexive argument in which performers flex the muscles of their humanity and attune themselves to many alternate points of view.

Biography

Newfoundland trumpeter **Patrick Boyle** (www.patrickboyle.ca) embodies the jazz spirit by synthesizing a range of influences into a compelling original voice. An in-demand session player never bound by genre, Patrick can be heard on over forty recordings and two critically acclaimed solo albums: "Still No Word" (2008) and "Hold Out" (2005). He has performed with Zakir Hussain, Mike Murley, Bill Frisell, Mickey Dolenz, Great Big Sea, and many others. Patrick is a doctoral student in performance at the University of Toronto and a junior fellow at Massey College. His primary research interest is investigating how improvisation can help students negotiate situations of tension and anxiety, within and without music.

Website: www.patrickboyle.ca

Roger Dean

Abstract

Erasure and Constructive Improvisation

Even in musical improvisation, in which no sound once performed can be removed from its audience, forms of erasure are important, and help retrospection to transform the impact of earlier events. In improvisatory logical

discussion directed towards social policy formation, erasure can also have utility beyond the concepts of removal and correction. OEErrors¹ are part of this process, somewhat as they are essential tools for the production and maintenance of biological diversity and evolution. Dialogic community discussion tends to emphasize only the functions of removal and correction. But in improvisatory transaction even within language, reinterpretation, novel juxtaposition and other processes can enliven the impact of earlier thoughts that no longer appear at the verbal surface of a document or discourse. I will discuss such improvisatory erasure in the context of exploratory and generative models for the creation of ideas.

Biography

Roger Dean is a composer/improviser, and a research professor in music cognition and computation at the MARCS Auditory Laboratories, University of Western Sydney. He founded and directs the ensemble *austraLYSIS*. His creative work is on thirty commercial audio cds, and he has released many digital intermedia pieces. His 400 research publications include seven humanities books. Previously he was CEO of the Heart Research Institute, Sydney and then vicechancellor and president of the University of Canberra. Website: marcs.uws.edu.au/?q=people/professor-roger-dean
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