

Peter Johnston: Teaching Improvisation and the Pedagogical History of the Jimmy Giuffre 3

The growth of interest in jazz in university music departments has required instructors and administrators to develop strategies for teaching improvisation that are distinct from the text-based methodologies that dominate Eurocentric music pedagogy. As the formal jazz curriculum at universities has mirrored that of the European music tradition in becoming classicized around particular histories, repertoires, and performance practices, it is increasingly necessary to revisit our approaches to music pedagogy to account for how the institutions that support the musical trades – such as symphony orchestras and jazz clubs – are disappearing at an accelerating rate. In this paper I will argue that if students are encouraged to develop, in George Lewis’s words, their “own musical material and lexicon,” we can begin to connect music education to deeper social issues by helping them to self-identify as producers of culture, rather than as consumers and copyists of existing art forms, or as skilled tradespeople.

Maud Hickey offers an insightful argument for reevaluating how improvisation is taught in an article for the *International Journal Of Music Education* titled: “Can improvisation be ‘taught’?: A call for free improvisation in our schools.” Hickey argues that, “...the music education community’s current drive to include improvisation in school music is limited in its approach,” and that currently dominant teaching strategies inhibit students’ “creative musical growth.” She goes on to assert that improvisation cannot be taught; rather, it is “a disposition to be enabled and nurtured.” Hickey’s article is based on research into improvisation pedagogy at the level of early childhood education, but many of her observations are relevant to a critique of institutions of

higher learning, which is where I will direct my attention. Rather than directly answering the question in her title, Hickey concludes her article with a recommendation for further research to address gaps in improvisation pedagogy:

[We] need to collect pedagogical histories of the masters in the field in order to learn more about how they learned. ... Information gleaned from these studies should be made useable by current school music teachers.

Building on important ethnographic work by George Lewis, Paul Berliner, Eddie Prévost, Ingrid Monson, David Borgo and others, I will present my research into the rehearsal methods of the Jimmy Giuffre 3 – an under-documented, yet influential American jazz ensemble – as a specific example of masters in the field whose pedagogical histories offer a model that educators can use to nurture and enable the disposition to improvise.

On Giuffre

Jimmy Giuffre led several groups under the name The Jimmy Giuffre 3 throughout his career. My focus here is on Giuffre's trio with pianist Paul Bley and bassist Steve Swallow, which was his primary musical project from 1960 to 1962. In direct response to the pioneering work of Ornette Coleman, Giuffre, Bley, and Swallow participated in the avant-garde jazz scene in New York City, which was populated by musicians who were concerned with finding ways to structure improvised performances that avoided the compositional forms, harmonic progressions, rhythmic schemes, and melodic structures that typified jazz of the late 1950s.

My interest in the Giuffre 3 as a case study for improvisation pedagogy began with reading Steve Swallow's liner notes for the CD reissue of *Free Fall*, the trio's final album. Swallow wrote:

From the moment we came together, the trio rehearsed several times a week, long and hard. ... We set about to subject all the unconscious, given assumptions in the music we played to stern scrutiny and reevaluation. ... We spent as much time talking as playing at our rehearsals, asking such questions as: How can we play at a given rate of speed, but without a fixed tempo? For how long is it possible to improvise without reference to a tonic pitch? What's the longest unbroken melody we can play?

The revelation that this ensemble developed a systematic method of practicing ensemble improvisation was intriguing, given the dominant conception of free improvisation as spontaneous, "...personalized, creative expression." In addition, much recent scholarly work on improvisation revolves around the political and social implications of improvised music, largely due to the important connections between free jazz and the civil rights movement in the US in the 1950s and 1960s. Understanding the political context for free jazz is crucial, yet the academic discourse tends to obscure the particular musical materials that early free improvisers developed in their search for alternative methods of music making. Swallow's comments point towards the possibility of a material analysis of free improvisation through a detailed investigation of the Jimmy Giuffre 3's rehearsal practices. Such an analysis could begin to address the significant gaps in jazz education around post-bebop and ensemble improvisatory practices. For this project I arranged telephone interviews with Swallow and Paul Bley; Jimmy Giuffre had unfortunately lost the ability to speak due to Parkinson's disease in the decade preceding this research project, so I did not have the opportunity to interview him before his death.

The Practice

The pedagogical strategies that may be derived from the Jimmy Giuffre 3's rehearsal techniques hinge critically on the understanding that the trio intended them as

experiments for refining their “musical ears” and ability to interact with each other. Their rehearsal techniques were therefore not expected to generate coherent musical performances in the manner of indeterminate compositions, conducted improvisations, or theatre improv games; instead, their playing in rehearsal was intentionally removed from the frame of performance to allow them to focus on solving particular musical problems that, in Steve Swallow’s words, “were there and demanding solutions.”

Paul Bley described the trio’s rehearsal techniques as being based on “premises for improvising.” This phrase refers to the treatment of “high-level aspects of musical gesture, interaction, and form” as materials for manipulation, as opposed to restricting oneself to fixed systems of sonic organization like predetermined compositional forms, the Western tonal system, or a steady rhythmic pulse. Bley provided details on this concept:

If you sense the band has roots all the way to the beginning of early jazz, when the band plays you can use these indications as premises for improvising. For example, the blues can be a premise. You don’t need a particular piece, a key, or even to have twelve bars – you just need agreement on the premise, which leads the band to a certain feeling. A piece isn’t a blues because it has so many bars or the usual progression, but because it has the right feeling, and this feeling is what you are really talking about in improvised music. The liberties you want to take with the basic premise are up to you.

An equally important idea that determined their approach was Giuffre’s notion that the instruments in the trio be “equal voiced, where everybody has exactly one-third of the responsibility,” rather than being limited to the conventional soloist and accompaniment roles of traditional jazz. With these ideas as an operational framework, the Giuffre 3 examined basic musical elements and constructed exercises to search, in Swallow’s words, for “musical possibilities that we didn’t know existed before.” I have

chosen three particular musical exercises based on the premises of tonality, pulse, and counterpoint to illustrate the Giuffre 3's approach to learning to improvise together.

For the first example, Steve Swallow recalled that tonality was a recurring topic of debate, and described how exploring this premise presented him with specific challenges:

The issue of whether what we were playing was tonal or not was forever alive, and there seemed to be endless possibilities that were worthy of discussion and playing about. We spent a lot of time talking about whether or not reference to a root note, to tonality, was inevitable – was it possible and/or desirable to play without reference to tonality at all? As a bass player I had a strong vested interest in roots, but Jimmy would throw down the gauntlet and say something like: “Stop seeing that thing you’re playing as a bass. Now, let’s play for ten minutes, and you’re not the bass at any time during those ten minutes.” So we’d do it, and I would get frustrated and say something like, “I can’t help it, I’m the lowest guy. When I play a note I hear what’s going on on top of it, and if I sense that if I moved a half step down I would cause a V-I resolution to happen then it’s virtually impossible for me not to do it.” And Jimmy would simply say, “Well, don’t do it next time and see what happens.”

Swallow's efforts to resist his tendency to resolve notes according to tonal conventions ultimately led to the tonally ambiguous performances featured on the trio's recordings, and, perhaps just as importantly, to the bass assuming a more interactive role in their music than it does in standard jazz ensembles.

The trio had similar ideas about manipulating musical time, and conducted a purposeful deconstruction of the regular pulse that characterizes most jazz. Bley described their intentions with this premise:

The three of us had all played a lot of music with a steady pulse. When we started to work together we played a lot of free music without any pulse at all, and also a lot of music that went from pulse to no pulse and back... One was not better than the other. The trick is to have the flexibility to do what you want, when you want.

Swallow provided detail on how they worked collectively towards this ideal of rhythmic flexibility:

We'd spend hours talking about how if you're not going to play with a fixed pulse, how many gradations of tempo can we conceive of and execute? Is there a tempo that exists between medium and fast, or medium and slow? Can you have very slow? Then can you split those in half? In addition to the question of whether or not we can play without reference to a fixed pulse, the question arose: can we each play a distinct pulse so that there are three clear pulses going on at the same time, without stumbling as we listen to each others' pulse? That would be several days' worth of work.

In treating time in this way the Giuffre 3 elevated pulse to the level of the primary elements of variation in jazz improvisation – melody, harmony, and rhythm – and thus opened up a range of new musical possibilities.

One more example demonstrates how the Giuffre 3 worked towards developing the kind of collective, shared knowledge that might be called 'ensemble musicianship.' Steve Swallow described an exercise they developed to explore how the registers of their three instruments influenced their interactions:

As an exercise we would very consciously play in the same register, all of us clustered around middle C for ten or fifteen minutes. That would be the only given. Then we would stop and do the opposite. Paul would play as far above Jimmy as he could and I would play as far below Jimmy as I could, and we would observe the effect of the three voices being separated by as much air as possible. And that would indicate to us that it was a lot easier to hear the music as counterpoint when there was separation between the voices. When we played right on top of each other it tended to sound like clusters and it was more difficult to distinguish the individual voices. Again, we'd ask the question: "Is counterpoint essentially more valuable than the other stuff?" The answer would be no, that each musical approach would have its place, and we now had a better understanding of how our instruments could work together.

This exercise demonstrates how even a physically fixed premise, such as the ranges of the instruments in an ensemble, can be unpacked to reveal internalized musical conventions; once opened up for close analysis these conventions can be deconstructed

towards developing an individual and collective “lexicon” based on the participants’ experiences as they experiment with various premises.

Conclusion

Steve Swallow positioned this work as an extension of the jazz tradition, stressing that the trio used the materials and relationships they had internalized through studying jazz as points of departure for expanding that tradition. Yet these recollections reveal a critical thought process that can be productively applied to diverse musical formations, including jazz, classical, popular, and non-European musics, to arrive at vastly different musical discoveries than those documented on the trio’s recordings. The possibilities of the thought process outlined here aligns with Edward Sarath’s notion of “trans-stylistic improvisation;” Sarath writes that, “the trans-stylistic approach is not intended to replace style-specific engagement but to lay groundwork that enables musicians to move freely between both worlds.” The Giuffre 3’s rehearsal techniques thus offer a supplemental process that can aid students in making the necessary connections between the skills they acquire through conventional methods and the next step of creating music that reflects the aesthetic and political ideals of the people making it.

The Jimmy Giuffre 3’s recordings are over five decades old, so rather than pointing towards an entirely new approach to free improvisation, this analysis of their rehearsal methods illuminates the need for an epistemological shift in the discourse of improvisation pedagogy to account for persistent gaps in currently dominant teaching methods. Two key points emerged from my research: the importance of collective experimentation to developing musical knowledge, and the need to recognize that free improvisation, which is discursively reduced to being about emotional and political

expression, is also a rigorous, thoughtful, and material-based musical practice. As such it merits the same kind of disciplined engagement that is applied to the more easily codified harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic elements of bebop jazz. Bley's and Swallow's descriptions of the Giuffre 3's rehearsal methods offer an important historical link between the harmony- and composition-based learning strategies comprehensively documented by Paul Berliner and Ingrid Monson, and the practice of free improvisation as described by Derek Bailey and Eddie Prévost.

The insights gained from analyzing the rehearsal practices of the Jimmy Giuffre 3 will not be new to experienced improvisers, for they already know that free improvisation requires discipline, practice, and critical thinking, and will likely be familiar with the substantial recorded history of the music. But it is hoped that the remembrances of these creative musicians will offer an entryway into free improvisation for educators and students who have been either resistant to this part of the jazz tradition, or simply unsure of where to start exploring collectively improvised music making. Taking the longer view, if we as educators can foster situations where students are compelled to find their own solutions to musical problems, then they might begin to mobilize the resulting sense of agency in other parts of their lives to deal with the inequalities and injustices of contemporary society that artistic activity alone cannot adequately address.