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**A Call for All Outlaws: Improvising Musicians and the Problems with Social Justice**

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Improvisation is primarily associated with the performing arts, yet recent research has begun to look for it in other areas, such as the legal system, public policy, and sports.

This trend towards broadening our understanding of what improvisation is and what it can do makes it necessary to contextualize our discussions about it through addressing the materials, assumptions, and social structures that mediate the activities which we might claim to be improvised. The specific area I will attend to here is the music scene that emerged in London, England in the mid 1960s around the practice of performing without pre-determined structures; i.e. notated compositions, song forms, scales, and rhythmic cycles. This sociomusical domain, which I will refer to as improvised music, is rooted in free jazz, the American experimental tradition, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century European avant-garde.

Improvised music occupies a complicated position in Western culture. It is at once representative of basic human music-making relationships and a site of intricate negotiations between subjects living within a complex socioeconomic system. At the structural level, improvised music shares much with other musical formations, including performance conventions (public concerts, set lengths, a seated and listening audience), documentation (recordings, magazines, books), and infrastructure (venues, record labels, festivals, record shops), yet it is discursively constructed as a kind of alternate reality, a practice that resists social, political, and musical orthodoxies and

proposes positive alternatives. In a related manoeuvre, the improviser tends to be positioned as a cultural outlaw, or a trickster/shaman figure, who through their music can illuminate the systems of repression perpetuated by corporate popular culture and inspire us to construct a more equalitarian world. I argue that these assumptions about the transgressive powers of improvisation over-determine the discourse of improvised music. Although improvised music does involve community building and can propose alternative social models, improvisation in music is also about the manipulation of known sonic codes, and the struggle between musical subjects for the resources to pursue their aesthetic priorities. To illustrate, I'll begin my analysis with a comment by David Sterrit:

[Claims for the] allegedly inherent traits of improvisation – authenticity, spontaneity, individuality – are often exaggerated or misrepresented by its advocates. To make the latter assertion is not to deny in any way that improvisation is a longstanding and productive form of creativity in jazz. It is only to note how apprehensions over authenticity, spontaneity, and individuality in music have encouraged the discursive manoeuvre of emphasizing certain idealized virtues of improvisation even as improvisatory practice draws on techniques of preparation and pre-conceptualization that were developed before such apprehensions ever had reason to take root.

Although a specific reference to jazz, Sterrit's questioning of how much political work we can expect improvisation to do is relevant to my research, given the material history which grounds the practice of free improvisation. This paper draws on my experience conducting fieldwork in the improvised music scene in London to explore the dissonances that arise when, in the words of Peter Martin, we allow "philosophical speculation about the potential significations [of improvisation] for hypothetical 'subjects'" to drift too far from an understanding of how we "use music in real

situations". The disconnect between the political potential ascribed to improvisation and the material reality experienced by improvisers is obscured by the way improvisation is continually positioned as a positive and necessary resistance to the presumed prioritization of repressive forms of scripted/repetitive behaviour in Western culture. Yet improvised music arises out of a particular socioeconomic context and tradition of sonic materials in the same way that other musics do, and improvisers must negotiate with the opportunities and constraints of our current system of social organization in order to produce their creative work. To address the interconnections between social practices and the discursive framework of improvised music I will use sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of fields, a term he developed to describe the dynamic socioeconomic relationships and institutional infrastructure that revolve around particular modes of artistic production. Bourdieu's concept is founded on the basic Marxist notion that the products and practices we associate with art are mediated by the free market economy. Within this context, smaller micro-economies arise around the production of specific art forms. Bourdieu describes an artistic field as: "an independent universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated, and so forth... [An artistic field] is neither a vague social background nor even an artistic milieu, but a place of entirely specific struggles, notably concerning the question of knowing who is part of the universe, who is a real artist and who is not." Using Bourdieu's terms, we can read music as a sociocultural domain with a common set of structures – by which I mean venues, record labels, media publications, educational institutions – that are divided along aesthetic lines. An

independent musical field is formed when a critical mass of people engage in struggle over a distinct set of values and objects. Although the exact boundaries of a field are impossible to draw, a field is loosely defined through a kind of general awareness amongst those inside and outside the field that a recognizable collection of agents, social structures, institutions, and common practices interact to generate musical products of a specific type. The improvised music field arose in the 1960s out of the jazz and avant-garde art music fields, as a discrete set of practitioners and support structures developed in Europe and North America around the concept of free improvisation. As in other music fields, the specific struggles in the improvised music field occur over performance and recording opportunities, or, more generally, over the pursuit of situations where one can “make a name for oneself”, and maybe a few dollars besides. Improvised music is clearly aesthetically different from other musics, but socially it shares with other cultural forms an over-determination by, in the words of Simon Frith, the “nineteenth-century industrialization of culture” and the related conception of “music as a commodity”. Therefore, the shape of the improvised music field is mediated by the prioritization of public performance as the main location for the practice of improvised music; yet improvisers face a constant challenge given that improvised music as it is currently practiced is based on a negative relation to the materials of popular music.

As an example of the way the discursive framework of free improvisation conflicts with the demands of the dominant social structures, it became clear soon after my arrival in London that that there were long-standing divisions in the improvised

music scene, as improvisers worked with some players rather than others, venues and record labels supported particular musical aesthetics, and some musicians had more and better performance opportunities than others. We expect these kinds of divisions in other music scenes, but the much of the rhetoric around improvisation positions it as functioning outside of the repressive structures and exploitive relationships of mainstream culture. This is not to say that improvised music does not possess the virtues and transformative potential we might wish to ascribe to it, only that it is necessarily embedded in, and mediated by, the discourses and structures that determine how music in general is produced and consumed in contemporary Western culture.

Looked at from the dominating rather than the dominated position, certain public institutions, music festivals, venues, record labels and publications have the power to grant both symbolic and economic capital to musicians, as they offer prestige by association, which may in turn be converted into increased performance opportunities. This situation, in conjunction with the government system of arts funding, places musicians in competition with each other for capital. As an improviser living and working in Toronto, I deal with this situation all the time, as I am constantly sending out examples of my work to be adjudicated by festival organizers and government arts funding agencies in an attempt to secure a modicum of financing to continue my musical activities. This situation mirrors George Lewis's sociological assessment of the position of improviser: "Working as an improviser in the field of improvised music emphasizes not only form and technique but individual life choices as well as cultural, ethnic, and personal location". I clearly make particular life choices

to enable my participation in the improvised music field, as recently I have focused more of my time and energy into my work in the academy than I have on playing the bass. Other improvisers make similar decisions to support their musical imperatives, such as taking on the commercial work conventionally associated with being a “professional” musician, or working jobs outside of the music field entirely. The constraints of the dominant field of power thus continually infringe upon the political and musical ideals of improvisers, so that it become necessary to think about the improvised music field as a diverse constellation of members and institutions that struggle for the scant resources that allow for the continued production of improvised music.

In the same way that improvised music arises out of particular social contexts, it is part of a larger tradition of modernism in music. The noisy, dissonant sound of improvised music is determined in part by its relation to its formative influences of jazz, avant-garde classical music, and various world musics, but perhaps most significantly by its continuing dialectical relationship with popular music. The sonic manifestation of improvised music is shaped by what Georgina Born calls the “discursive ‘laws’ of avant-garde culture”, as improvisers base their activities on self-consciously avoiding the “harmonic and rhythmic structures” of conventional music forms. Although the deconstructive musical practices that the early improvisers developed in London did help build a distinct field of cultural production, they did not create a universal music that exists outside of discourse and historical context. Their music follows a discernable pattern of influence and operates with a particular reliance on the relative concept of

dissonance, and thus clearly fits within a material tradition of musical modernism. Modernism, as it relates to improvised music, manifested in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe in the music of composers such as Schoenberg and Webern, who pushed against the boundaries of the tonal system, and in the mid-twentieth with the music of African American jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk, whose harmonic, rhythmic, and social innovations helped to establish a conception of improvisation as high art. Over the last fifty years other influences have come to bear on the idea of free improvisation, yet improvisers still base their practice on the avoidance of the tonal resolutions, narrative structures, rhythmic patterns, and timbral conventions of Western popular music. This basic practice of working with the available sounds left over following the exclusion of the materials that are familiar to the average “musical subject” in Western society means that we are left with a recognizable sound world that has come to signify “improvised music”.

Guitarist and writer Derek Bailey theorized about this inevitable ossification of free improvisation, and wrote that in 1974 he had the “suspicion that freely improvised music as an identifiable separate music was finished. Like some early 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘ism’, I vaguely felt, it had run its course and would probably continue to exist, if at all, only as some kind of generalised influence.” I encountered an example of Bailey’s prediction in a recent review in Coda Magazine of Toronto guitarist Don Scott’s CD *Out Of Line*; the reviewer writes: “Scott’s music has much free improv in it, although there is also a feel for innate structure, harmonic foundations, and even jumpy post-bop”. In this instance, one can imagine that the reviewer hears moments on Scott’s CD that do not

have a discernable structure, do not groove, have large leaps between notes, and some scratchy, unpitched noises from the various acoustic instruments. It makes sense that these conventions have been incorporated into other musics to signify an avant-garde aesthetic, but the distinguishing feature of improvised music, at least as it is practiced by most of the musicians in my study, is the prioritization of these kinds of sounds as the main material foundation for their performances. Yet of course improvisers' focus on materials and processes that subvert the dominant conventions of popular music have resulted in a set of codes that musicians working in other areas can insert into their music.

The modernist ethic of avoiding the materials of popular music means that the improvised music field, as a social entity, has become limited to those who have developed the rather rarefied cultural competency to decipher and find meaning within the sonic codes employed by improvisers. I am not suggesting that a listener who is unfamiliar with improvised music cannot have a meaningful experience upon hearing it for the first time, as such experiences surely do happen. But the improvised music field is sufficiently marginalized from mainstream musics that it is now unlikely that one would arrive at an improvised music show without knowing what to expect. The fundamental restructuring of the field away from the formative infrastructures of the jazz and classical music fields took place over four decades ago, meaning that the force, scale, and pace of confronting orthodoxy has been reduced since the first generation of improvisers presented their music to an audience that might not have been expecting it. So it is possible that we are past the moment where improvised music is capable of



disrupting the dominant fields of cultural production in any substantial way. Instead, improvisers have developed their own structures and scenes, and continue to make their music with the support of a small group of listeners. In making such a gloomy statement I do not propose that contemporary improvised music, or the other musics that incorporate the signifying materials of improvisation, are being made in bad faith in terms of the basic modernist and ethical principles which underlie the idea of free improvisation, only that in the current moment improvisers wishing to innovate, transgress the norm, or establish alternative identities have a considerable weight of conventions and expectations working against these intentions. Despite the grand narrative of innovation, experimentation, and rupture that pervades the practice of improvised music, the day-to-day reality of the improvised music field is characterized by small-scale change and local, subjective transformations for improvisers and listeners. Our reading of improvised music needs to take into account the social situation and material tradition that informs the practices of musicians if we are going to continue to look for the ways in which improvisation might “advance the future of music” and propose “alternative social arrangements” to those that have already formed around the production and consumption of music.

To conclude, this interpretation of the diminishing returns of modernist improvised music is not new - Adorno made similar pessimistic claims about the avant-garde classical music that was of interest to him. But according to Paul Hegarty, Adorno left a small opening to allow for the possibility of agency within the dominating structures of contemporary society. Hegarty writes:

While I do not think genre, style, category can be suspended except very fleetingly, the attempt is still worthwhile, and if, as Adorno suggests, the attempt is all we can have, then the attempt is the highest form of freedom to be aspired to, and must be maintained as an aim.

With this, I come back around to the problematic discursive framework of improvisation I started with. Despite all of the constraints, restrictions, and conventions I have attempted to point out that mediate the manifestation of improvised music in Western society, an ever-growing number of improvisers are motivated by basic assumptions around the value of connecting to other musical subjects through the manipulation of sonic codes, despite the difficult life choices we must make to continue producing improvised music.