

Peter Johnston 2010

Ryerson Music Series: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Today I will be discussing my research into the practice and discourse of free improvisation. The particular musical practices that are of interest to me arose in post-World War II England, where a group of musicians used the concept of improvisation to develop musical identities that were something other than imitations of the African-American jazz musicians through whom they had initially encountered improvisation in music. These practices have since become a dominant component of the sonic code that signifies free improvisation in Europe and North America. The focus of my recent research has been on exploring what the concept of improvisation does for those who claim it as their primary generative process, and on situating the practice of free improvisation – which continues to be discursively framed as avant-garde – within a social and historical context by asking how, or indeed if, it has changed over the approximately 50 years that it has been an identifiable musical activity. My methodology for asking these questions has involved a combination of observing performances of freely improvised music, conducting interviews with those who identify as improvisers, reading relevant literature on the subject from a variety of disciplines, and documenting my own experiences as an improviser. This presentation will introduce some of the main ideas I investigate in my recently completed dissertation, including a sonic archaeology of the practice of free improvisation as it developed in London, an analysis of the position of improvised music within the dominant socio-economic structures that regulate cultural production, and an exploration of what I will call, following American sociologist Howard Becker, the

“social aging” of an experimental ethos and performance practice. This last point follows from influential English guitarist Derek Bailey’s provocative statement in 1980 that by 1974 free improvisation “had run its course and would probably continue to exist, if at all, only as some kind of generalised influence”. It clearly does still exist, but what kind of an influence does it have, or can it have, on contemporary musical and social practices? I can’t answer this question precisely, but I hope today to illuminate some of the issues that currently animate discussions of improvisation between scholars and musicians, which will hopefully lead to a productive ensemble improvisation at the end of my introductory solo set.

I

I will start with some background to the musical tradition that I will be discussing. The concept of improvisation emerged in the twentieth century as a determining influence on musical and cultural production in Europe and North America. Improvised musical forms persisted in European folk music alongside the production of notated sacred and art music compositions in the 18th and 19th centuries, but the practice of improvising performances, as described in contemporary accounts of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, was abandoned by subsequent generations of European composers and performers. As the ability to improvise cadenzas, fugues, and other forms became less important to European musicians, the aesthetic distinctions between composition and improvisation, and the related social divisions between the positions of composer and performer, became increasingly reified. Improvisation reappeared in Western musical discourse in a substantive way in the early twentieth century with the production of recordings of

African-American musics. The distribution of these and other recordings of non-European music led some European and American musicians to an active re-engagement with the concept of improvisation. This shift resulted in the emergence in the 1960s of a group of musicians who self-identified as improvisers, and the establishment of musical practices that prioritized spontaneous invention over the use of pre-determined musical structures, such as notated or internalized compositions, traditional song forms, harmonic schemes, scales, or rhythmic cycles. Despite its growing visibility as an area of scholarly inquiry in Western musical culture, improvisation remains a marginalized other in relation to institutionalized notions of the composed, the scripted, and the traditional; in other words, improvisation is discursively constructed by both advocates and detractors as existing outside of legitimate Western culture. My dissertation, from which the following ideas about improvisation are derived, is a practice-based discursive analysis of free improvisation as it has developed within this cultural framework, based on ethnographic data I collected from musicians who claim “improvisation as the aesthetic priority of their creative lives.”

The majority of the ethnographic research that forms the foundation of my dissertation was conducted from September 2006 to July 2007, during which time I had the good fortune to live in downtown London. I chose to focus my research on the London music scene because the musical techniques, philosophies, and general ethos of improvisation generated by London-based musicians have had a considerable influence on the establishment and character of what is now a global field of musical practice.

This influence extends to Toronto, where since the late 1960s a relatively consistent number of musicians have engaged with the operative concept of free improvisation in the generation of noisy, dissonant, and decidedly non-popular music. During my fieldwork in London I specifically focused on the practices and ideas which emerged in the mid to late 1960s in the work of, among others, the groups Spontaneous Music Ensemble and AMM. The experiments conducted by these English musicians took place on the fringes of the jazz and art school scenes, and followed on earlier developments in North America in the music of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Jimmy Giuffre, Albert Ayler, and others associated with the label “free jazz.” Since this formative period in the middle of the twentieth century, the practice of making music without pre-determined structures has solidified into a distinct domain of musical practice that is variously known as free improvisation, creative music, improv, and non-idiomatic improvisation (among many other names). For the sake of convenience I will refer to the specific music I have been investigating as “London improv”, and use the term “free improvisation” to describe the general activity of making music without the compositional structures mentioned above.

Improvised music in London—in around the world—is far from a monolithic aesthetic formation, as there are many distinct and different sub-scenes that are aligned around the concept of free improvisation. There is no clearly defined “London sound” that characterizes improvised music made in that city, and even within the small sample of improvisers I spoke with there are radically different approaches to music-making. For the purposes of my study, I focused on a shared prioritization of the idea of

free improvisation as the unifying element between the performances I attended and the potential interview subjects I approached. That said, the particular musical practices I am interested in are based on certain fundamental assumptions that regulate the creative actions of the improvisers I interviewed. Specifically, the practices I followed in London (and indeed here at home) are primarily defined by musicians' resistance to the use of pre-determined compositional frameworks and avoidance of the basic sonic materials that are familiar to the average musical subject in Western society. Examples of these elements include: the twelve note tonal system, narrative and cyclical forms, the presence of a steady temporal pulse, repetitive rhythmic patterns, recurring chord progressions based on triadic harmony, and a relatively narrow range of timbres from individual instruments. There is considerable variation within these basic parameters in Western music – including Beethoven's symphonies, Irish reels, lullabies, electric blues-rock, bossa nova, and mariachi music, among many others – but these diverse forms are unified by the larger narrative of tonality and the use of a regular rhythmic pulse; or the sounds that signify "music" to the majority of people socialized in Western society. Based on my observations, I argue that the practice of free improvisation as it has developed in London and beyond over the last five decades is contingent on how subjects relate to and resist these basic parameters of sonic organization.

To give some sonic context for the rest of this discussion I will play a series of excerpts from the London improvised music scene that are illustrative of the basic deconstructionist ethos of London improv – forty years of music in two minutes. In order, these examples are: Spontaneous Music Ensemble from 1974, AMM from 1982,

bassist Barre Phillips solo from 1968, Steve Noble, Alan Wilkinson and John Edwards from 2009, and the reductionist ensemble The Sealed Knot from 2006. **Play Audio.**

I came to this research primarily as a musician, and I undertook this project out of a desire to explore the history and social context of the sonic materials that I use in my ongoing practice as an improvising bassist. My musical background is in jazz and Western popular music, and I have worked professionally in a wide variety of musical contexts for the past fifteen years. But my creative priority for the past decade has been making music that is primarily improvised, in both regular groups and ad hoc encounters with other improvisers. Thus my original intention for this research was practical in nature: I wanted to understand the sonic materials used in London improv in order to improve and expand my own playing. During my fieldwork in the London improvised music field, however, my focus expanded to include a sociological component, as it became clear that an analysis of the contested assumptions, aesthetics ideals, and social conventions that determine the production of freely improvised music is a necessary corollary to understanding the sonic content of London improv. This broadening of my research priorities was guided in fundamental ways by my own practice as an improviser, for rather than attempting to develop a comprehensive analysis of London improv I followed sounds and ideas that resonated with my experiences playing and listening to improvised music. My interpretations of the practice and discourse of free improvisation are thus largely subjective, but I think that this subjectivity can reveal something useful about how certain ideas and musical

practices have travelled from a specific social and historical context to become part of the larger code that signifies free improvisation.

II

The music I studied in London occupies a complicated position in Western musical discourse, as free improvisation is at once representative of basic human music-making practices and a site of intricate negotiations between subjects living within a complex socioeconomic system. At the structural level improvised music as it is currently practiced 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 in some recent academic writing on the subject improvisation is discursively constructed as a practice that is inherently resistant to social, political, and musical orthodoxies, and that through its application to various kinds of interpersonal interactions can be used to model positive alternatives to inequitable social structures.

When I began reading for this project, I immediately felt that my experience as a musician revealed a gap between theoretical interpretations about the political potentials of free improvisation and the day-to-day experiences of life as a musician. As an example of this trend towards the theoretical in the study of improvisation I will quote Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin, who, through their work as academics and organizers of the Guelph Jazz Festival and Colloquium, are largely responsible for the

resurgent interest in the study of improvisation, and the resulting formation of

Improvisation Studies as a disciplinary field:

[Improvisation] is less about original acts of individual self-creation (itself a sort of originary orthodoxy about improvisatory practice) than about an ongoing process of community building, about reinvigorating public life with the spirit of dialogue and difference that improvisatory practices consistently gesture towards, even when at their most extreme they may appear to be doing exactly the opposite. (Fischlin and Heble 2004, 17)

Although I admire the great work that these scholars have done on behalf of improvisers, I question this framing of improvisation as being about community building, dialogue, and difference, for it reveals a kind of top-down conception of improvisation. Specifically, this interpretation positions improvisation as an activity that is removed from the particular practices and political ideals of social actors who are working within specific social and musical contexts. To put this another way, these ideas seem at odds with my experience of improvisers as subjects who must constantly struggle in a hostile economic environment to pursue their creative priorities, who self-consciously resist the materials and musical relationships that might include more members of the community, and who work within a scene that, although it is relatively self-sustaining, appears to have achieved a critical mass of interested listeners. My difficulty with this optimistic framing stems from my discussions with London improvisers, in which the most common themes revolved around the manipulation of sonic materials and the perpetual struggle to secure performance opportunities and the financial resources to continue their creative work. Based on these discussions, I argue that the musical practices that have come to be coded as free improvisation are more

closely aligned with a modernist ethos of negation, experimentation, and deconstruction than they are with a humanistic idea of inclusion and public dialog.

To clarify what I mean by this assertion, I will bring in a few quotes from my interviews. The first is from London-based percussionist Eddie Prévost, who has spent the last forty-five years performing improvised music exclusively. Prévost provides a concise summation of the thought process that underlies the musical practices of many improvisers:

[The improviser] must be prepared to jettison all sound-source material which bourgeois dominated culture refers to as musical, if attachment to these systems of music and their attendant philosophies is to be severed. Particular scales and pitch values will have to be abandoned. New systems and styles will emerge, bound to the needs of the moment, propelled by human ingenuity. [It's] just about impossible to bring some kind of pre-existing formulation to improvised performance – jazz, flamenco, or fiddle music, for example. It doesn't work. You have to relinquish all your anticipations about what music is in order to participate with people who may be coming from a different place.

English Bassist John Edwards employed a similar rhetorical manoeuvre in a comparison of the improvised music made in England and that made by improvisers in the Netherlands:

The Dutch thing seems to be more about them living in a socialist country and playing jazz with lots of humour thrown in. The British thing is about reducing it all down so we can really hear each other.

As a final example, a similar sense of negation is implied in Derek Bailey's much debated descriptor "non-idiomatic" improvisation. I don't wish to go too far into deconstructing this controversial term at this point; I bring it up only as an illustration of the basic ethos of exclusion that is fundamental to the musical practices of certain London improvisers. This ethos has resulted in a scene in which improvisers complain

about the lack of recognition and funding they get for their work, yet wilfully alienate themselves from funding bodies and the wider community of listeners by consistently avoiding any sonic materials that might imply “bourgeois dominated culture.”

London improv has remained marginalized, even as we get farther away from the originary break with jazz and classical music that took place in the 1960s. That said, the sound of free improvisation has become an increasingly known commodity as it has accrued sonic codes and performance conventions, so in our current moment it is at once more easily dismissed as an elitist musical form, able to be co-opted as an effect to signal experimentation, and less attractive to contemporary artists and listeners who are looking to make a radical intervention into culture. Such a situation problematizes the notion that improvisation is inherently inclusive and disruptive to cultural orthodoxy. London improv still sounds “out” in relation to conventional Western musics, but as it ages our ideas about what constitutes “free improvisation” have become more standardized, thus shifting the relationship between music that is claimed to be freely improvised and the other musics (which Bailey would call idiomatic) that improvisers explicitly define their practices against.

These thoughts have led me to pursue a bottom-up research methodology, which has involved asking questions about what kinds of structures and social practices have emerged out of the activities of musical subjects who orientate themselves around particular modes of artistic production. Put another way, perhaps it is not improvisation specifically that has built the community of interest that I am investigating, but a more general process of social organization that occurs around any

points of common interest. As the point of common interest in my work is the idea of improvisation, the interesting question for me becomes not what the practice of improvisation *can* do to improve society, but what it is that improvisation already does for those who currently claim it as their practice. In following this particular line of inquiry I am taking a note from English sociologist Peter Martin, who warns of the dangers present when researchers 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.”

So what does improvisation do for the specific improvisers I spoke with? There are of course many answers to this, but as I said at the beginning of my talk the major determining structural factor is that the dominant power structures in Western society are based on the idea of composition, or fixity, to put it more generally. At the musical level this manifests as a focus on the music of European composers in our educational institutions, government-funded high art organizations such as symphony orchestras and opera companies, and the commodities produced by the recording industry; at the larger social level composition manifests in the struggles over identity and citizenship, the legal system, and government policy. In other words, many of our social practices are regulated by fixed texts, so many artists and commentators conceptualize improvisation as an “other” mode of being and interaction that can potentially disrupt restrictive and hierarchical structures. Within this cultural framework the improvisers I spoke with evoked various reasons for why they choose to orient their artistic practices around the idea of improvisation. In Eddie Prévost’s quote from the previous section it

is clear that he is interested in resisting the systems of music and their attendant philosophies that serve bourgeois dominated culture, and he sees the attempt to construct new systems of organization in the moment of performance as the means of doing so. English pianist Howard Riley offered a more subjective reason for pursuing free improvisation:

Looking at in a sort of broad sense, I would say that the problem always for European musicians, certainly for my generation, is what to do with the fact that we're not American. I realized early on that there's no use in just imitating Americans – I call that 'dialect jazz.' It was great to play American-style jazz, but of course, after you've been playing a while you ask yourself, 'Well, is this it? Where do I come into it?' This is the tricky bit – developing your own feeling, and your own language.

This interpretation is a more nationalistic in tone, as Riley suggests that through improvisation it is possible to establish an individual and cultural identity that is distinct from the pre-existing dominant models. As a final example, American bassist Barre Phillips takes the view that there is an intrinsic value to perpetuating artistic practices within a social context dominated by commodity-focused music-making:

I guess sometime around 1975 I had a real choice. I could have chosen to make myself a place in the European jazz scene as a jazz musician, either as a freelance guy or a bandleader. But I chose to play improv for social reasons, to take a stance. In the overall cultural scene, it's important that there is the improvised music experience, next to the commercial use of music. But in order to focus on improv we developed a very low budget living situation, where we lived for ten years without a telephone or electricity.

In Phillips's comments we get a sense of the particular financial and lifestyle challenges that improvisers take on in order to pursue their artistic practices. These three examples give us some sense of what improvisation does for those who make it the aesthetic priority of their creative lives, and from here it becomes possible to trace the kinds of

structures and audiences that form around the activities of improvisers. Although it was unclear if the improvisers I spoke to would continue their musical work if there was no audience/community to support it, it was clear that they were willing to persist with only a minimum amount of support and little expectation that things might change for them in the future.

It should be noted at this time that other artistic communities specifically use composition as a means of resisting repression, asserting collective identity, and presenting an alternative to commercial musics – the African-American collective The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians is a well-documented example of a group of musicians who are skilled improvisers, yet who use compositions as the foundation for generating their performances. And it must also be remembered that Arnold Schoenberg's twelve tone technique for composition, which is now considered to be the high-point of composerly control, was originally proposed as a means of rejecting the musical and social hierarchies that regulated Western European culture in the early-mid 20th. Composition can thus create and foster community just as easily as improvisation, and probably does so more often, which one can see in folk music cultures, where song forms and lyrical codes are more accessible to a wider number of people. I mention this to underscore the historical and situational specificity of artistic practices; in the particular contexts of London and Toronto a considerable number of musicians find improvisation to be a useful frame for positioning their work as radical and transgressive, but such approaches to artistic production and political action are not universally applicable.

III

So far in this talk I have privileged the ground level perspectives generated by ethnographic research, which again is a bias that is likely the result of my own position as a practitioner. Yet it is clear that such a view of free improvisation is incomplete, for theoretical speculations are essential for helping us to understand how the individual subjects of our research fit within the larger systems that regulate collective action. In Ajay Heble's words:

[The] best writing on jazz has to involve a rather tricky balancing act, a complex set of negotiations between on the one hand the teachings of critical theory – especially its dismantling of socially produced assumptions about meaning, identity, and knowledge – and, on the other, a recognition of the value and importance of documenting insider perspectives. (2000, 91)

Unfortunately for me, I have spent much more time playing the bass than I have reading critical theory. In addition, I discovered in London that I am more skilled at talking to musicians in pubs over a pint or three than I am at sitting still and reading in the library. Nevertheless, in my studies at Goldsmiths College while I was living in London I was introduced to some analytical models for interpreting my fieldwork that made sense to me, and I have tried my best to apply them to my experience of observing improvisers in London, and of being an improviser in Toronto. The most useful concepts that I encountered come from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. My introduction to Bourdieu was certainly a case of the right information at the right time, as his ideas gave me a framework for understanding the shift I made over the course of my fieldwork from trying to define what free improvisation is in aesthetic terms, to

asking how this concept shapes the lives and cultural productions of those who claim it as their aesthetic priority.

Specifically, I base my arguments in my dissertation on 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 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." I use this idea of artistic fields to construct what I call the improvised music field, which is a conceptual entity that can contain the social and musical practices that I study academically and engage with on a daily basis as a musician. I situate the improvised music field historically as emerging in the 1960s out of the jazz and avant-garde art music fields, when a discrete set of practitioners and support structures emerged in Europe and North America around the concept of free improvisation. 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 an identifiable collection of agents, institutions, and common practices interact to generate and support musical products of a specific type. In my particular research the specific struggles occur over the idea of improvisation, with relationships determined around questions such as: what kinds of materials are permitted within an improvised

performance, who gets to be an improviser, and how one defines whether something is indeed improvised. These negotiations take place within a set of structures and institutions that are primarily defined by the larger economic system within which we as subjects live; in terms of music these structures include venues, festivals, government arts-funding bodies, record labels, radio and print media, and educational institutions. As in other music fields, the specific struggles in the improvised music field take the form of negotiations over performance and recording opportunities, or, more generally, over the pursuit of situations where one can “make a name for oneself”, in the sense of increasing one’s cultural capital and claiming an identity that one wishes to inhabit. Given that the basic sonic materials used in the production of improvised music are based on a negative relation to the materials of popular music, improvisers accept that their particular struggles for resources to continue their creative work will take place on the margins of the dominant field of power – meaning that there is little money at stake. This very short description is intended to demonstrate the potential of Bourdieu’s concepts to provide social and historical contextualize for the otherwise ephemeral idea of free improvisation.

From this discursive shift of reading free improvisation as an aesthetic ideal to thinking about the improvised music field as an identifiable place of work and social engagement emerges the idea of the improviser as a position one can occupy in the social world. At this point in history, at least in terms of music as a profession, one who claims the ability to improvise is expected to be able to fit themselves into a variety of musical traditions, or to be engaged in the creation of noisy and dissonant music.

English guitarist Derek Bailey's text *Improvisation: Its nature and practice in music* is an extended meditation on this discursive shift. In this text Bailey looks at six different musical traditions using the lens of improvisation to explain how musicians in these traditions generate their performances; these musicians themselves may not think of their performances in this way, and many of them conceive of their work as part of a tradition rather than a grand project of dismantling familiar materials and performance conventions. The basic assumption that underlies Bailey's work as a writer and musician is the essentially modernist notion that improvisation is a productive way of "questioning the 'rules' that govern musical language." I argue again that this particular ethos is fundamental to the ongoing improvised music project. Bailey's work, particularly his concept of "non-idiomatic improvisation," helped to discursively position improvisation as an autonomous practice that is applied in order to disrupt musical conventions, and to construct the improviser as a mobile musical subject who is not bound by the rules that regulate other musicians' performances. We have long since marked this transition by the way we once referred to playing jazz, or playing bluegrass, to how we now think of musicians as "improvising" within particular idiomatic contexts.

In George Lewis's terms, following the work of Bailey, Prévost, and other first generation London improvisers, "[We] can now identify 'improviser' as a functional musical activity role in world-musical society, along with such roles as 'composer', 'performer', 'interpreter', 'psychoacoustician', and various flavours of 'theorist'." Following Lewis's example, I argue in my work that there is a danger in de-

contextualizing the improviser, for the notions of artistic autonomy and the rhetoric of freedom that are connected to this term can obscure both the power structures that limit access to this identity, and the material traditions and established social structures that allow this music to be produced by musicians and comprehended by a listening audience. As a typical example of the kind of discursive manoeuvre that positions improvisation as an autonomous activity, English bassist John Edwards told me: "I love playing jazz - sticking within the rules of the game and doing my thing as the bass player. But I have never called myself a jazz musician." Edwards made this comment out of a sincere love and respect for jazz at the subjective level, but this discursive positioning of improvisation as a kind of blank, open space and jazz as a well-defined "other" that one can just drop into from time to time reflects structural inequalities around who gets to move between musical fields and claim certain identities, and who is restricted by the larger race, class, and gender hierarchies that limit aesthetic agency and practice in Western society. To be clear, I am not suggesting that John Edwards is unaware of these inequalities, or that he is acting in any kind of bad faith, only that at the structural level his position as a white, European, and thus unmarked improviser allows him access to this mobile idea of "non-idiomatic," or autonomous improvisation. My intention in reproducing this comment is to demonstrate that the improvised music field, as a universe regulated by global power dynamics, the flow of capital, and the struggle over who gets to claim the resources that come with being recognized as an improviser, is a socio-musical domain that is at the material level distinct from other fields, but at its foundations is a transformed version of other artistic, social, economic,

and political fields which co-exist within the dominant socio-economic system that regulates daily life.

Bourdieu's concepts allow for further contextualization of the concept of free improvisation through enabling a look at the improvised music field from the dominating as well as the dominated position. This level of inquiry allowed me to bring my experiences as a participant in the improvised music field into my analysis of the discursive framework of free improvisation. As an example, my experience in the field has revealed that 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 resources and symbolic capital. As an improviser living and working in Toronto, I deal with this reality all the time – 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. And many of my friends are doing the same, which places some strain on these relationships and on the idea of community itself. Jason Toynbee suggests that it is important to recognize that culture-making in capitalist society has “a strong individualistic and self-serving aspect, which provides a useful counter to naïve or ideological beliefs in the purity of art and community which appear to be out of kilter with the prevailing climate of political pragmatism.” The constraints of the dominant field of power thus continually infringe

upon the subjective political and musical ideals of improvisers, so that it becomes necessary to think about free improvisation not just as an aesthetic and musical practice that can bring about social change, but as a site of constant negotiation between a diverse constellation of members and institutions who struggle for the scant resources available for the continued production of non-commodity based music.

IV

In the same way that improvised music arises out of particular social contexts, I argue in my work that free improvisation is part of a larger aesthetic tradition of modernism in music, despite its being continually positioned as perpetually contemporary. The aesthetic debates in the improvised music field around musical autonomy, the ethic of innovation, and the prescription to resist the musical orthodoxies that manifest as genre are typical of the kinds of discussions that take place in other modern art forms that are coded as radical or inaccessible. Like the European avant-garde composers of the early 20th century, the London improvisers who began documenting their music in the mid-1960s proposed a radical re-evaluation of how we make and perceive music. The assumptions around both these musics are that the creation of new systems of organization can address the aesthetic shortcomings and social inequities that are imagined to be contained within older musical forms. Yet as we have seen, once these musics have entered into the mainstream musical discourse they become part of the continually expanding cultural field, rather than precipitating a large-scale re-evaluation of the dominant systems of musical and social organization. Derek Bailey dates the absorption of freely improvised music into the dominant musical culture to

1974, although he continued to make challenging music until his death in 2005. The innovations of Schoenberg, Webern, Prévost and Bailey are still noisy and dissonant in relation to the dominant Western musical culture, but these sounds have become known in a way that allows them to be regulated within the cultural field. In other words, the atonal music of the past century has not been fully incorporated into mainstream Western culture in the way that the once forbidden parallel fifth has, but has been reduced to the level of code—or to use Bailey’s terms a “generalised influence”—that can be dropped into more conventional musics to signify the far out, experimental, or modern.

As a case in point of this perhaps inevitable shift towards stylistic compartmentalization, I recently encountered an example of Derek Bailey’s prediction about the fate of improvised music in a review of Toronto guitarist Don Scott’s CD *Out Of Line*, where 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” (Chapman 2008, 35-36). In this instance, one can imagine that the reviewer hears moments on Scott’s CD that lack a discernable structure, do not groove, have large leaps between notes, and feature some scratchy, unpitched noises from the various instruments. This reading of Scott’s music as a composite of various improvisatory traditions contrasts with the kinds of rhetoric I encountered from many of the improvisers I interviewed, who described their music making practice more as a unified generative process that hinges on the avoidance of conventional musical materials and the creation of emergent structures. In a conversation we had about the future of free

improvisation as a political force, Eddie Prévost spoke in terms that clearly connect to the contemporary reality expressed in this CD review:

We think of improvised music as still being marginal, but it's a big margin now compared to what it was when we started playing in the 1960s. It's changed now beyond all recognition in terms of its acceptability at festivals and in the media. And people can cross over – I know young trained musicians now who do a bit of contemporary music, a bit of session work, a bit of free improvisation... Now it's become one of the strings you can add to your bow. That's not the way most of the people who began it saw it, especially those of us, like Derek Bailey, who gave up secure careers as commercial musicians to focus on improvising.

Prévost insists that meaningful musical exploration must exclude the use of codes from other musics – such as “jumpy post-bop” – but the rigor that he and others have brought to their creative practices have resulted in the development of a recognizable sound-world. So it makes sense that the musical conventions I have connected to free improvisation have since been incorporated into other musics to signify experimentation and an avant-garde aesthetic, as once the sounds and instrumental techniques are documented on recording and reproduced in performance they become open to appropriation. There is no way to avoid this gathering of conventions and codes which now signify free improvisation, but reviews such as this demonstrate how we need to think carefully about the relationship between how particular art practices are used in real situations and how they are constructed in discourse.

Looking back on this work I did during my PhD I can see that I have attempted to develop a genealogy of sorts of free improvisation, as the narrative I constructed involves tracing how the innovations of a particular historical moment shape, both consciously and unconsciously, how we think about free improvisation today. Specifically, my analysis of the ethnographic data I collected is structured in my

dissertation as an interrogation of the influential ideas and practices of the first generation of London improvisers, in order to build a more nuanced understanding of how improvised music functions as an art practice today. As I have tried to do in brief today, throughout my dissertation I try to illuminate the assumptions, ideologies, and aesthetic ideals that underscore the continuing improvised music project, with the intention of connecting the disembodied domains of discourse and structure to the lived experiences of improvisers, who struggle to produce musical culture within a generally disinterested economic system. I can see now, too late to use his specific ideas in my dissertation, that this approach mirrors Michel Foucault's description of some of his writings as a "history of the present," as I am also attempting to uncover the origins of the rules, practices, and institutions that presently regulate the artistic activities of improvisers. This idea of a "history of the present" also aligns with the kinds of "present-focused" terms improvisers use to describe their music; for example, the notion of being in the moment, creating music without pre-conceived structures that disappears once played, and the interest in prioritizing the contingencies that arise when working with only the materials that one has on hand. These kinds of rhetorical manoeuvres again de-contextualize improvisation by positioning it as a perpetual avant-garde, or a practice that exists essentially at the cutting edge of musical research. I suggest that we need to attend more to how the socio-musical domain of improvised music is regulated by the imperative of negating the materials of popular music, the necessity of engaging with existing sonic codes and instrumental techniques, and by the continuing race, class, and gender hierarchies that regulate cultural production in

Western society. My goal of situating the practices and sounds we now associate with free improvisation within a social and historical context thus inevitably became a history of the present, as the subjects in my study connect the identity position of improviser to the ideal of creating music that is “ever afresh,” even as they are working within an increasingly defined and compartmentalized area of cultural production.

To conclude, my admittedly gloomy interpretation of the diminishing returns of modernist improvised music is not new; Adorno made similarly pessimistic claims about the avant-garde classical music that was of interest to him. But despite all of the constraints, restrictions, and conventions I have described that mediate the manifestation of improvised music in Western society, it is clear that there remains a dedicated group of musicians who value the concept of improvisation enough to make the difficult life choices required to continue producing unpopular music. In researching the origins of the improvised musical practices in London, I hope to have shed some light on how improvised music continues to function in society, and from here perhaps we can begin to think about the potential of art practices to generate social change beyond the boundaries of an established audience. Based on my ethnographic research, I suspect that a productive line of future inquiry will involve a general investigation into what it means to be a producer of culture within a system that prioritizes consumption. Perhaps such a study will be my next composition, but until then, I look forward to improvising some answers to any questions you might have. Thanks for listening.