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A Practice-led Investigation into  
Improvising Music in  
Contemporary Western Culture

by

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis presents improvised practice with accompanying contextualisation alongside a discussion of the broader issues involved in improvising music in contemporary Western culture.

The first chapter explores aesthetic and philosophical issues relating to improvisation in general while also establishing a context for the practice that follows. Starting by examining the role of a musical instrument in an improvising situation, this chapter goes on to discuss how improvisation challenges distinctions such as art and craft or subject and object. The issues of risk, vulnerability, dialogue and collaboration are then considered leading to an exploration of the role that memory, the familiar and habit play in improvisation. The chapter finishes with an investigation into the relationship between ethics and improvisation.

The second chapter consists of improvised practice presented as four separate projects: The Quartet, Spock, CCCU Scratch Orchestra and a duo with Matthew Wright. Each of these projects consists of a commentary discussing particular issues raised through this research followed by the presentation of the relevant improvised practice. This practice is documented through and presented in the form of audio recordings.

A concluding section reprises and identifies the overall themes of the thesis and provides contextualisation for the final live performance that forms an important practical component of this research.





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# A Practice-led Investigation into Improvising Music in Contemporary Western Culture

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

This thesis consists of a mixture of improvised practice and philosophical discussion. The theory and the practice both share the same concerns. These concerns are, broadly speaking, related to the role of the familiar in improvised music, the connection between aesthetic and ethics and how the practice of improvisation extends beyond the cultural realm.

Chapter one (section 1.1) starts by considering how musical instruments are always already saturated with human intention prior to a musician's encounter with them. In section 1.2 the gap between a musician and their instrument is used as a metaphor to explore how improvisation takes place in the gaps or spaces between established codes, between dichotomies such as art and craft, subject and object, selfless and self-full. Section 1.3 looks at the role of risk in improvisation: how it can provide glimpses of ways forward that were previously inaccessible, how it can create uncertain, emergent and emergency situations that demand a specific dynamic of engagement and how it is a symptom of the more fundamental improvisational condition of vulnerability. Section 1.4 focuses on how improvised collaboration can range from sensitive support to the creative exploitation and manipulation of power relations. The important subject of memory, the familiar and habit is discussed in section 1.5. How can a practice that depends on formulae and habits continue to provide fresh insights into the same material? The final section (1.6) considers the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in improvised music.

The second chapter consists of improvised practice presented as four separate projects: The Quartet, a contemporary jazz group; Spock, a free improvisation quartet; CCCU Scratch Orchestra, an undergraduate student ensemble; and a duo with electronic musician and composer Matthew Wright. Each of these projects reprises and extends themes from the first chapter through both the practice itself and a written commentary. The audio examples that are used to illustrate points throughout the text should be considered complementary to the main body of practice that is presented at the end of each commentary.

A final section summarises the overall themes of the thesis and suggests that for many improvisers their practice is not solely an end in itself but also a means of opening up and exploring aesthetic, ethical and political alternatives. The thesis ends with a contextualisation of the final live performance that will form an important practical component of my research.

## 1.1 The Instrument

"The instrument - that's the matter - the stuff - your subject" (Lacy in Bailey, 1993, p.99)

Every musician has an instrument. An instrument contains in its design certain structures of possibility and expectation that shape and condition the kind of music played upon it. An instrument is an object saturated with human intention. To play an instrument is to engage in a dialogue with the individual instrument maker(s), the tradition and history of the makers, players and composers of and for that particular instrument and the whole range of musical, cultural, technological and physical expectations and aspirations that are encoded in these objects. The multi-disciplinary artist and musician Ansuman Biswas emphasises the social and physical aspects of engaging with an instrument:

Instruments are bequeathed to us socially. Every given instrument has been shaped by other bodies before ours ... the structure of human societies are too written into instruments ... by engaging with a given instrument I accept the proclivities and decisions of all those generations who have contributed to its design. The shapes and balances of their bodies are figured into its size and materials. I echo those bodies and enter a larger social body when I pick up or sit at this trace of them. I become the reification of a social idea (Biswas, 2011, p.101)

The reification involved in playing an instrument is what Derrida is referring to when he says that, "the already-there-ness of instruments and concepts cannot be undone or reinvented" (Derrida in Corbett, 1994, p.217). Like a well-trodden path, an instrument has a coercive power that tells of the past, conditions the present and leads into the future.

It is this coercive power that the composer and improviser Cornelius Cardew is referring to when he describes how the 'openness' and 'informality' of the improvising ensemble AMM was compromised by the instruments they were using.

AMM music is supposed to admit all sounds but the members of AMM have marked preferences. An openness to the totality of

sounds implies a tendency away from traditional musical structures towards informality. Governing this tendency – reining it in – are various thoroughly traditional musical structures such as saxophone, piano, violin, guitar, etc., in each of which reposes a portion of the history of music.

(Cardew, 1971, p.18).

I would argue that such 'thoroughly traditional musical structures' do more than 'rein in' or 'govern' sound making. One of the claims this thesis makes is that an instrument is one of the primary sources of improvisation. As well as containing a 'portion of the history of music' an improviser's instrument comes to contain, shape and articulate the personal history of the player. The instrument is both the means and the end of an improviser's physical, aesthetic and spiritual development. Improvisation is an archaeological process that involves sorting through and working with the accumulated layers of habit, memory, intention and meaning that 'repose' in the instrument. As Hogg observes, this dense web of personal and historical resonances is central to our conception of an instrument:

My use of the violin qua violin passes through and is formed by personally internalized cultural filters of sonority, history, learning, expectation, listening, watching and acting ... [my violin is] something that is only fully constituted *as* a violin in its relationship to my embodied and enculturated consciousness (Hogg, 2011, p.88-89)

The embodiment and enculturation involved in playing an instrument diffuses any Cartesian separation of mind and body. This is what I believe the improvising guitarist Derek Bailey meant when he said that "there is a kind of creativity which is attached to playing an instrument ... which is not available in any other way" ('A Liberating Thing', 1992). Of course composers also engage creatively with instruments but their musical imagination is not bound to them, derived from them, or fed by them to the same degree. Charles Rosen speaks of a pianist's "inexplicable and almost fetishistic need for physical contact with the combination of metal, wood, and ivory" (Rosen, 2003, p.10). It is this on-going physical interaction with an instrument that can make the difference between a composer's and an improviser's relationship to instruments.

The function of instruments, for improvisers who spend so many hours of their lives in dialogue with these inanimate collaborators, ranges beyond the aesthetic. In Jacques Attali's envisaged utopian future, improvisation heralds "the emergence of the free act, self transcendence, pleasure in being instead of having" where "instruments no longer serve to produce the desired sound forms, conceived in thought before written down, but to monitor unexpected forms" (Attali, 1985, p.115-134). Attali's suggestion that an instrument is a form of antennae, or divining rod, that can sensitise the improviser reinforces Evan Parker's observation that an instrument "teaches you as much as you tell it what to do" (Parker in Fischlin, 2009, p.1). Like meditation practice the hours spent with an instrument extend into and shape everyday reality. The instrumental relationship is both one of the themes of this thesis and the primary method of research.

The musical instrument, like the scientific instrument, is not an end in itself but a means ... the most appropriate appreciation of a musical instrument is to use it to sensitise the mind to the music of what happens (Biswas, 2011, p.101)



## 1.2 The Musician

Free improvisation is a strange place, strange because it is not really a place but more of an edge between spaces, between times (Peters, 2009, p.44)

Improvisation happens in the gaps. This elusive and transient activity shows up most clearly in-between things, states, cultures, places and people. Some critics have argued that jazz started life as a short improvised solo break in-between ensemble passages. The cadenza in a concerto happens in a ‘gap’ before the coda that grew from a brief elaboration of a cadence into a substantial structural element. Improvisation grows in the cracks between established orders. It is a parasitic activity, it needs something upon which to ‘improve’, it relies on there being something to subvert. Cobussen, paraphrasing Attali, talks about improvisation as a form of ‘noise’; as “an aggression against all sorts of code, against all kinds of order ... which compels recognition of something new” (Cobussen, 2005, p.30). Mackey sees improvisation as a form of ‘discrepant engagement’ whose focus is “opening presumably closed orders of identity and signification, accent, fissure, fracture, incongruity” (Mackey, 2004, p.371). This is why the concerto cadenza grew so unwieldy and why Louis Armstrong’s melodic embellishments sowed the seeds of free jazz: a practice that feeds on dismantling established codes will eventually devour the context of its birth. This discussion will be continued later (in section 1.6).

The relevance of introducing these ideas at this point is to provide a context for a discussion of the most fundamental ‘gap’ in improvisation: the gap between an improviser and their instrument. Why is this an appropriate way of examining the relationship between musician and instrument? In recent Western culture at least, it is difficult to experience, talk about or practice improvisation without encountering some trace of the notion of a composer or performer, an artist or a craftsperson, art or entertainment, discipline or freedom, innovation or tradition. Improvisation takes place somewhere in-between each of these (and many other) dichotomies, in the gaps or cracks between clusters of oppositions.

The first of these oppositions is the distinction between the art and craft of improvisation.

### *Art/craft*

The craftsperson aims to overcome the technical challenges of playing an instrument so that their intentions can be articulated clearly. The instrument is a tool, a means to an end, and it is the craftsperson's job to minimise any friction between their intentions and the implementation of those intentions.

Jazz saxophonist Ronnie Scott summarises this position:

I practice to become as close to the instrument, as familiar with it, as possible. The ideal thing would be to be able to play the instrument as one would a kazoo (Scott in Bailey, 1993, p.101)

The notion of a musician spending years practicing to achieve fluency on their instrument is a familiar one. The reason it is not superfluous to mention it here is because writing about improvisation often de-emphasises the craft element of the activity. There are several interrelated layers of craft in improvisation. Firstly, as mentioned above, there is the craft of instrumental ability. Secondly there is the craft of a specific improvising tradition such as the Persian Radif, bebop jazz vocabulary or French organ improvisation. Thirdly, there are aspects of improvisation that go beyond, or come before, specific traditions that are concerned with group dynamics and how ones-self is engaged in the process of improvising. Whilst the concept of craft is perhaps not fully adequate here, these aspects of improvisation that touch upon character and social interaction require a kind of ethical discipline that shares something with the objective system of values and standards within which a craftsperson works (MacIntyre, 1985).

One of the defining features of the craft of improvisation is automaticity. The basis of improvised activity, like a kind of Maslow's triangle of mental processing, is thoughtless, automatic. Conscious choice and explicit awareness occur only at the tip of the triangle and are made possible by this 'lower-level' processing. Later we will see how the automaticity and physical habit of craft sit uncomfortably with what some theories demand of artistic production. From the craftsperson's perspective the automatic nature

of what they are doing grants them greater freedom. This is the freedom-to do, and respond, rapidly and intuitively. Pressing summarises this view:

The change from controlled processing to automatic motor processing as a result of extensive skill rehearsal is an idea of long standing (James 1980, Schiffrin and Scheider 1977), and it undoubtedly improves movement quality and integration (Eccles 1972). The accompanying feeling of automaticity, about which much metaphysical speculation exists in the improvisation literature, can be simply viewed as the natural result of considerable practice, a stage at which it has become possible to completely dispense with conscious monitoring of motor programs, so that the hands appear to have a life of their own, driven by the musical constraints of the situation (Bartlett 1947, Welford 1976, Pressing 1984a). In a sense, the performer is played by the music (Pressing, 1984, p.139)

It is possible to imagine, on the other hand, an improviser of a more artistic bent for whom the instrumental embodiment of their idea involves a compromise. They are suspicious of the storehouse of automatic motor patterns and the aesthetic and physical habits that constitute instrumental ability; what Nachmanovitch calls “the danger that inheres in the very competence that we acquire in practice” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.67). They believe that the original character or force of their idea, or even their ability to conceive of ideas, is diluted and distorted through this prior conditioning. Peters makes this point forcefully:

Just think of the smug confidence of the virtuoso with a technique that glitters on the surface of aesthetic forms that are assumed, resumed and consumed as prefabricated chunks of performative cultural capital, forever ready-to-hand to be repeatedly mastered by the master. Or think of the dubious automatism that is too easily and too often promoted as a quasi-spiritual force surging through the veins of the improviser without regard for the manner in which the automatic is, in truth, the product of training, rote learning, and an absolute embeddedness in the given to the point of forgetfulness (Peters, 2009, p.118)

This touches on the question of whether (an) improvisation is an act or an object. Peters’ ‘smug virtuoso’ is clearly a manipulator of musical objects (‘prefabricated chunks of performative cultural capital’). This notion of virtuosity seems antithetical to the risk-taking uncertainty of ‘true’ artistic production: how can such ‘embeddedness’ play a part in genuine aesthetic

discovery? Cardew highlights the Modernist aesthetic/ethic subtext of Peters' polemic when he pits the subjectivity of the improvisers in the ensemble AMM against the objectivity of a professional musician. In his definition of the improvisational virtue of integrity he makes a distinction between 'making the sound and being the sound':

The professional musician *makes* the sounds (in full knowledge of them as they are external to him); AMM *is* their sounds (as ignorant of them as one is about one's own nature) (Cardew, 1971, p.20).

For Cardew the professional musician is alienated from their labour. Their craftsmanship leads them to deploy sounds with the strategic distance of a general or a politician. Cardew, like the experimental theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, believed that artist-improvisers "are not after recipes, the stereotypes which are the prerogative of professionals" (Grotowski in Hogg, 2011, p.80). Where the 'professional' sees their instrument as a means to an end, the artist-improviser sees it as an end in itself.

To summarise, whereas the improvising craftsperson aspires towards a positive freedom-to respond automatically and thoughtlessly the improvising artist prefers a negative freedom-from "the endless regurgitation of a stockpile of clichés and standardised formulas" (Peters, 2009, p.84). For Collingwood craft in general involves "a distinction between planning and execution" where "the result to be obtained is preconceived or thought out before being arrived at" whereas a work of art is "not made ... by carrying out a preconceived plan, nor by way of realising the means to a preconceived end" (Collingwood in Sawyer, 2003, p.105). The creativity scholar Keith Sawyer makes a connection between Collingwood's distinction and "the modern psychological distinction between problem finding and problem solving":

A craftsman is problem solving, whereas an artist is problem finding (Sawyer, 2003 p.105)

The truth is, of course, that an improviser must be both an artist and a craftsperson. Improvisation is simultaneously problem solving and problem finding, objective and subjective, led by neither the instrument nor the

musician but by the friction of their engagement. The improvising flautist John Denley, in the course of making a distinction that echoes those made above, cautions against thinking of these aspects as separate from each other:

For the improviser the physicality of producing sound (the hardware) is not a separate activity to the thoughts and ideas in music (software) ... [although] as soon as I try and define these separately I run into problems. It is a meaningless enterprise for it is the very entanglement of levels of perception, awareness and physicality that makes improvisation (Denley in Bailey, 1993, p.108)

This entanglement can be understood as a form of interaction between feedback and feedforward loops (Pressing, 1984) where the possible scope of a performer's intentions is derived from the instrument at the same time as the scope of what is possible on an instrument is derived from the performer. This can take place on a micro level, on a moment-by-moment basis in the course of a particular improvisation, and a macro level, as an improviser's relationship to their instrument gradually changes and develops. Saxophonist Evan Parker describes it in this way:

“You couple yourself to that instrument and it teaches you as much as you tell it what to do. So you're sensitive to . . . how it's responding to your efforts to control it. By hearing it, the way it's feeding back to you, you learn to control it better, so it's a very dynamic and very sensitive process . . . [But] the instrument at the same time seems to be giving you additional information so that there are things you have under your control, but every so often something will go wrong. You'll lose control. [And] in that moment you are given an opportunity to learn something else that the instrument can do . . . the nature of the instrument and its will in relation to its destiny . . . [its] set of intentions in its relationship with you, and you start to find it difficult to distinguish yourself and your intentions from the instrument's intentions” (Parker in Fischlin, 2009, p.1)

Improvisation always involves a dialogic friction between the intentions of the musician and the intentions of the instrument. This friction/dialogue is a form of thinking through doing, thinking through physical interaction with an instrument. This is what Iyer calls ‘embodied cognition’. For Iyer perception and cognition are “structured by the body” (Monson, 2009,

p.27), meaning that sensory processes and motor processes are “fundamentally inseparable, mutually informative, and structured so as to ground our conceptual systems” (Iyer in Monson, 2009, p.27). In other words in improvisation there is no ‘gap’ or spilt between mind and body, art and craft or thinking and doing.

### *Subject/object*

The art/craft distinction comes from the same cluster of dichotomies as the distinction between subject and object. An important manifestation of this relates to the presence or absence of human agency in improvised music. In other words: what are we listening to in improvisation, the musician or the music?

Pianist, composer and improviser Misha Mengelberg refers to improvisation as ‘instant composition’ (Corbett, 2004, p.390) and Arnold Schoenberg once likened composing to a “slowed down improvisation” (Schoenberg in Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.6). Some musicians certainly consider improvisation as a means to an end, a method of generating a musical object – an improvisation – that bears some similarity with a composition (it is interesting that both words can refer to both an activity and an object). The Oxford Music Online entry for *Improvisation* reinforces this view by defining improvisation in relation to a musical object:

[Improvisation is] the creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed” (Oxford Music Online, 2012)

While there is some currency in this idea that improvisation is a means of constructing a musical object - it was useful, for example, to those writers who aimed to legitimise jazz through comparisons with Western art music - it is a distorted view that ignores precisely what distinguishes improvisation from other forms of artistic activity.

A second view, that is more alive to the unique subjective character of improvisation, is that improvisation is the subject made audible. That what

we hear in improvisation is a person doing, acting and reacting, making choices. This is what the music therapist Kenneth Bruscia asserts when he reflects, after a stream-of-conscious account of himself improvising, that “in these few, simple moments of improvising, I have encountered the conditions of being human, the very sound essence of who I am” (Bruscia in Wigram, 2004, p.18). Nachmanovitch describes how, for him, “improvisation extended the scope and relevance of music making until the artificial boundary between life and art disintegrated” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.6) and jazz drummer Art Blakey describes how a musician’s personality is communicated, unedited, when they are improvising on stage:

“You’re in the nude, you’re in your birthday suit and people can see clean through you. And your music, your actions and your vibes, that you bring forth to the audience, come out and you cannot hide that” (Blakey, 1985)

If you believe, like Bruscia, Nachmanovitch and Blakey, that an improviser’s intentions are projected, relatively undiluted, through the instrument then this sense of agency should be central to the way we listen to improvised music. The music is heard as the embodiment, in sound, of the improviser’s personality or character; human agency is foregrounded and provides an important aesthetic focus for the listener. The composer and improviser Gavin Bryars observed that:

In any improvising position the person creating the music is identified with the music. The two things are seen to be synonymous. The creator is there making the music and is identified with the music and the music with the person. It’s like standing a painter next to his picture so that every time you see the painting you see the painter as well” (Bryars in Bailey, 1993, p.115)

This close proximity between person and music is a defining feature of musical improvisation. It changes the way the music is heard. It is difficult not to hear a dramatic, biographical dimension to the music when listening to a live improviser. As saxophonist Yusef Lateef observes, it is difficult not to hear the music telling you something about the improviser’s character:

The sound of the improvisation seems to tell us what kind of person is improvising. We feel that we can hear character or personality in the way the musician improvises (Lateef in Lewis, 2004, p.156)

However, as with the art/craft distinction, it should be obvious that both the perception of human agency and the sense that the act aspires to something beyond the individual are fundamental to our experience of improvisation. The view that a musician's intentions, character and personality are expressed directly through improvisation is flawed. Improvisation is, as I mentioned above, always a dialogue. Even solo free-improvisation is a dialogue with the instrument, the instrumental tradition, one's personal vocabulary, the audience and/or the performing space. It is impossible to imagine improvisation that does not interact with some external source. There is no improvisational equivalent to silently reading a score. Of course sounds can be spontaneously conjured up in one's inner ear but I would contend that the friction involved in realising those sounds in physical reality is an important defining feature of improvisation. An improviser's intentions or personality are never heard in a direct, transparent way. Improvisational agency always shows itself as the product of an engagement or dialogue with an 'other'. Bryars' painting analogy is misleading in two respects. Improvisation is not an object separate from its creator like a painting and neither is it simply a subjective projection of the improviser's personality. Improvisation is always a reaction-to or a dialogue-with and human agency is revealed as a by-product of this engagement.

Also, as Bailey (1993) observes, most improvising is 'idiomatic'. Most improvisers work within a specific tradition and with a specific vocabulary. Each performance subtly adds to, 'signifies' on or interrogates this vocabulary. Like language, an improvisational vocabulary changes slowly over time as the result of many individual instances of use. To suggest that human agency provides the main aesthetic focus for the listener is to ignore the fact that for many improvisers and listeners the vocabulary and the tradition is centre stage. People go to Jazz festivals, Indian classical music concerts or Flamenco nights as much for the idiom as for the individual performers. The use of the idiom's name in identifying and advertising the event underlines its cultural significance. Human agency may be an



important part of the experience in most improvised music but, once again, this is revealed obliquely through the patterning of language, through the unique friction between the individual and the idiom.

### *Selfless/self-full*

A different way of thinking about the role of human agency in improvisation is to consider the presence or absence of a sense of self for the improviser. This change of emphasis opens the discussion up to the area of consciousness studies and raises the issue of improvisation inducing a state of consciousness in which a sense of self is dissipated. Saxophonist Ronnie Scott gives a typical account of this phenomenon:

[W]hat seems to happen is that one becomes unconscious of playing, you know, it becomes as if something else has taken over and you're just an intermediary between whatever else and the instrument (Scott in Bailey, 1993, p.52)

The notion of self-awareness receding through the act of improvising connects both the art and craft perspectives discussed earlier. The craftsperson practices for many years so that a significant proportion of the processing required for the task becomes automatic. The artist develops strategies that help them to avoid the staleness of habitual formulae; strategies of awareness that “sling you forcibly into a new phase” (Cardew, 1971, p.17) and allow fresh insights into familiar material. The ideals of the craftsperson and the artist converge in the notion of an improviser losing their sense of self through absorption in the activity. Freedom-from and freedom-to can both find fruition in the selfless present. In these moments the simultaneous freedom-to make use of the storehouse of instrumental ability and freedom-from the habits of everyday consciousness is made possible through a state of heightened awareness. How this happens and what exactly constitutes heightened awareness in the context of improvisation is covered in more detail in section 1.5 through a discussion of Sarath's theory of ‘cognitive event cycles’ (1996).

What is relevant here is to get a clearer understanding of how the presence or absence of a sense of self affects improvisation. The state of absorption

mentioned above is described by Csikszentmihalyi as ‘flow’ (2002). Flow describes a state of optimal experience where the self is forgotten temporarily whilst deeply engaged in an activity, a “state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p.4). Seen in this way selflessness is a form of being present in the moment with attention focused in such a way that normal regulatory systems, behaviors or habits (such that help to constitute a sense of self) are not triggered. There are two relevant aspects of this theory. One is that improvisation is a particularly flow-inducing activity and the other is that perceptions and ability are enhanced through flow.

Improvisation is particularly likely to induce flow because of what was described above as ‘embodied cognition’; in other words it simultaneously engages both body and mind.

Flow always involves the use of muscle and nerve, on the one hand, and will, thought, and feelings on the other (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p.118)

One of the consequences of the conflation of oppositions (mind/body, art/craft, subject/object) that characterises improvisation is that it is a unique and intensely involving activity. According to Csikszentmihalyi this full engagement of the faculties and unselfconscious absorption in an activity has implications for ethics and the development of the self:

It is when we act freely, for the sake of the action itself rather than for ulterior motives, that we learn to become more than what we were” (p.41-42)

Csikszentmihalyi observes that during such experiences of total absorption, physical and mental processes appear to ‘flow’, unimpeded by conscious awareness. This observation is borne out by research in consciousness studies. The neuroscientist Dehaene found that “a stream of perceptual, semantic, and motor processes can ... occur without awareness” (Dehaene et al in Blackmore, 2003, p.278) and Claxton claims that “many tasks are best done without the interference of consciousness, or deliberation-mode” (Claxton in Blackmore, 2003, p.283).

Whilst it is obvious that a large proportion of motor processing occurs most effectively without conscious intervention (a point made earlier in this section) the claim here is that there are certain states where higher level processing not only occurs without conscious awareness but also produces results that would be unobtainable in a state of normal consciousness. What is interesting is how Csikszentmihalyi, a social psychologist with a quantitative bent, describes how this occurs:

What slips below the threshold of awareness is the concept of self, the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are. Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward. This feeling is not just a fancy of the imagination, but is based on a concrete experience of close interaction with some Other, an interaction that produces a rare sense of unity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, p.64)

It is important to note that a loss of self-consciousness or self-transcendence is not normally the motivation behind flow experiences. These phenomena are by-products of a ‘close interaction with some Other’. This echoes my earlier observation that human agency in improvisation is never heard in a direct, transparent way but is always revealed through an engagement or dialogue with some ‘other’. There is a sense in which the selflessness of improvisation can leave space for otherness and difference; it is characteristic of the activity that otherness is sought out. This is perhaps what Cardew means in his definition of the virtue of selflessness when he says “to do something constructive you have to look beyond yourself” (Cardew, 1971, p.20). Ramshaw makes the ethical implications of this, in relation to jazz improvisation, more explicit:

This openness of improvisation towards the other, ‘towards the unknown’ (Bailey 54), not only sustains jazz as a creative art form, it also nurtures the possibility of ‘improvised musicking’ ... as that which links jazz to ethics, resistance and democracy (Ramshaw, 2006, p.9)

The ‘discrepant engagement’ of improvisation seeks out, interacts with, resists and acknowledges otherness. The political and ethical implications of this will be discussed later in the thesis (in section 1.6 and the conclusion).

I want to finish this section with a brief investigation of the role of self/other in two contrasting group improvisation situations: the ensemble AMM and John Zorn's game piece *Cobra*.

The musicians in AMM, at least in their early stages of development, aspired towards selflessness. Eddie Prevost mentions that the players in AMM were "content for [their] individual contributions not to be identifiable ... early AMM performances were often made in total darkness ... listeners were not aware where a particular sound came from" (Prevost, 1990). This notion of the ego of individual performers being subsumed into a group identity is made explicit in an aphorism that appeared on the sleeve of their first commercial recording:

Does group direction, or authority, depend on the strength of a leading personality, whose rise or fall is reflected in the projected image, or does the collation of a set of minds mean the development of another authority independent of all of the members but consisting of all of them? (Prevost, 1990)

This is more than just a reformulation of the truism 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. The implication here is that giving yourself up to the 'authority' of the group identity grants access to creative realms that were not previously accessible. I believe that AMM were, as Maggie Nicols describes the work of John Stevens, "practicing an alternative society" (Nicols in Stevens, 2007, memoir two).

"For AMM it was by virtue of collectivism, not in spite of it, that one's individuality could thrive and blossom ... AMM had learnt that the virtue of selflessness could lead, propitiously, to individual discovery and self-realisation" (Tilbury, 2008, p.293-307)

*Cobra* (1984) is a game piece by John Zorn consisting of an elaborate system of hand signals that the players use to cue a variety of musical events. There is no indication of what to play, only when to start and stop or who to play with and in what way. Zorn describes his game pieces as "a complex set of rules that, in a sense, turned the players on and off like toggle switches to such a complicated degree that it didn't really matter what the content was" (Zorn, 2008, p.200). At the time Zorn was interested

compositionally in “changing blocks of sound” ” (‘Passing it on’, 1992). One such block was a genre of music or, by extension, the improvising style of a particular player. As in AMM an ‘alternative society’ is being created in Cobra. The difference is that the rules of this society are clear, complex and rigid; group authority here is very much dictated by a ‘leading personality’ (in the recorded and videoed performances of Cobra that I have seen Zorn is always standing in front of the band giving/receiving the cues from the players):

What I’ve basically created is a small society and everyone kind of finds their own position in that society. It really becomes like a psychodrama ... People are given power and it’s very interesting to see which people like to run with that power, which people run away from it, who are very docile and just do what they’re told, and who try very hard to get more control and more power ... So it becomes kind of a scary, frightening thing to be in front of that band, to see these people blossom and become the assholes that they really are” (‘Passing it on’, 1992)

Whilst Zorn is undoubtedly being arch and humourous here, there is definitely a sense in Cobra (I have organized and participated in several performances of the piece) that improvisers are treated like stylistic ciphers, to be turned on and off at will, as if all an improviser did was regurgitate “a stockpile of clichés and standardised formulas” (Peters, 2009, p.84).

The distinction between group improvisation in AMM and in Cobra summarises some of the distinctions covered in this section. Whilst AMM’s music making retains the hope that the individual self can be positively transformed or developed through collective improvisation Cobra sees the improviser as a source of stylistic tropes and derives much of its interest and success (as a form of group improvisation) from exposing and exploiting the power relationships that exist between the musicians.

### **1.3 Musician and Instrument**

Oxford Music Online states that “one of the typical components of improvisation is that of risk” (2012), the ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl acknowledges the presence of a “risk factor” in all improvisation (1998, p.16) and improvisers from The Grateful Dead (Garcia in Bailey, 1993, p.42) to Earl Hines (Hines in Taylor, 1998, p.8) emphasise the importance of risk in their performances. For something to be risky there must be something at stake. This section looks at what is at stake for an improvising musician and the related phenomena of mistakes, accidents, otherness, uncertainty and vulnerability.

For improvisers, like many artists, value judgments are an important means of navigating a course through their field of aesthetic practice; without them conscious artistic choices could not be made. But black and white distinctions such as good/bad or right/wrong do not account for the complex interactions between perceptions, intentions and actions that characterise improvisation. The pianist Herbie Hancock helps to clarify what is meant by this:

The music was building, the audience was right there with us, and at the peak of Miles' solo on “So What” I played a really wrong chord. Miles took a breath and played a phrase that made my chord right. Miles didn't hear it as wrong, but instead as something that happened. (Hancock in Eskow in Klemp, et al., 2008)

Hancock notes that Davis was not hearing the music as either right or wrong. The notion of a mistake was not in his conceptual field of vision. This is an example of Cardew’s improvisational virtue of “preparedness for no matter what eventuality” (1971, p.20); a flexible acceptance of, or readiness for, whatever happens that is often cultivated by experienced improvisers. The way an improviser is orientated towards, or relates to, the events that come their way determines the identity and significance of those events. This is not simply an assertion of a relativistic aesthetic. The perceived character and import of a musical event in an improvisation is what causes the next link in the chain. How an improviser perceives or hears an event determines how the music progresses; subjectivity becomes

structure. This creatively productive openness to otherness can be likened to an oyster's creation of a pearl:

“The oyster thereby transforms both the grit and itself into something new, transforming the intrusion of error or otherness into its system” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.88)

It is possible however that Davis did hear Hancock's chord as a mistake and, through deft invention, redeemed the situation (this is a subtle but important difference). Paul Berliner calls such moments 'musical saves'. Berliner and the many jazz musicians he interviewed for his huge study *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (1994) emphasise the craft involved in “taking an idea that doesn't work and turning it into something that does” (Barron in Berliner, 1994, p.210). Stanley Turrentine describes how fellow tenor saxophonist Cannonball Adderley would react to mistakes:

He'd be going fast, man, and a chord would sneak up on him and bam, hit him upside the head. He'd just go 'Oh, oh!' and get right out of it. Yes, sir. That's just knowing your horn and knowing your scales, being in command of your instrument (Turrentine in Berliner, 1994, p.211)

Turrentine's focus on instrumental ability and automatic motor patterns demonstrates a perceived connection between technical competence and creatively agility: being prepared for unforeseen musical 'emergencies'. In contrast to this approach is the pianist Earl Hines for whom risk taking became something of a trademark. Taylor describes Hines as a “musical tightrope walker” whose improvisations “seemed at times to skirt the edges of musical disaster” (Taylor, 1998, p.8). Hines himself agrees:

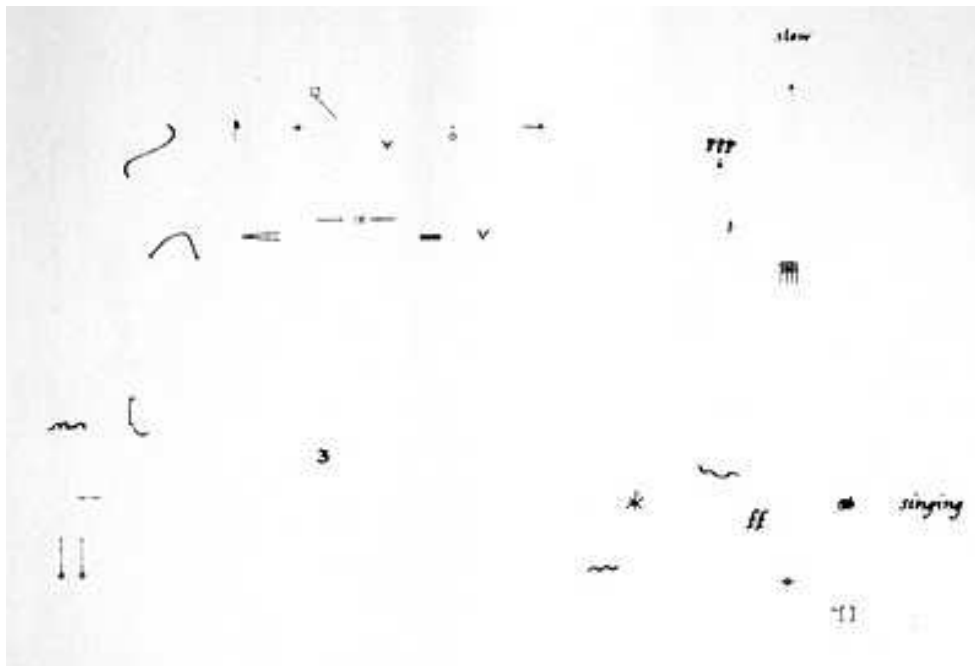
I was always exploring and trying to find something else . . . Sometimes I was lost and didn't know where I was but I'd always keep going around till I caught up ... I'd do it purposely. The rhythm section never did know what I was doing! (Hines in Taylor, 1998, p.8).

In contrast to Berliner's concept of 'musical saves', Hines clearly states that he would get lost on purpose. Why would an improviser do this? To answer this question fully I need to look at two more examples.

The composer Christian Wolff was asked, in the course of a public discussion, about his indeterminate scores:

Q: “in these indeterminate pieces that come out differently each time you do them, what is the connection between the idea, or the score, or the conception”?

A: “I’m interested in the outcome and nothing else ... some of these indeterminate situations are a technical means of producing and giving the sounds a particular quality.” (Lukoszevieve, Ryan & Wolff, 2007, p.13)



*Edges* (1968) by Christian Wolff

For Wolff the ambiguity of the notation created a specific dynamic of engagement that affected not only what but also how the performers played. An example of a similarly indeterminate situation is the process used by Miles Davis to generate the music on his album *Bitches Brew* (1970):

I brought in these musical sketches that nobody had seen, just like I did on *Kind of Blue* and *In a Silent Way* ... I had told Teo Macero, who was producing the record, to just let the tapes run and get everything that we played ... So I would direct, like a conductor, once we started to play, and I would either write down some music for somebody or I would tell him to play different things I was hearing, as the music was growing, coming together. It was loose



and tight at the same time. It was casual but alert, everybody was alert to the different possibilities that were coming up in the music ... that recording was a development of the creative process, a living composition ... what we did on *Bitches Brew* you couldn't ever write down for an orchestra to play. That's why I didn't write it out, not because I didn't know what I wanted; I knew that what I wanted would come out of a process and not some prearranged shit" (Davis & Troupe, 1990, p.289-290)

Davis' account of this recording session reveals a deliberate compositional methodology that exploited the character of semi-improvised musical responses in an uncertain and emergent situation. Like Wolff, Davis cultivated "a unique capacity for attention" (Smith, 1998, p.285) by underdetermining the performance situation. The risk in these instances is that the musician will be inhibited or confused by such uncertainty but it is precisely because of these stakes that such incompleteness can draw out a unique form of agency from a musician:

[Such an] experience of inconclusiveness and imbalance gives people little choice but to make their own moves of creative imagination if they are to make sense of the performance and arrive at a meaningful account of what is happening. In so doing ... they complete the construction of its reality. (Schieffelin in Smith, 1998, p.263)

The uncertainty in such a situation confronts a musician (and a listener) and demands their creative participation; the way in which they listen to and take part in the music changes with the sense of responsibility and ownership that this brings.

To return to the question of why did Earl Hines would deliberately lose his place in the music: it was partly, judging from accounts of his character (Taylor, 1998), a form of showing off; the bravado of the tightrope walker. But Hines' willful flirtation with musical disaster was also a deliberate strategy or methodology for creating situations that demanded a genuinely spontaneous response. The risk was failure - appearing incompetent to other musicians, tripping up the rhythm section, losing his place in the form - but the rewards included personal exhilaration, humour, respect from fellow

musicians and access to a level and type of creativity that could only be brought about by an emergency.

In 1980 an earthquake in the mountains near Naples killed four thousand people and left 250,000 homeless. Torrential rain and mudslides made rescue efforts extremely difficult. A slow official response and sheer necessity led to an improvised rescue operation involving almost six thousand volunteers. This was highly successful for a few days until the army arrived and took over. Despite their advanced training and resources the army were initially less effective than the improvised operation because they needed time to adapt their established procedures to the specific situation.

This account is one of many documented by creative collaboration scholar Keith Sawyer, who concludes that:

Most of us tend to believe that planning in advance makes groups more effective and that centralised control is especially important in a disaster. But studies repeatedly show the importance of these emergent groups ... After decades of disaster research, we know that improvisational groups are often the fastest and most effective in the uncertain and rapidly changing conditions caused by a natural disaster ... when people improvise together, they develop innovative responses to unexpected events even though no one is consciously aware of exactly what the group is doing or why it works (Sawyer, 2007, p.23-28)

Sawyer is a well-established expert on group creativity whose research into improvisation ranges from experimental theatre to disaster studies to organisational management. His book *Group Genius* (2007) presents many examples in which improvisation is a necessary prerequisite of innovation.

The musical disasters invited by Earl Hines are not only the catalyst for *individual* creative problem finding/solving. As with Wolff and Davis' underdetermined situations, Hines' musical emergencies demand creative participation from the other members of the band and the immediacy of the situation unites the group with an intuitive sense of purpose that is rarely accessible through other means.

Hines is certainly not alone in exploiting the creative possibilities of losing control. In the previous section Evan Parker mentioned how, when improvising “every so often something will go wrong. You’ll lose control. [and] in that moment you are given an opportunity to learn something else that the instrument can do” (Parker in Fischlin, 2009, p.1). For Parker a loss of control opens up the possibility of a new discovery about his instrument. However, it may not specifically be the mistake that exposes such new information but rather the sudden and unexpected intrusion into a field defined by conscious selection and control. The creative possibilities of this idea were utilised by the educator and musician Emile Jacques-Dalcroze in his 'interrupt technique'. This is an improvisation exercise where the student must change the course of their improvisation (the nature of the change is decided beforehand and might consist of a change of key or tempo) when the teacher says 'hopp' (Jacques-Dalcroze, 1931, p.121-130). This is intended to “provoke personal responses” (Doerschuk in Pressing, 1984, p.143) in the student, forcing them to invent an immediate solution to a problem they could not be fully prepared for, a little like the volunteers who improvised the rescue operation in the wake of the Naples earthquake. The point is that unpredictable events can provide a 'jolt' out of the habitual course, “sling[ing] you forcibly into a new phase” (Cardew, 1971, p.17). Jazz drummer E.W. Wainwright describes such unpredictable events as “the only way you can get to some place you’ve never been before” (Wainwright in Klemp et al., 2008, p.3). The loss of control experienced in such a situation can cause the sudden realisation that there are ways of proceeding that were previously inaccessible to you.

So it is not the nature of the unpredictable occurrence – accident, mistake, loss of control, uncertainty – but rather the sudden injection of unforeseen information that can cause the intuitive creative leaps that are the pay-off in improvisational risk. This unforeseen information, or ‘otherness’, can come from a faulty instrument, unusual acoustics, a restless audience or, perhaps most commonly, through the infinite variables involved in playing music with another human being. The whole of an improvising group is rarely the

sum of its parts. Steven Kellert, writing about chaos theory, explains that “the behavior of [a] system is not studied by reducing it to its parts” (Kellert in Borgo, 2007, p.4). The sheer number of variables and the variety of levels at which such variables interact in musical improvisation make parallels with chaos theory particularly appropriate:

“The edge of chaos is a technical term ... that describes when a dynamical system is in a critical region between order and disorder ... this critical state only occurs in dynamical systems that are dissipating internal energy, are open to continual energy fluxes from outside the system, and are operating under what are known as ‘far-from-equilibrium’ conditions” (Borgo, 2007, p.84)

This is a useful formulation of the aspect of improvised music I am discussing here. Earl Hines, Evan Parker, Miles Davis and Christian Wolff have all explored the creative possibilities of 'far-from-equilibrium' conditions.

So far I have focused on the potential benefits or pay-offs of the risks involved in improvisation. An important characteristic of improvisation is that things do go wrong and not necessarily in a spectacular or interesting or dramatic way. In my experience as an improviser and a listener much of what is played in the name of improvisation can be heard as compromised in some way. But a distinction needs to be made between compromise that is the result of creative courage and compromise that is the result of creative cowardice or apathy. In *The Imperfect Art* (1988) jazz critic Ted Gioia describes how compromise is a defining feature of creative endeavor in improvisation and what this means aesthetically:

The improviser, if he sincerely attempts to be creative, will push himself into areas of expression which his technique may not be able to handle. Too often the finished product will show moments of rare beauty intermixed with technical mistakes and aimless passages ... [jazz's] unpolished beauty may, in fact, stand as a compelling argument for viewing art as a spiritual and expressive communication between artist and audience and not as a class of perfected objects (p.68-111)

Gioia is suggesting rethinking aesthetics as the judgment of communicative acts rather than the judgment of crafted objects. This distinction between *action* and *object* is fundamental to my understanding of improvisation and helps to contextualise the role of risk. We are responsible for our actions in a far more direct and immediate way than we are responsible for our objects. An object is, by definition, separate from us physically and chronologically and their creators renounce a certain degree of responsibility: Beethoven is only one of a number of agents and factors that contribute towards the meaning of a performance of his fifth symphony for a modern audience. An improviser, on the other hand, is judged chronologically in the present and physically in the presence of an audience and can be held to account for their actions in a way that Beethoven cannot. It is through this accountability that risk can be understood as a symptom of the more fundamental improvisational condition of vulnerability.

The Oxford English Dictionary (2011) defines being vulnerable as being “open to attack or injury of a non-physical nature; esp., offering an opening to the attacks of raillery, criticism, calumny, etc.” There are several ways in which this applies to improvisers. The first, as I have mentioned above, is chronological and related to the fact that improvisation is an activity rather than an object. What would conventionally occur prior to the presentation of an art object - reflection, editing, selecting, refining – becomes, in improvisation, the sole substance of the activity. Clouzot’s film *Le Mystere Picasso* (1956) uses time-lapse photography to capture a painterly improvisation that demonstrates this:

He starts with the figure of a reclining nude – but then loses interest, and the curve of the woman's leg reminds him of a matador's leg as he flies through the air after being gored by a bull – so he paints over the nude and creates an image of a bull and a matador. But this leads him to yet another idea; he paints over the bullfight image and begins work on a Mediterranean harbour – with water-skier, bathers in bikinis, and a picturesque hilltop village ... Five hours later, Picasso stops and declares that he will have to discard the canvas ... ‘Now that I begin to see where I'm going with it, I'll take a new canvas and start again’ (Picasso in Sawyer, 2000, p.149)

This is an example of what I described earlier as subjectivity as structure. Each action derives from the previous one in some way. Moment by moment Picasso's stream of visual associations and connotations accumulate into something like a cause-and-effect structure. The difference with music of course is that this process does not culminate in an object. All an improviser has is this process of becoming. The improviser can only let people into their workshop, exposing themselves at work on something that will never be finished and that is therefore forever vulnerable to revision, error or accident.

The second source of vulnerability is the physical proximity of the improviser to an audience. Being close to another human being enhances the social dimension of any communication. This factor is enhanced by the intimate venues often used for improvised music. An audience's engagement with improvisation is simultaneously an engagement with the improviser and therefore the music is inevitably charged with a personal, biographical or social dimension.

“[in improvisation] immediacy and proximity re-emerge as ethically charged features of social interaction” (Gilroy in Fischlin & Heble, 2004, p.35)

The third potential source of vulnerability is to do with cultural context. In the West improvisation takes place in a cultural arena where objects are highly valued. Taking their cue from Capitalist economics, cultural critics conventionally ascribe value to the utility, unity or perfection of objects. Actions and interactions of any kind - let alone compromised ones - are less permanent and harder to ascribe a fixed and immutable value to. The cards of legitimate cultural value are stacked against improvisers. Engaging in an activity that so fervently valorises process in the context of a culture that so fervently valorises product is almost an act of political resistance by default.

To contextualise these ideas about vulnerability I will briefly discuss Miles Davis' 1964 recording of *My Funny Valentine*. Davis is a paradigmatic

example of the risk-taking, vulnerable improviser. Chronologically and physically it is significant that this performance was recorded live and is presumably unedited (chronologically: in a live performance there is less recourse to reflection or selection; physically: the presence of the audience gives the performance a social charge that is absent in a studio recording).

After a brief piano introduction Davis paraphrases the theme completely solo. Beyond these eight bars the theme is referred to only obliquely and the ensuing playing includes a huge array of half-valving, false fingering and lip bends with notes cracked, split, smudged, dipped, smeared and de-tuned. Davis takes risks throughout this solo, playing at the extremes of his instrument's register and dynamic range, using this exposition of technical vulnerability to intimate, highly expressive and dramatic effect. Unlike Hines, Davis did not boast about his risk-taking. On the contrary, from all accounts (including his own (Davis & Troupe, 1990)) he seems to have been particularly concerned about being perceived as in control. Davis' risk taking was led by the music, despite the opening to criticism that this offered in a competitive, judgmental cultural environment. It is easy to lose sight of how vehemently Davis was criticised during his lifetime. The American jazz establishment was striving for, and achieving, cultural legitimacy throughout the 1970's, 80's and 90's and a result of this was an emphasis on historical awareness and classicism that obscured and devalued the uncertainty and risk that has always defined Davis' work. The eminent author, critic and jazz musician James Lincoln Collier wrote:

Miles Davis is not, in comparison with other men of major influence in jazz, a great improviser. His lines are often composed of unrelated fragments and generally lack coherence. His sound is interesting, but too often it is weakened by the petulant whine of his half-valving (Collier in Walser, 1993, p.344)

The musicologist Robert Walser points out that standard evaluative methods, such as transcribing recorded improvisations, “cannot cope with the problem of Miles Davis: the missed notes, the charged pauses, the technical risk-taking, the whole challenge of explaining how this powerful

music works and 'how' it means" (1993, p.359). Walser summarises the issues of failure, risk-taking, creativity and vulnerability in Davis' work:

Despite his dislike of failure, Davis constantly and consistently put himself at risk in his trumpet playing by using a loose, flexible embouchure that helped him to produce a great variety of tone colours and articulations, by striving for dramatic gestures rather than consistent demonstration of mastery, and by experimenting with unconventional techniques. Ideally, he would always play on the edge and never miss; in practice, he played closer to the edge than anyone else and simply accepted the inevitable missteps, never retreating to a safer, more consistent performing style ... the work of Miles Davis seems to repudiate conventional notions of aesthetic distance and insists that music is less a thing than an activity (1993, p.356, 359, 360)

Walser reaffirms the conclusion drawn earlier in this section; that improvisation is an act, not an object. Davis' work effectively exemplifies and summarises the role of risk and vulnerability in improvised music.



## 1.4 Musicians

For most people improvisation is about playing with other people and some of the greatest opportunities provided by free improvisation are in the exploration of the relationships between players (Bailey, 1993, p.105)

Improvisation is, as I mentioned earlier, always a dialogue. Whilst this dialogue may be with the instrument, the audience or the musician's personal vocabulary this section focuses on the most obvious form of dialogue in improvisation: playing with other people. Most improvisatory traditions have conventions governing the scope of dialogue and interaction between musicians. In Hindustani classical music, interaction between the soloist and the tabla player normally occurs after the opening *alap* (an expressive exposition of the raga without a regular pulse) and will be based on a shared knowledge of typical *layakari* or rhythmic variations. Similarly dialogic interaction in the mainstream jazz tradition is often foregrounded near the end of an arrangement in an exchange of two, four or eight bar phrases. These frameworks constitute a shared language within which the improvisers may converse. In the relatively convention-free practice of free-improvisation, dialogue and interaction is often the central focus of the activity. Bailey describes this process:

Two musicians, coming together to play a piece of music, I think, has to be interesting even if the results are, in themselves, not a great piece of music. The way they find to work with each other says something about music. So you can hear one musician figuring out ... how the other musician is matching what he does against what the other guy does, even if it's not working in completed musical terms, but the process can be, I think, one of the most interesting listening experiences you can get (A Liberating Thing, 1992)

The 'figuring out' and 'matching' that Bailey talks about is described as 'negotiation' by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis who talks about jazz improvisation as an opportunity for "a group of people [to] come together and create art ... and negotiate their agendas ... and that negotiation *is* the art" (Supremefactory, 2012). Bailey and Marsalis both clearly value the socio-aesthetic dimension of dialogue in improvisation. They both suggest

that this interaction can be, and perhaps ought to be, the central focus of the activity.

Bailey was fascinated by these initial musical encounters. The ever-changing personnel in Bailey's free-improvisation group Company testifies to this. A particular incarnation of Company would be formed for a week long festival (these festivals were called Company Weeks) before disbanding. According to Bailey a week was just long enough to stop the ensemble from "turning into some kind of band, and I think at that point, for my tastes, a kind of deterioration sets in ... that development thing, I don't see it as being, from the improvisational point of view, some kind of advance or improvement" (Childs et al, 1982/83, p.50). Bailey, known for his "monastic vigilance" (Carr in Borgo, 2007, p.23) regarding the habitual side of improvising, is making an extreme case for short-lived ensembles that has particular currency in free-improvisation. As I mentioned above, improvisation that aspires to operate outside of the framework of a tradition or established musical language relies more heavily on the dialogic aspect of the activity. What was special about Company as opposed to a long-term improvising group was the friction, uncertainty, imminent failure, immediacy and genuine sense of exploration involved in bringing such a diverse range of musicians together for the first time. The music was the sound of these players, instruments and styles negotiating their relationships and their identity in an unfamiliar context; a manifestation of the belief that we reveal ourselves more fully in such unpredictable encounters.

However unpredictability is not exclusive to this collaborative honeymoon period. An established relationship can provide the security necessary to take certain risks. Despite the views expressed above Bailey himself was involved in many long-term improvising collaborations such as his duo with the drummer John Stevens and various groups with the saxophonist Evan Parker. It is to be expected perhaps, that musicians who share similar views and work together regularly will express their friendship in their music making. The pianist Frederic Rzewski asserted that the music of improvising group Musica Elettronica Viva was "based on friendship. This

element of friendship is communicated in the music: it cannot be concealed” (Rzewski in Lewis, 2004, p.158). However the social and musical aspects of a collaborative relationship, while always present, should not be conflated. Conceivably one could develop at a different rate or along different lines to the other. I have certainly experienced effective musical/aesthetic partnerships that are socially dysfunctional. A certain amount of social friction or discomfort often serves to avoid creative complacency.

The problem here is the same as in all areas of improvisation: the Achilles heel of this form of music making is the sheer familiarity that comes from continually dealing with the same instrument, the same musical vocabulary and the same people. The onus is on the improviser to continually find fresh ways of avoiding the staleness and complacency that are an almost inevitable by-product of the activity. In the previous section I discussed how risk taking can bring vitality to the improvised present. This section focuses on how the socio-aesthetic realm of collaboration can do the same.

The example of Miles Davis is, again, instructive here. Davis had more highly productive collaborative relationships throughout his career than many artists. He engaged in most of these through his role as a band-leader. For Davis this meant the “creation and manipulation of a symbolic ‘ritual space’” (Smith, 1998, p.262) in which a careful choice of musicians, subtle use of visual and sonic cues and the manipulation of power relations combined to create a “quality of attentive musical flexibility that would lift his players to the level of co-composing interpreters” (1998, p.262). For example during the recording of *Aida*, for his 1981 comeback album *The Man with the Horn*, Miles Davis:

Told [bassist Marcus] Miller to play an F and G vamp, but when Miller stuck resolutely to the chords, Davis stopped the band. ‘Is that all you gonna play?’ he asked. ‘I heard you was bad. You ain’t playin’ shit. ‘So Miller filled in his vamp ornately on the next take, and Davis stopped the band again. ‘What are you playin’?’ he asked Miller. ‘Just play F and G and shut up’ (Chambers, 1987, p.303-304)

Listening to *Aida*, there is an alertness to Millers playing, a tension between restraint and irrepressible virtuosity, that may not have been present in the

playing of a young musician with extraordinary technical facility making his first recording with the legendary Miles Davis, were it not for Davis' perverse, elliptical direction. Smith notes that Davis "intentionally supplied, withheld, and distorted performance information because of a quality of attention that such an environment evoked from his players" (1998, p.262).

There are two points about collaborative work within improvised music that help to contextualise the example above. The first is that improvisation "calls into question the myths of individual agency and innovation-in-isolation on which the dominant Western understandings of artistic production are based" (Hebdige in Fischlin & Heble, 2004, p.24). This discussion is continued in the following section through a critique of the idealism of modernism in relation to improvised music. The second point reinforces the Vygotskian perspective of the key text in this area, John-Steiner's *Creative Collaboration* (2000), through the words of Bakhtin:

"I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other, finding the other in me" (Bakhtin in John-Steiner, 2000, p.5)

While I agree with both of these statements their sources either de-emphasise or ignore the fact that more often than not collaboration involves "complex issues of power play" (Fitch & Heyde, 2007, p.72). It is hard to disagree with Peters' observation:

"Certainly anyone familiar with improvisation either as a spectator or participant could not fail to be aware of the fact that free-improvisation is more about power than it is about freedom" (Peters, 2009, p.52)

Davis certainly collaborated with Miller on *Aida* – the end result could not have been achieved without either of their contributions – but Chamber's account of the process does not invoke the conventional collaborative associations of equality and friendship. The theatre improvisation teacher Keith Johnstone's work with status transaction is revealing here. Johnstone's observes that humans are "pecking order animals" and that "every sound and posture implies a status" (Johnstone, 2007, p.72-73). This puts a different slant on Bakhtin's words: seen through Johnstone's eyes the

process of ‘finding myself in the other, finding himself in me’ becomes a negotiation of status. And this is what is happening when Bailey describes hearing “one musician figuring out ... how the other musician is matching what he does against what the other guy does” (A Liberating Thing, 1992) or when Marsalis talks about ‘negotiating agendas’. As the composer Fabrice Fitch and cellist Neil Heyde observe, “a successful collaboration will not attempt to defuse the difficulties of the situation, which are in any case unavoidable, but will harness it’s provocative and questioning aspects” (Fitch & Heyde, 2007, p.73).

## 1.5 The Familiar

All improvisation takes place in relation to the known whether the known is traditional or newly acquired (Bailey, 1993)

I have discussed the way in which a musical instrument is saturated with human intention even before it has been played, the web of automatic motor skills and physical habits that collectively constitute instrumental ability and the dangers of staleness and predictability that can result from repeatedly improvising with the same people. Despite all of this, an improviser still hopes (and is expected) to make something new, on the hoof, out of this old, overused material. Gary Peters dramatizes what he describes as the ‘tragic predicament’ of the improviser by re-presenting Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*:

His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (Benjamin in Peters, 2009, p.18)

The improviser - the angel, advocate, creator of the new - is turned towards the past, the known, the familiar. As they are propelled inexorably through time they must face the immediate past - in the form of what has just been played - as well as the accumulated debris of the longer-term past that constitutes the tools of their trade: their instrument, their relationship to their instrument, their musical vocabulary, and the musicians they are playing with.

Another of Peter's analogies that helps to set the scene for the coming discussion is how the reality-TV-game-show *Scrap Heap Challenge* reflects the predicament of the improviser:

“The [improvising] artist, like our contestants, is thrown into a situation piled high with the discarded waste products of cultural history. These are the defunct, clapped-out, disintegrating remnants of past times on the edge of an oblivion that promise, at best, a faint

but continuing resonance as nostalgia and the cliché or, at worst, as universal forgetfulness” (Peters, 2009, p.17)

Scrabbling through the rubble, improvisers salvage what they can from the ruins of the once-great edifices of established musical traditions. Peters’ Adorno-esque painting of the improviser’s predicament focuses on the macro-historical aspect of the situation, the realm of cultural memory. The title of this section refers to both the familiarity of this inherited cultural (macro) memory as well as the personal level of (micro) memory that includes everything from the physical habits of instrumental ability to the history of the social relationships between improvising musicians. The fundamental point I want to make here is that a musician’s relationship with what is familiar to them (whether cultural or personal) is the primary source and site of creativity in improvisation.

A reliance on personal memory and physical habits has been the basis of much criticism of improvisation. Elliott Carter believed that “a musical score is written to keep the performer from playing what he already knows” (Cox and Warner, 2008, p.250). Pierre Boulez complains that free improvisation is reduced to “extremely banal criteria and clichés” because of the inadequacy of human memory (Boulez in Peters, 2009, p.82). Theodore Adorno writes of the “stereotypical and standardised formulae” (Adorno in Peters, 2009, p.79) of jazz improvisation. Luciano Berio felt that improvisation was “a haven of dilettantes” who “normally act on the level of instrumental praxis rather than musical thought ... [by] musical thought I mean above all the discovery of a coherent discourse that unfolds and develops simultaneously on different levels” (Berio in Borgo, 2007, p.20). Karlheinz Stockhausen takes pains to disassociate what he calls ‘intuitive music’ from improvisation: “to me the term ‘improvisation’ no longer seems appropriate to describe what we are playing, since improvisation is always associated with the idea of underlying schemata, formulas, stylistic elements. It thus somehow moves within a musical language [whereas] Intuitive Music emerges as pure as possible from the intuition” (Stockhausen, 1993, p.12). In the handbook to his graphic score *Treatise*,

Cornelius Cardew warns that “the danger in this kind of work is that many readers of the score will relate the musical memories they have already acquired to the notation in front of them, and the result will be merely a gulash made up of various musical backgrounds of the people involved” (Cardew, 1971, p.19).

Carter, Boulez, Adorno, Berio, Stockhausen and Cardew all make the assumption that what is familiar is creatively unfertile. Memory is conflated with formulae and cliché (and gulash), ‘instrumental praxis’ is considered distinct from ‘musical thought’ and it is implied that working within a musical language inhibits intuition. There is some validity in these criticisms but we must first contextualise what is being said.

The most obvious observation to make about these critics is that, with the exception of Adorno, they are all composers. This partly explains their comments: having chosen to make music in a certain way, they prioritise different aspects of the activity. More relevant however is how their comments reveal the power relations between composers and performers in the twentieth century. The similarity between the hierarchies in Modernist art music and the political/industrial power structures of capitalism has been discussed by Cook (2000) and Small (1998). The idea of a musician bearing a significant part of the responsibility of the music making was something approached with caution by even the most radical Modernists. As seen above, both Stockhausen and Cardew offered various misgivings and caveats when it came to performances of their pieces that quite deliberately drew upon improvisation-related resources (e.g. *From the Seven Days* (1970) and *Treatise* (1967)).

This parsing of creative responsibility into artist (composer) and craftsperson (performer) is just one of many symptoms of the apparent irreconcilability of Modernism with improvisation. The friction between these roles (artist and craftsperson) is a defining feature of improvisation and, as we have seen, one of its richest resources. A brief discussion of the



incompatibility of Modernism and improvisation will help to expand what I mean here.

Improvisation has suffered at the hands of the Modernist discourses with which it became entangled, articulated and shaped throughout the course of the twentieth century. For example, when applied to improvisation the Modernist focus on innovation and originality emphasises one aspect of the activity to the point of distortion. Of course originality is an important ingredient in improvised music but what Modernist dialectics were not well-equipped to recognise or articulate was just how closely bound up with the past, the present and the local – the physical and contingent – the originality of improvisation is. Peters points out that:

“the valorisation of originality, novelty, innovation, and unpredictability [in Modernist thought] obscures the fact that within an artwork or performance the new is not always powerful and the formulaic is not always sterile” (Peters, 2009, p.103)

Peters believes that improvisers are “heirs to a modernist aesthetic (or ideology) of innovation and novelty that is often at odds with the real predicament of the artist at work” (Peters, 2009, p.1). Improvisation has always retained its links to the contingent nature of lived experience (real life) and therefore has always, in some respects, been at odds with the absolutism and idealism of modernism.

The various forms of modernist ideology to which Carter, Boulez, Stockhausen and Cardew subscribed were not designed to accept and work with the contingent, compromised nature of ‘the artist at work’. There was a utopian emphasis on purity, control, originality, innovation, newness; a nostalgic post-romantic valorisation of the ‘other’ (the noble savage/proletariat) that inhibited comprehension of the actual nature of improvisatory processes. This was one of the most radical things about improvisation in the twentieth century; it acknowledged, and even celebrated, the imperfect, imprecise, accidental, practically necessary, habitual – in short the real rather than the ideal - in music. The medium, the source, of this acknowledgement was the instrument. There is a rootedness

in reality, a form of humility, provided by the physical presence of an instrument.

So in the wake of this contextualisation what is left of Carter, Boulez, Stockhausen and Cardew's criticism? It is certainly true that improvisation is characterised by the 'limits of human memory' but what Boulez doesn't acknowledge is that the serendipitous unreliability/unpredictability of human memory is one of improvisation's richest resources (and the Achilles heel of serialism). Carter, like Miles Davis and Derek Bailey, knew the benefits of steering the performer away from 'playing what he already knows'; any experienced improviser is aware of the cul-de-sacs of habit and has developed strategies to manage this. But what about Adorno's 'stereotypical and standardised formulae'? It is true that improviser's use formulae. Is it really possible to say something new with the 'defunct, clapped out, disintegrating remnants of past times'? To answer this we must turn to Derrida, who agrees that:

"It's not easy to improvise. It's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or microphone, one ventriloquizes or leaves another to speak in one's place the schemas and languages that are already there. There are already a great number of prescriptions ... prescribed in our memory and in our culture. All the names are already preprogrammed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise. One can't say whatever one wants. One is obliged, more or less, to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation but always with the belief that it's impossible" (Derrida in Fischlin, 2009, p.5)

From this perspective improvisation "is always circumscribed by the already said, by the prescribed, by preprogramming, by stereotypes" (Fischlin, 2009, p.5). Elsewhere Derrida complains that improvisation "is never absolute, it never has the purity of what one thinks one can require of a forced improvisation ... a battery of anticipatory and delaying devices, of slowing-down procedures are already in place as one opens one's mouth" (Derrida in Peters, 2009, p.169). But as I discussed earlier such absolutism misses an important point: the activity of improvisation manages to combine an aspirational sense of what is possible with a rootedness in and an

acceptance of the contingent limits of reality (“the new is not always powerful and the formulaic is not always sterile” (Peters, 2009, p.103)). Davis’ directions during the recording of ‘Aida’ didn’t result in a radical alteration to Miller’s vocabulary but to a “quality of attentive flexibility” (Smith, 1998, p.262), much as Stockhausen’s text pieces, *From the Seven Days*, are designed to cultivate an ‘attunement’ of the musician’s sensibilities and Zorn’s game pieces set up certain pregnant relationships between the players. Zorn is relevant here because a piece like *Cobra* was specifically designed to harness the “personal languages” of musicians who had developed “a very particular way of relating to their instruments” (Zorn in Bailey, 1993, pp.75-76). It was the physical habits, the personal clichés with which each player was identified, that formed the resource that Zorn was tapping into in this piece (Zorn in Maykrantz, 2004).

In these examples the emphasis is not on innovation - on playing something beyond what Derrida calls ‘the schemas and languages that are already there’ - but on a change in the quality of listening; a change in the way we relate to such schemas and language. Such a paradigm shift means that “the cliché [the epitome of schema and language] can be recognized, as it is in comedy, as a privileged site for the unconcealment of being” (Peters, 2009, p.131). Peters suggests that:

“Derrida has things the wrong way round: it is not the ‘battery of anticipatory and delaying devices’ that will ‘protect’ us from improvisation but, rather, improvisation that can and should protect us from *them*” (Peters, 2009, p.169)

The implication is that improvisation ‘can and should’ have something approaching an ethical dimension; that improvisers are able to model an alertness to complacency and a simultaneous awareness of both the compromised, contingent nature and the limitless possibility of life that we might learn from.

This anticipates the final section of this first chapter. But before I turn to the ethical dimension of improvisation I want to return to the subject of the familiar. Earlier I made the claim that the familiar is both the source and the site of creativity in improvisation. Peters’ example of a stand-up comedian

helps to clarify what I mean here. Both improvising musicians and comedians draw on a pre-established stock of material (this material is often, mainly because of the need for instant recall, stylised or clichéd to some degree). But the simple re-presentation of this material does not guarantee laughs. The successful comedian must discover, must improvise, ways of “de-familiarising the familiar” (Peters, 2005, p.304) that will reveal their worn subject matter afresh. To describe this process Peters adapts two terms from Heidegger and Levinas respectively: ‘*es gibt*’ (it gives) and ‘*il y a*’ (there is). The familiar material is what is ‘*there*’. What distinguishes the improvising of the successful from the unsuccessful comedian is their sensitivity to how the *there gives*:

What is *there* for the funny and unfunny comedian alike is more or less identical: same mother-in-laws, same genitalia, same racial and gender stereotypes ... [improvisation in this context] has almost nothing to do with the invention of new material on the hoof but, rather, with the manner in which the *there* is *given* differently. The re-novative production of the new out of the old, difference out of the same, the absurd out of the obvious, is what makes us laugh ... but it is important to understand that absurdity is not produced by the comedian during flights of comic fantasy but is, rather, something recognised or heard calling within the *there* itself ... It is about grasping what is given in the *there* as *it gives* and also having the necessary (ironic) agility to escape the *there* once the giving ceases” (Peters, 2009, p.126-7)

Deep in the folds of what is most familiar lies the greatest potential invention: a creative methodology that involves what Allen Ginsburg describes as “settling down in the muck of your own mind” (Ginsberg in Hyde, 2007, p.147-148) as a means of making unpredictable, fundamental discoveries in real time. Peters’ way of understanding this process has the advantage of locating the source of the ‘new’ (the fresh insight into the everyday or already-known) in the material rather than the improviser. He does this in order to bypass the notions of self-expression, autobiography and the individual genius that too often dominate talking/writing about improvisation. An improviser’s responsibility is to listen to the ‘call’ of the *there* giving itself differently. Improvisational insights do not come from either the improviser or the material but from an improviser’s relationship to their material at the time of invention.

I want to conclude this section with a more detailed model of what Peters refers to as the ‘call from within the *there*’, given by the musician and scholar Ed Sarath (1996).

Sarath presents a technical model of the idea that invention in improvisation is about how you relate to the familiar. His theory parses the process of improvising into inward and outward phases that make up a ‘cognitive event cycle’. An inward movement is when “the conscious mind connects with realms of internal imagery in the internal reservoir” (1996, p.8). This is the point where an improviser engages with their memory. Outward movement is when the material generated by the inward movement is actually played. Creation consists in the move from inward to outward, externalising the internal, and is mediated by three ‘cognitive tendencies’: actuality, possibility and probability.

The actuality phase is the perception of a musical idea sounding in the localized present. Possibilities are the field of implications generated from each actuality. Within this field of possibilities exist one or more probable successors, which are potential events more likely to occur due to tendencies shaped by the background of the artist and the musical environment of the moment ... "probable" in the preceding sentence refers to instances where conception is driven by strongly conditioned patterns which bind the awareness in one time coordinate to a future coordinate (p.8)

Sarath's 'strongly conditioned patterns' and 'internal imagery in the internal reservoir' are the same as Peters' “stockpile of clichés and standardised formulas” (Peters, 2009, p.84). According to Sarath's model what is currently happening in the music suggests a range of possible ways forward and the improviser selects from among these. The selection process involves engaging with a vast storehouse of aural, haptic and visual patterns and conditioning. These strongly established neural networks are necessary for a choice to be instantly accessible and it is here that Sarath locates what he calls the creativity-craft paradox: access to these internal resources is necessary for the creative act to take place but these same resources inhibit

and limit freedom of choice by their nature as formulae. This is why the frequency of cognitive event cycles is so important:

The frequency of such cycles is significant, in that the actuality phase is the point in the cycle where awareness can penetrate into the internal reservoir, upon which invention and adaptation are dependent. Consequently, the more cycles per time frame (by the clock) the greater the interactive and creative potential in music making (p.8)

The more frequently the improviser chooses or 'checks' what they are doing, the greater their freedom of choice. Sarath calls this 'neutralising probability tendencies' and it is essentially a model of heightened awareness. Sarath is not saying that an improviser should avoid the obvious but that they should be as aware of their choices as possible:

The task of the improviser is neither to embrace nor discard external manifestations of inner content, but to neutralise the temporal bonds of that content. In so doing, the creativity-craft paradox is resolved through the co-existence of freedom-from and access to internal creative resources in heightened event-cycle frequency (p.12-14)

Sarath is less cautious than Peters when it comes to discussing the spiritual implications of this kind of heightened awareness.

By deconstructing the temporal associations of such object referral patterns, the improviser sheds the bonds which confine awareness to localised, ordinary present-consciousness and invokes a self-referral, heightened conception ... Heightened consciousness is therefore more a matter of clearing away obstacles – object referral attachments which shroud the union of the personal and unbounded self – and revealing a relationship that was always there, than it is of attaining some abnormal state of functioning through external means. The Zen practitioner ruminates over nonsensical ideas, or *koans*, and in so doing shatters the logic patterns which bind consciousness to its ordinary state and allows union with the unbounded. In much the same way, the improviser shatters the logic patterns embodied in temporal associations of ordinary object-referral consciousness, and in so doing reintegrates the personal self with its unbounded source in a state of heightened awareness (p.15)

There is a spiritual dimension to improvisation that resides in this Buddhist-orientated notion of enhanced awareness as a pre-condition of freedom and the belief that, if freed from attachments in this way, the self is naturally abundant and compassionate. The arguments in this section can be

summarised by Lord Krishna's advice to the prince Arjuna when he asks how to achieve success on the battlefield. Krishna replies that the successful warrior achieves spiritual illumination through increased self-awareness, an enhanced awareness of the familiar:

“curving back on my own nature, I create again and again” (Dillbeck in Sarath, 1996, p.14).

## 1.6 Ethics

Near the beginning of this chapter I called improvisation a ‘parasitic activity’ and claimed that ‘a practice that feeds on dismantling established codes will eventually devour the context of its birth’. I want to start this final section by explaining what I meant by this.

There is a link between Sarath’s theory of cognitive event cycles outlined in the previous section and Cobussen’s claim that “tacit rules and existing codes are re-investigated, re-form(ulat)ed, re-used and thereby abandoned, mutilated, deterritorialised ... in the act of improvising” (2005, p.33). For Sarath an improviser’s “internal repository of concepts, techniques and tendencies” (1996, p.7) are the main resource from which they draw. As discussed earlier, the crucial factor is the frequency of ‘cognitive event cycles’. The lower the frequency of these cycles the more an improviser’s behaviour is dictated by their ‘internal repository’. The higher the frequency of cycles the less an improviser’s behaviour will be simply a projection of their storehouse of aural, haptic and visual conditioning. I want to draw a parallel between Sarath’s ‘internal repository’ and Cobussen’s ‘existing codes’. An improviser aims to ‘re-investigate, re-formulate, re-use’ (Cobussen, 2005), re-novate and re-vivify (Peters, 2005, 2009) the pre-existing physical and mental structures that allow them to improvise. This is what I mean when I say that improvisation is about dismantling established codes. In order to make something new using something old (pre-existing physical and mental structures) an improviser must abandon, mutilate, deterritorialise (Cobussen, 2005), disrupt, trouble (Fischlin & Heble, 2004), violate, rework (Badiou, 2001), interrogate, critique and resist the very structures that enable them to act. And it is through this process that improvisation gains its social and ethical charge:

The social force of improvised music resides, at least in part, in its capacity to disrupt institutionally sanctioned economies of production, to trouble the assumptions (and the expectations of fixity) fostered by dominant systems of knowledge production (Fischlin & Heble, 2004, p.22)



This claim is substantiated through Alain Badiou's ideas about ethics. For Badiou an ethical truth is all about dismantling established codes. An ethical truth is a radical event that ruptures the established 'situation' in which it occurs. A 'situation' is characterised by conservatism: it consists of institutionalised knowledge and established power relations that, by their very nature, contain a 'void'. This void consists of whatever cannot be conceived of from within the context of the situation. An event is something that grants access to this void; a glimpse of what was previous unknowable. The role of ethics in all of this concerns a person's fidelity and on-going commitment to the truth generated by an event.

Badiou points to the birth of the classical style in music as an example. The Baroque style was a well-established set of musical practices yet at its heart "lay the absence ... of a genuine conception of musical architectonics" (2001, p.68). This was the void in the situation. It was the event of Haydn and his fidelity to the truth of a new architectural and thematic way of composing music that ruptured the situation of Baroque music.

A truth punches a hole in knowledges ... but it is also the sole known source of new knowledges ... it is by violating established knowledges that a truth returns to the immediacy of the situation, or reworks that sort of portable encyclopaedia from which opinion, communication and sociality draw their meaning (p.70)

This view of ethics as a singular act, derived from the context/situation in which it occurs but not deducible from (or reducible to) a ten-commandments-style set of abstracted injunctions, that 'reworks' pre-existing structures in such a way as to provide an unforeseeable insight into those same structures, shares much with the view of improvisation that has been put forward in this chapter. Badiou's 'portable encyclopaedia' (mentioned above) sounds similar to Stockhausen's 'automatic brain processes' (1974), Cobussen's 'existing codes' (2005), Peters' 'stockpile of clichés' (2009), Adorno's 'stereotypical and standardised formulae' (Adorno in Peters, 2009), Derrida's 'schemas and languages that are already there' (Derrida in Fischlin, 2009) and Sarath's 'internal repository' (1996). These are the pre-existing structures, the scaffolding that is necessary for improvisation to take place. The improvising musician, like the stand-up

comedian, monitors how these structures are present in their playing, listening for the *there* giving itself differently (Peters, 2009), ‘neutralizing the temporal bonds’ of these structures (Sarath, 1996) so that they will “be freer, will expect things differently, will anticipate and know something different is coming down” (Davis & Troupe, 1990). In the present an improviser searches for something that is not available a priori, hoping to catch, out of the corner of their eye, a glimpse of the void in their material – some undiscovered and un-mined shaft of creative fecundity, a patch of light where they suddenly confront a truth. This is the “unheard music” that Eliot writes of in the Four Quartets:

“Sudden in a shaft of sunlight/Even while the dust moves/There rises the hidden laughter/Of children in the foliage/ Quick now, here, now, always” (Eliot, 1974, p.195)

These new truths will eventually become encrusted through use and go on to become the established knowledges, situations and physical/mental habits that will, in their turn, be interrogated by future improvisers.

An important aspect of Badiou’s theory is his insistence on the singularity of ethical truths. He argues against liberal humanism, pointing out that the conventional human rights-style of ethics defines what is good negatively. Human rights are generally freedoms-from, “rights to non-evil” (2001, p.9). This propagates the notion that “evil is that from which good is derived” (p.10) which “encourages us to think that the definition of a human subject is ‘the being who is capable of recognising himself as a victim’” (p.10). This is the idea (also present in some forms of capitalism) that humans are evil by default and it is the role of ethics to protect us from our nature. “If our only agenda is an ethical engagement against an evil we recognise a priori, how are we to envisage any transformation of the way things are?” (p.13-14). Badiou’s ethic of truths is, like improvisation, an attempt to envisage such a transformation, to envisage something that is not visible from within the current situation. But this is not just a simplistic binary of pessimism and optimism; it is to do with time and presence.

Thanks to its negative and a priori determination of evil, ethics prevents itself from thinking the singularity of situations as such,

which is the obligatory starting point of all properly human action ... All humanity has its root in the identification in thought of singular situations. There is no ethics in general (p.14-16)

And this is where Badiou's argument becomes particularly relevant to improvisation. For Badiou ethics, like improvisation, consists of human action rather than abstract injunctions. It occurs (and only exists) in a specific time and place and between specific people; an ethical truth comes into existence at the point of action. In other words ethics is the process of translating the "abstract, statistical generality" (p.14) of principles into action, the rediscovery of the ethical force of such principles through their application:

It is not possible to derive concrete norms one must follow in a specific situation from ethics itself – which means that the subject has to assume the responsibility of 'translating' the abstract injunctions of ethics into a series of concrete obligations, the subjects own contingent act of performatively assuming an ethic (Cobussen, 2005, p.39)

The abstract injunctions of ethics, whose relevance is reinvestigated and reinvented every time they see practical use, are equivalent to the pre-existing structures that constitute what is *there* for an improviser. Just as a stand-up comedian uses improvisation to transform hackneyed truisms about mother-in-laws into laughter (the laughter that recognises a truth afresh) so a moral agent improvises from abstract imperatives to singular action. The performative, enactive nature of improvisation – the way in which knowledge is constituted through doing – is why it is appropriate to think of ethical behaviour as a form of improvisation.

Is the reverse true? Is it appropriate to think of improvisation as a form of ethical behaviour? It is certainly true that "improvisatory performance practices can *model* different ways of being in the world" (Fischlin & Heble, 2004, p.11, my italics). This belief is fundamental to the practice of such diverse improvising communities as music therapists, the musicians in John Zorn's game pieces and the \$4 million research project *Improvisation, Community and Social Practice* (based at the University of Guelph, Canada). It was this belief, so radical in the England of the 1960's and 70s,

which inspired and sustained the work of Cornelius Cardew and John Stevens. The Scratch Orchestra, formed by Cornelius Cardew, Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton in 1969, was a collective of musicians, artists, poets and other creatively minded individuals formed as a result of an article/advert placed in the Musical Times entitled ‘A Scratch Orchestra: draft constitution’ (Prevost, 2008). John Stevens’ improvisation workshops in South London in the 1970’s and 80’s - open to all comers regardless of experience or ability - led to the development of the practice known as Community Music (Stevens was the co-founder and musical director of Community Music Ltd in 1983). His exercises are collected in a workshop handbook called *Search and Reflect*.

Both the Scratch Orchestra and Stevens’ workshops were practical embodiments of (or empirical experiments towards) a philosophy of music and, by extension, a moral and political philosophy. In the preface to *Search and Reflect*, Maggie Nicols recalls that Stevens “believed that in making community music, we were ‘practicing an alternate society’” (Nicols in Stevens, 2007, memoir two). Cardew was more explicit about the ethical implications of improvised music making. His thoughts during this period were collected in the essay ‘Towards an Ethic of Improvisation’ (1971) in which he outlines seven “kinds of virtue or strength that can be developed by the musician” (p.17): simplicity, integrity, selflessness, forbearance, preparedness, identification with nature and acceptance of death.

The Scratch Orchestra “posited music-making as a truly life-enhancing, life-fulfilling activity which freed and enabled ordinary people ... the Scratch Orchestra was an expression of the universality of art” (Tilbury, 2008, p.363-441). In their own ways both Stevens and Cardew focussed on the “moral dimension of music as an expression of human relations” (Tilbury, 2008, p.372) or what Small, in the foreword to ‘*Search and Reflect*’, calls the “universal need to affirm oneself in relation with others” (Small in Stevens, 2007, p.V). The language used here suggests that Stevens’ work was more orientated towards *modeling* ideal ways of being in the world

(‘practicing’ rather than building an alternate society) while the Scratch Orchestra aspired to actually living differently. But music was only one of many activities that the Scratch Orchestra engaged in and its aspirational nature led to the group taking on an increasingly political dimension. The fact that the legacy of Stevens’ work has in some ways outlasted that of the Scratch Orchestra may be, significantly, because it focused on the most profound connection between musical and social communication: listening. It is through listening that music can cross the fine line from modeling ethical behavior to actually being fundamentally ethical:

Listening is voluntary because it entails active restraint from habitual, involuntary reactions; and it is selective because it seeks out that which is subtle or obscure, at the fringes of awareness ... listening must be deliberately cultivated at this very moment, however difficult, rather than as a special framed activity done in ideal conditions (Biswas, 2011, p.103)

[improvisation] succeeds as music only to the extent that listening achieves equal status with playing ... if free improvisation has anything emancipatory or ‘anticipatory’ about it, then this kind of proleptic vision is contained within the act of listening, not in the sounds themselves (Stanyek in Borgo, 2007, p.28)

The kind of listening cultivated in Stevens’ exercises is valuable from both a musical and a social perspective; in fact they deliberately conflate these two perspectives. They bring to the surface the social dimension that exists in all music making. The fact that the focus of the exercises is on developing certain ideal kinds of listening, as opposed to ways of playing or specific musical material, is what connects the resulting music making with social (and therefore ethical) practice. The piece/exercise Ghost is a good example of this. Ghost involves each member of the group taking turns at being an improvising soloist while the rest of the ensemble ‘ghosts’ them, “imitating as closely as possible the rhythms and pitches of the solo, as it is being played, until the soloist has finished” (Stevens, 2007, p.88, Stevens’ emphasis). Effective ghosting demands a kind of listening that gives itself completely to the soloist. Stevens instructs the group to shut their eyes and to “be on guard against anticipating what the soloist might do next, always subordinating their individual reactions to the all-important ghosting” (p.90). The ghosting must “be careful to maintain a sound balance that

allows an aural distance between the soloist and the accompanying collective” (p.89). If a ghosting instrument is having difficulty playing quieter than the soloist they must “invent new ways of making sound on their instruments” (p.90). A good way of testing the listening in this piece is to check if the group stops precisely with the soloist: “the group must be so aware of the soloist’s every sound, that whenever there is the slightest pause in the solo, there should be no ‘overlapping’ by the ensemble” (p.90). Everything about this piece intensifies and focuses the listening of the collective to the individual. Ghost has an enormous impact on group cohesion and how the individual relates to and is related to by the group. Almost every group of humans contains some kind of tension between dominant or passive personalities. Ghost directs the group’s awareness towards each personality in turn, ensuring that they are listened to with greater sensitivity and greater attentiveness than they would normally receive socially. Despite the non-verbal nature of this communication the listening of the ‘ghosters’ retains a powerful social resonance, it is an interaction between people and as such it has an intimacy to it, the sheer attentiveness and sensitivity of such listening can be an intimate act of generosity. The musicking of Ghost can certainly be experienced, heard and thought of as a form of ethical behavior.

The distinction between modelling and actually embodying ethical behaviour is a fragile and not hugely significant one. I contend that all improvisation has some degree of ethical charge if only by dint of its social currency (music is always a communicative interaction between humans). To continue to discuss what is unique about the relationship between improvising and ethics some connections must be made between these ideas and my overarching argument that improvisation involves a return to, or a reinvention from within, what is familiar.

As I mentioned earlier in relation to Badiou’s ethical philosophy the abstract injunctions that form the basis of many ethical systems share something with an improvisers ‘pre-existing structures’. The philosopher Daniel Groll

points out that an improvising musician (or a moral agent) doesn't consult a "set of rules or principles" (2006, p.9) before acting. Instead, the flow of improvisation is the result of extensive preparation. This preparation doesn't involve "considering every case [they] might encounter" (p.9) but instead consists of attuning themselves to certain kinds of situations.

Improvising well takes tremendous preparation even if no particular instance need involve serious preparation. We might think of the preparation needed as involving the formation of character such that individual decisions, individual instances of improvisation, flow out of the character in a seemingly unproblematic way ... Improvisation, then, will involve a lack of what we might call explicit systemisation of the deliberative process. It would also seem strange to think that a complex chain of practical reasoning is going on 'implicitly' or in the background in these instances (p.3-15)

For Groll a good musical, or moral, action has the appearance of being natural or instinctive, free from complex reasoning, yet this simplicity is achievable only through extensive preparation and on-going cultivation and correction. Cardew makes a similar point in his definition of the improvisational virtue of simplicity: "where everything becomes simple is the most desirable place to be. But ... you have to remember how you got there" (Cardew, 1971, p.20). But how does an improviser work towards such simplicity when "improvisation cannot be rehearsed" (p.17)? Cardew goes on to say that "training is substituted for rehearsal, and a certain moral discipline is an essential part of this training" (p.17). What exactly are Groll and Cardew talking about when they refer to an improviser's moral discipline, training, preparation or attunement?

Imagine that an improviser is a lens. The light shining into the lens is the past. An improviser's past is made up of a vast array of biological facts, technological inheritance, enculturation, physical habits and muscle memory, cultural tropes and a degree of personal volition. The past is refracted through the lens of the improvising present to create music; there is a sense in which improvisation is a projection of the past. Because of the contingency of creating in real-time an improviser has limited powers with which to prevent their enculturation from shaping the majority of their actions. A biologically finite capacity for sensorimotor processing, the

unpredictability of playing with other musicians, the powerful social dynamics of most performing contexts, what Parker refers to as “the precise emotional, acoustic, psychological and other less tangible atmospheric conditions in effect at the time the music is played” (Parker in Bailey, 1993, p.81); all combine to potentially inhibit the amount of conscious control an improviser has over the situation. An improviser’s lack of control over this projected past is what leads to Peters’ “endless regurgitation of a stockpile of clichés and standardised formulas” (Peters, 2009, p.84). This is what Cage was referring to when he said that improvisation “does not lead you into a new experience, but into something with which you’re already familiar” (Cage in Darter, 1982, p.21). This was the basis of the criticism in the previous section from Boulez, Berio, Carter et al: that improvisation is a mere projection of enculturation or a kind of musical Rorschach test, with the conscientious musician leaping about in vain trying to filter, censor, refine or rationalise the vast ray of unconscious, redundant information shining through them.

There are two things to say in response to this view of improvisation. The first is that it is precisely an improviser’s inability to fully consciously control what they are doing that gives improvisation its power and depth (this unconscious, irrational dimension is another important level on which improvised music making challenged Western art music in the Twentieth Century; the shockwaves of this cultural confrontation are only now being absorbed as academia becomes more receptive to improvised practices). The second point to make is about habits. Essentially what I mean by enculturation is that an improviser, as a matter of necessity, relies on their habits. When John Cage asked “how can we find ways of improvising that release us from our habits” (Cage & Retallack, 1996, p.274) the implication was, of course, that habits are something we need to be released from. I have argued that habits are both a necessary precursor to the act of improvisation and its main source of creativity. Release from them is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, an improviser’s responsibility is to ensure that their habits are good (Davidson, no date).



This is what Cardew and Groll mean by ‘training’, ‘preparation’ and ‘cultivation’. An improviser is responsible for their past; held to account, in the improvising present, for previous ways of being and doing. The musician and educationalist Wayne Bowman observes that:

We are what we do and do repeatedly. Music’s ritualistic actions and the dispositions that undergird them are fundamental to the formation of character, both collective and individual. More strongly still, music plays a fundamental role in the social production and regulation of identity. If music is an important part of the machinery by which people’s individual and collective identities are constructed, reconstructed, maintained, and regulated, music education becomes something dramatically more momentous and problematic than an act of overseeing the development of musical skills, musicianship, or ‘aesthetic sensibilities’. The view on which this claim is based is performative, one that sees identities not as natural facts, but cultural performances (Bowman in Barrett, 2006, p.186)

Bowman emphasises the responsibility of music teachers towards the enculturation of their students, highlighting the ethical dimension of this responsibility. A similar ethical responsibility rests with an improviser in relation to their own enculturation; they oversee the ‘construction, reconstruction, maintenance and regulation’ of the pre-existing structures that form the basis of their actions. Bowman’s idea of identity as a cultural performance, echoing Cobussen’s earlier observation about the shared performativity of ethics and improvisation, makes it clear that the improvised, performed present is an expression of (or result of) our behaviour in the past.

Enculturation has a physical dimension that is particularly relevant to improvised music. Culture leaves its mark on our bodies and especially on how we relate to our bodies. The improvising pianist and scholar Vijay Iyer, whose concept of ‘embodied cognition’ was introduced in section 1.2, sees music as “an embodied, situated activity ... [that] depends crucially on the structure of our bodies, and also on the environment and culture in which our musical awareness emerges” (Iyer, 2008, p.273). An improviser’s enculturation is encoded in their body, conditioning how and what they can do. Improvising violinist Bennett Hogg suggests that:

Our bodies and personal histories can be figured as a form of ‘physical “notation” or “score”’. This suggests that music is culturally and experientially inscribed within us, as it were – an internalisation of musical experience that also organises it (Hogg, 2011, p.89)

For improvising musicians their experience of culture is always already there, in their bodies, physical habits, ritual gestures, posture, sense of balance and the instruments with which they have shaped their bodies. Whereas Hogg talks about our bodies as ‘scores’ Cardew points outwards, seeing music as ‘culturally and experientially inscribed’ in the natural world:

The natural context provides a score which the players are unconsciously interpreting in their playing ... thus it is that the natural environment is itself giving birth to something, which you then carry as a burden; you are the medium of the music” (Cardew, 1971, p.18)

Whilst Hogg’s Foucaultian post-modernism might jar with Cardew’s more poetic turn of phrase the connection between them lies in the notion that improvisation is already encoded to some degree in both our bodies and the ‘natural environment’. I mention Cardew here because he hints at the ethical responsibility involved in this transformation of the commonplace into music, where “the subtlest interplay on the physical level can throw into high relief some of the mystery of being alive” (Cardew, 1971, p.17). As ‘the medium of the music’ an improviser bears the burden of what Badiou would call fidelity to a truth, modelling this as a possibility for others.

If the concept of enculturation can be extended to our bodies how might prior cultural conditioning affect our perceptions and our receptivity to sensory information? While Bowman believes that identities are cultural performances, some cognitive scientists and Enactivist philosophers have described our construction of reality as a kind of performance. The cognitive scientists Varela, Thompson and Rosch draw the conclusion that:

Cognition is not the representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind but is rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs (Varela, Thompson & Rosch in Hogg, 2011, p.86)

Our understanding of reality is a product of our actions and interactions with the world combined with the culturally conditioned and biologically determined features of our perceptual apparatus. Sensory information is not objective data but is extracted from the world selectively and interpreted according to previous experience. Merleau-Ponty uses the analogy of a keyboard to describe this:

The organism cannot properly be compared to a keyboard on which the external stimuli would play and which their proper form would be delineated for the simple reason that the organism contributes to the constitution of that form ... the properties of the object and the intentions of the subject ... are not only intermingled; they also constitute a new whole ... This would be a keyboard which moves itself in such a way as to offer – and according to variable rhythms – such or such of its keys to the in itself monotonous action of an external hammer (Merleau-Ponty in Varela et al, 1993, p.174)

As Hogg says, “consciousness, then, is something we *do* rather than something we *have*” (Hogg, 2011, p.86). The enculturation involved in improvising is also something we do rather than have. As the light of the past meets the lens of the improvised present there is the possibility of transformation as the improviser performs, enacts, constructs and reconstitutes their history.

It is in this fleeting present that an improviser glimpses the chance to reinvent their past in such a way as to give themselves a future; re-situating or re-contextualising the familiar to reveal fresh material, work yet to be done. Nietzsche, in his ‘Uses and Disadvantages of History’ makes this point powerfully:

The best we can do is to confront our inherited nature with our knowledge of it, and, through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were a posteriori, a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did originate (Nietzsche in Peters, 2009, p.134)

Nietzsche's 'stern discipline' echoes Cardew's call for 'moral discipline' in preparation for improvisation. An improviser must live into the future they want to come to pass. This is what Peters' describes as the "resolution to produce each moment as a new origin of a past to come" (2009, p.136). They must embody in their life those qualities they would like to find in their improvising: "If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn" (Charlie Parker in Lewis, 2004, p.158).

I want to finish this section by returning to Alain Badiou's ethic of truths. Like Cobussen, I find Badiou's three principles of an ethic of truths a useful way of highlighting and summarising the ethical aspects of improvising music. These three principles are: discernment, courage and moderation. Discernment is to do with the "recognition of the void" of the situation. Being "open for something to happen 'instead of being satisfied with what there is'" (Badiou in Cobussen, 2005, p.39). This ties in with Cardew's notion of preparedness (or awakeness) and Peters' depiction of the improviser listening for the "*there* giving itself differently" (Peters, 2009, p.127). Discernment is related to the heightened awareness brought about by a high frequency of Sarath's 'cognitive event cycles'. By courage Badiou means an improviser should "not give up any possible encounter with a void [or] relapse into the known of a situation (Badiou calls this a betrayal) at the expense of a leap into the unknown" (Cobussen, 2005, p.39). This reprises the overarching theme of the familiar, the pre-existing structures that both enable and inhibit an improviser's ability to create. It clearly takes courage to take the necessary risks to chase the possible encounters with the unknown. This was described in section 1.3 as vulnerability. Courage requires vulnerability because there must be a real chance of failure for an act to be courageous. Moderation is related to singularity. "The Good is Good only to the extent that it does not aspire to render the world good. Its sole being lies in the situated advent of a singular truth" (Badiou in Cobussen, 2005, p.39). Badiou's principle of moderation refers, in my mind, to the humility of improvisation, being aware of the limits, the transience, the contingent nature of the activity, the humility of being instrumentally

connected to physical reality. It is an activity that normally doesn't leave an object or a legacy behind and is engaged in for its own sake; it is an end rather than a means, an act rather than an object.

## CHAPTER 2

### 2.1 - The Quartet

This commentary explores issues around recording and improvisation through my work with a jazz group called The Quartet. Being the only project in this thesis to involve studio recordings, my work with The Quartet provides a good opportunity to discuss the philosophically rich field of improvisation and recording. The Quartet is also the most composition-orientated project in this thesis, providing an opportunity to discuss the relationship between improvisation and composition and how this relates to recording, agency and collaboration.

The Quartet is a contemporary jazz group that was, until recently, co-led by composer/guitarist Jack Hues and myself. This ensemble was formed in 2002 and has existed in various forms with me and Jack being the core members. Most of the music played by the band is written by Jack. The Quartet has released two albums on Helium Records. Before I discuss the music on these albums I want to contextualise the uneasy relationship between recording and improvisation.

#### *Recording and improvising*

Documents such as tape recordings of improvisation are essentially empty, as they preserve chiefly the form that something took and give at best an indistinct hint as to the feeling and cannot convey any sense of time and place (Cardew, 1971, p.27)

The whole culture of listening to records I don't understand. Where do you look? Do you stare at a wall when you listen to records? Normally, what do record buyers do? Do they buy the record, take it home, put it on for the next ... I mean, they can last for 74 minutes! Do they sit there for 74 minutes, they don't do the dishes, just sit and look at something, or close their eyes? (Bailey in Cox & Warner, 2008, p.111)

I have a terrible fear of making a record of a Beethoven sonata and someday, somewhere, someone is going to listen to it while eating a liverwurst sandwich (Schnabel in Hamilton, 2003, p.346)

This PhD relies heavily on audio recordings. They provide the evidence for the majority of the practice element of my research. However, as Andy Hamilton points out, “the recorded image, like the photographic image, is always crafted” (Hamilton, 2003, p.351). The medium of recording is not transparent and can be unreliable as a document; a recording is an artifact and has an ambiguous relationship with the ephemeral, action-orientated nature of performance. Piccini highlights this tension when she observes that:

“Performance frames time and space as singular and unrecoverable whilst time and space are constructed as fixed and repeatable within recording practices” (Piccini, 2002)

This distinction between performance and recording is blurred by the further distinction between live and studio recording (the latter is discussed later in this commentary). Phillip Auslander points out that the concept of ‘live recording’ is something of an oxymoron:

In the case of live recording the audience shares neither a temporal frame nor a physical location with the performance but experiences the performance later and usually in a different place than it first occurred. The liveness of the experience of listening to or watching the recording is primarily affective. Live recordings allow the listener a sense of participating in a specific performance in a vicarious relationship to the audience for that performance not accessible through studio production (Auslander, 2011)

If the liveness of a ‘live recording’ is a vicarious, virtual experience then where does this leave improvisation - a way of making music defined by liveness? An activity defined by singularity and transience is fundamentally altered when captured in the medusa’s gaze of reproductive technology and turned into an object defined by repetition. Jed Rasula notes how “recording tends to reify improvisation, converting the extemporaneous into scripture” (Rasula in Jarrett, 2004, p.321). In other words recorded improvisation becomes something like a ‘text’. It endures, accumulating meaning both on an individual level (where through repeated listening listeners can become familiar with details they missed the first time around), and a wider cultural

level (through layers of historically-specific criticism, evaluation and analysis). A recorded improvisation can be compared with similar ‘texts’, and objectified to a degree that would be impossible with ‘live’ improvisations (this objectification invariably involves further text-based interpretation such as talking, writing or notated transcriptions).

These ‘text-like’ qualities are one of the factors that have led to recordings playing such an important role in jazz historiography. The use of recording technology in jazz throws into relief the peculiar double-think that arises from the tension between singularity and repetition inherent in recorded improvisation:

Critics and historians have always used jazz records as primary sources, while pretending that what they are really talking about is something else, some putative essence of a ‘living tradition’ that cannot be captured by the ‘blatant artifice’ of technology (Rasula in Jarrett, 2004, p.321)

There is a tension in jazz between the perceived authenticity of live performance and the ‘artifice’ of recording. Hamilton terms this an imperfectionist aesthetic:

“For imperfectionists ... live performance is privileged and recording has at best documentary status” (Hamilton, 2003, p.347)

This aesthetic is shared by many of the producers who make jazz recordings. Tom Dowd, famous for his work with John Coltrane, Charlie Parker and Ornette Coleman (amongst many others), likens the role of the jazz producer to “a sports photographer” (Dowd in Jarrett, 2004, p.324) while Michael Cuscuna (producer for the Blue Note record label) feels that “as a producer, you should really be as invisible as possible ... you really should be wallpaper if you possibly can” (Cuscuna in Jarrett, 2004, p.325).

The Quartet’s approach to studio recording contrasts strongly with the aesthetic perspective sketched above. The bandleader and main composer for The Quartet is a guitarist and singer called Jack Hues who studied composition at post-graduate level at the Royal College of Music before embarking on a successful career as a pop musician and later as a producer. He had several top ten hits in the US in the 1980’s. The Quartet’s two studio



albums have been made with the producer Chris Hughes who also worked on Jack's hit records in the eighties. Chris has produced albums for Tears for Fears, Paul McCartney, Robert Plant, Peter Gabriel and Jon Bon Jovi amongst many others. Needless to say Chris and Jack's approach towards recording is very different to Tom Dowd's or Michael Cuscuna's. The following example is the opening of the first track, Magonia Heights, from The Quartet's first studio album, Illuminated:

### **Audio example 1 - opening of Magonia Heights**

In the light of the purist 'imperfectionist' aesthetic sketched above this is a bold opening for a jazz album that makes a statement about the music to come. The instrumental trailing off after the first segment is enhanced and extended by reverb and delay effects which morph into something like a reverse delay effect, which is in turn underscored by the acoustic piano. Brian Eno's description of 'the studio as [a] compositional tool' (Eno, 2008, p.127) seems too crude to express the way post-production techniques are used here to amplify the aims of the composition and project the agency and intention of the musicians. What I mean by this is that it is the intention of the musicians to play the written figure with a strong sense of groove and rhythmic propulsion before improvisationally elaborating the increasingly shorter pauses. The way in which the production 'amplifies' these intentions is through the mixing and mastering. The rich punch of the bass sound, for example, enhances the sense of groove and the stereo imaging enhances the sense of space in the pauses. The intentions of the musicians are extended by the reverb/delay effects, stretching their improvisational filigree out into an imaginary sonic space where the fading electronic traces of their activity regain momentum with a distant Reichian afterglow. There is also an improvisational element to the production here. Whilst editing and mixing this recording I found myself tapping along on a woodblock that was lying around. Chris suggested I get back in the live room and record what I was doing and this is what you can hear for a couple of seconds before the track starts (it can also be heard during the piano solo later in the track). This

example confirms, at least in this instance, the producer Wayne Horvitz's view:

One of the myths of producing is that you have a strong image ahead of time. Production is a very improvised art (Horvitz in Jarrett, 2004, p.324)

There is a collaborative diffusion of individual agency in this way of working in the studio that undermines the notion of a single composer or author.

The liner notes for many jazz recordings include such curious statements as:

No use is made of multi-tracking, overdubbing, or tape-speeding on any session (Tristano, 1962)

There is no compression, homogenisation, eq-ing, post-recording splicing, mixing or electronic fiddling with the performance (Paul Lytton Quartet, 1996)

There are no edits or overdubs on this record (The Bad Plus, 2003)

Reading like the labels you find on sugary drinks that claim 'this product contains no additives or preservatives', such statements can sound like puritanical boasts but they are also symptomatic of a deeper concern about the perception of human agency in improvisation. If a recording that was presented as a two-minute improvisation were known to contain sixty edits from ten different takes would this change the way it was heard? If the editor was sensitive to the improvisers musical personality and managed to retain something of an improvisational flow – in other words if it was edited in such a way as to project an image of agency – then I contend that knowledge of the construction of the recording shouldn't impact significantly on the way it was heard. Knowing that a two-minute scene took a week to shoot might be of interest to aficionados, but I don't believe that such knowledge significantly enhances or detracts from the enjoyment of a film: it is simply how films are made. The pianist Glenn Gould makes a similar point in relation to classical music:

One should be free to 'shoot' a Beethoven sonata or a Bach fugue in or out of sequence, intercut [and] apply post-production techniques as required (Gould in Hamilton, 2003, p.354)

I realise that this may not be a widely held view. It may be argued that recordings are more like photographs than films: that they make more of a claim towards documenting an event but, as I pointed out at the beginning of this commentary, “the recorded image, like the photographic image, is always crafted” (Hamilton, 2003, p.351).

Let’s change the previous question and imagine that a recording of an improvisation is a complete take; is this any more ‘authentic’ than the edited example mentioned earlier? This improvisation may have been recorded separately from the rest of the piece, it may be the twenty-eighth take, the piano might be close mic’d and sound very different than it would ‘live’, perhaps even the bass and drum accompaniment were recorded earlier. Where is the line of ‘acceptable’ artifice drawn? It is unlikely that those improvisations recorded with ‘no overdubs or edits’ were achieved on the first take and even if they were, afterwards the musicians could have a break, listen back to the recording and start rehearsing the next piece to be recorded. This hardly replicates the conditions of ‘live’ performance. The notion of authenticity has little meaning in the context of studio-recorded improvising. While it could be argued that most audio recording involves creating (or creating with) the illusion of human agency, this has particular relevance in improvised music. The meaning and mode of engagement of this form of music making is uniquely dependent on the intimacy and singularity that Walter Benjamin describes as the ‘aura’ of aesthetic experience (Benjamin, 1968).

[Jazz] producers work hard to enable and to record sounds that, when we hear them, will give every impression of having escaped the clutches of production and the constraints of recording technologies. Wherever and whenever this effect of ‘having escaped’ is created, it is called improvisation (Jarrett, 2004, p.323)

Never mind that the process of recording inherently involves significant sound manipulation; the point is that the aesthetic of jazz is such that recordings are engineered to create a simulation of live sound, to present the impression of ‘being there’. (Solis, 2004, p.341)

Interestingly recorded improvisations almost always *are* produced, edited and mixed in such a way as to create the illusion of agency. The only example I have come across of a recorded improvisation being edited in an un-improvisational way - in a way that draws attention to the process - is Phil Manzanera's guitar solo on *China my China* from Brian Eno's album *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)* (1974). Here there are several edits per second and the manic Dadaist result is enhanced by a simultaneous typewriter solo sounding like a laconic, Burroughs-style-cut-up critique of 70's rock guitar tropes.

This discussion has been leading to the next audio example. Taken from the same piece as the previous clip, this is the piano solo from *Magonia Heights*.

### **Audio example 2 – piano solo from Magonia Heights**

An anecdote best serves to introduce a discussion of this example. After this piano solo had been edited and mixed I asked the producer, Chris Hughes, where the edits were. He replied 'why do you want to know? I'll tell you if you're interested creatively but not if it's a matter of personal pride' (paraphrased). Tellingly I cannot identify with certainty where the edits are. I suspect that there may be two main edits (0.20 and 1.46) but these moments of musical contrast are equally convincing as acts of human agency. If the sense of release, contrast and climax at 1.46 is the work of the engineer/producer then it was made with the same musical logic that might guide an improviser. It might be argued that the editor/producer has more time to think about such decisions but in the studio I had the improvisational equivalent of 'time to think'. The bass/percussion/guitar accompaniment was 'built' first and I then played many takes, sometimes going back into the control room to listen through, before identifying takes and sections that I liked. Finally, Chris encouraged me (again I was just doodling along with the playback) to improvise along with my solo on melodica. Sections of this were used and provide an interesting level of intertextuality, with myself commenting and elaborating on my own improvisation. This process could

not be much further from a 'live' improvisation and is perhaps best thought of as a fruitful fusion of composition and improvisation, although in many ways this way of working is successful precisely because it steers clear of such conventional distinctions. Whatever you call it (it is revealing that there is no established theoretical vocabulary that adequately describes such processes) this is clearly an example of creative, collaborative music making where the authorship of the final product is unclear.

To conclude this section I want to return to those curious claims to authenticity found on some jazz CDs. It is indeed impressive and admirable that these studio recordings were made without edits or overdubs (although there is no mention of how many takes it took to achieve this) but it is impressive in the way that virtuosity is impressive. Technique should, ideally, be a means to an end rather than an end in itself. If the musicians on these records were musical and creative enough to make a great jazz record with no overdubs or editing, what might they have achieved if they had fully engaged with the creative possibilities of the medium with which they were working?

### *Composition and improvisation in The Quartet*

I do not hope to deal exhaustively with the subject of composition and improvisation here, only to discuss its relation to my work with The Quartet and the collaborative diffusion of agency that I have been discussing in relation to creative studio work.

When improvisation is involved the nature of composition changes. For a start the conventional Western boundaries between composer and performer become blurred. In jazz this re-distribution of compositional and creative authority is often represented in the role of the band leader. As Solis argues, much of what a bandleader does can be thought of as compositional:

[Thelonious Monk] had to pick sidemen who shared his vision of how to approach the material, and then work together with them to achieve a level with which he was happy. I contend that this approach itself should be seen as part of expressing an authorial

voice in jazz, as much as should writing and arranging songs (Solis, 2004, p.337)

Solis' point is that 'picking sidemen' and rehearsing with them has, arguably, just as much (if not more) creative impact in an improvisational context than notation. Monk's work with his quartet is part of a rich tradition of band-leading-as-composition in jazz which has already been discussed in 1.4. But it is important to note that even when a bandleader communicates their intentions through conventional notation this notation is charged with, and interpreted in relation to, the social dynamics, aesthetic values and power relations that constitute the 'semiotic environment' or 'symbolic interpretive space' created within that band. In this way even the writing and interpretation of notation becomes part of the collaborative web of agency in an improvising ensemble.

The example to which I will now turn is the piano solo from a piece called *Canterbury Tales*. This piece, composed by Jack Hues, contains four contrasting improvisation sections, one for each member of the band. Each of these sections is a 'tale' in that they frame and project each musician's improvising style. The sense that this piece consists of a series of stories is reinforced by the track divisions and titles on the album on which this piece first appears. Although the piece runs continuously for 13.53 the album track listing divides it into six separate tracks (an opening composed section, four separate improvisation sections and a final composed section):

- 1 Prologue
- 2 The chav's tale
- 3 The check-out girl's tale
- 4 The deacon's tale
- 5 The wife of the councillor's tale
- 6 Canterbury bells, Saturday 5.20pm

As well as hinting at a dimension of character and narrative in the music, the title of this piece acknowledges the influence of the 'Canterbury sound' from the late 60's and early 70's and is intended to suggest parallels with Canterbury's current music scene.

This piece belongs to a long tradition of jazz compositions written to harness the improvisational personalities of specific players. Composer-bandleaders such as Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus were known for their ability to create improvisational contexts that drew the best playing from specific musicians at the same time as effectively deploying this playing within a compositional framework.

The piano solo section in *Canterbury Tales* is essentially one long crescendo and it is the dramatic centrepiece of the composition. But the structure of the piano solo is not just about loud and soft. The compositional/improvisational arc here is about contrast on a number of levels: solo to ensemble, spacious to busy, dissonant to consonant, tentative to confident, from the openness of stylistic freedom to the satisfying comfort of stylistic derivation. The role of improvisation in this structure is to provide the detail and the energy necessary to articulate the compositional arc. This structure is a supporting scaffold for the improvisation but it also makes demands of the soloist: they must leave enough space at the beginning to create the necessary atmosphere of anticipation and possibility and then generate enough energy to ‘justify’ the climactic final section. It is in this way that the composition and improvisation can be heard to rely on, and interact with, each other.

### **Audio example 3 – piano solo from *Canterbury Tales* (studio)**

(A transcription of this solo is available in the appendix)

The collaboration here between soloist and composer, soloist and ensemble and performance and production is another example of the web of agency and authorship that characterises much music making that involves improvising, particularly when it happens in the studio. A close examination of the opening of this piano solo provides evidence of at least three separate layers of agency/authorship (audio example 4, and the transcription that follows it, focuses on this opening section).

Bars 1-5 (in the notated example below) effect a smooth transition from composition to improvisation. The figure in b.1 plays an important structural role in the overall piece, framing and linking various sections. Here it is gradually removed from the picture, leaving just the final rising major second repeating as the meter slackens, changing from 5/4 to 6/4 (b.4). This repetitive and increasingly spacious beginning to the piano solo is entirely composed; the piano plays exactly what is written and yet it sounds improvised or at least it doesn't draw attention to itself as 'composed'. It feels as if the guiding, ordering hand of composition is gradually being withdrawn. At the same time the gradual reduction of the compositional material to just two notes is a strong suggestion for the improviser to begin their solo with this same material, as happens in this recording (in fact the piano remains attached to this two note motive for the first 1.22 of the solo). The transition from composed to improvised material is effected by the composition becoming more improvisatory and the improvisation beginning in a compositional manner.

The delay on the piano in bars 3-10 enhances the effect of leaving the moorings of compositional material and drifting into a wider, pensive space. Whilst continuing the repetition of the two note cell, the echoes, and their spiraling vapour trails (achieved by altering the delay speed), create a sense of (cosmic) reverb that contributes to the expansive anticipatory atmosphere at the beginning of the improvisation. In other words, this post-production decision (which may have simply originated in an attempt to fill in the gaps, as an antidote to too much space) supports and expands upon both the compositional intentions and improvisational agency in the music.

A final layer of collaboration can be heard in the improvised interactions between the piano soloist and the guitarist (who is also the composer). In b.8 the piano plays the first fragment of improvised material, an inversion of the two-note motive heard immediately before. The piano is then silent for three long, empty bars (bear in mind the delay effects were not present at the time of performance). Concerned that the pianist may have frozen, lost for words, the guitarist plays another two notes as a prompt (b.11). The



piano appears to acknowledge this support by extending these same two notes into a longer phrase (b.12-13). The interaction here is a ‘live’, real-time instance of composer and performer collaboratively extending compositional material and nudging a tentative improvisation into existence.

#### Audio example 4 – opening of piano solo from *Canterbury Tales* (studio)

Opening of piano solo from *Canterbury Tales* (studio recording):

The musical score is divided into five systems, each showing the interaction between an Electric Guitar (E. Gtr.) and a Piano (Pno.).

- System 1:** Shows the first two measures. The Electric Guitar part begins with a rest, followed by a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Piano part provides harmonic support with chords and moving lines. A 'Ped.' (pedal) marking is present under the piano part.
- System 2:** Shows measures 3 and 4. The Electric Guitar continues its rhythmic pattern. The Piano part features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. A 'Ped.' marking is present.
- System 3:** Shows measures 5 and 6. The Electric Guitar part continues. The Piano part has a more active role with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.
- System 4:** Shows measures 7 and 8. The Electric Guitar part continues. The Piano part has a more active role with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. A 'Ped.' marking is present.
- System 5:** Shows measures 9 and 10. The Electric Guitar part continues. The Piano part has a more active role with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. A 'Ped.' marking is present.
- System 6:** Shows measures 11 and 12. The Electric Guitar part continues. The Piano part has a more active role with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. A 'Ped.' marking is present.
- System 7:** Shows measures 13 and 14. The Electric Guitar part continues. The Piano part has a more active role with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. A 'Ped.' marking is present.

The score includes various musical notations such as rests, eighth notes, quarter notes, and half notes. A 'Ped.' (pedal) marking is used to indicate sustained notes in the piano part. A '7' above the guitar staff in the second system indicates a fret number. A '4' above the guitar staff in the third system indicates a fret number. A '13' above the guitar staff in the seventh system indicates a fret number. An 'approximate rhythm' marking is present in the piano part of the fourth system.

I hope that my close reading of the first forty seconds of this piano solo has gone some way towards revealing the dense web of agency and authorship that occurs on a moment-by-moment basis in this kind of music making. Before leaving this example I want to look at how this diffusion of authorship can also be seen at the macro-level.

The two piano solos I have discussed in this commentary are related. The piano solo in *Magonia Heights* (audio example 2) is announced by a sudden absence of the propulsive rhythmic figure that recurs throughout the piece. The harmony and meter (although not the pulse) fall away leaving the piano exposed and open, the improvisational equivalent of a blank slate. This situation was arrived at collaboratively through rehearsal and discussion. It was decided that the openness and freedom here was a risk worth taking: this unfamiliar musical situation proved an effective creative catalyst for this particular soloist (the guitar solo took a different approach). The studio recording and the subsequent performances of this piece confirmed that this was a fruitful way of presenting the piano improvisation. The experience of participating in these subsequent performances, alongside a general familiarity with the pianist's creative personality, fed into the composition of *Canterbury Tales*. Compositionally the piano solo in *Canterbury Tales* is very similar to the piano solo in *Magonia Heights* (with the addition of a structure that gradually builds towards a dramatic climax). The first part of the piano solo in *Canterbury Tales* is a deliberate compositional deployment of the improvisational strengths exhibited in the piano solo of *Magonia Heights*. The second half of the solo deliberately puts the pianist in another unfamiliar situation: generating and sustaining intensity towards a rock-influenced climax. I would speculate that this was an intuitive compositional gamble that charges the solo with the drama of rising to this challenge. I believe you can hear, in the tentative character of the beginning of the solo, full of aborted ideas and pensive space, this sense of risk and uncertainty. In the studio neither composer nor improviser knew exactly what was going to happen (the fact that this piece had not been rehearsed

with a full band prior to the recording session added to the apprehension). Why take such a risk?

The structure of the piano solo in *Canterbury Tales*, like Monk forcing his sidemen to learn his compositions by ear on the bandstand or Davis' destabilising directions to Marcus Miller whilst recording *Aida*, is a way of shaking an improviser out of their habitual relationship to the familiar and lifting them "to the level of co-composing interpreter" (Smith, 1998, p.262). This kind of risk, and the potential creative pay off, is only available to composers who regularly work with improvisers; it hinges on both a social and musical understanding of a particular musician.

*Live and studio recordings of improvisation*

I mentioned earlier how recording transforms the act of improvising into an object. What is interesting is how these recorded objects can go on to affect subsequent improvised acts. This can be heard by comparing the studio recording of the piano solo from *Canterbury Tales* with a live recording of the same piece. Live recording, unlike studio recording, does have a certain claim to documentary status. Even though the live recording in question here has been mixed and mastered (with the result that the recorded sound differs from what the audience heard at this particular performance) it is unedited and is close enough to being a document of what actually happened for my purposes here.

Before comparing these two recordings it is important to contextualise the phenomenon of improvisation recorded in the studio affecting subsequent performances of the same material. In 1978 a performance by the pianist Ray Bryant was reviewed in the American jazz magazine *Downbeat*:

"Tonight, Bryant played 'After Hours' in a note-for-note copy of the way he played it on the Dizzy, Rollins and Stitt album on Verve some fifteen years ago. Was it written then? Or worse. Has he transcribed and memorised his own solo, as if it were an archaeological classic? It was fine blues piano indeed, but it was odd to hear it petrified in this way" (Hollenberg in Gioia, 1988, p.55)

As mentioned earlier the perception of creative human agency – the notion that someone is inventing in real time – is a vital part of what it is to hear something as an improvisation. Significantly the two possible ‘crimes’ cited by the critic above (composing improvisations in advance and performing transcriptions of improvisations) affect the *way* the music is heard rather than *what* is actually heard. Bryant’s performance is still described as ‘fine blues piano’. What the critic objects to is the fact that he believed Bryant to be improvising when he wasn’t. It is unlikely that Bryant intended to willfully deceive his audience. It is more likely that he felt that the audience had come to see him on the strength of his best-known recordings and that it was respectful to give them a little of what they wanted (this situation perhaps says more about the discrepancy between the American critical establishment’s romantic notion of authenticity in jazz and the reality of making a living as a black jazz musician in America in the 1970’s than it does about improvised practice in general).

What Bryant’s example does demonstrate is that studio recordings often exert influence over subsequent live performances of the same material because of their nature as musical objects or commodities. Promotion in the music industry is generally product-led. It is hard to organise a tour, review or interview without something to sell. It is in this way that both musicians and audiences become familiar with studio-recorded products, often before they have played or attended a live performance. The commodity value of a studio recording grants it an authoritative status in a capitalist economy (of course live recordings are commercially released but they rarely lead an artist’s career, they tend to be aimed at cashing in on potential sales of already-established artists). All of these things combine to create a situation where, through repeated listening, a studio recording gradually accumulates familiarity, meaning and authority to the point where it can affect subsequent performances of the same material. Another example of this is Dud Bascomb’s trumpet solo on the Erskine Hawkins Orchestra’s recording of Tuxedo Junction (1939). This was Hawkins’ most successful recording and audiences/dancers at subsequent performances of this piece expected to hear the ‘original’ or recorded improvisation played note for note. This was

perpetuated in subsequent written arrangements of Tuxedo Junction where Bascomb's solo was notated as part of the arrangement; it had become absorbed into the composition.

Of course the situation was a little different with the piano solo on Canterbury Tales. The Quartet albums have not achieved great commercial success but they were made in the same way that commercially successful recordings are made. This process involves a great deal of repeated listening over a long period of time. The original recording session took five days and there were several subsequent visits to the studio over the following months for overdubs, mixing and mastering purposes. Listening to music is a meaning-making process and it is normally the case that repeated listening results in an accumulation of meaning.

A specific example of this can be heard by comparing the beginning of the studio and live recordings of the piano solo in Canterbury Tales.

**Audio example 5 – opening of piano solo from Canterbury Tales (live)**

Opening of piano solo from Canterbury Tales (live recording):

(guitar enters 2nd time)

Electric Guitar

Piano

(G to F 1st time only)

4

E. Gtr.

Pno.

7

E. Gtr.

Pno.

approximate rhythm

10

E. Gtr.

Pno.

I have already discussed the beginning of the studio recording. What is interesting here is that the live piano solo starts in a very similar way. The falling major second in b.3 of the studio recording is heard in b.2 of the live recording. But where the guitarist seems to prompt the pianist in b.6 of the studio recording (with the notes F and E), this is now played by the pianist in b.4 of the live recording. What was originally an improvised response by the guitarist on the studio recording has become absorbed into the fabric of the piano solo.

In terms of an overall comparison the main difference between these two improvisations is that the studio recording has more space. This can be seen in the transcription of the two beginnings. There are five bars where the piano doesn't play anything in the studio recording (studio transcription:

b.6-7 and b.9-11) and three of those are in succession. In the live version there are only three separate bars where the piano remains silent (live transcription: b.6, 8 and 10). This increased use of space is part of the tentative character of the studio recording that contrasts with the bolder, faster pace of the live improvisation. Further evidence of this can be heard in the amount of time each improvisation takes to reach a point where there is some kind of continuous activity. At b.79 (refer to full transcription in the appendix, p.155) in the studio recording a continuous line emerges with a restlessly shifting metric orientation. This is where the intensity of the improvisation shifts up a gear in preparation for the climatic final section. In the live recording a similarly restless line begins as early as b.26, initiating almost continuous activity for the rest of the solo. As a result the live improvisation has to find other ways of intensifying the music as it heads towards the final climax. One of the ways it does this is through the urgent bursts of semi-quavers that occur at b.56 and b.65. Perhaps the broadest evidence that the recorded improvisation leaves more space/takes more time is that it is a minute longer than the live improvisation (the studio solo lasts for 3.52 whereas the live solo lasts for 2.52).

Before drawing any conclusions about this it is useful to look at the final sections of both improvisations. Here the durations and harmonies are identical (unlike the earlier part of the solo) and a more direct comparison between the two recordings is possible.

**Audio example 6 – full piano solo from Canterbury Tales (live)**

**Audio example 7 – end of piano solo from Canterbury Tales (studio)**

The improvising on the studio recording is more laid-back, poised and sparing whereas on the live recording it is more intense, leaves less space, is more rhythmically predictable and uses octaves, tremelo and two-handed textures to generate volume.

This section of the studio solo was recorded several months later than the main body of the solo and was overdubbed over a previously recorded

double bass, drum and guitar accompaniment. I was alone in the live room playing multiple takes of this improvisation. I remember the producer telling me 'you're there now, you don't have to try'. The intensity of this improvisation was provided by the previously recorded accompaniment, I just had to ride on top of this and the volume of my playing would be appropriately mixed. In the live recording however I was competing for volume, on an acoustic piano, against an amplified double bass, amplified guitar and a drummer playing with great intensity. Also, having brought the band to this level of intensity through the course of my improvisation I was also excited and physically involved in a way that was not possible in the comparatively dispassionate environment of the studio. The playing on the live recording is entirely appropriate for the context in which it occurs – in fact it is generated by this context - but it would sound somewhat gauche and heavy-handed on the studio recording. This point is reiterated by the pianist Claudio Arrau:

Things that work in performance are sometimes not good on records and vice versa. Recording has its own laws (Arrau in Bajalica & Lockett, 2009, p.232)

The tentative character of the studio recording may have been related to the fact that we had not played the piece before nor had we even met the bass player and drummer prior to the recording session. The slightly nervous intensity of the live performance may have been because we had not played the piece in front of an audience before. It had been pieced together in the studio and none of us were sure if we could pull it off.

Comparing the studio and live recordings of the piano solo from Canterbury Tales reveals a lot about the impact that differences of context have on improvisation.

### *Copyright*

To conclude I want to look at the real-life manifestation of the question of authorship I have been discussing - in the form of copyright law - and use



this as way of reprising, from a different angle, some of the themes from this commentary.

Despite the collaborative nature of the music I have been discussing Jack Hues owns most of the publishing rights to both Magonia Heights and Canterbury Tales. This is less to do with any inequality within the band and more to do with legal structures that are ill-equipped to deal with the complex issues of authorship that surround improvised music making. Whilst the collaborative aspect of The-Quartet's music-making might be catered for, if a little crudely, by having multiple copyright holders (with creative rights being divided into different percentages) the related issue of authorship in composition and improvisation is more complex.

UK copyright law protects two types of musical work: recordings and scores. The law states that:

It is an offence to perform any of the following acts without the consent of the owner:

Copy the work.

Rent, lend or issue copies of the work to the public.

Perform, broadcast or show the work in public.

Adapt the work. (UK Copyright Service (UKCS), 2009)

In a conventional jazz situation an improvisation is normally considered to be a 'derivative work':

A derivative work is a work that is based on (derived from) another work; for example a painting based on a photograph, a collage, a musical work based on an existing piece or samples, a screenplay based on a book. (UKCS, 2009)

An improviser should therefore seek authorisation from the copyright holder before making a derivative work. If this is granted the improviser is then able to copyright their "new content", but only if they can demonstrate that their work is "significantly different to the original work" and is "itself ... an original work of skill, labour and judgment" (UKCS, 2009). It is interesting that the creator of the original work is not required to similarly demonstrate the 'skill, labour or judgment' involved in their creation. When Nettl describes how improvisation is often viewed by the musical

establishment as “a kind of third world of music” (1998, p.7) it brings to mind the difficulties of claiming asylum in a first world nation. Asylum seekers must support their claim for asylum by demonstrating what value they might offer the country to which they are applying, just as improvisation has to prove it’s ‘skill, labour or judgment’ to be considered, and granted the rights of, a musical ‘work’. Indigenous Westerners, like musical ‘works’, are not required to demonstrate their value.

In practice very few improvisers seek authorisation from the original copyright holder. In the US there is a compulsory licensing scheme which, for a one off royalty payment, allows musicians to use many compositions without having to negotiate with the copyright holder. This conveys the right to record but does not allow an improviser to copyright their ‘new content’. This still requires the consent of the original copyright holder, which in practice is rarely asked for. This leads, in the US, to the situation described by the former head of Capitol Records, Alan, W. Livingston:

[A] glaring example of inequity involves the highly talented jazz musician whose... skilled performance and creative improvisations on what may be an extremely simple theme go unpaid when the jazz musician's record is broadcast; only the writer and publisher of the original theme receive payment when the record is performed. (Livingstone in Harvard Law Review, 2005, p.1957)

So why does improvisation get such a raw deal? I contend that it is because it is an act and not an object. Copyright law is a sub-category of intellectual property law which is explicitly concerned with objects:

Intellectual property (or IP) refers to creative work which can be treated as an asset or physical property (UKCS, 2009)

Perhaps it is not surprising that, in a culture obsessed with objects, improvisation should be poorly served by the legal system. What is surprising is that, in the ninety-four years since the first jazz recording (The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, 1917), we are only just starting to get a clearer philosophical and musicological picture of what improvisation is and how it might be valuable to us.

I want to discuss the notion of improvisation as a derivative work. If one accepts Small's claim that "music is first and foremost action" (Small, 1998, p.9) then it is possible to liken a composer's claim to a segment of this vast continuum of musical activity to an explorer planting a flag in 'virgin' soil. Both legal and cultural notions of originality share this sense of an original first claim. Anything that then occurs within this metaphorical musical property is, of course, owned by the composer. This imperialist metaphor is one way of interpreting the power relations implicit in the concept of a 'derivative work'. Another approach is to acknowledge that improvisation *is* always derivative in some sense. The philosopher Bruce Ellis Benson observes that:

One never begins with nothing, for even improvising without a chart or chord structure still requires that one be situated within a discursive practice (Benson, 2006, p.463)

An improviser always improvises on/with something. If the improvisation is not based on a specific melody or harmonic progression then it might be based on a timbre, the acoustics of the performing space, a physical pattern or interaction with other musicians. An improviser works with what is to hand; as Derek Bailey says "having to make do seems to me an important part of improvisation" (Childs, B. *et al*, 1982/83, p.50). Invention is compromised by necessity:

[The] improviser is situated precisely between these points: an *imitatio* that can never be wholly imitative and an *inventio* that can never be wholly inventive. Or we might say, following Claude Levi-Strauss and Derrida, that the improviser is always a *bricoleur*, borrowing from and working with what is at hand. (Benson, 2006, p.464)

It is not surprising that the creations of Benson's 'bricoleur', so reminiscent of Peters' improvising contestants on Scrap Heap Challenge, are derivative. This is a defining feature of their mode and context of construction. But how is this different to the composer's situation? Surely a composer is neither wholly imitative nor wholly inventive, surely they too make use of what is 'to hand' - what else could they use? Composition is derivative too, that is part of what it means to be situated within a language:

The composer is exactly like you, constantly on the horns of the same dilemma, caught in the same dialectic – the great models and an unknown future. He cannot take off into the unknown. (Boulez in Benson, 2003, p.43)

Composers never create *ex nihilo*, but instead “improvise”: sometimes on tunes that already exist, but more frequently and importantly in the tradition in which they work ... improvisation is not something that precedes composition or stands outside or opposed to composition. Instead I think that the activities that we call 'composing' and 'performing' are essentially improvisatory in nature. (Benson, 2003, p.2-25)

As I observed whilst looking at the intertwining, co-dependent authorship of the piano solo in *Magonia Heights* and *Canterbury Tales*, both improvisation and composition (and performance) are ongoing forms of creative musical activity. Perhaps the difference is that composition plots, refines and preserves points along this developmental continuum whereas an improvised performance (and all performances are improvised to some extent) simply mark where the improviser is at that time. The old distinctions - composer, improviser, performer – have long been losing currency in musical practice and it is hopefully only a matter of time before copyright law catches up:

Copyright's inability to fully comprehend and incorporate its own *sine qua non* - originality - lies at the heart of all of these problems. (Harvard Law Review, 2005, p.1941)

For the practical component of this project I have chosen to submit The Quartet's two studio albums, *Illuminated* and *Shattering*. Information about the release dates and personnel on these recordings can be found on the sleeve. *Illuminated* received four star reviews in *Mojo*, *The Guardian*, and *Jazzwise* and was album of the week in the *Independent*. *Shattering* was favourably reviewed in *The Times*, *Jazz UK*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *Jazzwise*, *BBC Music* magazine and the *Guardian* (see [www.the-quartet.co.uk](http://www.the-quartet.co.uk) for more details).



## 2.2 – Spock

This commentary explores issues around what I have called the familiar in improvisation through my work with an improvising ensemble called Spock. The music making in Spock provides an opportunity to discuss how clichés and tropes relate to creative possibility in improvisation. I will trace the course of the band’s development looking at various strategies of intervention that I have employed as a bandleader, composer and improviser. It is important to note that Spock is a project that, in my opinion, has shown great potential but has not yet realised that potential in a sustained way. This provides a fertile area for discussion.

Spock was formed in March 2008 as a trio with Liran Donin (bass guitar) and Mark Holub (drums). The first Spock gig came about through my work as a jazz promoter. I had helped to organise several performances and a workshop for a group called Led Bib that Mark and Liran played in. In fact Mark was the leader, drummer and main composer for the band (Led Bib were nominated for 'best album of the year' in the Barclaycard Mercury Music Prize 2009 and have appeared on BBC2 and Channel 4). This information is relevant because Spock originally consisted of two experienced and confident young musicians with a well-established social and musical relationship being ‘led’ by me at a time when I was only just starting to explore more open forms of improvising. Spock’s development as a band runs parallel with my own exploration of my identity as an improviser.

The unequal balance of power and experience in the group coupled with the exploratory uncertainty of my playing at this time meant that Spock’s early performances were strongly influenced by the rock-inspired playing of the more established bass and drums duo. As in Led Bib there was a tendency for the music to become loud and heavy-rock influenced which, to me, seemed to reduce both the possibilities for invention and for my participation in the music. Even though I found this kind of playing exhilarating in Led Bib performances, I found it unconvincing, even

embarrassing, in Spock. The aesthetic of the group in its early performances can be heard in this section of a piece called *Neighborhood Spock* (by Liran Donin):

### **Audio example 1 – Neighborhood Spock**

Although I sometimes enjoyed these cathartic thrashes (like a guilty pleasure) I craved a quieter music where close listening and subtle interaction played a greater role. Faced with what I perceived to be a limiting aesthetic approach with an immature reliance on stylistic tropes, I tried a number of different ways of changing the music making in the group. The first and most direct way of affecting the course of the music was, of course, through my own playing. However my ability to influence the music was often limited by the volume of the piano (in comparison to the drum kit and amplified bass guitar) and the role of the bass guitar in this ensemble. Without a pre-composed harmonic structure the bass guitar effectively controlled the harmony and had considerable power over establishing and changing grooves. The role of the piano became primarily textural. The scope for melodic playing in this context was limited by a combination of the lack of sustaining power of the instrument and the issue of volume.

The following audio example demonstrates the harmonic and rhythmic power of the bass guitar and how the piano reacts to this. The example begins at the end of a bass guitar solo. As a signal that the solo has ended the bass plays a simple riff in 10ths with a stronger sense of pulse and meter than before. The drums respond first by confirming the time-feel of the bass with a fill and then the piano enters playing quiet partially-chromatic segments of semi-quavers.

### **Audio example 2 – Liran's d minor riff and my response**

The empty space and repetition of this bass-line invites participation. The stable harmony, simple rhythm, loud volume and slightly aggressive edge to the tone of the tenths imply a certain kind of response, perhaps equally loud,

rhythmically assertive and harmonically static. The piano deliberately counters this, attempting to subvert the expectations set up by the bass-line in several ways. The piano plays quietly (something the bass quickly responds to, reducing its volume at 0.24), in a contrasting register, using asymmetric semi-quavers runs. The chromatic piano lines acknowledge the underlying harmony of d minor, mainly at the ends of phrases, but are primarily concerned with dissonance. Although these tactics were intended to destabilise the bass riff the overall affect is complementary, with the piano providing the complexity lacking in the bass whilst the bass provides the space and stability necessary to contain and offset the complexity of the piano. In this example the tension between the different aspirations and intentions of the group members results in an effective balance of stability and (mildly) disorientating complexity.

Other forms of intervention come under the broad category of band-leading. The most significant of these was the addition, in March 2009, of Matthew Wright to the band. There were several reasons behind this. Firstly I hoped that Matthew's instruments (turntables and laptop) would bring a new focus on timbre that might lead the group away from a rock-influenced aesthetic and encourage a more open form of improvising. Secondly this new member brought a different level of compositional/conceptual sophistication and maturity to the group. Thirdly, I had an established duo with Matthew that meant we had a level of musical and social understanding equivalent to that of Mark and Liran (thus evening out the balance of power in the group).

Another band-leading decision that had a significant impact on the music was my request that Liran play double bass rather than bass guitar. This helped to defuse the rock influences in the music and led Liran to find a different role in the band. This oblique strategy was both a demand to change and an opportunity for the bass player to creatively re-negotiate his role within the ensemble; he found his own way of making the changes that I felt were necessary.



The following example demonstrates how these two factors (the addition of Matthew Wright to the band and Liran switching to double bass) affected the improvising in Spock. For the beginning of our second gig at the Vortex jazz club in London the decision was made, collectively, to abandon the short ‘head’ compositions that Spock had used in earlier performances. Instead I repeated the lowest note on the piano slowly and loudly for a few minutes before bowing the same string with a hank of cello bow hair. This functioned as a kind of call to prayer that boldly announced the beginning of the performance and encouraged a more timbre-focussed and open improvisational approach:

### **Audio example 3 – low A**

This approach led to improvising that explored entirely different aesthetic territory to previous Spock performances. The bowed piano strings provided common timbral ground across the whole band: Matthew’s turntables and samples, Liran’s bowed bass and Mark’s bowed cymbals and glockenspiel were able to participate equally and with less stylistic baggage in this sound-world. There are moments when it is hard to distinguish who is playing what. For the first time with this ensemble the sense of individual boundaries became blurred.

Composition is another mode of intervening in and influencing the improvisational processes of a band. Most of my compositions for Spock respond in some way to issues related to the group’s improvising. Shortly after Matthew Wright joined the band I observed that most of the musicians were playing most of the time in Spock improvisations. Listening back to recordings I noticed that there were occasional solo sections but very few extended duets. There was also a tendency, possibly more social than musical, for the band to feel divided into two duos (me and Matt/Liran and Mark). *Way of the Exploding Fist* was a piece designed to exploit all the potential duo combinations in the group. Similar to John Zorn’s *Archery*, this piece consisted of a list of the six different duo combinations, a brief pentatonic fragment (the name and this melody were taken from a martial

arts based computer game made by Melbourne House in 1985) and the instruction that each musician should bow to their ‘opponent’ before starting their duet. The purpose of this was to stylise and satirise, and thereby hopefully defuse, the occasionally antagonistic relationships in the ensemble. This theatrical element rarely worked however (although a few laughs from the audience can be heard on the recordings) because the musicians either forgot to bow or felt awkward doing it. This is the closest thing to a score that existed for this piece:

1 LD – MH	4 SB - LD
2 MH – MW	5 LD - MW
3 MW – SB	6 MH – SB

This piece resulted in some unexpected and inventive improvisation. For example the duet between Matthew and Liran, who had been arguing fairly heatedly in the rehearsal immediately before the first performance of this piece, was quiet, fragile and sparse; maybe even reconciliatory. Equally unexpected was the violence at the beginning of the duet between Matthew and myself. Simple though it is, *Way of the Exploding Fist* encouraged a level of detail in the improvised interaction in Spock that would not have occurred otherwise. Most importantly it identified and mined an area where there was work yet to be done. One of the ingredients in successful improvisation is this sense of construction or becoming, the sense that *work is being done in performance*. If there are avenues that have not yet been explored, either on a group level (e.g. new instrumental combinations or roles) or an individual level (e.g. un-mined areas of technique or timbre), then the performance has the potential to be an arena for discovery. This is what Cobussen means when he writes that:

[T]he process of art production is itself investigative. Knowledge is gained through the creative act ... reflection and theorising are done neither before nor after the work has been composed; rather they are an inextricable part of the process of making (Cobussen, 2005, p.32)

Despite the new focus on timbre and the related exploration of the duo combinations within the group, Spock still continued to gravitate towards

loud rock grooves. One of the intentions of my composition *Roscoe's Ritual* (lead-sheet included in appendix) was to channel this tendency in a way that retained the energy and power of this playing but within more ambiguous rhythmic and stylistic parameters. Another aim was to integrate the turntables into the group sound. This piece begins with a sample from the title track of the album *Sound* by the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet (1966). The cymbal roll on the sample is taken up by the live drummer and the piano plays a melody that slowly builds in intensity.

#### **Audio example 4 – Roscoe's Ritual**

The skittering arrhythmic turntables-and-drums duet that accompanies the second time through the melody is designed to create a context where the turntables can contribute texturally and rhythmically on an equal level with the drums. It is also important that the turntables begin the improvisation section. After the terrifying intensity of the climax the sudden bare fluttering of the turntables is charged with a genuine sense of drama and anticipation in this performance. The purpose of this compositionally is to stimulate improvisation that accommodates and reacts to the turntables rather than the other way round (the usual situation was that the turntables/laptop had to find a way of integrating into the already established and complete sound world of the jazz piano trio).

It is interesting that the violence and power of the playing in this performance of Roscoe's Ritual is more intense than any of Spock's heavy-rock influenced improvisation. The album from which the initial sample is taken was a landmark recording in the 1960's because of its focus on timbre and space rather than the fire and energy that had preoccupied freer forms of jazz in the early 1960's. Spock's performance of this piece touches both ends of the spectrum of free jazz intensity. With no regular pulse and a slowly building melody the intensity of the final section has a feverish/cathartic spiritual quality reminiscent of seminal free-jazz albums such as *Spiritual Unity* (1965) or *Ascension* (1966). But while it may be argued that I was simply exchanging the existing stylistic references within

the band for ones of my own, this piece did generate music making with an intensity and emotional depth that was not present in previous Spock performances.

As I become more assured as an improviser I started using certain pieces, exercises and ways of playing in a variety of different contexts. My work with CCCU Scratch Orchestra (see section 2.3) had demonstrated the value of John Stevens' pieces/exercises in *Search and Reflect* and I decided to use *Dot Piece* (2007, p.87) to further stimulate alert listening and restraint in Spock. *Dot Piece* is an exercise in which the musicians play the shortest possible sound on their instrument. Stevens' likens the piece to placing a dot on a blank canvas or attempting to cover the surface of a flowing river with paper darts.

The recording of Spock rehearsing *Dot Piece* contains examples of the group's tendency towards subversion and humour. Previously I had not fully recognised this tendency towards subversion and humour as a valuable resource. It was a strong characteristic in our early performances but it was overlooked, and in some cases actively discouraged in some of the pieces and improvisational strategies discussed above.

In the following discussion I refer to what is said by the musicians during the rehearsal process as well as what they play. My reason for doing this is to provide a sense of the playful subversion that pervaded much of the social and the musical activity in this band. The implication here is that the social and musical dynamics of an improvising ensemble are often inseparable: an understanding of one is necessary for an understanding of the other.

I started by asking the band to play the shortest sound possible on their instruments: "you've got to be really trying hard to make them short; they've got to be the shortest sounds you can make". Mark spends some time trying to get the shortest sound on his drum kit. When it is Liran's turn he finds a short sound on his bass more quickly and Mark complains: "are

you saying his is shorter than mine?” Next it is my turn to play and Mark immediately retorts “that’s not that short”. A little later the piece begins and the very first ‘dot’ is played by Mark (the drummer) leaning over and hitting Liran’s bass with a drum stick. I take the bait and accuse him of cheating. “Is it cheating?” Mark replies, “You didn't say anything about *how* I could make a quiet sound!”

My manner (I was accustomed to directing this exercise with students) and Mark’s mood undoubtedly contributed to the playfully subversive tone of this exchange. Also at work was a clash of values that lies at the heart of much of the work discussed in this commentary. Mark and Liran were professional musicians with a shared and well-grounded aesthetic orientation – rock and jazz. It is likely that they also shared a mild suspicion of academia and sensed that they were occasionally being coerced towards an aesthetic perspective that they did not necessarily share. At several points in the band’s development Mark and Liran requested that we just ‘play’ rather than follow the ‘rules’ of various improvisational strategies. It would have been hard for them not to have felt criticised as I continued to impose such strategies. In the light of this there is a generosity to Mark’s humour and creative response to the restrictions of *Dot Piece*. It is also important to note that I was attempting to recast a well-established musical relationship. Mark was used to playing in more free contexts but not with Liran. Their playing as a duo had developed over many years in the same band together and it is unsurprising, given Spock’s intermittent performing activity, that this shared understanding and aesthetic approach should be resistant to change.

Returning to the rehearsal, in the light of the prevailing subversive tone I felt compelled to add a ‘rule’ to *Dot Piece*. After explaining that “you can play whenever you like but not at the same time as someone else” I added “if you do play at the same time as someone else then you’ve got to stop playing for a little while”. “What, like as a punishment?” asked Mark, poking fun at my increasing exasperation. I was keen for silence to play an important role in this improvisation, as it had done when Scratch Orchestra

played *Dot Piece*. Based on my previous experience with Spock and the eagerness to play, bordering on impatience, that I felt in the room at the time (we had spent about an hour setting recording levels and trying to get Matthew's turntables and laptop to come through the PA) I judged that an extra measure was necessary to achieve the restraint and alert listening that I wanted in the music. This rule was made clearer, through discussion, by imposing a ten-second period of silence if two musical events overlapped or occurred simultaneously. In practice this rule was dropped after a few minutes, by which time it had served its purpose, encouraging improvisation in which close listening and an alert restraint/silence played an important role.

#### **Audio example 5 – *Dot Piece***

Spock could be very creative when it came to subversion. An example of this is the way the 'rule' mentioned above was interpreted and exploited in the improvisation. Rather than avoid simultaneous playing (what the rule was designed to do) the musicians soon worked out that if you deliberately played at the same time as someone else you could 'knock them out'. If two players were knocked out in this way then the remaining players had an opportunity to play unfettered for at least 10 seconds. This can be heard in the next example. The piano is interrupted by the turntables meaning that both have to wait for 10 seconds before playing again. The double bass takes the opportunity to play a repetitive figure in 7/8 (this is where the audio example begins). The obstinate repetition here suggests to me a child deliberately stepping into an area they have just been forbidden to enter, the hammer-on at the end of the figure even hints at a finger-waving snoot. As soon as the piano is 'allowed' to re-enter it deliberately plays at the same time as the double bass in order to shut it up (this is not speculation – I remember clearly that this was my intention). The intricate pile up of turntables, drums and piano that occurs immediately afterwards might be heard as a smug, victorious gesture aimed at the 'defeated' bass.

#### **Audio example 6 – *Dot Piece* (Liran's subversion)**

*Dot Piece* was the catalyst for some fruitful improvising but this success owes as much to Spock's subversive, playful creativity as it does to John Stevens' piece. Despite the sparse, restrained aesthetic encouraged by *Dot Piece*, Spock's resourceful ways of interpreting the limitations imposed by the piece meant the playful character of the ensemble remained intact. I mentioned earlier how Spock's development ran parallel to my own creative development. This group provided me with ongoing opportunities to test out a range of different ways of stimulating and influencing improvisation. It is a testament to the openness and creativity of the musicians in Spock that they not only tolerated and accommodated this continuous and varied series of interventions but also artistically engaged with them in such a way that their own musical identity was not compromised.

The practice I have chosen to submit for this project is a recording of the most recent Spock performance. This performance took place on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2012 as part of the Free Range series of events in Canterbury (see conclusion for more details about the Free Range events). There were two fifteen-minute sets in this performance, the first of which is presented here.

Several of the areas of concern highlighted in this commentary are resolved in this performance. There is a better balance in terms of volume. There is a wide variety of duet combinations (drums and turntables, piano and drums, bass and turntables, piano and bass). There is much more space in the music than in previous Spock performances (by which I mean restraint is exercised; there are only a few moments where the whole ensemble is playing for a sustained period). The double bassist is particularly sensitive to his previous tendency to dominate certain aspects of Spock's music making. One example of this is the fact that for large parts of this recording he refrains from playing. Although there are stylistic references they do not inhibit or strongly condition the direction of the music. Rather than 'references', which suggests a kind of conscious stylistic name-dropping, moments such as the In a Silent Way-style boogaloo groove at 11.00 or the ECM/Azimuth-style piano texture and harmony at 13.10 are better

described as allusions. Certainly the sound world and the sensitivity to textural density in this set allow more scope for the turntables to participate in the improvising than in previous performances (rock or jazz tropes had inhibited such participation in past performances). Moments in the music are given the time to establish themselves and develop. This is combined with a collective sense of when a section is coming to an end and where the music will go next. This is evidenced in the well-judged transition from a turntables and drums duet to a turntables and bass duet at 5.50-6.00 or the confident transition from an inchoate drums, piano and turntables section to a more focussed drums, bass and turntables groove at 10.50-11.00.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this performance, at least for myself, is an acceptance of the way the different members of the band play. Spock's previous performances had been characterized by a restless discontent on my part that manifested itself in the various forms of interventions described in this commentary. In this audio example there are no attempts to control the situation from the outside (through composition or band-leading). There is also a shift in the way that I engage with the situation from the inside (through my playing). Whereas in earlier performances I played *against* the music (e.g. audio example 2) here I am playing *with* it. An example of what I mean by this can be heard at 2.20 or 11.50. The improvising here seems to show an acceptance that the role of the piano within this ensemble is often textural and that harmonic, rhythmic or melodic contributions are best made from this textural perspective (such as the repeated notes at 2.20 or the tremolo at 11.50).

It seems to me that this acceptance is symptomatic of a greater confidence and sense of creative identity in my own playing that has allowed me to step back from Spock. One of the consequences of this is that this ensemble is finally free to develop its own identity, something which I believe can be heard in this audio example.

### **Audio example 7 – Spock at Free Range**



Recorded at the Veg Box Café, Canterbury on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2012.

Musicians: Piano - Sam Bailey  
Turntables - Matthew Wright  
Double Bass - Liran Donin  
Drums - Mark Holub

### 2.3 Canterbury Scratch Orchestra

This commentary focuses on my work with an undergraduate student ensemble at Canterbury Christ Church University called Canterbury Scratch Orchestra. The first part explores links between aesthetics and ethics in relation to John Steven's piece *Ghost* while the second part examines a piece inspired by Stevens' work called *Shops*.

The nature of my involvement with this ensemble differed from my work with the other projects presented in the thesis. As the director of a student ensemble my responsibility was as an educator. While I certainly consider my educational work to be an extension of my creative practice it is beyond the scope of this thesis to present my work with the Scratch Orchestra in a substantially different way to the other projects here. What I can do usefully is look at some of the issues raised through the practical application of John Stevens' pieces and review some of the work that has followed on from this.

Scratch Orchestra was formed, almost by accident, in September 2008. I was asked to give an improvisation workshop to the new first year undergraduates with a view to presenting a piece in a concert at the end of the week. Having given the workshop and organized a group of willing students the concert was cancelled and I asked the students if they wanted to get together and play anyway. This group was interested in rehearsing on a weekly basis and they chose the name of the ensemble. Named after the Scratch Orchestra formed in 1968 by Cornelius Cardew, Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton, it was felt that the playful experimental character of the Scratch music sketchbooks, the openness to anyone who was interested in participating regardless of experience or ability and the notion that they were starting 'from scratch' related to how the students felt about what they were doing. None of them had any experience in improvising and I had very little experience of running a student ensemble and no vision of what the ensemble would be beyond wanting to try out some exercises. Everyone in the ensemble was starting from scratch, including me. As one of the students put it:

When we started off, the pieces, they weren't really normal for anybody, like the Stockhausen poem [*Set Sail for the Sun*] ... nobody really does that normally so we all had to get away from our default style and then we all had to find a style that we could merge with, which was why it worked, and that's why we had a feeling of identity and cohesion (Osborne, 2010)

In the handbook that accompanies his graphic score *Treatise*, Cardew wrote that “ideally such music should be played by a collection of musical innocents” (Cardew, 1971, p.19). Whilst we were far from being musically innocent – we were all trained musicians working within the context of a music degree – we were naïve and ignorant enough for our encounters with pieces like *Treatise* (Cardew, 1967) and *From the Seven Days* (Stockhausen, 1970) to seem like genuine discoveries.

In the intervening four years the number of students in the group has varied from five to twenty five and we have performed a diverse range of improvised music such as *Raga Shivranjani*, *Treatise* (Cardew, 1967), *Cobra* (Zorn, 1984), *In a Sentimental Mood*, *Fado de Defesa* (Calem & Sabrosa, 2003) and *Lonely Woman*. In the last two years however the ensemble has played less pre-composed ‘repertoire’ and focused more on improvised exercises, pieces composed by members of the group and collaborations with film makers, singer-songwriters and curators. However, one thing that has remained a consistent feature of the group’s activities, in both performances and rehearsals, is the use of John Stevens’ exercises from *Search and Reflect* (2007).

In 1.6 I discussed the ethical implications of Stevens’ piece *Ghost* (score available in appendix). I talked about how this piece demands a kind of listening that gives itself completely to the soloist and I pointed to the social and ethical dimensions of this kind of listening. Here I will look at the issues that have arisen through playing *Ghost* in Scratch Orchestra with the aim of strengthening my claim that both the work of this ensemble and Stevens’ pieces highlight connections between aesthetics and ethics.

Normally the first obstacle to overcome when playing *Ghost* is the idea that you have to accurately imitate the soloist. This is a particular problem for conventionally trained musicians (such as the members of Scratch Orchestra). This point is reiterated in the foreword to *Search and Reflect* where Small observes that Stevens' exercises are often "easier for the untrained than for the trained performer" (Small in Stevens, 2007, IV). Stevens' demand to imitate "as closely as possible the rhythms and pitches of the solo, as it is being played" (Stevens, 2007, p.88, Stevens' emphasis) can easily be misinterpreted as a demand to *accurately* imitate the rhythms and pitches of the solo but this is not what he is asking for. This point is illustrated in the following audio example where a ghost (me) becomes momentarily preoccupied with 'getting it right', shifting their listening away from the soloist to focus on the accuracy of their own playing. The extract begins with the violin soloist playing a trill. The pianist ghosts the trill but not at the same pitch. As the violin continues to trill (for almost 7 seconds), the pianist searches for the 'correct' pitch. After about 5 seconds the piano finds the right notes. The violin then moves on to play a double stopped chord but the pianist doesn't ghost this, their listening has shifted away from the soloist and it is another 7 or 8 seconds before the pianist is effectively ghosting again.

#### **Audio example 1 – ghost (getting it right)**

This extract highlights the distinction between the kind of listening required to 'ghost' effectively and the kind of listening required to accurately reproduce specific pitches. Of course they are not necessarily mutually exclusive but participation in the activity of ghosting is granted first and foremost through attentiveness; accurate aural ability may well aid or be the result of sustained, cultivated attentiveness but it is not a prerequisite. Attentiveness is achievable by anyone (who can hear) regardless of musical experience or ability. This is one of the extraordinary features of the pieces in *Search and Reflect*; both non-musicians and musicians can fully and fruitfully engage with the processes in each exercise. Part of the process of

*Ghost* involves letting go of the egotistical urge to ‘get it right’ and cultivating a non-judgmental attentiveness regardless of the outcome.

The ‘score’ for *Ghost* asks that:

Everyone must keep their eyes closed, as they should be listening for the soloist, rather than watching them. This is an aural exercise (Stevens, 2007, p.90)

This is a feature common to many of Stevens’ exercises and is central to the conception of listening that underpins his musical philosophy. It might seem redundant to point to such a simple and obvious way of focusing listening were it not for the fact that so much musical training and ability relies on visual data. From reading notation to subtle unconscious cues of body language to the spectacle of live performance, what Lawrence Kramer calls the ‘listening gaze’ (Kramer, 2002, p.77) is integral to our perception of music. The implication in Stevens’ work is that our habitual multi-sensory mode of musical engagement dilutes and compromises the intensity of our listening.

This point can be explored by comparing two recordings of the same viola soloist being ghosted, the first with eyes open and the second with eyes shut (the ghosts consist of piano and two violins).

**Audio example 2 – ghost (eyes open)**

**Audio example 3 – ghost (eyes shut)**

In the first example the two violins match the pitch of the viola accurately but the ghosting does not finish precisely when the soloist stops (Stevens’ warns against this in the score: “whenever there is the slightest pause in a solo, there should be no ‘overlapping’ by the ensemble” (Stevens, 2007, p.90)). One of the violinists pointed out during this recording session that they were able to not only visually anticipate when the violist would play but also anticipate which pitch they would play by watching the position of their hand on the fingerboard.

In the second example the time delay between the soloist's entry and the ghosting remained similar (despite being unable to see the gestures of the soloist). What changed noticeably was the precision of the phrase endings: the three ghosts stop almost exactly when the soloist stops. This is related to the fact that the ghosting is quieter on the second take. Presumably this was out of necessity: without visual stimulus there was a greater need to hear the soloist clearly. Predictably the pitch matching of the two violins is less accurate. I consider the result of this to be far more interesting than the more accurately pitched first take. The light of the soloist is refracted through the ghosting to form a shifting sonic shadow, a kind of naturally occurring harmony. This is an important point: when Stevens' pieces are played 'correctly' the ethical and aesthetic aspects of the activity are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. The aural sensitivity in the best performances of *Ghost* is compelling, even the silences are charged (see following example) and the natural inability to ghost pitches accurately produces an often beautiful harmonic shadow that is the sum total of the attentive listening and aural ability of the group.

Stevens' statement that "we celebrate mistakes because they highlight innocent human failings" (Stevens, 2007, p.2) recalls Cardew's views on the 'wonderful configurations' and insights revealed by failure:

Failure exists in relation to goals: nature has no goals and so can't fail, humans have goals and so they have to fail. Often the wonderful configurations produced by failure reveal the pettiness of the goals. Of course we have to go on striving for success; otherwise we could not genuinely fail (*BBC documentary on Cornelius Cardew*, 2001)

One of the most profound ways in which *Ghost* fuses the ethical and aesthetic is the way in which it sensitises and focuses the listening of a group to an individual. The soloist in the next audio example is very shy during group rehearsals. They rarely contribute verbally in rehearsals and when directly invited to contribute they blush and appear unwilling to speak (this is the only current group member who acts this way). However as a soloist in *Ghost* this member of the group is eloquent and expressive and will play for several minutes without prompting. In the example (taken from

a lunchtime concert on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2011 in the St Gregory's Centre for Music at CCCU) this clarinet soloist can be heard playing with and testing the attentiveness of the ghosts using a variety of sudden short notes, longer notes with a crescendo, melodic fragments and trills (the ghosts here are flute, clarinet, melodica, voice and tuba).

#### **Audio example 4 - ghost (group listening)**

The soloist's sudden silences seem intended to check the attentiveness of the group's listening as if, in a game of Grandmother's footsteps, they are spinning round to try and catch the ghosts off guard. The loud ascending two-note fragment at 0.07, answered by a quieter descending fragment at 0.10, uses dynamic variation to further gauge the group's responsiveness. From around 0.30 there is the sense that the soloist, having tested the attentiveness of the listening to their satisfaction, starts to focus more on the musical features that have arisen so far. The long note with a crescendo alternates with the clipped two-note fragment as the material is repeated and developed. I contend that the listening of the ghosts draws out or leaves space for such intuitive musical logic from the soloist. In a discussion of listening in a psychotherapeutic context, Bion uses the metaphor of a light to evoke the revealing power of the space created by such listening:

Instead of trying to bring a brilliant, intelligent, knowledgeable light to bear on obscure problems, I suggest we bring to bear a 'diminution' of the light – a penetrating beam of darkness; a reciprocal of the searchlight ... The darkness would be so absolute that it would achieve a luminous, absolute vacuum. So that, if any object existed, however faint, it would show up very clearly. Thus a very faint light would become visible in maximum conditions of darkness" (Bion in Casement, 2005, p.222-223)

The alert silence of the listening in Ghost is similar to Bion's 'absolute vacuum'. The musical personality of this clarinetist - their playful eloquence, expressiveness and intuitive musical logic - shows up clearly in this vacuum.

This quote from the psychotherapeutic tradition makes a deliberate connection between ideals of listening in psychotherapy and John Stevens' exercises. In the second of the two memoirs that preface Stevens' book Maggie Nicols speaks of her experience of participating in Stevens' workshops:

John often spoke about working at the pace of the most vulnerable person in a group ... when people feel valued they gain confidence and give more of themselves. The whole group is strengthened (Nicols in Stevens, 2007, memoir two)

This echoes the fundamental tenet of the humanist psychologist Carl Rogers who believed that "humans require acceptance and, given acceptance, they move towards self-actualisation" (Kramer in Rogers, 1995, xi-xii). The means of this acceptance - what Rogers also calls 'unconditional positive regard' - is "attentive listening [that] is in the service of both the individual and the grand question, what it means to become a person" (Kramer in Rogers, 1995, xiv). Roger's ideas about 'self-actualisation' and personal growth have become common cultural assumptions but it is important to mention them here in order to state explicitly what is often only implied: that listening in an aesthetic context shares the ethical charge of listening in a social or therapeutic context. The peculiar character and richness of Stevens' exercises lies in their ability to combine an educationalist's humanistic idealism with a rather austere Modernist-influenced aesthetic sensibility that grounds and deepens the left-wing political and ethical assumptions of the former. The Webern-like pointillism of *Dot*, for example, reveals something simultaneously profound yet utterly familiar about the timing and gestures of social interaction. And this insight is facilitated by the unlikely symbiosis of a Modernist aesthetic with a politically aware ideal of shared group music making focused on inclusion and fun.

I want to turn now to look at how Stevens' pieces have influenced my work with Scratch Orchestra. The ensemble has generated over twenty compositions/exercises (from both students and staff) ranging from fully notated works to a series of instructions explaining how to use a DVD of a



Grand Prix race as a score. One of the more enduring of these is my musical version of the memory game ‘I went to the shops and I brought...’ called *Shops*. Originally conceived as an exercise for solo performer (to fill the need for structured personal practice of improvisational skills), *Shops* works best in groups of about three to six players. Here is how it works in a group of three players:

Round 1: Player 1 plays a fragment of music (A)

Round 2: Player 1 plays (A) again, player 2 adds (B)

Round 3: Player 1 plays (A), player 2 plays (B), player 3 adds (C)

Round 4: Player 1 plays (A), player 2 plays (B), player 3 plays (C), player 1 adds (D)

Round 5: Player 1 plays (A), player 2 plays (B), player 3 plays (C), player 1 plays (D), player 2 adds (E)

Round 6: etc.

In each round a player adds an idea to the list. Normally the list grows until each player has three or four musical fragments, depending on the size of the ensemble (although some of my piano students have managed to remember up to thirty-five fragments in duet performances of *Shops*). From here you can either continue adding to the list until the players start to make mistakes and the resulting uncertainty and confusion forces the musicians to improvise or you can set a limit to the amount of fragments each musician must remember and cycle through this finite set of musical ideas, expanding and elaborating each one a little more each time round. Both routes eventually result in improvisation that is made more coherent through the musician’s (and audiences) familiarity with a series of short musical fragments.

*Shops* has mainly taken the form of verbal direction during rehearsals but I did once, with a view to setting it as homework for the Scratch Orchestra, put a version for solo performer into written form:

**Score for solo performance of *Shops*:**

*Play something.*

*Play the same thing followed by a new thing.*

*Play the same two things followed by a new thing.*

*Play the same three things followed by a new thing.*

*Repeat this process until you start to make mistakes.*

*Whilst still attempting to play your list of musical events accurately and in the right order let improvisation creep in.*

*Gradually relinquish control and improvise freely with the material that has been generated.*

*Tips for playing Shops:*

- *Each idea must be memorable and repeatable. Because of this they will probably take the form of short and distinctive fragments. Single notes are fine, more than four notes is probably too complicated.*
- *Leave a gap before each return to the first idea.*
- *Try and make music with the gaps between your ideas.*
- *Gradually extend each idea with a view to discovering its character and potential. Take your time doing this.*
- *After a while start to merge, develop or superimpose your ideas.*
- *Error, accident and failure are crucial ingredients of this piece. Let them contribute.*
- *Don't worry about whether what you're doing is good or has any point to it. Just focus on playing on the piece and try to notice and enjoy the friction between discipline, failure and invention.*

The most obvious function of *Shops* is developing the fundamental improvisational skill of being able to remember and reproduce previously improvised phrases. On a deeper level, *Shops* also addresses issues concerning the management and creative exploitation of failure, helping to inhibit the habitual associations of an improviser's vocabulary and generating improvisation with a high degree of coherence.

The following discussion of *Shops* prepares for the presentation of a nine-minute recording of a rehearsal with an accompanying transcription

followed by a separate six-minute recording of a live performance. The transcription includes labels highlighting relevant points. Consequently short audio examples are not used to illustrate the points made in the following text.

What Cardew described above as ‘the wonderful configurations produced by failure’ play an important role in *Shops*. The clearest form of this comes when the ‘musical shopping list’ starts to contain more information than can be remembered accurately. At this point the musician(s) must negotiate the transition from highly structured to open improvisation. In my first chapter Schieffelin described how such an “experience of inconclusiveness and imbalance gives people little choice but to make their own moves of creative imagination if they are to make sense of the performance and arrive at a meaningful account of what is happening. In so doing ... they complete the construction of its reality” (Schieffelin in Smith, 1998, p.263). The uncertainty at this point in *Shops* forces improvisers to act independently, provoking their creative participation and cultivating their courage. Knowing that you will fail and learning to creatively capitalise on and enjoy this fact is an important lesson for a student improviser (with clear ethical implications).

Another important feature of *Shops* is the way it changes how a musician relates to their improvisational vocabulary. Imagine an improviser’s vocabulary as a neural network in which each node is connected, to a greater or lesser degree, to every other node. Activating one node immediately suggests a variety of potential ways forward, with the most frequently used being presented first. *Shops* intervenes in this process in several ways. The brevity and repetition of the fragments, although ostensibly to aid memorization, pares away any musical context or association that the material might have had for the improviser. Vocabulary is, conventionally, given meaning by the context in which it functions; words are only comprehensible within the context of a language. The concision and repetition of the fragments in *Shops* helps to strip away layers of association until, like Mondrian’s trees, the material is completely

abstracted from its original context. Although impossible, the fragments aspire to being blank ciphers that will allow maximum freedom when used in improvisation.

This severing of the connections between the nodes of an improvisational vocabulary is reinforced by the turn taking in *Shops*. Whilst a musician is waiting to play, their attention is focused on following the sequence of turns around the other players. The opportunity for preparing what to play in advance is limited by this outward directing of the attention and by the difficulty of predicting what the person before you will do. In practice there often is a feeling of being suddenly put on the spot that leads to a kind of immediate, knee-jerk response. The immediacy of this response coupled with the unpredictable juxtaposition of other fragments subverts the suggestion of 'potential ways forward' offered by an improviser's vocabulary resulting in greater spontaneity and less habitual playing.

Subverting the conventional processes of an improvisational vocabulary is also one of the functions of the repetition in *Shops*. While the repetition at the beginning of *Shops* may seem mechanical (perhaps especially so when heard on a recording) the clarity/readability of the process can be engaging for an audience. It serves to familiarise both the musicians and the audience with the material that will be used in the following freer improvisation. This process of familiarisation is interesting. Upon repetition the fragments, that may initially have seemed to follow one another arbitrarily, start to seem connected. Each time the same bare fragments are heard again they accumulate another layer of meaning as a range of similarities, contrasts, parallels and other patterns are perceived. Brian Eno observes a similar phenomenon:

The interesting thing about improvisations is that they become more interesting as you listen to them more times. What seemed like an almost arbitrary collision of events comes to seem very meaningful on re-listening (Eno, 2008, p.127-128)

However Eno makes no mention of the original intentions of the improvisers and what role they might play in this production of meaning.

The implication is that the accumulated meaning has little relationship ('almost arbitrary') to the original intentions of the improvisers. I disagree with this. I find, in *Shops* at least, that the repetition amplifies and brings to the surface latent musical features that were, on some level, intended by the improvisers. There are several ways in which the design of *Shops* encourages the presence of these latent features.

As the ideas are generated it is almost impossible for improvisers not to respond to the fragment before them. The adjacent ideas in the following audio examples are connected in many ways, some more overtly than others. Also the meaning of the earlier fragments is subtly altered as each new idea is added to the list, given new implications through the subtle change in context. Added to this is the increased technical facility gained through repetition that can lead to clusters of fragments following one another in rapid volleys. Finally, the meaning of the fragments is affected as the gaps between them start to be used to make music, exploring and amplifying latent connections or discontinuities.

All of these features – the fragments that, as an aide memoir, contain pithy material that lends itself well to being unpacked and developed; the semi-conscious connections between these fragments; the inhibition of the conventional processes of an improvisational vocabulary; the accumulation of meaning and increased technical facility that results from repetition – result in a level of coherence in the improvisation in the latter part of *Shops* that would not otherwise be present.

An example of this can be heard in the first audio example below (audio example 5 – *Shops* in rehearsal). This is a recording where *Shops* was first presented to a small group of Scratch Orchestra players (two violinists and a violist). Consequently there are occasional verbal interjections during the first three minutes. The reasoning behind presenting this example is that the process of the piece is particularly clear and the repetition (and the resulting familiarisation with the material) helps the listener to appreciate the extent of the motivic relatedness that characterises the final three minutes. Here is

a table of the twelve fragments generated in this performance of *Shops* (the letter stands for the musician's name, e.g. P2 = Phillip's second fragment):

Fragments from *Shops* (audio example 5)

These motives are labeled throughout the transcription of this recording. The more freely improvised section (where the turn-taking collapses into improvisation) in this performance starts at 7.12. The listener is asked to pay particular attention to the motivic connectedness in the final three minutes of this extract.

The second audio example (audio example 6 – *Shops* in performance) is a recording of a live performance of *Shops* given by the same musicians that took place four months after the previous recording. The purpose of including this is comparative. In this performance, for example, there was no opportunity to stop and discuss tactics after a certain amount of fragments had been generated. The more freely improvised section starts around 2.20 and constitutes around sixty four percent of the performance (as opposed to approximately twenty two percent in the first recording). The motivic connectedness is perhaps a little more superficial and self-conscious but is still a strong feature of the performance.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this commentary the educational impact of the work here is beyond the scope of this thesis. However for a full understanding of the music making here it is important to bear in mind that

the musicians on these recordings were undergraduate music students with little prior experience of improvisation.

**Audio example 5 – *Shops* in rehearsal**

Recorded in the St Gregory's Centre for Music, Canterbury Christ Church University on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

Musicians: Piano - Sam Bailey  
Violin - Phillip Osborne  
Violin - Benjamin King  
Viola - Matthew Brown

**Audio example 6 – *Shops* in performance**

Recorded in the St Gregory's Centre for Music, Canterbury Christ Church University on 26th January 2011 with the same musicians.

## 2.4 Duo with Matthew Wright

This commentary focuses on my collaboration with composer, turntablist and laptop artist Matthew Wright. Since meeting in October 2007 we have performed seventeen times together, often co-composing semi-improvised structures and continually searching and re-searching for points of contact between our different instruments and musical histories. I will look at a part-composed part-improvised project called *Prelude* that is documented in four different recordings. The first of these recordings is of a rehearsal in which we initially experimented with the idea of using Chopin's prelude no.2 in A minor from Preludes Op.28 (1993) as the source material for improvising (the original score for this piece is included in the appendix). This idea formed the basis for a commission from the Sounds New Festival that was performed a year later. This performance was successful enough to generate another performance the following year and a final re-worked performance followed a few months later. These recordings/performances will be referred to in the text as:

<i>Rehearsal</i>	23 <sup>rd</sup> January 2008
<i>Prelude 1</i>	26 <sup>th</sup> April 2009 at Orange Street Music Club, Sounds New Festival
<i>Prelude 2</i>	10 <sup>th</sup> July 2010 at The Old Synagogue, Sounds New Festival project
<i>Preludes</i>	21 <sup>st</sup> October 2010 at the St Gregory's Centre, Canterbury Festival

(*Prelude 1* and *Prelude 2* are both performances/recordings of the same work that will be referred to as *Prelude* when discussed independently of a particular recording)

In its broadest sense the *Prelude* project is about the piano, a practical manifestation of Lacy's words that prefaced section 1.1: "the instrument - that's the matter - the stuff - your subject" (Lacy in Bailey, 1993, p.99)). One of the aims of the project was to reassess or re-discover the sound of the piano, to de-familiarise this ubiquitous timbre in the hope of 're-vivifying' or 're-novating' the way it is heard. An important part of this process was engaging with the sound world most readily associated with the



piano: the style of romantic pianism, and in particular the notion of virtuosity. As improvisation was the main tool with which we intended to realise our aims it seemed logical to focus on pieces that represented the crystallisation of, or perhaps even an epitaph to, an established improvising tradition, namely Frederic Chopin's Preludes op.28.

Perhaps the most famous description of Chopin's Preludes op.28 is Schumann's depiction of them as "sketches, beginnings of Etudes or, so to speak, ruins, solitary eagle's wings, a wild and colourful motley of pieces" (Schumann in Goertzen, 1996, p.330). The notion of the Preludes being 'ruins'; crumbling, incomplete monuments to a fading tradition of improvisation (Wangermee described op.28 as the "stylisation of an ideal of improvisation which had already effectively ceased to be practiced" (Wangermee in Temperley, 2009, p.334)), resonates with Gary Peter's description of the improviser's predicament previously mentioned in 1.5:

[The improviser] is thrown into a situation piled high with the discarded waste products of cultural history. These are the defunct, clapped-out, disintegrating remnants of past times on the edge of an oblivion that promise, at best, a faint but continuing resonance as nostalgia and the cliché or, at worst, as universal forgetfulness" (Peters, 2009, p.17)

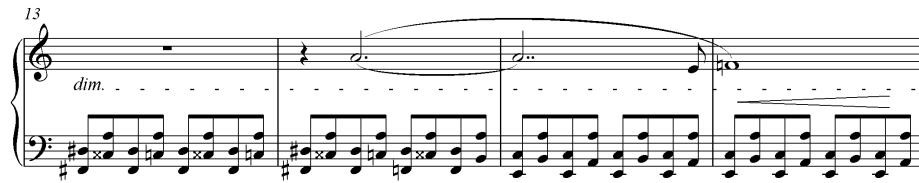
Alfred Cortot's 1945 vinyl recording of Chopin's Preludes (1977), which plays an important role in the *Prelude* project, is certainly a 'remnant of past times'; a monument to a fading tradition of pianistic interpretation. Cutler describes the process of sampling, manipulating and improvising with these old vinyl recordings as the creative re-appropriation of "fragments of cultural debris". He adds that this practice, known as plunderphonics, implicitly critiques and explores such Western assumptions as "ownership, originality, copyright, skill and cultural exhaustion" (Cutler, 2008, p.138). A final layer of memory in this project is my personal history with both my instrument and this repertoire. Preparing the piano was a means of putting some aesthetic distance between the instrument and the musician in this performance; widening the 'gap' mentioned in 1.2 to create a new space in which the music might grow.

The first rehearsals for *Prelude 1* were focussed on preparing the piano in ways that were new to both Matthew and myself. We used e-bows, dental floss, tambourines, hand fans, cello bow hair, pencils, pens, singing bowls, wind chimes, shakers and other percussion instruments. These were placed, scraped or dropped on the piano strings. As we explored these sounds in rehearsal we realised that this is what we wanted the performance to consist of: exploration and discovery. The preparations not only created new and unfamiliar sounds but they responded in unpredictable ways that meant we could not fully anticipate the result of a particular preparation. We deliberately used imprecise preparations and we deliberately did not explore or test them exhaustively. This ensured that there would be moments in the performance where the music would literally *be* the sound of discovering the possibilities of a particular instance of a preparation. This haphazard, serendipitous approach was a conscious and deliberate methodology that, like the examples of Christian Wolff or Miles Davis mentioned in 1.5, was “a technical means of producing and giving the sounds a particular quality.” (Wolff, 2007, p.13).

A specific example of this process at work can be heard in the following audio example (from *Preludes*). At 0.13 the LH of the piano plays the harmony from b.13 of the original prelude. At 0.17 The RH crosses over and plays a low note which, due to the preparation, (probably a tambourine laid on the strings) has an unexpectedly complex, percussive resonance. The piano then explores whether other nearby pitches share this resonance. In fact the piano becomes obsessed with this note/timbre and plays with it for almost a minute (0.17 – 1.13). Matt notices this and responds astutely by slowly removing the preparation. From around 0.56 the note is no longer triggering the preparation. The piano responds to this by fading in volume and, at 1.13, playing the melody from b.14 of the original prelude as a signal to move on to the next harmony of the original piece (b.14-15). The reference to the melody is a sign that this moment of the music is over, a recognition that the ‘giving’ had ceased.

**Audio example 1 – *Preludes* (low note resonance)**

## Chopin's prelude no.2 in A minor (b.13-16)



The idea of preparing the piano as a means of reassessing and rediscovering aspects of its familiar timbre was part of a larger structural plan. The structure of both *Prelude 1* and *Prelude 2* was designed around the idea of the sound starting inside the instrument, making its way onto the keyboard and then being extended out into the performing space. Contained in this structural plan was a chronological sense of the means of sound production, with the various ways of preparing (or sounding) the piano growing in technological complexity and dominance. For example both performances open with harmonies from the first of Chopin's preludes, no.1 in C major, being sounded sympathetically (the keys are silently depressed and the undampened strings are vibrated by the striking of a loud staccato note). This way of producing the sound was related to the fact that the harmony in the first bar of this prelude is loosely related to the harmonic series (echoing the first prelude from J.S. Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (1994) and Chopin's own first study op.10 no.1 (1994), both also in C major) and would therefore be particularly resonant when the fundamental was struck. This created a jarring, alien opening to the piece where both performers and audience gradually start to focus their listening in-between the violent staccato notes on the near-silent ghostly resonance of harmonies that have not been 'played'. Straining to hear meaning in the unfolding of this indistinct, timbrally distorted yet familiar tonal harmonic progression can be likened to listening to a distant memory.

**Audio example 2 – *Prelude 1* (opening)**

In retrospect the performance of this section (from *Prelude 1*) does not seem to allow enough time in-between the staccato notes for the listeners to focus

on the resonance. Ideally the resonance should die away to silence before the next note is struck, creating a sense of uncertainty as to whether it can still be heard or whether we are left with just the memory of having heard it. In *Prelude 2* the sympathetic resonance was amplified with added reverb creating something of a sugar-coated version of this effect. The third performance (*Preludes*) did not include this section so these ideas have not been satisfactorily realised to date.

Before discussing the other end of this structural/technological spectrum – where the means of sound production extend out into the performing space through speakers and ultimately drown out the acoustic sound – I want to look at the significance of the various forms of technology used in the *Prelude* project.

*Prelude* makes use of three different forms of technology that were designed to archive sonic events: printed scores, vinyl records and digital sampling. As well as representing different forms of memory, different ways of capturing the past and reconstituting it as the familiar, each of these technologies have their own emphases and cultural connotations. Printed scores and audio recordings, for example, represent competing forms of authority in the cultural hierarchy or economy that provides the scaffolding for the canon of musical works from which *Preludes op.28* comes. Interestingly Chopin's preludes do not fit neatly into this canon. A leading Chopin scholar, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, claims that the preludes are not introductory pieces but a unified cycle connected by a three note motif that he traces in an elaborate variety of transpositions and inversions throughout the work (Eigeldinger in Temperley, 2009, p.324). However, Kallberg describes Eigeldinger's theory as "willfully anachronistic" (Kallberg, 1992, p.136), an attempt to place this "wild and colourful motley of pieces" (Schumann in Goertzen, 1996, p.330) on a par with the large-scale formal unity of Bach or Beethoven. This is not just an academic theory; this Teutonic bias, that undervalues improvisation and the small form, has contributed to it being standard practice to perform or record *Preludes op.28* as a set. This convention ignores the improvisatory tradition in which these

pieces took shape as well as their poetic and utilitarian nature as ‘beginnings’ or introductions. In this way the *Prelude* project can be understood as a form of critical commentary on the interpretative tradition that relies so heavily on the authority embodied in the printed score. It interrogates a performance practice that ignores both the function and the improvisatory nature of the preluding tradition that formed the subject matter of Chopin’s Preludes op.28 (Chopin’s preludes themselves were ‘signifying’ on this context). The role of audio recording in this interrogation lies in the juxtaposition of alternative authoritative voices. Which represents the most ‘authoritative’ or ‘authentic’ embodiment of Preludes op.28: the unrealised instructions of the printed score, Alfred Cortot’s feted 1942 recording (1977) or the live improvisation that engages with both? These issues are manifest in *Prelude* most powerfully in a key moment in when the piano comes to the end of a semi-improvised exploration of prelude no.2 in A minor and a recording of Alfred Cortot playing the same piece is played and then used as material for further improvisation.

Before listening to this moment in the music it is important to consider the performance setting of these pieces. With *Prelude I* the venue’s white baby grand piano was moved to the centre of the room (an old ballroom with a high ceiling) and put on an old carpet with an antique lamp beside the keyboard (the image of these theatrical tropes alongside a macbook, a mixing desk and a pair of turntables visually highlights the juxtaposition of performance practices in this piece). The venue was a music club with a busy bar. We had requested that no-one approach the bar during the performance and that all the drinks fridges were turned off before we started. This venue had never been so quiet or so intimately set up for a performance. During the section based around prelude no.2 in A minor (from which the following extract is taken) Matt was moving slowly around and inside the piano manipulating the various preparations. This was visually intriguing for the audience that were seated at tables all around us and it undoubtedly focussed their listening on the prepared effects. When listening to the recording of *Prelude I* the rate of change can seem very

slow and the durations excessive. However, the focus of the playing and the intimate, involving setting would have gone a long way towards mitigating this impression for the audience present at the live performance.

**Audio example 3 – *Prelude 1* (into turntables playing prelude no.2 in A minor)**

There is a lot packed into this moment. When the piano stops and the record takes over, the effect is like looking back at a black and white photograph of the original prelude. This verges on the sentimental but there is a disconcerting sense of both distance and intimate fragility to the sound that is due to the vinyl recording and the intense introspection of Cortot's performance. Coupled with the oddness of the 'real' piano playing along with the recording (starting at 2.03) and the gradual introduction of variable speed turntable effects and digital sound processing, this is enough to dispel the impression of mere nostalgia. Mixed in with the aesthetic effect of this moment are a rich range of conceptual resonances. The audience can see the pianist stop playing: technology takes over but not with something new but something older and possibly more authentic. This is an inversion of Walter Benjamin's proclamation: "that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of a work of art" (Benjamin, 1968, p.221). Here Cortot's recording rises up, in the presence of the still, silent live performer, like the ghost of the original piece. Benjamin's mourned 'aura' haunts the corporeal performance as the spectre of author-ity or authenticity whose rest is disturbed by what composer Edwin Roxburgh allegedly and disdainfully described as 'mucking about with Chopin' (overheard after the performance of *Prelude 2*).

The next audio example is from the end of *Prelude 1*. Alongside the structural plan based on an increasing sophistication of piano preparation there is also a basic crescendo throughout the whole 45-minute performance. The most prominent form that this takes is density of texture; samples of earlier sections are retained and accumulate as the piece progresses. In this extract, samples of earlier moments in the piece, where

piano strings were sounded by e-bows, hand fans and dental floss, form a kind of sonic swamp of memories. The preparations that had been removed from the piano, after the version of prelude no.2 in A minor, are here replaced, adding to this sense of accumulation. Pencils, rulers and a tambourine are among some of the things bouncing around inside the piano at this point in the music.

There are, again, some important aspects of the performance that are not conveyed through the recording. Four speakers were placed around the perimeter of the performance space. Ideally we would have used a surround sound system but, in the absence of the necessary equipment, we used panning with two pairs of stereo speakers in an attempt to provide the most dramatic spatialisation possible (given the means at our disposal). As I mentioned earlier it was part of our structural plan that the sound would appear to originate deep inside the piano – the ghostly near-silent resonance of the opening – and gradually move outward, eventually enveloping the audience in a swirling mass.

**Audio example 4 – *Prelude 1* (final section of prelude no.24 in d minor)**

This is a dramatic moment. The pianist is playing a version of prelude no.24 in D minor. The occasional fragmentary re-take or wrong note is initially due to the perceptual confusion and physical effort involved in competing with the density and volume of the amplified sound (the piano is louder on the recording than it was in the performance). This moment of the piece dramatises the virtuosity of romantic pianism as a struggle against mechanical reproduction. There is a shrillness, almost an hysterical edge, to the virtuosity here; it is a physical symptom of the desperation of the lone performer in the face of such a barrage of sound. And of course the machine can play so much faster and louder: instrumental virtuosity, that most revered (and maligned) of romantic tropes, is exposed as simply a less efficient, outdated form of reproductive musical technology.

When the final perfect cadence of the original prelude resolves (at 01.01) an interesting thing occurs. The piano starts to behave more like the samples, repeating the same musical gesture, skipping back a few seconds as if flicking a needle back over the surface of a record or like the stammering of a cd glitch (interestingly anyone who has heard pianists practice will be familiar with this obsessive arrhythmic repetition of difficult passages). It is possible to hear this moment as the pianist having finally been coerced into adopting the repetition-based techniques of the machine. After several minutes of frantic physical effort that has had considerably more visual than aural impact, the final repeated D's of Chopin's original prelude signal the pianist's exhausted defeat. In the presence of the silenced virtuoso the samples echo on as repetitive traces of human activity.

These themes were revisited a year later in *Preludes*. The symbiosis between the piano and turntables at the end of *Prelude 1* led to further exploration of ways of linking and juxtaposing these two instruments. Although both instruments were popular means of democratising music - bringing it into the home and providing the means of reconstituting the mass-produced musical blueprints of printed scores and vinyl records - they have highly contrasting cultural associations. Put crudely the piano is the ultimate romantic/modernist instrument whereas turntables-as-instrument is a quintessentially post-modern invention (there is a long list of binaries along similar lines: high vs low culture, an interface where great care has been taken to filter out 'noise' and standardise pitch steps vs an interface that delights in noise and specialises in glissandi, the 'masterworks' of the piano repertoire vs the Duchampian 'readymade' or found object, the instrument of choice for the 'cult of genius' vs the deconstructive death of the author).

For *Preludes* a Trigger Finger USB/MIDI control surface and a laptop were used to play samples. This interface enabled the samples to be triggered quickly and intuitively thus increasing the potential for intricate, rapid-fire reactive interplay between the two instruments. The concert started and finished with performances of *Shops*, the piece/exercise discussed in 2.3 that



was designed to facilitate the generation and memorisation of material conducive to improvisation. In place of the overarching structure of *Prelude 1* and *Prelude 2* we used a pallindromic structure built around Chopin's prelude no.2 in A minor:

*Shops*

Electronics solo

Duo

Chopin Prelude no.2 in a minor

Duo

Piano solo

*Shops*

The samples used in both versions of *Shops* were pre-recorded fragments of me playing the same piece in rehearsal. This process was an extension of the intertextuality contained in *Prelude 1*: the pianist in *Preludes* was improvising responses to someone improvising responses using samples of the same pianist improvising responses. This disorientating intertextuality is highlighted when used in the turn-taking additive material-generating context of *Shops*.

#### **Audio example 5 – *Preludes* (opening version of *Shops*)**

There are moments, particularly in the tangles of rapid-fire interactions, where it is difficult to tell which instrument is producing which sound. This sense of equivalence is played out in the improvising as the two instruments imitate their respective idiomatic effects. The articulation of the first note of the performance is an example of this. The pianist plays this note with a short, mechanical staccato in an attempt to sound like an edited sample.

Another example occurs at 3.00. After a quickly rising piano arpeggio the samples begin a rapid repetitive texture, recalling the glitches of a skipping cd, which the piano quickly starts to imitate. A more unusual reversal of roles occurs at 2.40 when pitch-shifted samples play something approaching a melody over a fragmented piano accompaniment. The gestures used to

activate the samples (via the trigger finger) bring a responsive physicality to the electronics. This performance expands upon the moment at the end of *Prelude 1*, where the piano is coerced into adopting the repetitive techniques of the machine. Here the piano starts to adopt the musical behavior of the electronics at the same time as the samples start to behave more like an acoustic instrumentalist.

Questions of virtuosity and agency are again raised by this: if the trigger finger can produce an intricate arpeggio at the touch of a button how does this impact on the way the audience perceives what the pianist is doing, what Lawrence Kramer calls the ‘listening gaze’ (Kramer, 2002, p.77)? Many audience members are familiar with the peculiarly mundane experience of watching a laptop performer at work. That we might experience this lack of correlation between sounds and gestures as incongruous or frustrating reveals much about our expectations of live performance. A reviewer of a recent series of laptop performances noted that “with computer generated ... performances we must release our hold on the aura of the original gesture” (Parkinson, 2011). Once again we return to Benjamin’s concept of the aura of authenticity, this time in the context of the physical gestures, rituals and other social constructs that surround the concept of live performance. The ubiquity of ‘mechanical reproduction’ has led to an increasing investment of cultural capital in the authenticity of the live event. In fact, as Phillip Auslander observes, the concept of ‘liveness’ depends on such technology:

Historically, the live is an effect of mediatization, not the other way around. It was the development of recording technologies that made it possible to perceive existing representations as ‘live’ ... [the category of live performance] only has meaning in relation to the existence of an opposing possibility. (Auslander, 2011)

The Prelude project has been a means of de-familiarising and re-novating the piano and, by extension, the concept of live performance and the interpretative tradition that the piano represents. These are the ‘established codes’, mentioned in 1.6, that are ‘interrogated’, ‘deterritorialised’, reworked and critiqued through improvisation in this project. This process is

partly a product of the juxtaposition of piano, laptop and turntables. The contrasting cultural associations of these instruments and the different ways that they deal with memory, presence and authenticity provide the ideal means of de-familiarising the familiar.

The practice that I have chosen to submit in relation to this project is the first performance/recording of the *Prelude* project. *Prelude 1* was performed at Orange Street Music Club, Canterbury on April 26<sup>th</sup> 2009 as part of the Sounds New festival.

**Audio example 6 – *Prelude 1* in full**

## Conclusion

Improvisation is a basic instinct, an essential force in sustaining life (Bailey, 1993, p.140)

My attitude is that the musical and the real worlds are one. Musicality is a dimension of perfectly ordinary reality. (Cardew, 1971, p.20)

Improvising extended the scope and relevance of music making until the artificial boundary between life and art disintegrated (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p.6)

Music is your own experiences, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn (Parker in Lewis, 2004, p.158)

Derek Bailey, Cornelius Cardew, Steven Nachmanovitch and Charlie Parker agree that “how improvisers play inevitably interacts with how they live” (Reason in Fischlin & Heble, 2004, p.78). If there is an over-arching theme running through this thesis then this is it. While observations about the relationship between life and art are commonplace (Cameron, 1995; Kaprow, 2003) what is unique here is the transience of improvisation; its action-orientated singularity and ephemerality. However before I go further with this discussion I want to reprise some of the themes of the practical projects that have hopefully grounded and focused the more philosophical tone of the first chapter.

I talked about the ‘collaborative diffusion of individual agency’ that characterized The Quartet’s studio recording process. Although this might not be the most complete example of Cardew’s improvisational virtue of ‘selflessness’ this aspect of The Quartet’s working method can be heard as a situation where individual authorial contributions start to lose currency (as evidenced by the inadequacy of copyright law to accurately reflect creative responsibility in such situations).

The recordings of Spock provide examples of improvised music making that involved an ongoing ‘negotiation of agendas’. My repeated attempts to change the group’s improvising (through band leading, composing and

through improvising itself) can be heard as various forms of negotiation; proof that the social and musical aspects of a collaborative relationship are related (but should not be conflated) and that a certain amount of friction or discomfort often serves to avoid creative complacency.

Amongst other things the work of the Canterbury Scratch Orchestra underlines the observation that listening in an aesthetic context has a similar ethical charge (and therefore responsibility) to listening in a social or therapeutic situation.

The Prelude project with Matt Wright interrogated and reworked the ‘established codes’ of Romantic pianism, the distinction between live and prerecorded performance and the timbre of the piano; ‘de-familiarising the familiar’ as a means of revealing fresh insights into worn subject matter.

The collaborative diffusion of individual agency, the musical/social negotiation of agendas, the thinly veiled ethical charge of ‘aesthetic’ listening and the performance of de-familiarising the familiar; these are some of the findings from my practice that flesh out the notion that improvisation is a ‘lived’ activity rather than a “class of perfected objects” (Gioia, 1988, p.111). Cardew explores the implications of this in his final improvisational virtue, ‘acceptance of death’:

From a certain point of view improvisation is the highest mode of musical activity, for it is based on music’s fatal weakness and essential and most beautiful characteristic – its transience.

The desire always to be right is an ignoble taskmaster, as is the desire for immortality. The performance of any vital action brings us closer to death: if it didn’t it would lack vitality. Life is a force to be used and if necessary used up. ‘Death is the virtue in us going to its destination’ (Lieh Tzu) (Cardew, 1971, p.20)

Before discussing this it is relevant to compare Cardew’s views with Bailey’s:

Improvisation, unconcerned with any preparatory or residual document, is completely at one with the non-documentary nature of musical performance and their shared ephemerality gives them a unique compatibility. So it might be claimed that improvisation is best pursued through its practice in music. And that the practice of music is best pursued through improvisation (Bailey, 1993, p.142)

Despite their difference in tone these two musicians, both key references in this thesis, say essentially the same thing. Transience and ephemerality are defining features of music and are particularly attenuated in the case of improvisation making it a paradigmatic, ideal form of music making. Bailey's emphasis on improvisation's 'non-documentary nature' and Cardew's characterisation of it as a 'vital action' both reprise a distinction made earlier in this thesis (in section 1.3) between actions and objects. When he mentions the 'desire to always be right' and the 'desire for immortality' Cardew is alluding to composition. The construction of enduring musical objects is pitted against the mortality of improvised 'vital action'. Cardew's 'ignoble taskmaster' brings to mind Faust's Mephistopheles; in particular the Adorno-like incarnation of Satan that taunts Thomas Mann's Adrian Leverkühn (Mann, 1999). It is improvisation's transient nature as an activity that has been primarily responsible for situating it against Western political, economic and cultural norms. Our culture is as obsessed with objects as our economy is with commodities. What we fetishise in objects is their permanence – the present of lived experience is overlooked as fear of our death fixes our gaze on the future.

And it is to this present that improvisation binds us, drawing our attention to the experience of being alive. It is relevant that Cardew's virtues can be read in two ways. When he says "I am trying to think of the various different kinds of strength or virtue that can be developed by the musician" (1971, p.17) it is not clear whether these seven virtues are recommended as means of enhancing improvisation or whether they are ends to be achieved through the means of improvisation. To consider the latter is to understand improvisation as a profoundly appropriate means of cultivating the virtues of simplicity, integrity, selflessness, forbearance, preparedness/awakeness, identification with nature and acceptance of death. 'Towards an ethic of Improvisation' (1971) was written during Cardew's formative improvising experiences with AMM, experiences that contributed to a radical change in his aesthetic and political views in the years that followed. Improvisation

was certainly a means, at least for the musicians in AMM, of opening up and exploring aesthetic, ethical and political alternatives:

It is no exaggeration, I believe, to say that with AMM Cardew rediscovered himself. As an improvising musician he discovered modes of expression which symbolised new spheres of psychic and social experience; within AMM music he recognised a dimension of an ethical reality which embraced freedom from egocentricity, a sensitivity to the (musical) needs of others, and which validated the dichotomous relation of the individual to the collective. AMM was for Cardew a moral force and he came to recognise the profound social and philosophical implications of what it was doing, the consequences of which were to surface and consume him several years later (Tilbury, 2008, p.294)

At the beginning of this thesis the multi-disciplinary musician, artist and academic Ansuman Biswas described how “the most appropriate appreciation of a musical instrument is to use it to sensitise the mind to the music of what happens” (2011, p.101):

Music is a perfect laboratory for the examination of what David Chalmers (1996) has called the ‘hard problem’ [of consciousness]. It allows the observer to discern fine physical and emotional details, allows experimental manipulation of states of mind, creates a forum for the comparison and verification of otherwise private, subjective experience, and has begun to establish a literature and methodology for just such activity ... Of all musical forms, however, improvisation seems particularly suited for opening up awareness to the dynamic, irrational, embodied mind. It offers a set of practices for training the attention and directing it to examine the constantly changing, emotional substrate of conscious experience. And emerging from this introverted phase, music also offers a means of sharing and communicating the insights gained (Biswas, 2011, p.107-109)

For Biswas improvisation can be understood (and heard) as a form of meditation: a research methodology for increasing understanding and awareness of the experience of consciousness. On a micro-processual level improvisation can be a way of engaging with, and thus diffusing (or fusing) the distinctions between mind and body, subject and object, art and craft; it challenges musicians to continually re-negotiate their relationship to what is habitual and familiar to them, it cultivates awareness of the functioning of memory; it provides interaction with other musicians that involves a unique interplay of power and vulnerability; it can provide a space in which to

explore, grow and establish different aesthetic, ethical or political possibilities.

This can be illustrated through Marcel Cobussen's description of Evan Parker's improvising:

Seeking out the unnameable, permanently resisting, going against the current: this requires of a musician an enduring alertness, a continuous (musical) thinking in order to exceed his knowledge, his achievements, his own being ... it is a matter of showing how the space of the possible is larger than the one we are assigned (Cobussen, 2005, p.41)

Many art forms have the capacity to model ways of *doing* or *perceiving*. What this description of Parker's playing suggests is that "improvisatory performance practices can model different ways of *being* in the world" (Fischlin & Heble, 2004, p.11, my italics). But I want to go further than this. In Parker's music you are not hearing a pattern designed to give the impression of resistance and alertness (or a trace of the resistance involved in a prior process); you are listening to Parker *resisting*, you are bearing witness to "a lived, enacted performance of *being* differently in the world" (Fischlin & Heble, 2004, p.11, my italics).

It is this taste of 'being differently in the world', if only whilst playing music, which helps to explain improvisation's connection with liberatory politics. The composer and pianist Frederic Rzewski expands on this:

[Improvised music] has to do with being present. It also has to do with democratic forms and equality, at least in a group situation. It can function as a kind of abstract laboratory in which experimental forms of communication can be tried without risk of damage to persons. The great improvised music of the twentieth century may be remembered by future generations as an early abstract model in which new social forms were first dimly conceived. (Rzewski, 2008, p.271)

This utopianism that is associated with some improvised music might be thought to be incompatible with a reliance on memory, habits and the familiar. Lock, in his book *Blutopia* (2004), makes a similar distinction between "a utopian impulse, evident in the creation of imagined places



(Promised Lands), and the impulse to remember, to bear witness” (p.2). But he also makes the point that improvisation is unique in its ability to bring these two things together:

These impulses can fuse, forming a crossroads in the creative consciousness where visions of the future and revisions of the past become part of the same process, a ‘politics of transfiguration’, in which accepted notions of language, history, the real, and the possible are thrown open to questioning and found wanting (p.2)

I want to finish this thesis by providing a context for the live performance that will complete the practice element of my PhD submission. One of the results of my research has been to establish a weekly series of improvised and experimental music, film and poetry events called Free Range (see [free-range.co](http://free-range.co)) Loosely modelled on London's Little Theatre Club - the venue that provided a creative laboratory for the first generation of British free improvisers in the late 1960's and early 70's – the main purpose of this series of events was to gather together and galvanise the various loose threads of artistic activity happening in Canterbury and the surrounding area. Significantly Evan Parker gave the first performance in the series.

One of the most important results of this series of events, in terms of my improvised practice, has been opportunity for the development of a solo piano vocabulary. I set myself the task of playing an opening solo piano set before each Free Range event. Five months of notated sketches and recordings of both rehearsals and performances document the development of an improvisational vocabulary focused around a particular intervallic structure. I became fascinated with the possibilities contained within a chord or series built from expanding intervals (C, Db, Eb, Gb, Bb, Eb, A, E, C etc.). While the details of this development fall outside the scope of this thesis this fledgling improvisational vocabulary forms the backdrop to the live performance that will be presented as the conclusion of my research here.

The aim of the final performance is to use this solo improvisational vocabulary in the context of a duo performance with electronic musician and composer Matthew Wright. The performance will draw upon the existing archive of recordings that document the development of this language; both musicians will share the same pool of 'memories'. It is hoped that the contrasting modes of retrieval and implementation of this shared information - via the piano on one hand and the laptop and turntables on the other – will yield fresh insights into the material, the instruments and the musicians. Care will be taken to leave certain questions unanswered

(and unasked) so that the performance will consist of genuine searching, researching and discovery.

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## **Appendix**

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## 2.1 The Quartet

Transcription of piano solo from *Canterbury Tales* (studio recording):

This transcription is intended as a listening guide (not a performing score)

Electric Guitar

Piano

Delay effects -----

4

E. Gtr.

Pno.

7 Guitar continues D pedal

E. Gtr.

D pedal continues

Pno.

12

E. Gtr.

approximate rhythm

Pno.

17

Pno.

23

E. Gtr.

Pno.

28

E. Gtr.

Pno.

30

E. Gtr.

Pno.

32

E. Gtr.

Pno.

35

E. Gtr.

Pno.

delay effect

38

E. Gtr.

Pno.



45

E. Gtr.

Pno.

L. H.

51

E. Gtr.

Pno.

grs  
early

55

E. Gtr.

Pno.

(8)

62 (8)-----1

E. Gtr.

Pno.

67

E. Gtr.

Pno.

delay effect

delay effect

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is divided into five systems. The first system (measures 45-50) shows the guitar playing a melodic line with a flat and a slur, while the piano provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and a bass line. The second system (measures 51-54) features a guitar solo with a flat and a slur, and the piano part includes a 'grs' (grace notes) marking and an 'early' dynamic marking. The third system (measures 55-61) shows the guitar playing a melodic line with a flat and a slur, and the piano part includes an '(8)' marking. The fourth system (measures 62-66) shows the guitar playing a melodic line with a flat and a slur, and the piano part includes a '(8)-----1' marking. The fifth system (measures 67-70) shows the guitar playing a melodic line with a flat and a slur, and the piano part includes 'delay effect' markings.

72

E. Gtr.

Pno.

etc.

75

E. Gtr.

Pno.

77

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

80

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

83

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

86

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

89

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

92

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

Dotted line indicates metric discrepancy between piano and guitar (e.g. there are two different ideas about where the first beat of the bar is - the dotted line refers to the guitarist's metric orientation)

94

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

96

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

99

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

102

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

106

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

110

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

Gm/Bb Dm/F G G/B

114

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

Gm<sup>9</sup>/Bb Dm<sup>9</sup>/F E7

117

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

Gm<sup>9</sup>/Bb G/B Gm<sup>9</sup>/Bb

120

E. Gtr.

Pno.

U. Bass

Dm<sup>9</sup>/F E7 Gm<sup>9</sup>/Bb

(guitar enters 2nd time)

Electric Guitar

Piano

Double Bass

4 (G to F 1st time only)

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

7 Guitar continues D pedal

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

10 D pedal continues

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

2

13

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

17

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

20

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

24

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

27

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

30

The dotted line represents the metric orientation of the guitar and double bass

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

33

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.



4

35

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

38

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

40

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

43

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

etc.

46

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.



48

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.



50

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.



52

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

delayed



6

55

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

60

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

indistinct

65

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

69

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

72

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

shout

G/B

Gm/Bb

75

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

Dm/F

G

L. H.

L. H.

G/B

gru

78

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

drum fill finishes

Gm<sup>9</sup>/Bb

Dm<sup>9</sup>/F

E<sup>7</sup>

G/B

8

82

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

Chords: Gm/Bb, Dm/F, G

85

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

Chords: G/B, Gm/Bb, Dm<sup>9</sup>/F

88

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

Chords: E<sup>7</sup>, Gm<sup>9</sup>/Bb, G/B

91

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

Gm<sup>9</sup>/Bb

Dm<sup>9</sup>/F

93

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

LH pitches approx. throughout

## Transcription of piano solo from Canterbury Tales (live recording):

This transcription is intended as a listening guide (not a performing score)  
(guitar enters 2nd time)

Electric Guitar

Piano

4 (G to F 1st time only)

E. Gtr.

Pno.

7 Guitar continues D pedal

E. Gtr.

Pno.

10 D pedal continues

E. Gtr.

Pno.

13 l. v. l. v.

E. Gtr.

Pno.

17 8va

20

E. Gtr.

Pno.

24

E. Gtr.

Pno.

27

E. Gtr.

Pno.

30

E. Gtr.

Pno.

The dotted line represents the metric orientation of the guitar and double bass

33

E. Gtr.

Pno.



35

Pno.

38

Pno.

Db.

40

Pno.

Db.

43

Pno.

Db.

46

Pno.

Db.

48

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

50

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

52

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

54

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

delayed

The image displays a musical score for measures 48 through 54. It is arranged in four systems, each containing three staves: Electric Guitar (E. Gtr.), Piano (Pno.), and Double Bass (Db.). The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 4/4. Measure 48 shows the E. Gtr. with a few notes, the Pno. with a complex chordal texture, and the Db. with a steady eighth-note bass line. Measure 50 features more active guitar and piano parts. Measure 52 shows a change in the piano part's texture. Measure 54 includes a 'delayed' effect on the guitar and triplets in the piano part. The Db. part maintains a consistent rhythmic pattern throughout.

59 indistinct

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

64

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

69

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

72

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

75

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

Dm/F

G

L. H.

L. H.

G/B

gtr-----

78

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

Gm<sup>9</sup>/B<sup>b</sup>

Dm<sup>9</sup>/F

E<sup>7</sup>

G/B

drum fill finishes

82

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

Dm/F

G

85

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

gtr.

G/B

Gm/Bb

Dm<sup>9</sup>/F

88

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

E7

Gm<sup>9</sup>/Bb

G/B

91

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

Gm<sup>9</sup>/Bb

Dm<sup>9</sup>/F

93

E. Gtr.

Pno.

Db.

LH pitches approx. throughout

Gm<sup>6</sup>/Bb

etc.

etc.

## 2.2 Spock

Lead-sheet for Roscoe's Ritual:

## Roscoe's Ritual

Sam Bailey

As an introduction play the track SOUND (take 2) by the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet from 17.15 to about 18.20. Use vinyl crackle

Rubato ♩=80ish

Turntables and Laptop

Piano

Drums

Start playing along with the cymbal roll on the recording  
keep playing the cymbal roll after the recording fades, use crotales for punctuation

7

Pno.

Dr.

13

Pno.

Dr.

2

19 **C** Start scratching when bass starts tremelo - duet with Mark

Pno. *p* *mf* tremolo tremolo

Bass *p* *f* tremolo tremolo

Dr. *mf* Textural - duet with Matt

25 **D** rit. . . . Tacet

Pno. tremolo *loud* tremolo

Bass tremolo *loud* tremolo

Dr. rit. . . . Tacet **D** *loud*

31 **E**

Pno. Gradually build tremolo tremolo

Bass tremolo

Dr. **E** tremolo Gradually build



35

Pno.

Bass

Dr.

tremolo  
tremolo

tremolo  
tremolo

37

Open repeat - stop suddenly

Pno.

Bass

Dr.

*really loud!*

*really loud!*

tremolo

tremolo

tremolo

*really loud!*

Once you have stopped the improvisation begins with turntables/laptop.  
When the improvisation has finished play from C

## 2.3 Scratch Orchestra

Transcription of performance/rehearsal of Shops:

0.00 0.01 0.02 0.03 0.04 0.05 0.06 0.07 0.08

S1

Piano

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

restart  
("We'll gradually repeat them  
so you become familiar  
with the initial one.")

P1

B1

0.09 0.10 0.11 0.12 0.13 0.14 0.15 0.16 0.17

S1

Pno.

"that's 'round 1'"

"round 2"

"round 3"

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

P1

0.18 0.19 0.20 0.21 0.22 0.23 0.24 0.25 0.26 0.27 0.28

S1

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

P1

B1

B1

M1

*f*

2

0.29 0.30 0.31 0.32 0.33 0.34 0.35 0.36

8 S1

Pno.

Vln. I P1

Vln. II B1

Vla. M1

0.37 0.38 0.39 0.40 0.41 0.42 0.43 0.44

9 S1 S2

Pno.

Vln. I P1

Vln. II B1

Vla. (mistake) M1

0.45 0.46

10 S1

Pno. (mistake)

Vln. I F2

Vln. II

Vla.

restart  
("oh, I'm sorry, I didn't  
leave you to do your  
thing, did I?")

3

12 0.53 0.54 0.55 0.56 0.57 0.58 0.59 1.00 1.01 1.02 1.03 1.04

Pno.

Vin. I

Vin. II

Vla.

Let's have a longer pause when it's the end of a round!

14 1.05 1.06 1.07 1.08 1.09 1.10 1.11 1.12 1.13 1.14

Pno.

Vin. I

Vin. II

Vla.

(Inter appears as C)

15

Pno.

Vin. I

Vin. II

Vla.

(Mati has made a mistake)

4

16 1.21 1.22 1.23 1.24 1.25 1.26 1.27 1.28 1.29 1.30 1.31

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

P1

B1

M1

P2

B2

M2

18 1.32 1.33 1.34 1.35 1.36 1.37 1.38 1.39 1.40 1.41 1.42 1.43

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

P1

S3

M1

20 1.46 1.47 1.48 1.49 1.50

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

P1

1.51 1.52 1.53 1.54 1.55 1.56 1.57 1.58 1.59

Piano score for measures 1.51-1.59. The score includes parts for Piano (Pno.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), and Viola (Vla.). Measure 1.51 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 1.52 has a dynamic marking of *fz* and a *P2* marking. Measure 1.53 has a dynamic marking of *fz* and a *B2* marking. Measure 1.54 has a dynamic marking of *fz*. Measure 1.55 has a dynamic marking of *fz* and a *M2* marking. Measure 1.56 has a dynamic marking of *fz*. Measure 1.57 has a dynamic marking of *fz*. Measure 1.58 has a dynamic marking of *fz*. Measure 1.59 has a dynamic marking of *fz*.

2.00 2.01 2.02 2.03 2.04 2.05 2.06 2.07 2.08 2.09 2.10 2.11

"I think it's Ben,  
you can do something different  
next time if you want, Matt"

Piano score for measures 2.00-2.11. The score includes parts for Piano (Pno.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), and Viola (Vla.). Measure 2.00 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.01 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a *P1* marking. Measure 2.02 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.03 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.04 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.05 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a *M1* marking. Measure 2.06 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.07 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a *M2* marking. Measure 2.08 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.09 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.10 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a *pizz* marking. Measure 2.11 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a *pizz* marking. A *mistake* annotation is present below the Viola part in measure 2.11.

2.18 2.19 2.20 2.21 2.22 2.23 2.24 2.25 2.26 2.27 2.28 2.29 2.30

Piano score for measures 2.18-2.30. The score includes parts for Piano (Pno.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), and Viola (Vla.). Measure 2.18 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.19 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a *P1* marking. Measure 2.20 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and an *arco* marking. Measure 2.21 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and an *arco* marking. Measure 2.22 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and an *arco* marking. Measure 2.23 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and an *arco* marking. Measure 2.24 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.25 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.26 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.27 has a dynamic marking of *mf*. Measure 2.28 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a *pizz* marking. Measure 2.29 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a *pizz* marking. Measure 2.30 has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a *pizz* marking. A *p* marking is present below the Viola part in measure 2.30.

6

33 2.33

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

"that was Matt's turn,  
that was supposed to be the begining"

35 2.43 2.44 2.45 2.46 2.47 2.48 2.49 2.50

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Pi

arco

"so now we've got our series of events,  
and now you can start to subtly alter them,  
still keep their character, you can expand them,  
and eventually each little event is going to expand  
into being a section of music by itself.  
When its gets fairly big,  
the other people can start to contribute to that event,  
but still followed by the following event,  
so we'll end up with a piece with, maybe, 12 sections"

38 2.51 2.52 2.53

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

pizz

3.30 3.31 3.32 3.33 3.34 3.35 3.36 3.37 3.38 3.38 3.39 3.40 3.41 3.42 7

Pno. S2 S3

Vln. I P1 P2 P3

Vln. II B1 arco B2 B3 pizz

Vla. M1 arco M2 M3 pizz

3.43 3.44 3.45 3.46 3.47 3.48 3.49

Pno. S1

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

3.50 3.51 3.52 3.53 3.54 3.55 3.56 3.57 3.58 3.59

Pno. S2

Vln. I P1 P2

Vln. II B1 arco

Vla. M1 arco



8 4.02 4.03 4.04 4.05 4.06 4.07 4.08 4.09 4.10

47  
Pno. S3  
Vln. I P3  
Vln. II B2 B3 pizz  
Vla. M2 M3 pizz

Detailed description: This system covers measures 47 to 50. The piano part (Pno.) has a measure rest from 47 to 49, with a fermata over the final measure (50) labeled S3. The first violin (Vln. I) has a measure rest from 47 to 49, with a fermata over the final measure (50) labeled P3. The second violin (Vln. II) has a measure rest from 47 to 49, with a fermata over the final measure (50) labeled B2. The viola (Vla.) has a measure rest from 47 to 49, with a fermata over the final measure (50) labeled M2. There are also pizzicato markings (B3 pizz and M3 pizz) in measures 49 and 50.

4.13 4.14 4.15 4.16 4.17 4.18 4.19 4.20

50  
Pno. S1  
Vln. I P1  
Vln. II  
Vla.

Detailed description: This system covers measures 50 to 53. The piano part (Pno.) has a measure rest from 50 to 52, with a fermata over the final measure (53) labeled S1. The first violin (Vln. I) has a measure rest from 50 to 52, with a fermata over the final measure (53) labeled P1. The second violin (Vln. II) and viola (Vla.) parts have measure rests from 50 to 53.

53 4.21 4.22 4.23 4.24 4.26 4.27 4.28

53  
Pno. S2  
Vln. I  
Vln. II B1  
Vla. M1 arco

Detailed description: This system covers measures 53 to 56. The piano part (Pno.) has a measure rest from 53 to 55, with a fermata over the final measure (56) labeled S2. The first violin (Vln. I) has a measure rest from 53 to 55, with a fermata over the final measure (56). The second violin (Vln. II) has a measure rest from 53 to 55, with a fermata over the final measure (56) labeled B1. The viola (Vla.) has a measure rest from 53 to 55, with a fermata over the final measure (56) labeled M1 arco.

4.29 4.30 4.31 4.32 4.33 4.34 4.35 4.36 4.37 4.38 4.39

57

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

4.40 4.41 4.42 4.43 4.44 4.45 4.46 4.47 4.48 4.49 4.50 4.51 4.52

61

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

4.53 4.54 4.55 4.56

64

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

10

4.57 4.58 4.59 5.00 5.01 5.02 5.03 5.04 5.05 5.06

66 M1

Pno.

Vln. I M1 *p*

Vln. II

Vln.

67 5.07 5.08 5.09 5.10 5.11 5.12 5.13

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vln.

5.16 5.17 5.18 5.19 5.20 5.21 5.22 5.23

68

Pno.

Vln. I *arco*

Vln. II

Vln. (Matt getting ready) M1

5.24 5.25 5.26 5.27 5.28 5.29 5.30 11

69 *pp* S2 *accel.*

Pno.  
Vln. I  
Vln. II  
Vla.

5.31 5.32 5.33 5.34 5.35 5.36 5.37 5.38 5.39 5.40 5.41 5.42 5.43 5.44 5.45 5.46 5.47 5.48 5.49

70 *pp* (mistake to end on Bb) *pppp*

P2 P3 + B2 M2

Pno.  
Vln. I  
Vln. II  
Vla.

5.50 5.51 5.52 5.53 5.54 5.55 5.56 5.57 5.58 5.59 6.00 6.01 6.02 6.03 6.04 6.05 6.06 6.07 6.08

74 *pp* S3

Pno.  
Vln. I  
Vln. II  
Vla.

12

83 6.09 6.10 6.11 6.12 6.13 6.14 6.15 6.16 6.17

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

88 6.18 6.19 6.20 6.21 6.22

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

90 6.23 6.24 6.25 6.26 6.27 6.28 6.29

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

pizz

II

6.30 6.31 6.32 6.33 6.34 6.35 6.36 6.37 6.38 6.39 6.40 6.41 6.42 6.43 6.44 6.45 6.46 6.47 6.48 6.49 <sup>13</sup>

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

6.50 6.51 6.52 6.53 6.54 6.55 6.56 6.57 6.58 6.59 7.00 7.01 7.02 7.03 7.04 7.05 7.06 7.07 7.08 7.09 7.10 7.11

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

7.12 7.14

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

14

101 7.18

Pno.

Vln. I F3 B2 checking notes

Vln. II (F3/P2) B2 B2 B2

Vla. M3 pizz.

107 7.22

Pno.

Vln. I F3

Vln. II B2 extra ♪ beat, mistake

Vla.

112

Pno.

Vln. I P1 P3

Vln. II approx.

Vla.

7.29 15 S3

117 7.32

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

M1

F2

*f*

122 (6) S3

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

M2

126 S1

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

M2

B3 pizz.

*p*

*pp*

*mp*



16

7.42

132

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

P3

P3 (pitches), P1 motif

pp

M3 pizz non-metric

7.45

136

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

mistake

not deliberate sound

B3 approx.

(M2)

P3 (pitches) (arco)

M1 (played flat)

B1

f

f

p cresc.

7.53

7.54

140

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

(from M2 after Eb changed to C#)

p cresc.

S3 (graces in contrary motion with Vla\*)

B1

M2 + S3 (graces in contrary motion with Vln I\*)

mp cresc.

7.57

17

143

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

8.00

145

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

*p*

*p*

*pizz*

*M3*

*f*

149

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

*Plucked*

*accidentally muted*

*Faster pizz*

*P1*

*B2 (arco)*

*B2*

18

8.13 8.26

154 Pedal off 8.26

Pno.

Vln. I P3 Scuffie P1

Vln. II B2 B2 + P1 B2 (rem.)

Vla. M1 M2 M1

*p*

8.38

159 8.38

Pno.

Vln. I pizz arco pizz

Vln. II

Vla. II III

8.50

161 8.50

Pno. l. v. l. v.

Vln. I

Vln. II ricochet FP PPP

Vla. M1 ord. FP

## 2.4 Duo with Matthew Wright

Prelude no.2 in a minor from Preludes op.28 by Frederic Chopin:

*Lento*

2

1 *p*

35 2 4

3 1 3 45

9

13 *dim.*

17 *slen-tan-do* *sostenuto*

*Led.* \*

5 5 5 5  
3 3 3 3  
4 4 4 4  
2 2 2 2