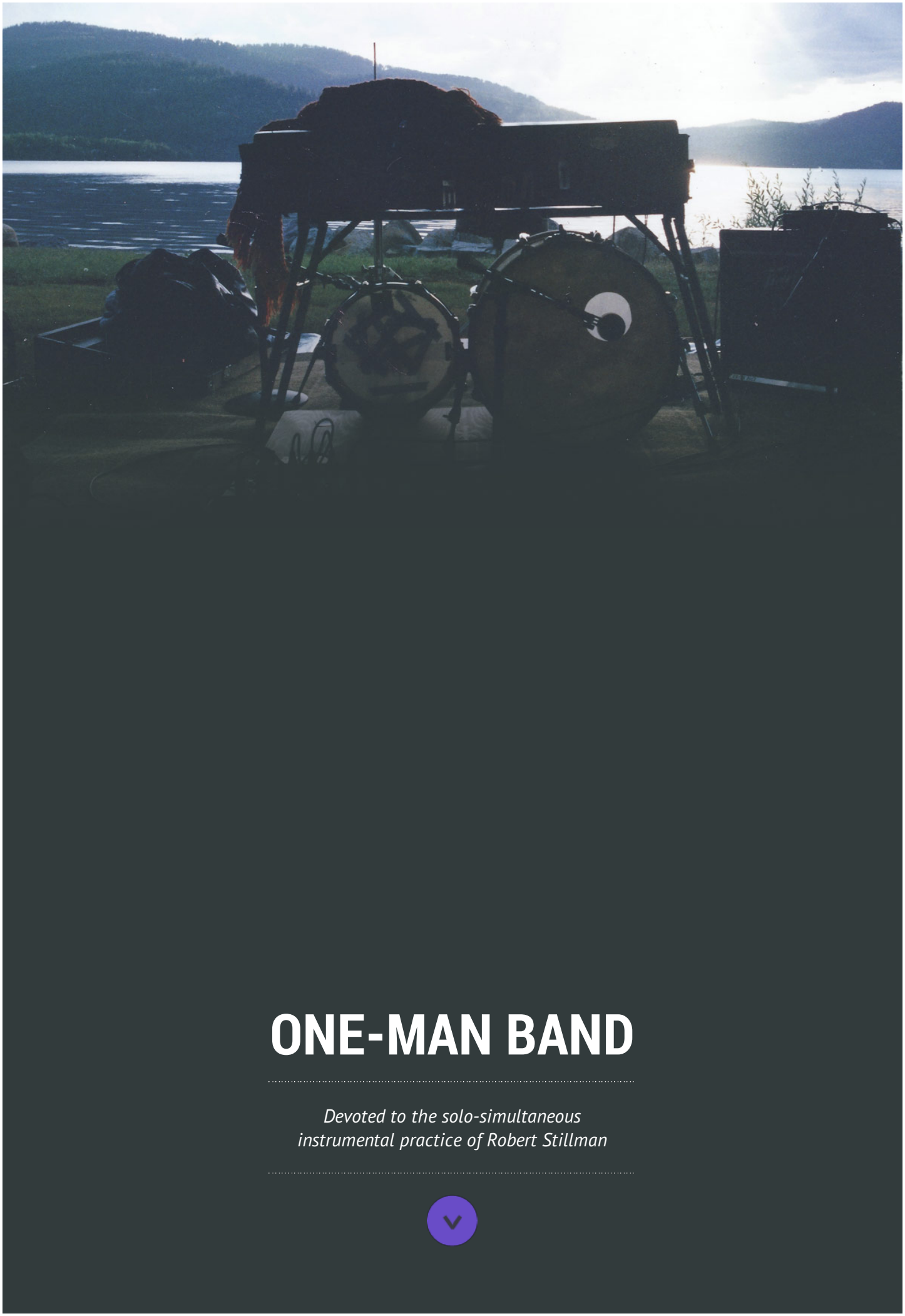


ONE-MAN BAND

Devoted to the solo-simultaneous instrumental practice of Robert Stillman

One-Man Band: A Manifesto

01

One-man band performance asks the body to do something it would rather not do. The sound of one-man band music, therefore, is not perfect. Rather, it is the sound of the outer limit of ability.

>

The Aesthetics of Autonomy: One-man Band in Performance and Composition

Abstract

This paper focuses on simultaneous multi-instrumental performance ('one-man-band'), with a particular interest in how this practice informs compositional process. Through analysis of the author's own creative practice, the study explores how factors related to one-man band such as limb coordination and instrument modification influence a musical result that is unique to this mode of musicianship. Examples of the author's work are examined to show how

one-man band practice, like overdub-based recording, facilitates a unique synchronization of expressive nuances across multiple instrumental sounds, thus reinforcing the perception of these features as integrated aspects of a composition. The paper also considers the potential of one-man band in an ensemble context, and as a form of live accompaniment for silent film.

Introduction

I began performing music as a 'one-man band' in 2006. Originally, my reasons for playing more than one instrument at a time were purely pragmatic; I was asked by a friend to play as part of a concert series she was curating, and next to no members of my band were available. When faced with the prospect of hiring replacement musicians and making do with one or two rehearsals, somehow the alternative of doing it all myself seemed attractive. Through experimentation with various configurations of different instruments, I arrived at a mode of performance that used a Fender Rhodes electric piano and percussion modified for the feet. As I pursued this practice further, my understanding of what I was doing, and why I was doing it, changed: what was initially developed as an alternate route to realizing my music live evolved into a substantial mode of musicianship that also extended into composition and studio practices.

This paper will seek to illuminate the ways in which the 'one-man band' mode of performance can be explored beyond the prescribed function its name implies: that of replacing or imitating an ensemble. It will present practice-based research focused on how this multi-instrumental format can influence the development and performance of original music. Using examples of my own work, I also hope to show how this influence is specific to the format of the one-man band; as in all modes of creative practice, the unique physical possibilities and limitations of the practice have a direct impact on the way it is employed, and the results it yields. The discussion will also consider theoretical and practical links between one-man band performance and studio-based, multi-track recording.

One Man Band in Context

The term 'one-man band' is used to describe a musician who plays several instruments at the same time. The history of the one-man-band can be traced as far back as the 13th century to pipe and tabor musicians who played the two instruments simultaneously, often as accompaniment for performers in traveling shows. (Rammell, 1990) This style of itinerant one-man band musician continued through the Elizabethan period, flourishing in America as common practice in folk and blues music of the late 19th and early 20th century. Oliver (2009) notes how the unconventional instruments and technique of the one-man band provided not only mobility, but crowd-attracting novelty that suited songsters and bluesmen of the early to mid 1900's such as Sam Jones ('Stovepipe No.1'), Johnny Watson ('Daddy Stovepipe'), and Weldon 'Juke Boy' Bonner, all of whom played several instruments modified for simultaneous performance. In an interview, one-man band musician Daddy Stovepipe (quoted in Oliver, 1965) emphasizes the autonomy afforded to the one-man band:

> *I'm what they call a one-man-band. Don't need no other fellers 'cause I play my own guitar and I got this harp on this rack round my neck so's I cin play it, and I stomp with my foot. So I jest set my box on the corner of Maxwell and Peoria and I'm a whole band. (p.148)*

In comparison to this basic set-up described by Daddy Stovepipe, many mid-century one-man band acts featured the modification and invention of elaborate instruments for solo performance, such as 'Lone Cat' Jesse Fuller's 'Fotdella' (a foot-operated bass instrument), and Joe Barrick's 'Pietarbajo', which combines fiddle, bass guitar, rhythm guitar, and percussion into a single one-man band instrument (Rammel, 1990). Contemporary examples such as Pat Metheny's recent 'Orchestrion' project have extended the ingenuity of such composite-instruments using current MIDI and voltage controlled solenoid technology ("Orchestrion Info", 2012).

In comparison to one-man bands like Barrick and Metheney, my own set-up is quite minimal, perhaps closer to the

earlier 'songster' model in the sense that it was developed, at least initially, as a practical approach to performing original multi-instrumental music without a band, with less need for ingenious instrument design. In selecting which instruments to use in my practice, keyboard and drums seemed the most logical choices because they were instruments on which I already had some proficiency: though my principle instrument is saxophone, I am a self-taught drummer, and have received training in piano. Perhaps more significantly, I compose music on the Fender Rhodes, so the employment of the same instrument for composition as performance represented an opportunity to better integrate two processes that, as a saxophonist, felt somewhat disconnected.

Coordination, Independence, and Musical Structure

The unconventional instrumental technique employed in one-man band performance has a substantial influence on the character of the music. The connection between the musical form and the physical act of creating it is not unique to the case of one-man band; Baily (1985) notes that "human movement is the process through which musical patterns are produced: Music is the sonic product of action" (p. 237). Though the physical act of one-man band practice, as a hybrid of piano and drum set performance, is no doubt linked to the pre-existing techniques associated with each of those instruments, the performance of these two instruments at the same time constitutes what I believe to be a unique musical practice involving specific physical and cognitive circumstances, chiefly, the coordination of all four limbs to play two instruments simultaneously. Iyer (2005) notes that, while most instruments require a degree coordination of some kind, instruments that make use of both the hands and feet constitute a "body centered polyphony"(p.395) requiring a particularly highly developed level of "bodily awareness" (p.395). As a practitioner, I am particularly interested in how the multi-limb/multi-modal aspect of one-man band technique influences characteristics of music composition and performance.

In my one-man band set-up the percussion is positioned underneath the keyboard, and consists of kick drum, snare drum, and hi-hat cymbals.

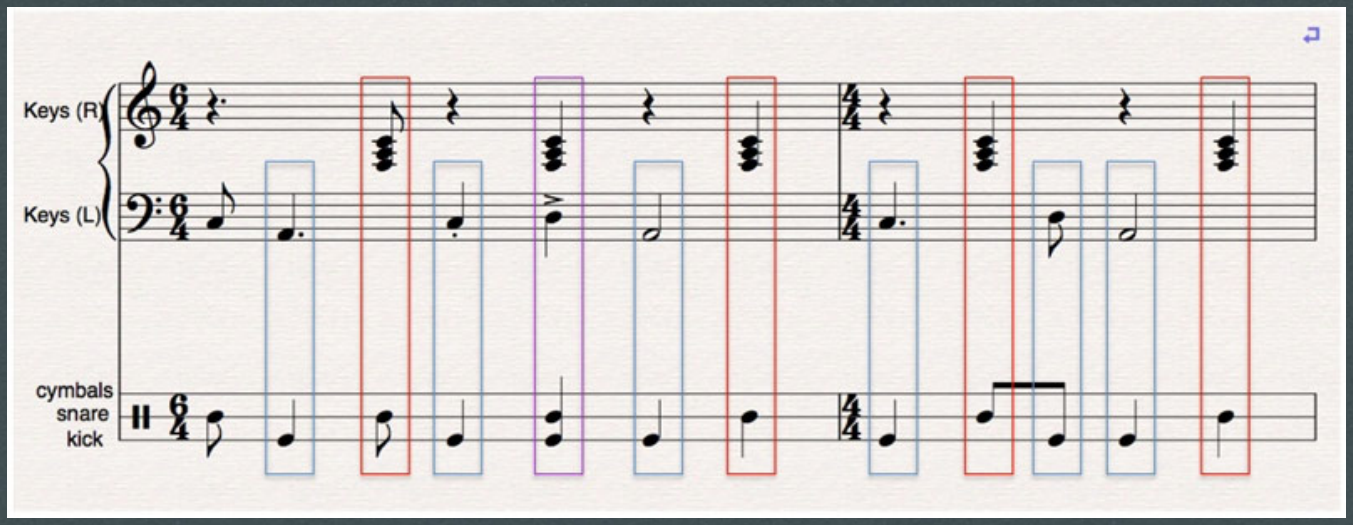
The kick drum is played with the left foot using a kick-drum pedal with a standard soft beater-head; the snare drum, held upright on a wooden mount, is played with a second pedal that is fitted with a small drum stick beater; the hi-hat cymbals are unmodified, but the pedal that operates the cymbals is positioned at an opposite angle to the snare drum pedal beside it. This opposed configuration allows the right foot to depress each pedal either independently, or at the same time. The use of the feet in my one-man band practice differs from standard drum-set technique in two ways. The first and most significant difference is the use of a foot-operated snare drum (this drum is usually played using hand-held sticks). The second difference is in the use of my left foot to play the kick drum, and the right to play hi-hat. In the traditional drum-kit set up, the right foot plays the kick drum, and the left operates the hi-hat.

In my initial experiments with various drum/keyboard set-ups, I found that shifting the kick drum to my left foot freed my 'better' right foot for the more demanding role of (A) operating both the snare and hi-hat pedals, and (B) playing faster, more nuanced figures appropriate for the snare drum's timbre.

This set-up also made sense with regard to hand-foot coordination. I found that there was a natural coordination of limbs on the same side of my body, making synchronized movements of left hand/left foot, and right hand/right foot much easier than synchronizations 'across' my body's center. This natural ease of coordination between limbs on the same side of the body (and difficulty with coordination of limbs on opposite sides) is explained by various experimental studies of synchronized limb movement. Ivry and Richardson (2001) present a model in which "multiple timers" (p.122), allow a certain degree of nuanced independent limb movement, while larger-scale movements between limbs on the same side of the body are linked through a neural gating process that facilitates in-phase movement of arms and legs in activities such as walking. Clayton, Sager, and Will (2004) apply Ivry and Richardson's findings to acts of musical "self-entrainment" (p.8) such as tapping feet and clapping hands, noting how the same neural gating that makes coupled limb movements possible may also make the uncoupling of these limbs for independent movement more difficult. The study concludes this difficulty "may reflect a fundamental constraint in human performance" (Clayton et al., 2004, p.8).

I discovered such constraints in my early one-man band experiments, to the extent that the function of my body could be conceptualized as 'split' into two halves across a vertical plane: left foot/left hand; right foot/right hand. Because each of these limbs operated an aspect of the instrumental set up, this split of the body also corresponded to a split of musical forces, in which left represented the kick drum and lower half of the keyboard (E1-C4)1, and right represented the snare drum, cymbals, and upper half of the keyboard (C4-E7). The music I made during my first experiments with the one-man band format reflects these pre-existing physical tendencies and limitations, and the corresponding patterns of musical groupings. 'Life Partners', one of the first compositions developed through one-

man band performance, is based on a repeated motif that is used throughout the piece.



= Left Foot + Left Hand

= Right Foot + Right Hand

= All limbs together

Considering this example, it is evident that, with the exception of the first beat of the music, the left hand (bass line) is directly synchronized with the left foot (kick drum), and the right hand (chords) is directly synchronized with the right foot (snare). Coordination of limbs on the same side of the body results in the synchronization between the musical figures that these limbs perform.

Though the musical texture in 'Life Partners' would be idiomatic in certain styles of popular music performed in a band context, the use of this pattern as the basis for a one-man band composition, and such strict adherence to it throughout the piece, could also be seen to reflect the physical constraints of the body in this coordinated act of multi-limb, multi-instrumental practice, at an early stage of its development.

'Life Partners' also shows a relationship between physical movement and musical gesture. The range of drum sounds follows the same low-to-high scheme as the keyboard range (low sounds on the left, high sounds on the right). Because sides of the body are linked to these low and high ranges, a sequence of actions moving from left to right will create a corresponding musical shape (low to high) in both the piano and percussion at the same time.

This mirroring of left-to-right and high-to-low could suggest that the ear might also have a role to play in determining synchronized textures in one-man band music. In my early experiments with this multi-instrumental set up, it became clear that one instrument (piano or drums) was often inclined to follow the other. While this could be a matter of natural ease of physical coordination, it is also possible that one instrument was imitating the registral (vertical) and physical (horizontal) movement of the other. This can be seen to relate to what Arnie Cox's "mimetic hypothesis" (2006, p.46), which argues that music comprehension involves the listener imagining, and in some cases imitating, the physical actions that create the music to which he or she is listening (i.e. quietly humming or tapping feet along to music). This idea assumes that musical gesture is not necessarily instrument specific, but that the "exertion dynamic" (p.50) producing a sound on one instrument can be can be translated into an equivalent musical action, and sound, on another instrument. Cox (2006) describes this as an amodal form of imitation in which "a musical gesture motivates imitative representations that are not confined to the modality in which they are produced" (p.51).

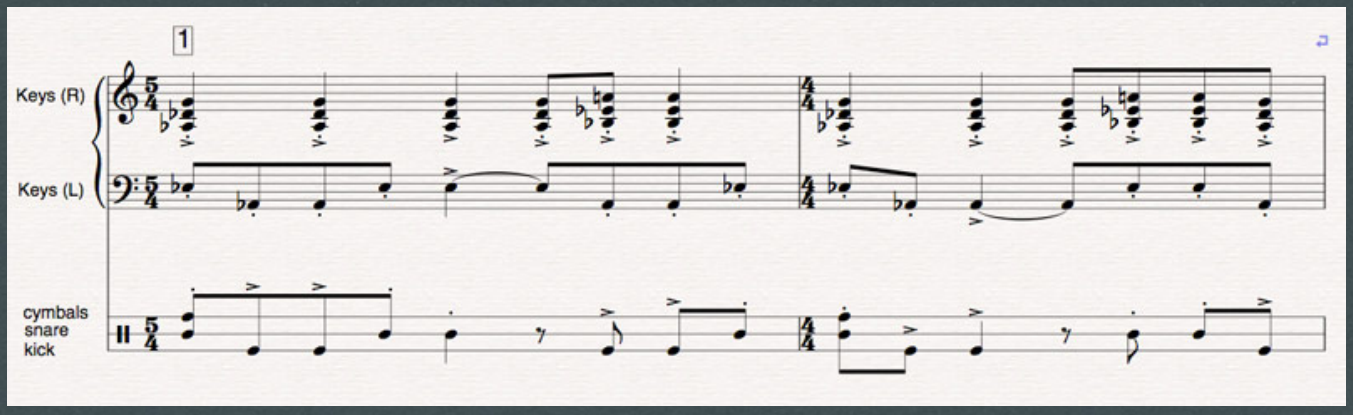
The tendency for feet to follow hands (or vice-versa) in one-man band performance can be seen as an example of such amodal or intra-modal representation of the same musical gesture. As Cox (2006) notes, this phenomenon could either be a practiced response, or a gut-level reaction. Though Cox's hypothesis assumes two distinct people (musician and listener, or two musicians), it is translatable to the circumstances of one-man band in that the player of two instruments is both player and listener, and is both playing and reacting. As one instrument follows the other, the same gesture is simultaneously translated from one musical sound to the other, hence the imitative relationship between hands and feet.

Although the influence of physical and cognitive "pre-existing modes of operation" (Baily, 1985, p. 237) produced a distinctive result in early one-man band pieces like 'Life Partners', the music was somewhat lacking in variety. For this reason, my later practice focused on developing a more deliberate control of musical movement, challenging natural tendencies in order to develop greater musical flexibility. The goal was a higher degree of agency over the relationships between limbs and their corresponding musical functions.

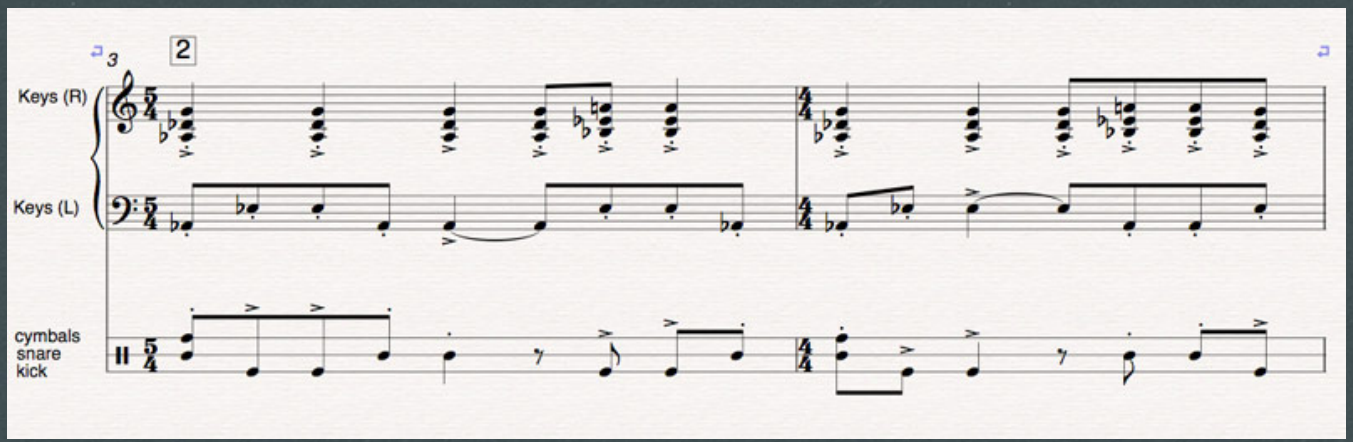
This overlaps with the notion of independence in other multi-limb instrumental practices. Independence is described by Van Seters (2011) as "facility with which drummers (in particular) and pianists can control various independent yet complementary musical elements executed by individual limbs (or fingers)" (p.46). Such technique does not necessarily entail limbs working in isolation from each other; John Riley's concept of "interdependence" (Riley 2007, p. 17; cited in Van Seters, 2011, p.46) broadens the concept of limb independence to include a more comprehensive multi-modality in which "each limb knows exactly what the others are doing and how they work together, not independently" (Riley 2007, p. 17; cited in Van Seters, 2011, p.46). Such flexibility allows for a wider range of possibilities for how limbs function in coordination-based music techniques.

Much of my one-man band practice has focused on activities that would develop the capacity to employ my hands and feet in a more controlled, independent way. The piece 'Looking Glass Music' was composed as an 'étude' for one-man band, and incorporates musical challenges specifically aimed at the development of interdependence. Whereas the earlier piece 'Life Partners' features synchronizations based upon the body's "intrinsic modes of operation" (Baily, 1985, p. 237), 'Looking Glass Music' systematically challenges these pre-existing tendencies.

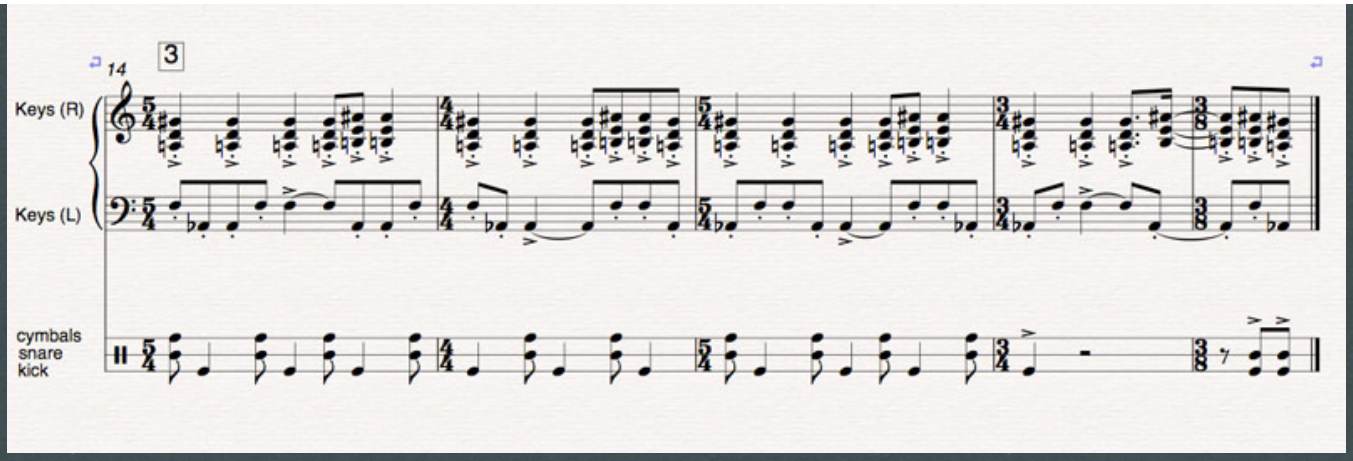
The scheme of the piece is based upon a series of repeated musical sequences: the first part of a sequence establishes a pattern between the hands and feet, and the second part alters this pattern. The following excerpt from 'Looking Glass Music' shows how, through a series of musical variations, links between hands and feet are challenged in order to build independence.



Sequence 1: The feet exactly 'mirror' the musical gesture of the left-hand bass: The two figures are rhythmically synchronized, and the direction of the lines is also imitative. The right hand emphasizes strong beats.



Sequence 2: The feet and right hand continue as in (1), but the left hand bass switches, inverting the figure so that the direction is exactly opposite to the feet. The two are still rhythmically synchronized.

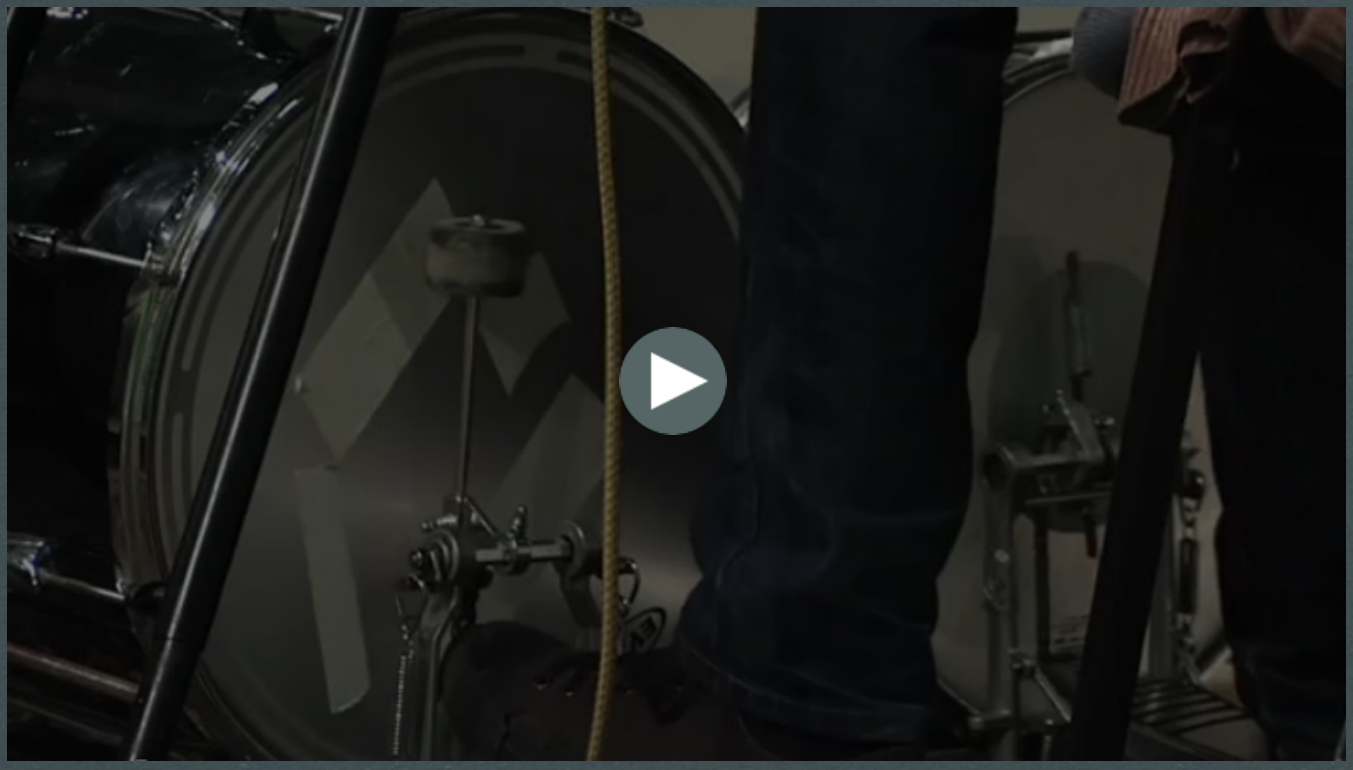


Sequence 7: The hands continue rhythmically as in (1) and (2), but the feet change, playing a cross-rhythm. The feet

ONE-MAN BAND MANIFESTO | THE AESTHETICS OF AUTONOMY | PRESENTATION
CONCERT | STUDIO PERFORMANCES | PAST PERFORMANCES | ABOUT

nds increases with each repetition of the sequence. While the resulting music gives the sense of independence between parts, the execution of such figures was achieved through a developed awareness similar to Riley's notion of interdependence. In other words, each musical element's performance is more easily executed when informed by an understanding of its relationship to the other. In the case of the one-man band, an awareness of both the feet and hands' relationship to shared parameters (in this case, tempo) is crucial.

In addition to increasing my capacity to perform distinct musical structures simultaneously in the feet and hands, building independence also gave me the capacity to explore a more dynamic relationship between the piano and drums. Whereas the early composition 'Life Partners' is characterized by the feet and hands mirroring each other, developing greater independence allowed me to create a wider variety of musical textures using keyboard and percussion. The following video excerpt from 'Station Wagon Interior Perspective II: Blues' illustrates how a one-man band arrangement can employ the piano and drums in roles that are alternatively independent, complimentary, or imitative.



Instruments, Technique, and the Role of the Feet

As in all musical practices, the instruments employed in the one-man band, and the way these instruments are used in performance, are central to the special character of the resulting music. Vertegaal and Ungvary (1995) characterize instruments as "transducers of physical parameters" (p.1) situated between the input of creative ideas and the output of sound. The physical specificity of an instrument, in direct relationship to the body that plays it, will likely have a direct influence on musical structures (Bailey, 1985). This idea has a particular significance in the case of one-man band, which makes use of a non-standard instrumental set up and technique.

The employment of the feet to do the work of the hands in one-man band performance has a significant impact on the resulting music. This is due to the feet and hands' very different ranges of movement: the hands, by way of the wrists and fingers, can execute very detailed, quick movements, of which the feet generally are not capable. Another significant asset of the hand, explained in depth by Richard Sennet (2009), is its highly developed ability to both manipulate and sense the material with which it is working. Though the feet have some capacity for touch in musical technique, the information the feet receive from the instrument is less complex than what the hands can gather. (This sense of touch is increased by playing shoeless, a common practice for drummers and organists).

In many one-man band configurations, including my own, the feet take on musical roles that would normally require the dexterity and touch of the hands and fingers. Though my foot-operated pedal is perhaps less well-suited for playing the snare drum than the hand-operated sticks for which the instrument was designed, I would argue that the sound that results from this unconventional pairing of limb and instrument is integral to one-man band music. Viewed objectively, the foot is capable of its own range of movements, some of which the hand may be incapable of replicating. In addition to what the foot can do, what the foot can't do is also valuable: the effort required of the foot to perform nuanced, hand-oriented technique influences the expressiveness of rhythm in the resulting music. Joel Ryan (1991) describes this value of such effort in instrumental technique:

> *Effort is closely related to expression in the playing of traditional instruments. It is the element of energy and desire, of attraction and repulsion in the movement of music. But effort is just as important in the formal construction of music as in its expression: effort maps complex territories onto the grid of pitch and harmony. And it is upon such that much of modern music invention is founded. (p.7)*

Audible effort in the feet's performance of the drums helps create a distinction between the sound of conventional percussion and the sound of foot-operated percussion. This is consistent with a central concern of my one-man band practice, which is the understanding and cultivation of one-man band music as its own musical sound, as opposed to an imitation of a conventional drummer and pianist performing together.

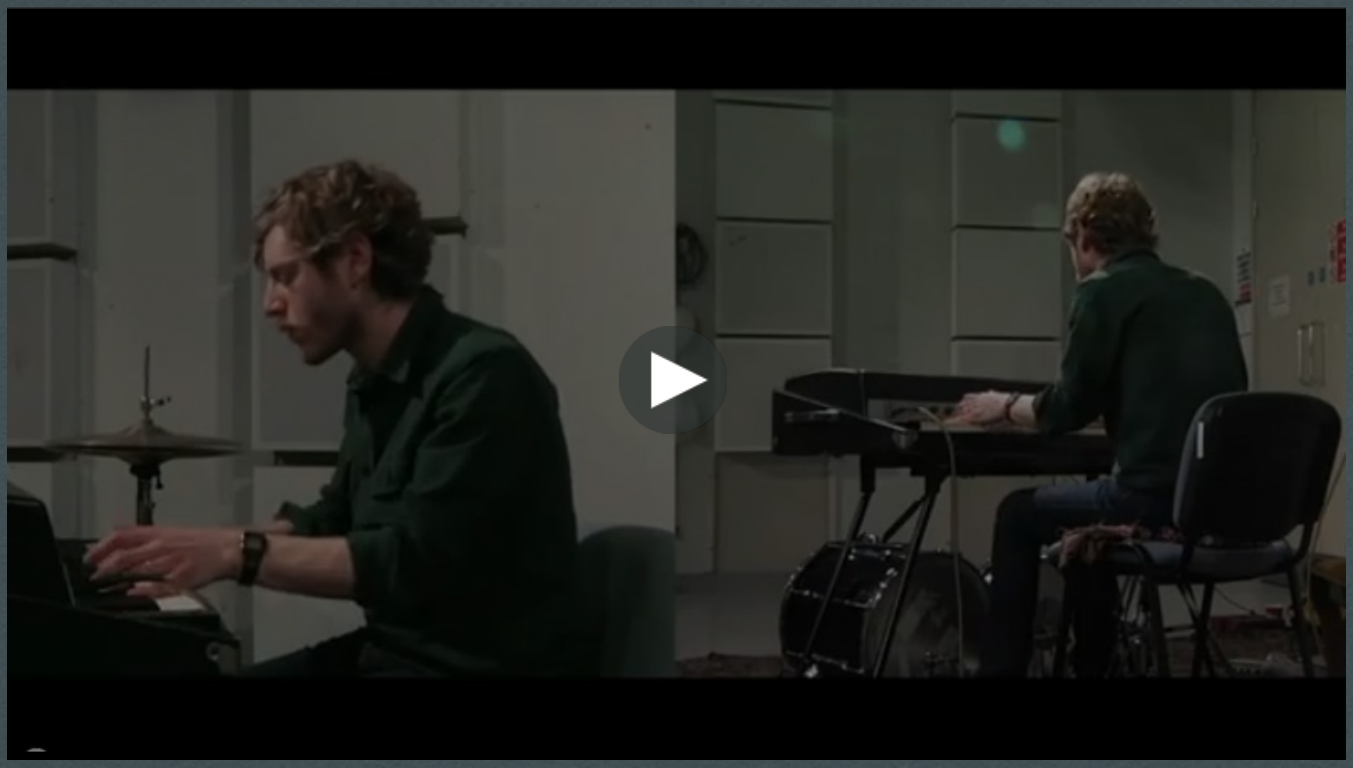
The rhythmic use of the feet in my one-man band set-up also suggests links to other modes of performance. In dance styles such as Flamenco, Clogging, and Tap, the feet play a central role both in the visual and sonic realization of rhythm. Traditional dances of Maidu Native American Indians integrated dance and instrumental technique through the use of resonant, hollowed-out logs that were played both through dance step and with sticks. (Densimore, 1939). My use of the feet in one-man band practice can also be related to the more informal act of tapping one's foot in time. While Cox (2006) cites foot-tapping on the part of the listener as an example of a "subtly overt embodied response" (p.46) to music, foot-tapping of the performer arguably falls between categories of ancillary musical gestures and actual sound producing gestures (Wanderley, 2006). In the case of particularly loud foot-tappers like Jelly Roll Morton, Charles Mingus, and Thelonious Monk, foot-tapping could be considered to be 'part of the music'. The foot-drumming in one-man band is arguably related to this musical foot-tapping in the way that it both embodies and sonically marks musical time.

Expressive Rhythm and One-Man Band

One of the most unique aspects of one-man band performance is the ability to synchronize musical gestures across multiple instruments. The solo multi-instrumental performer can synchronize subtle musical changes across two or more instruments with a degree of accuracy that would be very difficult for two individual performers to achieve. Importantly, for the one-man band, these changes can also occur spontaneously, independent of a pre-conceived (notated) scheme or direction from a third party (a conductor). This synchronization is most relevant to rhythm in one-man band: the ability to coordinate piano and drums in the performance of rhythm, both on a large and small scale, gives the one-man band performer an important degree of flexibility and expressive capacity.

One way that this coordinated flexibility of rhythm can be observed in one-man band music is in tempo. Subtle deviation from metronomic pulse can serve an expressive purpose in music (Collier, 1994). Eck, Gasser, and Port (1999) note that "musicians slow down and speed up in a way which helps bring alive the music they play" (p.3). In the case of the one-man band, this natural deviation from strict tempo creates the unique sound of an ensemble with a single, organic sense of time. Eck, Gasser, and Port also note how tempo variation can highlight musical structures, such as the beginnings and endings of melodic phrases or sections of a composition. While flexibility of this kind can certainly be coordinated between members of an ensemble, soloists have a particular freedom to adjust pulse more spontaneously, and with a greater fluidity (Collier, 1994). The one-man band mode of performance applies this rhythmic freedom of the soloist to a multi-instrumental setting.

Variation of tempo is an important characteristic of my own one-man band music. Besides the subtle shifts in tempo that occur naturally performance, many of my compositions also take advantage of the ability to coordinate deliberate changes in pulse, both abrupt and gradual, between the piano and drums. Though some of these composed shifts in tempo coincide with changes in meter, in most cases they are not metric modulations. For this reason it would be quite difficult to negotiate such transitions between unrelated tempos in an ensemble context without a great deal of rehearsal, or cues from a conductor. Furthermore, performing these transitions solo allows me the flexibility to vary the speed of these tempos each time they are performed. The following excerpt from 'Trail Music' demonstrates the use of variable tempo and shifting rhythmic feels within the context of a composition.



In addition to flexibility of large-scale rhythmic structures such as tempo and meter, there is also the potential for flexibility at the micro-level of rhythmic feel. For example, my one-man band practice often explores different degrees of swing feel in performance. 'Swing', in this case, does not refer to the rhythmic pattern 'swing', but to the swing feel in which adjacent beats are performed as 'long-short' (based on an underlying subdivision of pulse into triplets). This long:short 'ratio' in the swing feel can depend on factors such as tempo, accompaniment, and the

performer himself (Honing and de Haas, 2008), and can also be used expressively (Friberg & Sundstrom, 2002). The one-man band set-up offers an interesting opportunity to vary this swing ratio simultaneously in the hands and feet throughout the course of a composition. In most of my one-man band pieces, fluid movement between 'swung' and 'straight' feels gives expressive contour to each section of the piece. This expressive variation of feel can be heard in the following section of ' Station Wagon Interior Perspective I: Waltz'

Rhythmic feel also has implications in terms of personal style in one-man band music. Though rhythmic feel can be a variable parameter linked to tempo or compositional form, it can also constitute a distinct set of rhythmic tendencies that contribute to a musician's recognizable playing style. Used in this way, the word 'feel' can refer both to an audible characteristic of music, and a specific way in which the player 'senses' or feels musical time. Iyer (2001) notes: "In groove-based contexts, even as the tempo remains constant, fine-scale rhythmic delivery becomes just as important a parameter as, say, tone, pitch, or loudness… Individual players have their own feel, that is, their own ways of relating to an isochronous pulse" (p. 398).

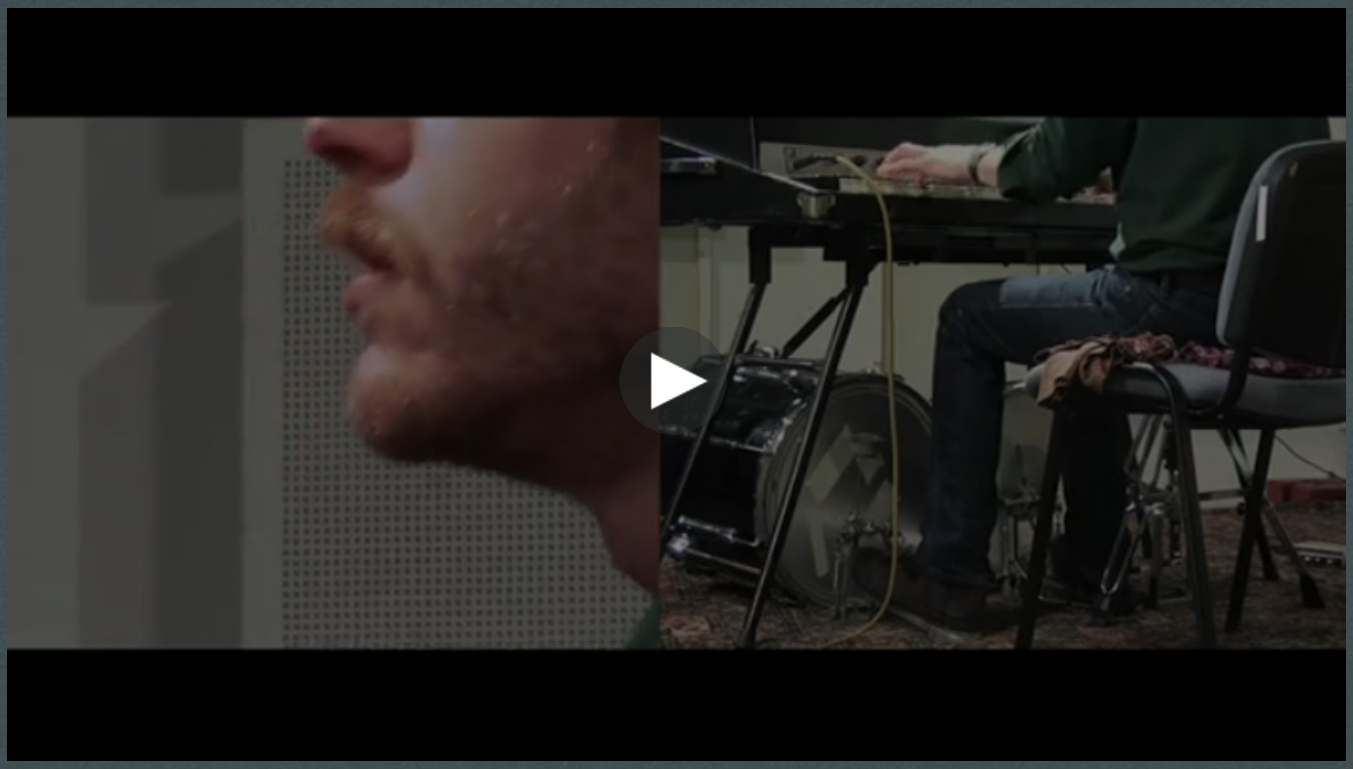
In one-man band music, individual rhythmic feel informs the performance of multiple instruments. The resulting sound is an unusual one in that the rhythmic idiosyncrasies of one musician act as global trait informing multiple musical forces at the same time. Recordings of one-man band performers such as 'Lone Cat' Jesse Fuller's 'San Fransisco Bay Blues' (World Song Records, 1955) and Joe Hill Louis's 'When I'm Gone (She Treats Me Mean and Evil)' (Checker, 1951) reveal this musical effect, in which multiple instruments accurately follow a single, very unorthodox groove.

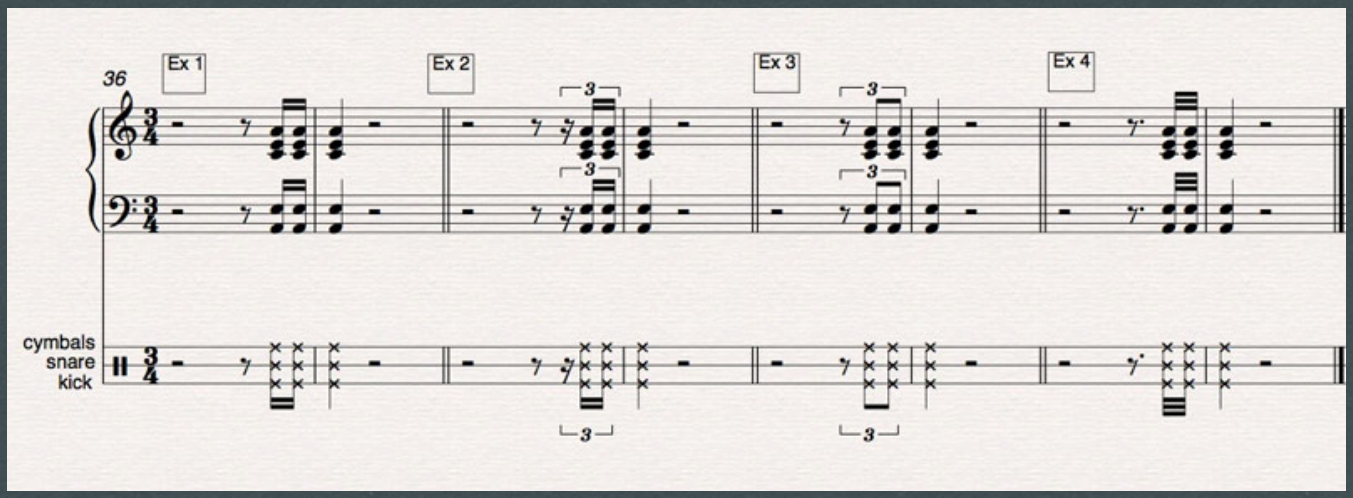
The Integration of Composition and Performance

My one-man band practice was originally developed for the purpose of realizing original compositions in performance. So far, this paper has discussed the influence of one-man band technique on composed musical structures. But these musical examples also show the extent to which one-man band collapses the distinction between composition and performance. This is due in part to the practice's capacity to coordinate the same musical feature across multiple instruments at the same time. In an ensemble context, such a coordinated musical event would normally suggest that musicians are following a pre-existing scheme; whether notated, rehearsed, or stylistically conventional, the event likely to be perceived by the listener as some aspect of the composition. However, in the one-man band setting, because one musical will is controlling multiple instruments, a spontaneous

impulse to change rhythmic figures, tempos, or even meters, can be translated into a coherent musical event synchronized between the piano and drums; even if this event is spontaneous, its occurrence in multiple instruments can create the impression of being composed.

Such coordinated variation of composed material forms the basis of much of my original one-man band music: In the following example, 'Station Wagon Interior Perspective I: Waltz', (Figure 5) the central rhythmic motif is varied throughout the piece. This three-chord figure is a flexible element within the composition that changes with each performance, but because it is played in rhythmic unison between drums and piano, it could also be perceived by the listener as a written aspect of the piece.





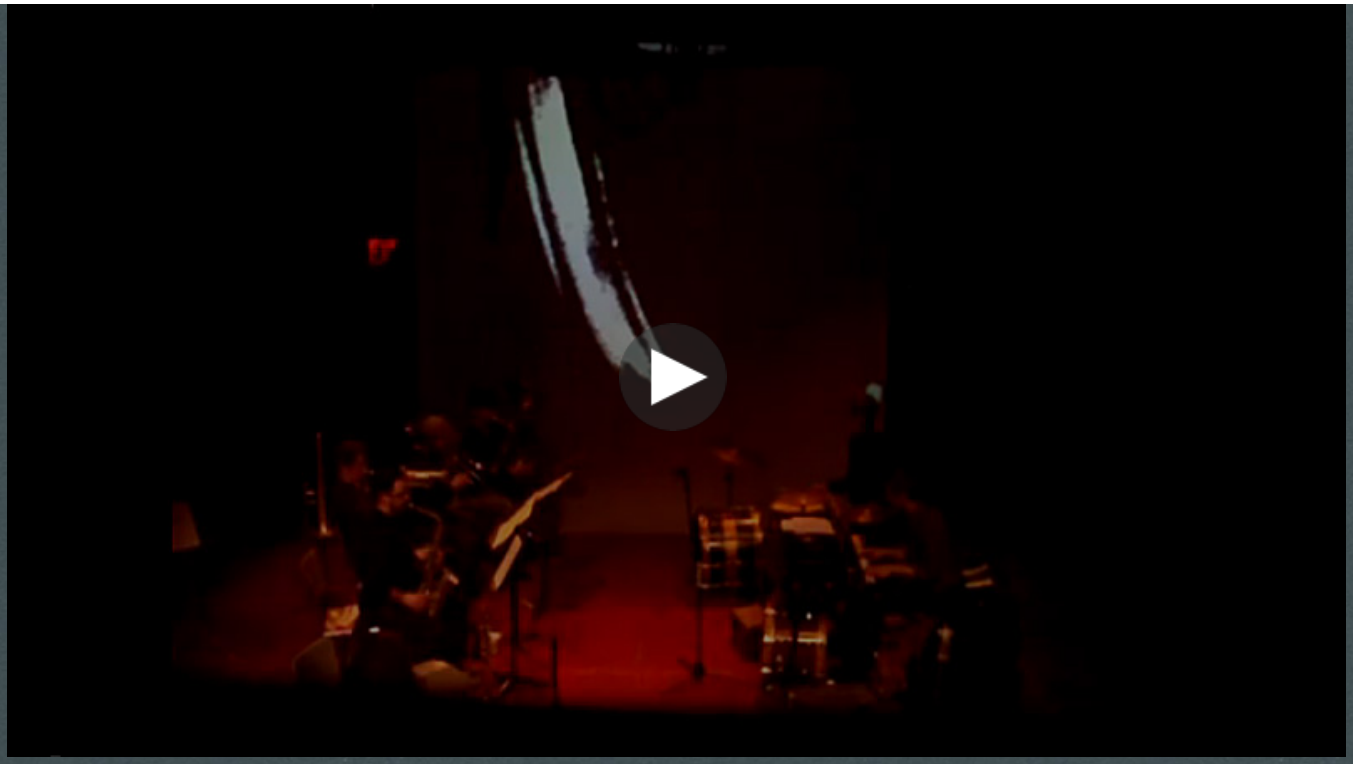
In one-man band practice, the line between composed and improvised music is less rigid, both for the performer and the listener. The act of performing an original work becomes an extension of the compositional process: each rendition presents a new opportunity to explore the variation of elements as small-scale as rhythmic nuance (as in the preceding example), and as large-scale as musical form. This capacity to shape multi-instrumental material in real time is particularly well suited for live accompaniment of visual media or dance; scores can be developed spontaneously in response to visual content, or a pre-composed score can be modified mid-performance, for example, to fit durations of formal sequences. These approaches of live 'scoring' exploit the flexibility of traditional

solo piano accompaniment of film, adapting it for a multi-instrumental format. In following example of 'Looking Glass Music,' performed as live accompaniment to a film, the duration of each of the piece's sections is adjusted to fit sequences within the film, either through (A) adjustment of tempo, or (B) repetition of 'open' sections of the piece.

In addition to opening up opportunities in the solo interpretation of original material, one-man band practice can also be an effective tool in the process of developing compositions for other instrumental forces. Elements of coordination, instrumental technique, and rhythmic flexibility that influence the character of one-man band music can also be translated to ensemble music. The project Station Wagon Interior Perspective (2011) was developed for one-man band, but subsequently arranged for additional winds and percussion. One aim of the project was to see if some of the musical characteristics of solo simultaneous instrumental performance could be translated into an ensemble context.

One way I tried to achieve this was through orchestration; my goal was to recreate the performance of each individual limb in as much detail as possible, mapping the specific rhythmic nuances, dynamics, and timings of each foot and hand on to a corresponding part for each of the four wind players. As opposed to a more traditional rationale of orchestration, which perhaps seeks to elaborate on a model (say, a piano score), I wished to retain as many characteristics of the one-man band model as possible giving the ensemble music the sound of a one-man band.

Translating the flexibility of rhythm and tempo to the ensemble format proved to be very challenging. This was ultimately achieved by exploring the one-man band's potential as a mode of conducting; as most of the winds' parts corresponded directly to an element of the one-man band set up, musicians in the ensemble were instructed to follow the visual and sonic gestures of my hands and feet. Idiosyncratic rhythms, flexible tempos, and abrupt transitions in feel were coordinated in rehearsal by each musician gathering musical information from my limbs, and coordinating their response to these cues with the rest of the ensemble. The percussiveness of my feet was particularly useful, as these musical figures could be seen, heard, and felt by other musicians in the ensemble. The following video clip features an ensemble performance of Station Wagon Interior Perspective II: Blues, performed by one-man band and ensemble.



One-Man Band and Studio Production

One-man band practice can also be incorporated into the studio production process. When recording Machine's Song (OIB Records, 2011) an album featuring repertoire for one-man band, I was interested in augmenting the instrumentation of Fender Rhodes and drums, while still retaining the sound characteristics of one-man band music. To do this, each recording began with a 'live' take of the one-man band. This track was then used as a guide for all subsequent overdubs, providing a reference for the performance of each new instrumental part in that piece. Because the one-man band track formed the foundation of the production, its musical characteristics (including tempo fluctuations and rhythmic nuance) were retained, even when removed from the mix. In this way, the details of one-man band performance were inscribed as part of the recorded composition.

The recording studio itself is a 'one-man band' of sorts, enabling performance of multiple instruments at the same time through the overdub process of multi-track recording. Multi-track, or 'sound-on-sound' recording, uses multiple tracks (either on tape or in a software sequencer) to make two or more recordings that play back simultaneously. Artists like Les Paul, a musician, inventor, and technician associated with the early development of multi-track, built intricate arrangements through the layering of his own guitar playing (Snyder, 2003). Subsequent artists like Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney, and Prince relied heavily on multi-track to layer recordings of themselves playing multiple instruments, creating a 'virtual ensemble' in which players are all the same person. This style of recording uses technology to transcend restrictions of temporality, creating what Moorefield (2005) characterizes as "an appearance of reality which could not actually exist—a pseudo-reality created in [the] synthetic space' of recorded media"(p. xv).

The one-man band can be seen as an attempt to translate the multi-track concept into a live practice in which the multiple tracks are performed in real time. In terms of compositional process, both studio recording and one-man band offer similarly autonomous approaches in which the conception and realization of music are integrated into one act. Articulating this intimacy between idea and sound in composition, Brian Eno (2004) notes how studio-based composition allows the composer to be "empirical in a way that the classical composer never was. You're working directly with sound, and there's no transmission loss between you and the sound" (p. 129). Eno compares this model of "working directly with sound" to that of a traditional composer, for whom the actualization of his initial idea in sound is mitigated by notation, the tastes and biases of conductors, and the technique of players. "Transmission loss", in his opinion, represents a dilution (or corruption) of artistic intent that occurs at each stage between the composer's idea and its realization as music. In an autonomous studio process such as that afforded by multi-track

recording, the roles of composer and performer are combined, and the composition is the sound-realization.

One-man band affords a similar autonomy, in that the intentions of the composer are translated directly into multi-instrumental sound. The mitigating factors standing between idea and musical realization, such as elements of coordination and instrumental technique, can be seen as representing potential stages of transmission loss; however, as previous sections of this paper have argued, many of these factors contribute positively to the distinctive character and possibilities of one-man band music.

The practical links that exist between one-man band performance and solo multi-track production may account for similarities in musical style: solo multi-track recordings, like one-man band performance, are often characterized by close coordination of nuanced rhythmic feels, flexibility in tempo, and synchronization of expression, dynamics, and timbre. This uncanny musical consistency can be observed in the first known example of this style of recording, Sidney Bechet's One-man Band (1941, RCA/Victor). In this music, Bechet uses an early overdub process to create music in which his time feel, phrasing, instrumental tone, and vibrato speed are mapped across a virtual ensemble of various woodwinds (all played by him.) The conceptual and musical similarities between this style of overdub-based recording and the live one-man band are reflected in the album title.

In his book Perfecting Sound Forever (2009), Greg Milner eloquently characterizes the finely synchronized sound in multi-track recordings as a "disquieting unity" (p.126). This characterization is consistent with feedback I've received from audience members at my performances, who have often used the word 'uncanny' to describe the musical effect of one-man band. In the introductory remarks to his essay 1919 The Uncanny, Sigmund Freud (1919/2003) describes the uncanny as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (p.124); the uncanny is experienced during the juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar, or upon the discovery of unexpected information that disrupts a sense of familiarity.

The conditions Freud describes are relevant to solo multi-instrumental music, both recorded and performed, which combines the familiar musical texture of the ensemble with the less familiar, "pseudo-reality" (Moorefield, 2005, p.xv) of a single musical will controlling all of the instruments. In terms of audience perception, the one-man band presents a situation in which the visual information (one performer) does not necessarily correlate with the aural information (multiple performers). This scenario has proven to be particularly interesting at crowded, standing-room-only shows, where the view of my feet is obscured. In this situation, an audience member's discovery of the actual source of music is, I've been told, often a strange experience, owing to the fact that the initial inkling that something is different about the music is confirmed by seeing its means of production. While I would not go so far as to characterize one-man band music as "frightening", it is possible that the uncanny sensation that arises upon hearing it is indeed part of what makes it compelling.

• • •

Beyond offering a practical means of making music unassisted, the one-man band constitutes an innovative mode of developing and performing music. It affords the artist a unique opportunity to control multiple elements of music making simultaneously, resulting in a product that explicitly bears his or her individual mark. While this musical approach is of great interest to me, I do not wish to suggest that such autonomous ways of making music replace collaborative ones; rather, I would suggest that the one-man band constitutes a legitimate and valuable addition to other forms of musicianship. Continued exploration of its potential value in collaboration with other practices, including free improvisation and live electronic music, suggests exciting areas for further study.

References

Baily, J. (1985). Music structure and human movement. In Howell, P. (Ed.), Musical structure and cognition (pp.237-258). Missouri: Academic Press Inc.

Blacking, J. (1983). The concept of identity and folk concepts of self: A Venda case study. In Jacobson-Widding, A. (Ed.), Identity: personal and socio-cultural (pp.47-65). Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell.

Clayton, M., Sager, R., & Will, U., (2005). In time with the music: the concept of entrainment and its significance for ethnomusicology. European Meetings in Ethnomusicology, 11, 3-142.

Collier, G. & Collier, J. (1994). An exploration of the use of tempo in jazz. Music Perception, 11 (3), 291-242.

Cox, A. (2006). Hearing, feeling, grasping gestures. In Gritten A. & Kind, E. (Eds.), Music and gesture (pp. 45-61). Hampshire: Ashgate.

Densimore, F. (1939). Musical instruments of the Maidu Indians. American Anthropologist, 41 (1), 113-118.

Eck, D., Gasser, M. & Port, R. (1999). Dynamics and embodiment in beat induction. In Desain, P. & Windsor, L. (Eds.), Rhythm perception and production (pp.157- 170) . Lisse: Swets and Zeitlinger.

Eno, B. (2004). The studio as compositional tool. In Cox, C. & Warner, D. (Eds.), Audio culture: Readings in modern music (pp.127-138). London: Continuum.

Friberg, A. & Sundström, A. (2002). Swing ratios and ensemble timing in jazz performance: Evidence for a common rhythmic pattern. Music Percpetion, 19 (3), 333-349.

Freud, S. (2003). The uncanny (McLintcok, D., Trans.). London: Penguin. (Original work published 1919)

Honing, H. & de Haas, W.B. (2008). Swing once more: Relating timing and tempo in expert jazz drumming. Music Perception, 25 (5), 471-476.

Iyer, V. (2002). Embodied mind, situated cognition, and expressive microtiming in African-American music. Music Perception, 19 (3), 387-414.

Ivry, R. & Richardson, C. (2002). Temporal control and coordination: The multiple timer model. Brain and Cognition, 48, 117-132.

Keil, C. (1995). The theory of participatory discrepancies: A progress report. Ethnomusicology, 39 (1), 1-19.

Milner, G. (2009). Perfecting sound forever: The story of recorded music. London: Granta Publications.

Moorefield, V. (2005). The producer as composer: Shaping the sounds of popular music. Cambridge: MIT press.

Oliver, P. (2009). One-man-band. In Shepherd, J. (Ed.) Continuum encyclopedia of popular music of the world. (Vol. 2, pp. 48-49). London: Continuum.

Orchestrion Info (2012). Pat Metheny (Artist's webpage). Retrieved March 12, 2012, from http://www.patmetheny.com/orchestrioninfo/qa.cfm

Rammel, H. (1990). Joe Barrick's one-man band: A history of the pietarbajo and other one-man bands. Musical Traditions, MT098. Retrieved March 12, 2012, from http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles/barrick.htm

Riley, J. (1997). Beyond Bop drumming. Van Nuys: Alfred Publishing Co.

Ryan, J. (1991). Some remarks on musical instrument design at STEIM. Contemporary Music Review, 6 (1), 3-17.

Sager, R. (2002). Musical meaning of Haitian Vodou singing: An ethnography of musical and ritual discourse at a Lakou Ginen in Northern Haiti. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Texas at Austin, Texas.

Sennett, R. (1993). The Craftsman. London: Penguin.

Snyder, R. (2003). Sel-Sync and the "Octopus": How came to be the first recorder to minimize successive copying in overdubs. ARSC Journal 34 (2), 209-213.

Sundberg, J. (1999). The perception of singing. In Deutsch, D. (Ed.), The psychology of music (2nd edition) (pp.171-215). San Diego: Academic Press.

Van Seters, T. (2011) Eighty-eight drums: The piano as percussion instrument in jazz, (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/.../ VanSeters_Thomas_A_201111_DMA_thesis.pdf

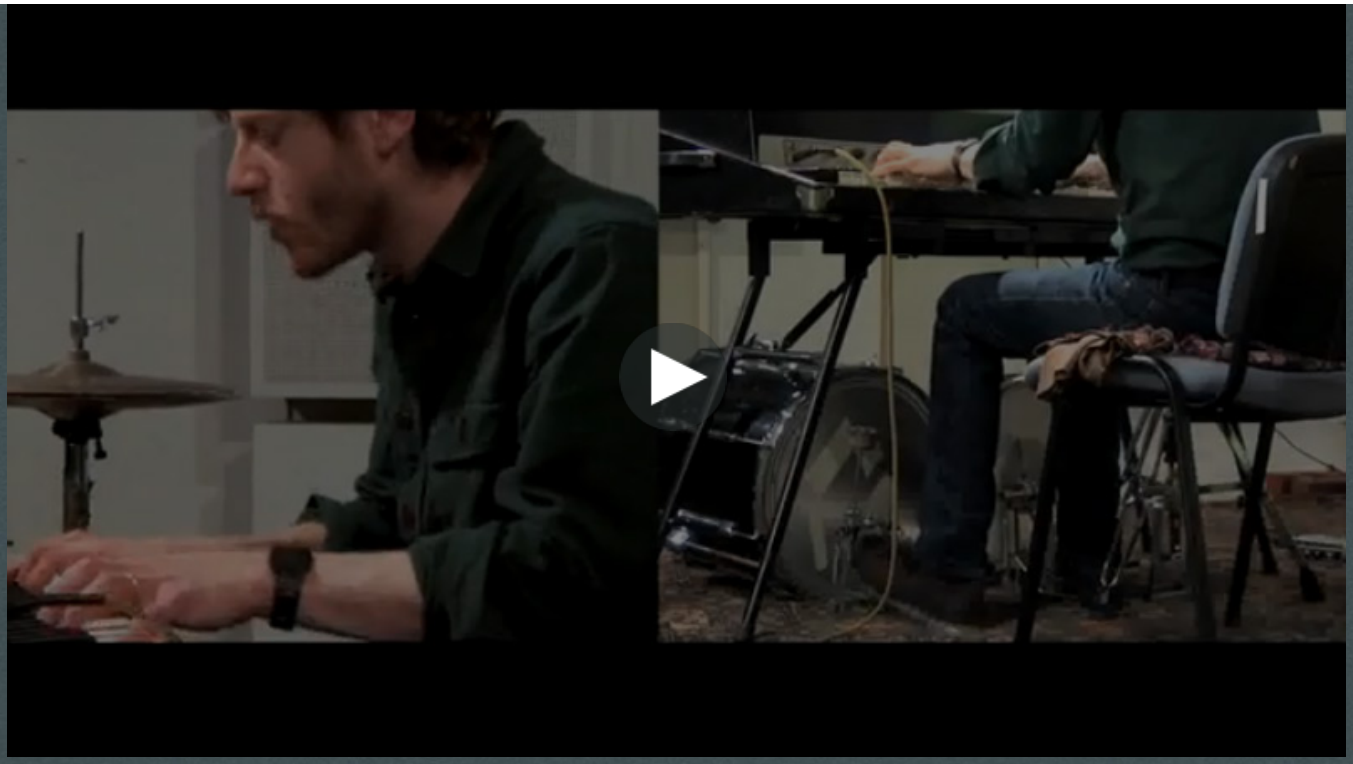
Vertegaal, R. & Ungvary,T. (1995). The Sentograph: Input devices and the communication of bodily expression. Proceedings of the 1995 International Computer Music Conference. Retrieved March 13, 2012, from http://quod.lib.umich.edu/i/icmc/bbp2372.1995?rgn=full+text

Wanderley M. M. & Vines, B. W. (2006). Origins and functions of clarinettists' ancillary gestures. In Gritten, A. & Kaine, E. (Eds.), Music and gesture (pp. 165-191). Hampshire: Ashgate.

Presentation

Concert

Studio Performances



Past Performances

2.5.13 The Vortex, London

1.3.13 Composition Day, Canterbury Christ Church University, Broadstairs

26.1.12 'Free Range' Series at The Veg Box Café, Canterbury

11.9.11 Komedia, Brighton

21.6.11 The Haunt, Brighton

7.6.11 KOKO, London

21.6.11 Ejector Seat Art and Music Festival, Southampton

23.5.11 Sounds New Contemporary Music Festival, Canterbury (UK PREMIER: 'New Works for Film')

5.4.11 Ear (Heart) Music Series, The Tank, New York (US PREMIER: 'New Works for Film')

3.4.11 Douglas Street Music Collective, New York

11.11.10 The Duke of Yorks Picture House, Brighton

2.11.10-4.11.10 UK TOUR
2.11 The Luminaire, London | 3.11 The Prince Albert, Brighton | 4.11 The Cube Cinema, Bristol | 4.10 The Deaf Institute, Manchester

24.11.10 White Night Brighton & Hove, St Peter's Church, Brighton

22.8.10, The Apohadion , Portland, Maine

7.5.10 Sounds New Contemporary Music Festival, Canterbury (UK PREMIER: 'Station Wagon Interior Perspective')

6.1.10 The Stone, New York (US PREMIER 'Station Wagon Interior Perspective')

8.12.09 Weirdstock Festival, Cambridge, Massachusetts

7.5.09 Stanmer House Festival, Falmer, East Sussex UK

5.02.09 The Basement (Arts Production South East), Brighton, UK

About

This website was created to collect and present practice and research related to solo simultaneous instrumental performance ('one-man band').

Using a mix of text and video, the site seeks to create a widely accessible platform for music and ideas resulting from one-man band activates carried out between 2008 and 2013.

Robert Stillman is an American musician, based in Broadstairs, Kent. He has performed is own work internationally since 1997 and has released 5 recordings under his own name on various labels. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in Department of Music and Performing Arts at Canterbury Christ Church University.

For more information please contact robert.stillman@canterbury.ac.uk

Website designed and built by Luke Twyman/Whitevinyl, and funded through a 'Quality Research' bid from Canterbury Christ Church University.