

# Teaching improvisation. Not teaching improvisation

## What does an improvisation teacher do?

Fred Frith

---

Musicians have always improvised. You recognize musically gifted children by the fact that they make things up. What follows, in the West, is that they learn to read music and do as they're told. This clearly illustrates the problems that are likely to surface if you are «taught» how to improvise. How can the practice of improvisation ever be compatible with «doing as you're told»? Teaching, especially in an institution, is usually considered to be dependent on codification, and comparability. We need rules that can be identified, syllabi, tools for assessment so that declared goals can be reached and outcomes graded. But improvisation is not a genre with rules; it comes from deep inside you. So what does an improvisation «teacher» do?

I

Like a lot of other kids my first musical steps involved pounding out random clusters on a piano, and being thrilled with the physical sensation linking my gestures to the sonic result. I've watched my own kids follow the same trajectory: first the joy of pure exploration, leading eventually to an attempt to pick out a tune they know; then, the desire to be able to do more, to develop skills; and finally the realization that this will mean work, work of the kind that they're not really sure if they're willing to undertake! The tension between invention and spontaneity on the one hand, and recognition and emulation on the other, is at the heart of all musical practice. And because it is much easier to measure progress in terms of instrumental technique, we tend to privilege instrumental technique over any other aspect of musicality. In fact musicality and technique are intimately intertwined. Since the majority of compo-

sers started out as performers, they are thoroughly grounded in notions of instrumental technique, and this often drives what they do as composers – wherever they situate themselves in the spectrum between traditional and avant-garde. This leads directly to «difficulty» – the degree to which musicians have to overcome their technical deficiencies to realize a score – becoming a highly motivating and desirable factor, a «challenge» that the musician loves to meet. As a result, emphasis on «technique» is the focus of most pedagogy. While I have no particular desire to disavow the importance of technique – it's obviously critically important – I hope the following reflections will provide some food for thought in considering how improvisation is taught.

II

My musical life began under the Bechstein, listening to my father play Debussy and Chopin and Bach. At the age of 5 I began violin lessons with a wonderful teacher who had what seemed to my parents like strange ideas. I was not allowed to touch the instrument for several weeks. Instead I had to learn how to relax, which involved breathing exercises and relaxation techniques, starting with whole body and then moving to arms, elbows, wrists, fingers. When I was deemed to be ready, I was allowed to pick up the violin, and several sessions followed in which we focused not on sound but on posture. What a profoundly wonderful way to start! The connection of music to the whole body made manifest from the outset.

My other early musical experience was singing in the church choir. This gave me a strong understanding of how MANY voices

can become ONE voice, how music is a deeply social activity with social rules, how important it is to know and accept your role in creating the larger whole. By the time I was 11, I was playing second violin at the back of the school orchestra, and these lessons were even more thoroughly absorbed. At 13 I picked up a guitar and my life turned upside down. By 14 I was in my first band and completely aware of the axis between private discipline – meaning hours of practice everyday – and social awareness: negotiating space with my band-mates as we moved slowly from cover versions to writing our own material.

### III

As I grew up, I listened avidly to everything that was available to me, which in the 60s, a period of unprecedented openness, meant that by the time I was 21. I was familiar with Bach, Beethoven, Bartók, & Britten, with Dowland, Delius, & Debussy, with Monteverdi & Messiaen. I knew the music of dozens of jazz players and studied them avidly: Brubeck, Billie Holiday, and Carla Bley; Duke Ellington and Eric Dolphy; Charles Mingus and John Coltrane; Monk, Sun Ra, Ornette, Miles. I knew every Beatles song by heart, and had attended performances by Muddy Waters, Ustad Vilayat Khan, Frank Zappa, John Lee Hooker, Maddy Prior, Jimi Hendrix, and The London Sinfonietta. I'd read books by John Cage, puzzled over Cardew's *Treatise*, heard Stockhausen's *Carré* at the Albert Hall, been mesmerized by the Balinese Monkey Chant, and worshipped at the shrine of Cathy Berberian, who re-confirmed and re-contextualized what I had learned from the Blues – that if the voice could be an instrument then the instrument could also be a voice. I count myself very lucky to have lived these formative years at a time when the record industry was more open and engaged than it has ever been, before or since.

### IV

Nobody talked much about «improvisation» – it was what jazz musicians did, of course, but that was its own world with its own rules, even if they were constantly being broken and expanded. Free Jazz did away with any preconceived compositional basis altogether, but it was still «jazz» – a culturally located music based in a specific community's experience. It had to do with slavery and emancipation (a powerful musical metaphor if ever there was one), with repression and civil rights. I didn't aspire to be a jazz musician particularly, but the music and its history certainly made a forceful impression.

One day I met a fellow called Tim Hodgkinson. His friend was creating a dance performance based on the destruction of Hiroshima and needed some music. They invited me to join them. The «music» was Tim playing alto saxophone and me playing violin. We operated somewhere at the intersection of Penderecki's *Threnody* and Archie Shepp. Nothing was planned, nothing was discussed – we improvised, and it was an extraordinary experience that left us both somewhat shocked at our

own intensity. If there was a single moment when I became an «improviser», that was it.

A few months later I saw John Lennon perform in Cambridge with Yoko Ono. He sat on the floor and held his guitar up to the speakers of his amp, letting it feed back for almost half an hour while Yoko screamed. I felt attracted and repelled at the same time; confused, excited.

Henry Cow, the band that Tim and I co-founded, opened on several occasions for the Pink Floyd. At that time their performances contained substantial tracts of spacey improvisation, with guitarist David Gilmore using extended techniques. This was a deep source of inspiration, as was the Grateful Dead's *Anthem of the Sun*, based on long improvised passages recorded live. Many years later I discovered that in the early 60s the Dead's bass player, Phil Lesh, had studied with Luciano Berio at Mills College, where I now teach.

### V

Why the long preamble? Perhaps because I feel the need to emphasize that my history as an improviser is, like everyone else's, unique and personal. In the academic world a composer is semi-officially defined as someone who learned how to compose by studying with a recognized composer who studied with a recognized composer. But I didn't learn how to «improvise» by studying with people who were recognized «improvisers». I listened to all kinds of music, and attended all kinds of performances, slowly finding a way to situate myself where I felt comfortable – playing songs, performing my own and other people's compositions, writing compositions for other people to play, and yes, making stuff up spontaneously; and definitely not deciding that any one of those activities was somehow politically or socially or culturally superior to the others. Which, for what it's worth, is where I still stand.

### VI

In 1990 I was invited to spend 6 months in the city of Marseille working with what the government described as «jeunes rockers au chômage des quartiers défavorisés» – young unemployed rock musicians from the ghettos! I arrived in early June, and had to choose 15 players from an applicant pool of around 35. It was a diverse group – the ethnic origins of these French musicians included Algeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Italy, Morocco, Spain, Tunisia, even England! – but their musical horizons taken as a whole were surprisingly narrow, existing in a plane that ran from Toto to Elton John. Someone had heard of Miles Davis. Nobody knew anything about my work. Most of them had no experience of improvising beyond what they referred to as «le boeuf», which was basically interminable jamming on one chord. They regarded me with a kind of suspicious enthusiasm, though the enthusiasm probably had something to do with the fact that they were going to be paid for 6 months if they passed the audition.

The participants were duly chosen and we went to work with the object of creating music for an «opera» being performed by three professional singers and the Théâtre du Point Aveugle, directed by François-Michel Pesenti. Since only a couple of the players could read music I needed to create a plan whereby we could make reproducible music without necessarily using conventional notation. We started by doing workshops, in which I would imagine a scenario – a kind of a movie scene – and then ask them, to spontaneously make up some music to accompany it. The scenes were generally emotive – «someone is tied to the rails and a train is coming» was one. They usually derived from conversations I was having every day with François-Michel. The musicians began to learn how to do less, and how to work together, rather than each of them trying to do the whole scene by themselves. When I had to go away to perform with John Zorn's band Naked City I invited Albert Marcoeur, the iconic French songwriter and theatre composer, to take over for a couple of weeks. This proved to be a turning point. Albert's background in theatre meant that he knew dozens of theatre improvisation games. Everything he did with this group formed the basis of the exercises that I have developed since: a repertoire of techniques for helping musicians to an understanding of how to happily be in the moment!

One of my aims was to create blocks of material that were organized in advance but, through the medium of a conductor, could be deployed in an unpredictable way – shifted, super-imposed, cut short, expanded, and otherwise manipulated in real time. Because no «score» was involved – all the material was learned during the process of its creation – the musicians became skilled at following directions and altering the structures as we went along. It was energetic, unruly, and impressive. It led me to the realization that even with supposedly unsophisticated and untrained players it was possible to achieve disciplined and complex results. That this was true was reflected in reviews of our record, which observed that it was obviously nonsense that these musicians were unschooled because the results were clearly too sophisticated for this to be the case!

## VII

Over the next few years I became increasingly involved in giving improvisation workshops in a wide variety of contexts – kids of all ages from pre-school to high school, college students, beginners, experienced improvising groups, classical ensembles, choirs. I tend to use the same basic approach in each case, which has proved to be interesting. A typical three-day workshop might begin as follows:

### *First session*

No instruments, only voices and bodies. We stand in a circle and transmit a «current» by squeezing hands until it gets back to the starting point. We try to do that as quickly as possible. There are many variations of this idea – shouting and squeezing

at the same time (which brings us straight away into the realm of sound); not stopping but continuing the current over and over again (which demands greater concentration); and so on. Eventually we might start just passing sound around the circle – imitating only the person immediately next to you. The point of this is to understand the detail in each utterance and to try and imitate it as closely as possible, rather than just imitating the original gestural impulse. Sometimes during this exercise I might have the participants split off into pairs and try and imitate each other in as detailed a manner as possible, simply in order to understand how much more closely they can actually imitate a sound than they might imagine. Then we resume the imitation circle and try to pass these *detailed* sounds around in one direction as fast as possible.

Having mastered that, I might ask them to try and do the opposite of what they hear, which of course can be interpreted in a number of basic ways – long-short, loud-soft, high-low, and so on. And we pass that around. Then we might try and imitate AND do the opposite in different directions simultaneously. Eventually it's possible to add other elements – handclapping one way, foot stamping the other, and physical gestures of all kinds until 5 or 6 elements (or even more) are being passed around the circle simultaneously.

Why are we doing this? Well there are a lot of different aspects. First of all it dismantles any hierarchical notions that may risk being established when instrumentalists and singers from different backgrounds and with different technical skill levels are thrown together. Improvisation makes people feel vulnerable. You are exposed; you have no choice but to reveal yourself. If you feel inhibited by someone's obvious technical ability you might retreat into your shell and assume you will not be able to function at the necessary level. Making a complete fool of yourself in front of others, who, in turn, are making complete fools of themselves in front of you, is a wonderful way to equalize the situation. Secondly, there's the matter of getting the material firmly into the ears and the body. As performing with Evelyn Glennie eloquently reminded me, we listen with our whole bodies, and these exercises are nothing if not physical. Dancers love working this way as much as musicians do. When I worked with the Pretty Ugly Dance Company and Tibetan Monks in Köln, for example, the movements from the workshop became integrated into the final choreography. Another aspect is the understanding of how *difficult* engaging in even two things at the same time can be. The concentration involved as we keep adding more elements is a useful reminder that improvisation with more than two or three people effectively precludes that you will ever really «hear» everything. If we can't fulfill four simple and predictable tasks, how can we expect to process all the unpredictable material being generated by our fellow musicians?

### *Second session*

Depending on how the first session went we might repeat elements or move on to new exercises. Sometimes I might divide the group into small sub-units – ideally 5 or 6 people in each – and ask them to invent a group vocabulary of sound gestures,

elect a «director» who will conduct, and practice making pieces using that vocabulary. After 5 or 10 minutes, I ask them to perform a short piece for the others. After the performance we may talk about what worked particularly well and what was problematic. Then they have a few more minutes to adapt their vocabulary to reflect everything they have just heard. Finally they arrange themselves in such a way that the «directors» are facing outwards from the center, with their backs to each other, each facing their own group. They then try to perform together, effectively becoming a quartet or a quintet in which each director's «instrument» is their subgroup of musicians. This exercise deals with quite a few issues that are common in improvisation. Restricting your vocabulary in order to get the most out of every component of it; understanding that you don't have to put everything you know into the mix every time you perform; grappling with orchestration in an improvising context, in other words controlling density and timbre; and trying to figure out how to stop, which is probably the single most difficult problem when playing with more than 2 or 3 musicians!

The basic idea is to get people thinking about the kinds of issues that arise when improvising BEFORE they have an instrument in their hands:

- When to sound, when not to sound?
- When to come forward, when to step back?
- Soloist or accompanist?
- How to start?
- How to end?

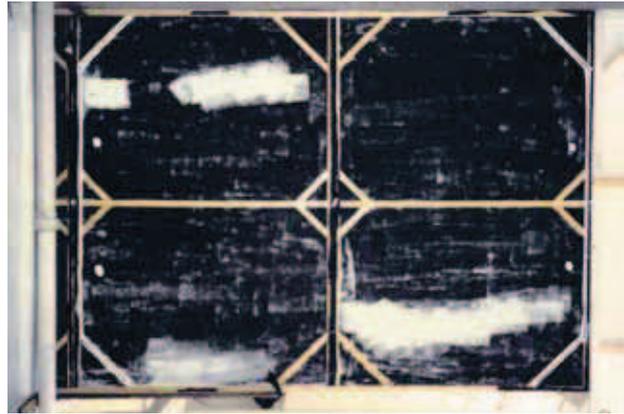
And so on.

### Third session

Now we start working with instruments and everything is geared towards creating space and formal architecture by introducing restrictions. For a long time in Montréal an indomitable group of improvisers – Jean Derome, René Lussier, Robert Marcel Lepage and others – would have open sessions which took the form of competitions, complete with absurdist judges. They invented a lot of simple games, a few of which I've used and developed in this context, my favorite being *3 over 2*. In this game, only two players are allowed to play at once, however large the ensemble. If a third player enters, the other two must immediately stop, though of course they might choose to immediately start again! Generally this is good training in how to be aware of the whole group all the time – it requires great concentration and acute listening. Strategies can also be developed in which players conspire to work together, setting up possibilities for multiple dialogues. Over the years the idea has grown, so that any player can indicate – by holding up fingers – what the maximum number of permitted players is, which might also allow for soloists.

### Other sessions

Through the use of restriction exercises like this one, the group develops a sense of space and of the importance of listening, as well as strategies for listening, and for creating form. This is not about instrumental or vocal technique but



*SCREEN: each player makes a single short intervention in the space of ten beats (two measures of 5/4 at quarter note = 60). The measures are then repeated over and over again, and the players must also repeat what they did—the same place, the same attack, the same duration, the same envelope, the same dynamic—until a change of material is indicated, at which moment the process may start again. Soloists may also be indicated by the conductor.* © Fred Frith/Pro Litteris



*DRY STONE II: «Wal» is constructed from bottom up. Each stone represents a solo. Conductor indicates each soloist, and then brings her in. When the next soloist enters, the previous soloist must freeze the last fraction of whatever she is playing and loop it, continuing the loop throughout the first three «lines» of stones while making a slow decrescendo. This process occurs three times, with the conductor indicating each time the process starts again.* © Fred Frith/Pro Litteris

about trying to do the right thing at the right time. At this point I might also introduce some of my graphic scores (which are partly reproduced in this article), particularly the ones that deal with memory and repetition like *Screen* and *Dry Stone*.

## VIII

In 1999 I was hired by Mills College to teach improvisation, though, like most of my colleagues, I am involved in both improvisation and composition, and teach both. I assumed the directorship of the Contemporary Performance Ensemble, and this became a kind of forum for the development of ideas concerning large group improvisation. The group was open to pretty much anyone who wanted to be in it regardless of their level of technique. I began by pursuing the same agenda that I

had used in my workshops. But I was also interested in exploring the various different ways in which composers had tried to harness improvisers' vocabulary and energy in semi-formal ways. In the end this comes down to the ubiquitous question of orchestration. Whether it's conduction, or graphic scores, or texts, or game pieces, the end result is a way of controlling density, and timbre, and architecture. I like to point out that if a composer decides to deploy a triangle, the chances are you'll hear it only at the very precise moments in the score where it adds something useful. And if an improviser deploys a triangle, the chances are you'll never want to hear a triangle ever again! So the issue of trying to set up controls to at least reduce «triangulation» is a pertinent one.

One of the things I relied on heavily in the early days was what Butch Morris has dubbed «Conduction». The idea that you can control form and orchestration while allowing the players themselves to determine the actual material that is being deployed by the conductor is very effective, I first saw it used by an Italian group called Stormy Six in the 1970s, and was immediately hooked. Now it is so common an approach that a friend of mine, the kotoist Miya Masaoka, drily observed that it was making life really difficult because each conduction artist has a completely different set of signs and instructions, and after the second or third conducted improvisation project you're totally confused! I found with the Mills ensemble that it was a great way to introduce very simple ideas about material and vocabulary to a large group – after all, as I already mentioned, music can, in the end, be reduced to a set of simple oppositions – loud-soft, long-short, dense-sparse, high-low, and so on, and these are easy to make signs for. The only problem – as anyone who's ever attempted this practice knows – is that, for the process to be successful, the musicians MUST give 100% of their attention to the conductor at all times, which makes them look & feel awfully like puppets, and the only person who can really be said to be improvising is the conductor. And it sure is a lot of fun to be the conductor.

This notion of the «gesture» of improvising rather than «improvising» is also prevalent in game pieces, where one is required to constantly change one's approach based on rules and signs being fluidly deployed as the piece unfolds, not to mention be involved in the deployment of said signs at the same time. Since the material is being altered and is going by so quickly, the player no longer really has an organic connection to what she is doing, meaning that the material becomes a kind of caricature of an improvisation, more of a piece ABOUT improvising than improvising itself. John Zorn and I had discussions about this issue in the late 70s, which led to my no longer being invited to perform his game pieces for some 20 years! But the fact is that it doesn't really matter whether we regard this as improvising or not. What's important is the simple fact that you're achieving a coherent musical result that couldn't be achieved in any other way, and which is really fascinating to listen to, which is all you can ask of any piece of music in the end.

With the Contemporary Performance Ensemble we played *Aus den Sieben Tagen* by Stockhausen and some of Pauline

Oliveros' *Sonic Meditations*, experimented with conducted improvisation, looked at Zorn's aforementioned game pieces as well as those I'd learned from the Montreal school, and performed graphic scores, notably Christian Wolff's *Burdocks*, Cornelius Cardew's *Treatise*, and the graphic scores of mine that were referred to earlier. Since I was now largely dealing with graduate students I was interested to find out how the issue of control would be received. In some cases there was open hostility. When I asked one student how they would suggest approaching *Treatise* he replied by tearing up the score and saying: «How about we just play music?» On another heated occasion, after a number of attempts to play it, I was trying to get across the idea that it was reasonable to assume that if you were going to try and «read» *Treatise*, it would require some kind of consistent approach to the graphics on the page. A member of the ensemble strongly disagreed. «Why?» he said. «If Cardew doesn't want to tell me anything about how to play it, I can interpret it as consistently or inconsistently as I please!»

In a way these two reactions are representative of two completely opposite points of view. One is rooted in the notion that improvisation is improvisation and any attempt to restrict it or focus it is counterproductive and pointless. And the other, coming from a more classical perspective is saying: «Tell me exactly what to do. And if you can't do that, then don't expect anything coherent or predictable from my side.»

It's hard not to sympathize with both perspectives! It reminds me of a story Roger Smalley told me back in the 60s. He'd been to a rehearsal of one of his pieces, a composition that in a couple of places allowed the players to furnish their own material, effectively to improvise. One of the musicians abruptly stood up and started packing away his instrument. Asked what he was doing, the man replied: «Mr. Smalley, I haven't been studying music for the last twenty years for you to tell me I can do what I WANT!»

## IX

I had a student a few years ago who came into the MFA<sup>1</sup> Performance program, the chamber music one, at the Mills College in Oakland; we didn't have an improvisation degree then. Her name is Jen Baker, and she's a wonderful trombonist, with an excellent and rigorous classical training, and she graciously allowed me to use her name, for which I'm very grateful. When she arrived at Mills she was really interested in improvisation, regarding it as an important thing to learn how to do. She took my graduate seminar on the history and practice of the interface of improvisation with composition in the last fifty years. We studied indeterminacy, Earle Brown, Pauline Oliveros, Third Stream, Sun Ra, Anthony Braxton, Butch Morris, John Zorn, Barry Guy, all kinds of different approaches and traditions. And she was in my ensemble for two years, in which we tackled the many improvisational pieces I've already mentioned. We also did some unrestricted improvisation and during her time at Mills Cecil Taylor came and worked with us, and also Wadada

Leo Smith. She also had a semester of improvisation workshops with Joëlle Léandre, and was a member of the informal Monday afternoon sessions that I ran in my office, where a small group of regulars came just to play. In other words she was deeply immersed in improvisation from multiple perspectives from the moment she arrived at Mills.

In her final semester she wrote her thesis on improvisation pedagogy, and basically said that she found the lack of improvisation teaching very difficult, that she felt like she hadn't been taught how to improvise. I was, and still am, fascinated by this, and we discussed it at length while she was writing the paper. I came to understand that as a classical instrumentalist there are certain practices that you learn, and one of them is how to engage in constructive critical dialogue. You play a piece in front of peers and your teacher, and people tell you what they think you did wrong, and how you can do better. They're all holding a score, so they have this reference where everyone can see how it's «supposed» to sound, and then they can point to particular deficiencies, either of reading, or interpretation, or of the technique required to realize a particular passage. It makes perfect sense, and is a very important part of learning an instrument at a high level. So players get used to the idea that after playing in a pedagogical setting, there will be feedback that will help them understand what to do, feedback based on a more or less universal idea of what is «good» or «acceptable» in a given setting, and what is «bad» or «unacceptable». In the two years of fairly intensive study of improvising at Mills, Jen was still waiting for someone to tell her what to do, to tell her what was good and bad, and in the absence of that kind of feedback, her assessment was that she hadn't been «taught» anything. And if, on the other hand, a teacher DID consistently «tell her what to do», she was well aware that improvising then became a matter of conforming to someone else's taste.

If you want to know the greatest problem with teaching improvisation, maybe you should start right there: who's defining the rules? Should there be any? And what happens if you break them? Are there «good» and «bad» in a universally accepted sense? How do you teach something that, at least nominally, has no accepted norms? I believe that all effective teaching is the act of facilitating the process of people teaching themselves. Improvisation is about you, naked, in the moment. Any training should recognize and accept who you are, so that you don't feel that you have to be someone else. And what works for one player might not work for another. Some like to be told that «this is 'good' and this is 'bad' and you should do as I tell you». It's the old-fashioned way to learn, to sit at the feet of an elder and absorb everything they can give you unconditionally. And when you're ready, you move on and establish your own place. For some people maybe it's easier to work things out collectively with others, trying things out, learning to recognize and deploy the elements that feel like strengths and to avoid or eliminate what feel like weaknesses. Find a common language, music as an ongoing conversation. And as with any conversation it may not always be witty and scintillating, it may even be pretty banal, but the



*SKYLIGHT 5 (extract): A piano concerto! Upper register instruments play horizontal information above the mid-line, lower register instruments play horizontal information below it. Percussion plays vertical information. Piano plays everything else. Black = sound, white = no sound. © Fred Frith/Pro Litteris*

quality of exchange makes it interesting anyway! I really don't know how to put this into words, because words in this case are pretty irrelevant. When you're playing you KNOW what's going on. It comes down to whether you want to learn to play like your elder and do what she or he says at all times – because if they're good it can't hurt, right? – or whether you want to explore in a safe environment with like-minded people without any special reference to a previous model. And figure stuff out that feels true to you. In the end the two approaches probably merge – you play, you listen, you learn. The talking is the least important part.

## X

Eventually we formed an ensemble at Mills that was solely dedicated to improvisation. By that time we'd established a performance Master's Degree in Improvisation, and we needed a vehicle for the participants in that degree to work together regularly. Meanwhile I had experimented with a different professorial approach: absence! At the beginning of the semester I would announce to the ensemble: «I'm going to be away for the next three weeks. When I come back, you're going to be doing an improvised concert, open to the public. Have fun!» The trick was that during the process they were required to keep journals. Sharing the contents of these journals was optional, and could even be done anonymously, but it proved to be absolutely fascinating, and very productive, providing immediate empirical evidence of how social dynamics in the group manifest themselves, and how they manifest themselves in the music.

Questions that arose included the evergreen «Do men and women improvise differently?» as well as «What constitutes

leadership?», «How do we make decisions?» and «Is any kind of material off limits?» The latter may seem like an odd conjecture, but of course it isn't at all. One of my students went to London to study improvisation, and took a workshop with a renowned improviser while she was there. At some point during the proceedings she played a major interval, A and C#. The teacher immediately halted the proceedings and insisted that such intervals could have no part in an improvisation. Anyway, as a result of my experiments with absence, I now try to keep at least a couple of places in the semester free for the students to work without a «teacher» being present, and the response I get is that these sessions are popular and productive, for some the high point of the semester. Doing nothing at all is often the best strategy!

Keeping a journal is now an essential part in the Mills Improvisation Ensemble, reinforcing the importance of each individual's identity, and the intrinsic value of her own learning process. A part of this process brings us to the question, already touched upon earlier, about improvisation as a model for a superior kind of society based on equality, and exchange, and democratic principles. I was asked in an interview: «Do you think that improvisation is socially resonant? That it 'teaches' methods and means of an ideal society?» I'm going to cite my response, because I don't think I can say it any better:

«The values that are associated with a good improviser aren't dissimilar to the ones you look for in your friends: being a good listener; sensitivity to your social surroundings; being there when you're needed but knowing how to step back too; knowing when to be supportive, when to be assertive, when your opinion is valuable, when to just go along with something, when to insist! Patience. Tolerance. Openness ... In the 70s there were a lot of folks holding up improvisation as a superior democratic model because, you know, all the players were equal, there was no social hierarchy, no leader, no external authority like a score, and so on. Did that teach methods and means of an ideal society? You've got to be kidding! I remember reading a review of a performance of Berio's *Sequenza* for trombone in which it was cited as a great performance of the piece because the player actually ignored the score after a few bars and just improvised. The question is, is that really cool, or really arrogant? Does being a good improviser mean that you have to disrespect composers, or think of yourself as superior to an orchestra musician because they are 'only' doing what they're told? Obviously not. I had a friend who performed at an improvised music festival in Seattle, and she brought a music stand with her because they were going to play one of my graphic scores. And the guy who was sharing the bill, a renowned improviser of some thirty years practice, was so upset that he threw the stand off the stage, because it DIDN'T BELONG there, this was about IMPROVISATION. If you think that years of improvising will produce people who are not dogmatic, self-righteous, and intolerant, think again!

There's always a danger whenever you start asserting that one form of musical practice is 'better' than another

on some sort of politico-social level. Every form of music is capable of being vibrant, dynamic, uplifting, and, needless to say, the opposite. I don't think that being a good improviser is going to make you a better person than if you are a good Baroque violinist or a good tabla player. Being a disciplined orchestral player is not somehow inferior to being an improviser. Have I learned less from Katia Labeque, or Viktoria Mullova, or Werner Bärtschi, because they are 'classical musicians'? Of course not! That level of virtuosity is totally inspiring whatever the context you work in. Nobody spends too much time talking about how their chosen musical milieu represents an ideal society, nor claiming that their chosen field of operations is ideologically superior, at least not the people I hang out with.»

Here's Cornelius Cardew, talking about the qualities needed for a good improvisation:

«Discipline is not to be seen as the ability to conform to a rigid rule structure, but as the ability to work collectively with other people in a harmonious and fruitful way. Integrity, self-reliance, initiative, to be articulate (say, on an instrument) in a natural direct way; these are the qualities necessary for improvisation. Self-discipline is the necessary basis for the required spontaneity, where everything that occurs is heard and responded to without the aid of arbitrarily controlled procedures.»

This is certainly a manifesto for good improvising, and it makes sense. However, it also implies negative things about the ability to read music, follow a conductor, and work together with others to realize someone else's ideas. The clue is in the words «rigid» and «natural», implying that anything other than improvising is somehow *unnatural*. I prefer this from Nelson Mandela in *A Long Walk to Freedom*:

«[...] to be free is not to merely cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.»

I also prefer Pauline Oliveros' answer to the question of what she'd been trying to do in her 1958 improvising sessions with Terry Riley and Stuart Dempster in San Francisco, something along the lines of: «We were exploring the things that interested us at the time». That seems as good a reason as any to improvise, and doesn't come with any socio-political baggage attached!

Another important consideration is failure. Failure is essential to learning; in fact it is HOW we learn. My neuroscientist brother Chris tells me that the way the brain learns is by continuously seeking out what it doesn't know, in other words *looking* for failure, and of course, how could it be otherwise? The more we are prepared to confront what we don't know, the more we learn. Another interviewer asked: «What are some approaches you may have used that failed or didn't work so well?» Here's my response:

«It isn't that simple. It's more a question of finding what works better WITH THESE PEOPLE! We're all different, and we have different training and backgrounds, different awareness. You have to be pragmatic and understand that what worked THEN with THOSE musicians, may not work

NOW with THESE ones! Always be ready to change and adapt the material while keeping the basic goals in sight seems to be the name of the game.»  
«What are the lessons you learned from those attempts?»  
«To be open-minded and ready to learn, and always ready to challenge what you thought you knew.»

## XI

I'd like to talk finally about the point I've reached now. More and more my work with the Mills ensemble has been a matter of returning to very basic questions and very basic musical issues. Rather than «improvising» I work on different aspects of ear training, working on rhythmic relations both simple and complex, on pitch recognition, on memory. We might start the semester by asking:

- What is your instrument?
- What is «technique»?
- What constitutes your musical material?
- How do you organize your material?

Or even more basically:

- How do you make a sound?
- How do you construct a phrase?
- How do you connect phrases together?
- How do you connect your phrase to someone else's phrase?

Since we started the Master's degree in improvisation we've accepted musicians coming from quite different perspectives of what improvisation means, including a Palestinian oud player, an Indian percussionist, a Lebanese singer, an Iraqi-American metal guitarist, and many others. The group sometimes feels like the project of Peter Brook, when he took people from different cultures that did not share a language, and went to live in the Sahara for a while to figure out the true implications of the word «theatre». In the end the only truth that seems to apply is that to improvise well with others you must accept and embrace yourself for who you are. The job of the teacher, therefore, is to create a context in which everyone feels free to be herself, to accept herself for who she is.

When I did a project for German radio recently I invited a group of people coming from similarly diverse backgrounds, and we rehearsed every day for four days, and then played three concerts, all recorded by SWR. It was a series of intimate encounters leading to a shared space. A drum'n'bass drummer from New York, a Chinese gu zheng player, an Indian percussionist, a German jazz trumpeter, two laptop players, one from Italy and the other from California, and a guitar player from England, me. As we worked I took notes arising from the process. This is what I wrote after the first day:

1. I am here, and I am alive.
2. To live, I have to breathe.
3. I am surrounded by sound. Familiar. Unfamiliar.
4. To survive, I must be ready for the unexpected.
5. To survive I must learn to communicate with others.
6. First question in a conversation: «Who are you?»  
Second question: «What do we have in common?»
7. Sometimes conversation means to disagree. Disagreement is best when it is clear. Disagreement should also be a matter of respect.
8. Not just pretending to agree – superficial acceptance – but acknowledgement of distance. The tension between: «we are here together» and «we are here separately».
9. Ritualized disagreement – «You say this, and I say this.»
10. To delight in being alive.
11. To delight in being alive is to accept the right of others to live?
12. To be a virtuoso is to strive to overcome one's limitations.
13. Exhilaration and wonder – how did we do that?
14. Intimacy. Regret. Longing.
15. From the moment we are aware, we are aware of transience, and decay.
16. Repetition equals survival? Reaffirming what we know.
17. On the other hand our deep desire to explore and embrace the unfamiliar – to travel, to learn, to try to understand.

---

1 MFA = Master of Fine Arts.

---