

When I told my improvising associate Ross Lambert the title of this paper he quipped back that I might rather have called it ‘The Notion of Irresponsibility in Improvised Music’. I thought that this not only showed the natural propensity of many improvisers to turn ideas on their head, but was also, I sensed, a reaction to the possibility that I might argue for constraints prompted by ostensibly dull concerns such as safety and politeness. Well, that certainly hasn’t been my intention in putting this paper together: rather it has been to investigate some of the social mechanisms and implications of the activity based largely on observations at Eddie Prevost’s Friday workshop and to see whether there are facets in which ‘responsibility’ can either be observed or be considered desirable. I shall focus on three specific but obviously interlinked areas: honesty, respect and nurture. Responsibility for one’s own actions and consideration of how these actions affect others form the basis of my argument and, although I’ll be considering this in the context of improvised music, many of the responsibilities discussed here apply equally to other forms of social interaction. This would seem to suggest that improvised music occupies a rather unique place in the musical world but also that it might offer a broader social outlet for creative expression.

Honesty plays an important part in the creative process for many improvisers and is doubtless a major factor in attracting them to the form in the first place. It is, after all, a form whose realisation involves the spontaneous and direct interaction of individuals’ past and present experiences in a chosen playing situation and in which none of the mediating factors necessary in other musical forms such as scores, conductors, agreed structures and so on are to be found. The people, their instruments and the heard results of their engagement are everything. The role playing and individual restraint inherent in other genres gives way to a creative situation in which each performer must take personal responsibility for the decisions they make and the way in which they engage with others to produce a piece of music. A certain honesty of expression would seem to be essential to this process since, after all, what would be the point in lying? Decisions are continually being made in the improvising context as to, for example, whether to lead or support, to complement or contrast, to play or not to play; whether to play loudly or softly, quickly or slowly and so on. All of these ongoing decisions involve close attention to the emerging piece in a focussed and, I would say, responsible way in which integrity and honesty are of paramount importance. I am personally, and this is a feeling shared by several other improvisers I have spoken to, always very conscious of moments when I introduce what I consider inappropriate or arbitrary material to an improvisation, either due to loss of focus or some other factor such as impatience, contrariness or whatever.

Engagement with sounds of whatever ilk or persuasion is the nub of an improviser’s work and, in this respect, and despite his disapproval of improvisation, the activity calls to mind a marked Cagean concern for sounds in and for themselves. Virtuosity takes on new, extended dimensions in which facets of instruments are explored in unique ways.

Indeed, improvisers will, mostly, wear the kind of virtuosity conventionally prized in other musical forms very lightly, taking inspiration from their own and others' collective experience and sounds, their musical choices driven by a kind of necessity and commitment to the spontaneously created music unfurling in the immediate context of the ensemble. Their concern is not to show how well or that they can play but to effectively grapple with and mould the material to hand in pursuit of cohesion and quality.

Keith Rowe once said to me, when I questioned him about his approach to material in improvised music, that the other participants were his material; not necessarily their musical input but the presence of the people themselves. This puzzled me at the time and has given me cause for reflection on a number of occasions since. Rowe's remark might be interpreted, for instance, as a desire to manipulate those individuals according to his own musical will and whim. If he perceived himself in a dominant overall position to his playing partners his statement could be construed, perhaps, as wishing to exert his power to coerce and direct the musical material by asserting his own will over that of the others. But, especially as Rowe claims not to pay too much attention to what his playing partners are actually doing during a performance, this didn't quite seem to equate with what I had generally observed of his playing in collective contexts. I prefer to think that Rowe, in an attempt to summarise the nature of freely improvised material, chose to refer outwards to highlight improvised music's dependence on individuals working collectively and to emphasise the importance of personality and total awareness in an improvised performance.

Perhaps more than in any other artistic genre, location, mood, personalities and various other conditions have a direct line into and influence on the resulting music, and are all important considerations for the performers. And, of course, there's the audience. If you're lucky there'll be one! They share in the creation of an improvised piece in a very important way. Although they are doubtless unaware of this for most of the time, they constitute another critical layer of the performance environment which feeds directly into the work in progress. Far from being the us-and-them situation prevalent in performances of other types of music, this is very much a shared situation, with the audience playing a greater part than they may perhaps realise in the music's creation. Inseparable from the performance situation, all audiences seem to acquire a certain indefinable group character and set up a unique performance dynamic; the kind of thing which stand-up comedians, for example, are acutely sensitive to. In an improvised musical performance this becomes another factor which has a direct influence on the content of the evolving music; a factor which musicians do well to be aware of in considering their own responsibility and how this conveys itself to an audience. Of course, improvising musicians expect the same respect and openness from their audience as they do among themselves so the notion of responsibility would seem to emanate from individuals to the larger collective group of performers and audience.

In the Prevost Workshop more experienced practitioners like to think that example is key to guiding newcomers to the form, and a newcomer flaunting a virtuosic technique for its own sake, and in an unconsidered way that fails to acknowledge playing partners, is unlikely to make the kind of impression they might expect. And although such an approach would not be openly admonished, it would be hoped that the individual might learn, through observation and practice, new ways of engaging with others through their instrument in more interactive and spontaneous ways. Trust and respect for fellow musicians are responsibilities which have to be learned by all who wish to practice this intriguing and addictive form of music and necessarily involves developing the kind of forbearance referred to as one of the improvising musician's essential virtues by Cornelius Cardew in his famous essay *Towards an Ethic of Free Improvisation*.

Another fundamental area in which individual responsibility and occasional restraint must be exercised is that of playing volume. This is much discussed in improvisation circles and one finds a vast array of attitudes to the issue. Essentially, though, one must again be guided by respect for others and musical context. Shaking a performance situation up might be necessary on occasion but this should surely not be at the expense of other people's physical wellbeing. Perhaps the one safe guideline is that high volume which threatens individuals' pain thresholds to the point that it risks damaging hearing is a bad thing as are high volume gestures that cause physical discomfort and unease. Eddie Prevost has, on one unusual occasion, stopped a workshop piece in progress to ask an individual to turn their amplifier down because he found it distracting and unpleasant. However, a number of improvisers are of the opinion that loud and quiet can cohabit successfully and productively. Holders of such views maintain that the use of volume is not a bad thing per se as long as individuals remain aware of their playing partners: aware that quiet activity is happening at the same time as their own and remaining alert to others, rather than excluding them to remain in a detached and impervious sound space. I personally find it intensely annoying to be shut out by individuals who I know are unaware of what I'm doing and find the feeling very much like that of being excluded from a conversation or dialogue. Sometimes, though, I'm happy to submerge myself in the course of a piece to achieve the desired contrast, but of course the decision to be quiet is mine and one which doesn't impinge upon the freedom of others. This is quite unlike struggling to be heard amidst a barrage of sound that has effectively excluded me. Such a situation is graphically described in Eddie Prevost's book *Minute Particulars* in which pianist John Tilbury was, in composer Alvin Curran's words, 'overwhelmed, trampled on and finally murdered' by the collected forces of electronic orchestra Mimeo, a collective of laptop and electronic sound artists, at a concert in Bologna, Italy in 2001. The episode displayed all the worst tendencies of the mob to conspire, gang up on, disfigure and annihilate any thing or person, in this case an acoustic piano and its player, that might not conform to their preferred worldview. I suggest we should all always be on our guard against such tendencies because, even though Tilbury wasn't actually 'murdered', his musical voice was silenced on this occasion as effectively as any totalitarian state might wish a dissenter's actual speaking voice to be.

The need to encourage and develop newcomers to the form of free improvisation is felt by a number of us who attend the workshop. Frequently people have come to the workshop with little experience of this particular musical genre and, on occasion, with little musical experience at all. I like to think that a certain responsibility is displayed by regular participants in regard to how such people are accommodated and welcomed. Part of this welcome is embedded in how we interact musically with newcomers and consideration of their particular musical background and experience. This might be known in advance or guessed at in the actual process of playing. More obvious personality traits also play a vital part in the interactive process and awareness of these are, I think, vital in attempting to encourage appropriate participation and dispel apprehension and anxiety. To take two opposing examples: a more outgoing newcomer might feel inclined to get it all out at the expense of interaction and listening whilst a person with perhaps less confidence might have reservations in engaging with the process at all. As ever, and especially in the workshop as in other realms of life, it is hoped that the example of more experienced practitioners will provide the necessary guiding principles and that individuals will gradually acquire the interactive playing and listening skills on which the activity thrives. Always, though, experience will try to encourage by example and persuasion rather than direction. There is also a tendency for newcomers to the workshop to want to prove their worth, as it were, and to seek respect by demonstrating their command of an instrument through overt and often inappropriate displays of technique. Of course, this isn't really necessary given that the skills needed to improvise are ones of interacting with playing partners in new and interesting ways that may often involve the extension or even abandonment of conventional instrumental technique. Proof of ability to play isn't therefore so much a requirement as the willingness to learn by interactive participation how one fits in with the broad gamut of sounds and personalities encountered and available.

All of this might prompt the speculation that free improvisation is really not that free at all given that there is so much to consider. After all, you might think, I can't show off, I have to learn when to be quiet, when to support, when to lead, when not to play too loud, to respect my fellow musicians, to retain focus on the activity. So how free is free improvisation? Oddly, it strikes me that a marked discipline is evident in much of the best music in this genre; the discipline of hard focus and sharing. It certainly seems that you can't just play anything. At John Stevens' workshop which I attended briefly back in the mid-seventies, musical freedom was still a challenge to newcomers and enthusiasts who frequently blasted away with little consideration for their playing partners or surroundings. This was perhaps symptomatic of the times but I sensed subsequently that such self-centred blast-outs were the result of a misguided notion that anything goes; that one could literally play anything that came into one's head regardless of what others were doing or how it might fit into a group context; almost as if there were some kind of fear of engaging. This was mistaken for freedom but was, of course, more often than not, nothing more than group self-indulgence. Things have moved on considerably since then

but, surprisingly, a number of people still argue that free improvisation can't really be free if one isn't at liberty to play, for example, snatches of one's favourite Scarlatti sonatas. For me, this completely misses the point of the activity which emphasises the importance of spontaneous and exploratory social interaction in the context of sound production, and can usually be countered by asking 'Well, why would you want to do that in this context?' If there is agreement amongst performers that interaction and response is a necessary function of the music then, sure, this could be considered a constraint of sorts although, personally, I find this to be far outweighed by the openness of the form to musical and extra-musical factors which guarantee frequently unique and fulfilling sound experiences and many enlightening exchanges which no other form of music can offer. In this regard I rather like the following extract from Ornette Coleman's website which chimes largely with my own approach to improvised music. It says:

Coleman is the creator of a concept of music called "harmolodic," a musical form which is equally applicable as a life philosophy. The richness of harmolodics derives from the unique interaction between the players. Breaking out of the prison bars of rigid meters and conventional harmonic or structural expectations, harmolodic musicians improvise equally together in what Coleman calls compositional improvisation, while always keeping deeply in tune with the flow, direction and needs of their fellow players. In this process, harmony becomes melody becomes harmony. Ornette describes it as "Removing the caste system from sound." On a broader level, harmolodics equates with the freedom to be as you please, as long as you listen to others and work with them to develop your own individual harmony. *[end of extract]*

This last sentence emphasises the need for listening to and working with others to develop a personal voice.

Not only can free improvisation be considered a social activity which is itself valuable and important even before issues of surface are considered, but it is also for many a very sociable activity in which acquaintances extend their bonds in an unspoken and collective context. With regard to it being a model of ideal social intercourse I am somewhat doubtful though. Although many of its characteristics of shared freedom through sound might appeal to those trying to project an image of idealistic co-operation reflective of a particular ideology, the nature of music itself could surely be seen to transcend such analogies. Firstly, I consider the activity to be hard but frequently rewarding work that sometimes founders but which more often produces wonderful, interesting and beautiful results which, despite uninformed and often lazy claims that it all sounds the same, are always different in terms of personal dynamics and production; a kind of new world each time, in other words, with its own rules. Secondly, the escapist and abstract aspects of

music need to be considered whereby a musical world might entertain possibilities of freedoms which are impossible in other social contexts.

In conclusion, I would just say that although, as in other life situations, consideration and responsibility are important, we must surely not forget to have fun and take risks with the extraordinary range of dynamics involved here. Myriad possibilities are there for the discovery not to mention the dizzying wealth of playing possibilities and combinations. There is little, I believe, that can't find expression in the form, and there should be no reason for this not to be positive and constructive. We should take those risks then but be on our guard about deafening or dominating people selfishly for the sake of novelty or shock value. Above all, we must show respect to our fellow players and listeners in making sounds that excite and challenge our preconceptions. And therein lies another responsibility?

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