

## The ImproMachine a.k.a. John



This story is about the ImproMachine (also known as John). The machine was conceived, designed and built by Jan Ruerd Oosterhaven, musician, thinker, instrument builder, visual artist, computer programmer. As an interdisciplinary artist, he investigates the space that exists between the categories into which we have classified our reality. As a teacher of Free Improvisation at the Prince Claus Conservatoire in Groningen, he asks what 'music' is, beyond the form we have given it, within cultural conditions, choices and limitations. Besides an improvisation machine, this story is also about a search for the origin, the power and the meaning of music.

### **What is music?**

Can music be captured in a definition? Is the ultimate form of music the perfect performance of Mozart, Beethoven or Bach? Is it the contemporary compositions? Is it rather free jazz? Is jazz really still free? How absolute are the musical principles as we have formulated them in the West? What is music: is it the free sounds of the orchestra that is still tuning, or the trained sounds of the score? If music is a language, is that language finished? Is there a possibility to look up the 'interlanguage'? The demand for a definition of music, says Jan Ruerd, is in itself at odds with the essence of music as a vital, constantly renewing energy. All musical forms are possibilities that arise from an open space, in which countless other possibilities exist. The power of all music, old and new, western and non-western, lies in the opening of - and the dialogue with - that vital space. Based on this vision, he invites musicians from all disciplines to take the leap into the void, free of pre-assumptions. He offers them the opportunity to question the concept of 'music' again and to approach their own musicality as a creative force. To this end, he developed a form of improvisation in which the existing musical standards are broken open and this motto is leading: everything is music.

## **John**

An essential part of this form of improvisation is the ImproMachine. It is a metal box measuring 26 x 15 x 9 cm with 4 main buttons in the colors black, white, red and blue, a rotary knob, and a digital screen on which letters, numbers and codes appear. In the box is programmed a database of an infinite number of starting points that can set a musical energy in motion. The machine was named John, after its inspirator John Cage. By creating John, Jan Ruerd created a playing field in which the participants can enter into musical dialogue as freely as possible. John is the game master. He links the different starting points together on the basis of chance (randomness) and thus determines the frameworks within which the game is played: the number of musicians, a set of notes, a soundtrack, varying from a well-known musical theme to the sounds of a construction site, and an occasion or theme, that poetry can be, an image or a single word. John can also generate real-time graphical notations and direct the game. Any combination of data is possible. John doesn't judge. The musical research is central, everything is allowed; the game is more important than the perfect stylistic outcome. When they no longer need John, they silence him. And every now and then John says: Thank you.

## **Space and boundaries**

The concept of the ImproMachine is based on the idea that limitation is the starting point of all art; it directs a flow of energy and creates a moment in space and time, to which we assign meaning. It is the boundary that transforms the emptiness into a meaningful space. In other words: the limitation generates motivation and gives meaning to the first note played. The musician, says Oosterhaven, is the manager of both the supply and the borders. The boundaries are fluid, changeable; every expression that we recognize as an art form is the temporary result of an endless process of flowing and limiting. The perfect form is now, instead of the mirror of a preconceived standard, the moment when real living meaning arises from the chemistry between player, space and boundary and between listener and game.

## **Iterations**

Working with the ImproMachine initiates the creative process for the participating musicians and makes it clear to them how this process works. Over a number of 'iterations', successive sessions, they tap into their own musicality; in a reflection on their experiences they become aware of that musicality. Over time, they build a database of capabilities from which to draw; in this way they enrich their musical language. Ultimately, they can formulate their own principles independently of the ImproMachine; start their own flow. The experience has become a lived experience, precisely because of the passage of time. By having their question about the nature of music reverberate time and again in musical forms created by chance, the players have formulated their own - provisional - answer.

With the help of the ImproMachine, says Jan Ruerd Oosterhaven, I stretch a membrane on which an unprecedented sound will resonate. For professional musicians, this means an extension of the axioms of their musical journey: opening vital space and recognizing infinite possibilities for innovation.

Text written by Janet Meester, November 2020.