**A Word or Two about Improvisation**

We both decided that Improvisation should be the starting point for this book. It is #4 in the Six Musical Africanisms, which is the general outline for the entire volume. Improvisation is fundamental and central to issues surrounding compositional process and performance practice.

Improvisation cannot and should not be explained easily. Many arguments ensue about whether Improvisation is “real-time” or “spontaneous” composing or performance as composition.

Leo Smith1 entertains a compelling argument about the words “composition” and “improvisation” and students wanting to delve more deeply in the the African-American perspective could do no worse than reading his “Notes.”

Pauline Oliveros2 splits the difference with her term “Sonic Meditation.” In her works called “Sonic Meditations” she usually asks participants (audience, dancers, musicians, anyone at all) to breathe, be deeply aware of themselves of others (Including the environment), then spontaneously produce sounds in reaction to whatever one may notice.

Ornette Coleman’s theory of Harmolodics (see Stephen Rush, “Free Jazz, Harmolodics and Ornette Coleman3”) involves listening to the ethos, groove, timbre and overall “vibe” of the music, then perform in response to, again, whatever one may notice.

Folks new to improvisation can be intimidated by the worry of “playing the right thing,” but composers such as Leo Smith, Pauline Oliveros and Ornette Coleman provide “newbies” a way out – *simply listen!* Of course, listening takes practice and skill, and one’s ear-to-instrument skills should be well-developed in order to become a skilled improviser.

Good improvisation need not be the mere regurgitation of a bunch of learned “licks” or “patterns.” The deepest approach to improvisation involves careful listening, and responding with one’s heart, soul and if necessary, an instrument (or voice).

Improvisation is a life’s work, and involves risk, attention, and above all, the willingness to open up one’s heart and ear to other musicians (people/environment) with an open mind and an open soul. This is indeed a life’s practice and need not provoke fear or worry in the hearts of anyone. We all can listen, but can we all be vulnerable to every musical situation? Improvisation is for everyone to try, practice, and improve upon. It is not the exclusive property of a few enlightened souls.

1Smith, Leo. *Notes (book in 8 pieces.* 2015. Corbette vs. Dempsey & the Renaissance Society (publisher).

2Oliveros, Pauline. *Deep Listening*. 2005.  iUniverse, Kingston, NY. (or see (<https://popandmom.org/collections/pauline-oliveros-collections/products/anthology-of-text-scores>)

3Rush, Stephen. 2019. *Free Jazz, Harmolodics and Ornette Coleman*. Routledge Publishing, New York, NY.

Also see:

Sarath, Edward W., “Improvisation, Creativity and Consciousness,” 2014, State University of New York Press.

**Experiences and Exercises in Improvisation:**

•Ask a friend to play – literally – anything. Try to respond musically. Keep going for at least 2 minutes. Talk about the experience, and try again.

•Ask a friend to – slowly – play in unison with you. Play slowly, this is hard. See how long you can keep it up.

•Gather a group of people together and do Pauline Oliveros’ “Tuning Meditation” (which involves a group of people trying to find a unison tone by listening).

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•Form a small combo and try playing a Blues (see the section on Blues in the Harmony chapter). Write your own lyrics or use a lyric from a classic blues artist (such as Muddy Waters or Howlin’ Wolf or B.B. King). Listen to the original version (or covers) and have fun.

•Procure some drums (of any sort, Elvis Presley’s drummer once recorded a TV special playing on a guitar case). Play any of the grooves you learned in the Rhythm Chapter. *Improvise* over the grooves – with rhythms, melodies, or lyrics.

•Have a friend “loop” two chords over and over in any groove. Listen. Play over the groove.

•Listen to any machine for the sounds/raga that come from the machine. Sing anything that fits. Have fun.