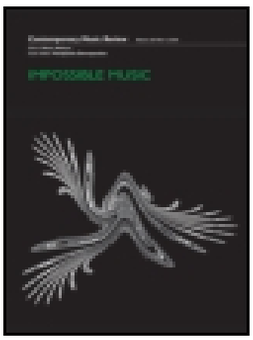

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Improvisation and the Orchestra: A Composer Reflects

George E. Lewis

In 1960, the influential ethnomusicologist Mantle Hood coined the term 'bimusicality' to describe the work of musicians of the Imperial Japanese Court, who were trained in both gagaku and pan-European classical traditions. As it happens, well before the publication of Hood's article, musicians trained in jazz were already well known as early practitioners of the bimusical. In 1930, William Grant Still's optimistic belief in the viability of a 'Negro Symphony Orchestra' was based on his own experience as both composer and performer in classical, jazz, and popular idioms. Still predicted that for the players in such an orchestra, 'their training in the jazz world will even have enhanced their virtuosity, and they will be able to play perfectly passages that would be difficult for a man trained only in the usual academic way' (Still, 1939, p. 267).

For much of the twentieth century, the boundary between high and low culture in the United States has been symbolized musically by the great competition between the jazz and classical traditions, a discursive stand-in for a more fundamental cultural struggle.

In proposing a performative amalgamation of these traditions in the late 1950s, the young composer and scholar Gunther Schuller felt that

> by designating this music as a separate, third stream, the two other mainstreams could go their way unaffected by attempts at fusion. I had hoped that in this way the old prejudices, old worries about the purity of the two main streams that have greeted attempts to bring jazz and 'classical' music together could, for once, be avoided. This, however, has not been the case. (Schuller, 1986, p. 115)

Perhaps Schuller's pluralist hope foundered on the shoals of existing discourses that foregrounded competing cultural nationalisms. In the 1930s, for example, the great philosopher of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke, could quote Leopold Stokowski as saying that 'Negro' influences would 'have the same revivifying effect as the injection of new, and in the larger sense, vulgar blood into dying aristocracy' (Locke, [1936] 1969, p. 95).

In the ensuing years, however, the rise of post-colonialism and the stirrings of the civil rights movement had vastly complicated these tropes. Now, as scholar and

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composer Jason Stanyek has noted, the face-to-face, cross-cultural improvisative space features an 'embodied collective learning' (Stanyek, 2004, p. 95) where sociality is marked as an important experience for both artists and audiences.

Thus, in an unpublished essay, composer and pianist Frederic Rzewski declared that the improvised music of Musica Elettronica Viva, an ensemble that he helped to found, was 'based on friendship. This element of friendship is communicated in the music; it cannot be concealed . . . Any unfriendly act on the part of some individual threatens the strength of the music we are all trying to create' (Rzewski, 1988). Rzewski's experience recalls critic Christopher Small's observation of African improvisers, who respond 'not only to the inner necessities of the sound world he is creating but also to the dynamics of the human situation as it develops around him' (Small, 1997, p. 295).

Romanticism: Hot Potato

The fading of expertise in improvisation from 'classical' music has become the subject of a slowly growing body of scholarship. Most recently, ethnomusicologist Angeles Sancho-Velasquez connected this disappearance with the twilight of nineteenth-century Romantic ideals of spontaneity, inwardness, and sublime and ineffable mystery. In 1911, however, composer Ferruccio Busoni was still holding fast these ideals in his 'Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music', declaring that 'notation is to improvisation as the portrait to the living model' (Busoni, [1911] 1962, p. 84).

In 1962, composer Lukas Foss could precisely reverse Busoni's terms, asserting that improvisation 'relates to composition much in the way that the sketch relates to the finished work of art' (Foss, 1962, p. 684). By this time, the image of the Romantic ego-driven mystic had been transferred first to bebop, and then to improvisation in general; no less a personage than Pierre Boulez dismissed the practice as 'personal psychodrama' (Boulez, 1975, p. 65).

But if we disconnect improvisation from the debates over European romanticism, we can see the practice of real-time analysis, exploration, discovery and response to conditions as fundamental to the existence and survival of the individual and the species. As the philosopher of mind Gilbert Ryle maintained of the normal human:

> if he is not at once improvising and improvising warily, he is not engaging his somewhat trained wits in some momentarily live issue, but perhaps acting from sheer unthinking habit. So thinking, I now declare quite generally, is, at the least, the engaging of partly trained wits in a partly fresh situation. It is the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against an unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle or hazard. It is a bit like putting new wine into some old bottles. (Ryle, 1976, p. 77)

In this light, the moral imperatives and double-star binary oppositions that have 'informed' so many discussions of improvisation and composition become something of an intellectual way station in classical music's mid-century confrontation with the post-colonial condition. In the interest of new music that incorporates both

disciplines, the binary will undoubtedly need to be jettisoned—not just for performers, but for the entire network that nurtures the culture of orchestral performance—composers, theorists, scholars, academicians, and the economic and technical support infrastructure that is so crucial to the performance of orchestral music.

Stations along the Path

In large measure, the composerly avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, both in Europe and in the United States, tended to view improvisation as, in one representative view, 'more or less profitable wanderings in a well-defined maze where the composer, performer and listener know the rules and references' (Reynolds, 1965, p. 139). One is struck by the vast gulf separating this view from the experiences of the improvisers themselves. As saxophonist Steve Lacy observed, 'You have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means but it is a leap into the unknown' (Bailey, 1992, p. 57).

In 1950s contemporary music, one path toward this leap involved the advent of graphic scores, whose seemingly indeterminate methods, particularly as applied by composer Earle Brown, often reflected not only an ideology of personal self-determination, but also a transhistorically, transnationally imagined community of thought and practice.

For Brown, the goals of this community became collapsed onto the idea of style:

> It is somewhat my responsibility to create conditions which, in a certain sense, won't be violated stylistically. For instance, if there's somebody who is very good at improvising in the style of Bach, or in the baroque period, very often I suggest something verbally. Like, I ask for erratic, jagged rhythms, so that he would not make sequences of 8th notes. (Bailey, 1992, p. 63)

As Brown told British guitarist Derek Bailey in an interview, 'I was working with improvisational forms' (Bailey, 1992, p. 61). Thus, beyond the conventional reading that a composer's task involves countering the performer's force of habit in the service of new music, Brown's suggestions reveal that the future history of any graphic score or improvisation will be partly oral, partly aural as mediated through recording, and partly related to the texts that musicians, scholars, and journalists have produced about it.

Brown's 1950s work reflected his strong interest in the psychology of open forms, from the music of Charlie Parker to the visual mobility of Calder and Pollock. Once a graphic score migrates conceptually beyond the communities in which it originated, however, the metatext that it represents inevitably becomes transformed. In that sense, either the graphic score or the improvisation can become a site for asserting affinities with, or articulating fealty to, a received tradition.

A powerful alternative, however, finds both improvisation and non-determinate notation transforming whatever combination of traditions the musicians performing the work have emerged from, thereby transforming the entire network from which the music emerges.

Teaching Improvised Music

Performer-centered models in which individual players adopt new skills, communicate cross-culturally, and articulate personal research directions have found trenchant articulation in improvised musics. Accordingly, in more liberal circles, it is often asserted that orchestral performers 'should learn to improvise'—whatever that may mean.

Learning new performance skills is only part of the issue, however. Christopher Small's understanding that 'the tension and the possibility of failure which are part of an improvised performance have no place in modern concert life' (Small, 1997, pp. 283–284) could be applied not only to performers, but also to the economic and social infrastructure that supports classical music itself.

Orchestra performers operate as part of a network comprised not only of musicians, conductors and composers, but also of administrators, foundations, critics and the media, historians, educational institutions, and much more. Each of the nodes within this network, not just those directly making music, would need to become 'improvisation-aware', as part of a process of re-socialization and economic restructuring that could help bring about the transformation of the orchestra that so many have envisioned.

Improvising the Orchestra

Many of the most radical practices and social changes that emerged from what cultural historian Daniel Belgrad called 'the culture of spontaneity' of the 1950s and 1960s seem to have occurred without very much input from the modern symphony orchestra. In both Europe and the United States, improvisation, and free jazz in particular, was widely viewed as symbolic of a dynamic new approach to social order that would employ spontaneity both to unlock the potential of individuals, and to combat oppression by hegemonic and racist political and cultural systems (see Bourges, 1968; Carles & Comolli, [1971] 2000; Globokar, 1972, 29–30; Willener, 1970).

In the late twentieth century, the most common route toward the encounter between improvisation and the orchestra, from Larry Austin to Hans Werner Henze to Steven Mackey, involved having star improvisers 'front the band'. While the results can be spectacularly successful, a more radical integration of improvisation into the orchestra, rather than simply grafting improvisative elements onto its surface, could explicitly call into question the nature of the orchestra itself as a sentient sound-producing body.

The set of alternative models that re-imagine the orchestra along improvisative and communitarian lines ranges from Cornelius Cardew's 'Scratch Orchestra' to Lawrence 'Butch' Morris's 'Conductions', in which an improvising conductor functions literally as a centralized conduit of musical current linking other improvisers. These models provide trenchant examples for recuperating the symphony orchestra as a

developmental site for new aesthetic models that foreground agency, identity, embodiment, cultural difference and self-determination.

If, as I have written elsewhere, 'in performances of improvised music, the possibility of internalizing alternative value systems is implicit from the start' (Lewis, [1996] 2004, pp. 149–150), we can more clearly view the difficulty with the earlier pluralist conceptions of improvisation and the orchestra, where, as art critic Hal Foster put it, 'minor deviation is allowed to resist radical change' (Foster, [1982] 1985, p. 13). Similarly, the pluralist tendency to situate African-American music as the vehicle of orchestral transubstantiation, while well-grounded historically, risks becoming overly narrow in the new century, as improvisative traditions from around the world, influenced or not by African-American forms, become part of a landscape that could inform the classical music of the future.

Indeed, what might a new classical music sound like in a post-colonial world? Certainly, such a new music would need to draw upon the widest range of traditions, while not being tied to any one. Rather than quixotically asserting a 'new common practice', perhaps such a music would exist, as theorist Jacques Attali put it, 'in a multifaceted time in which rhythms, styles, and codes diverge, interdependencies become more burdensome, and rules dissolve'—in short, a 'new noise' (Attali, [1977] 1989, pp. 138–140).

Improvisation would play an important, perhaps even a defining role, in fostering that new noise. For Attali, who includes the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians as emblematic of the project of using music to build a new culture, subsumed under the term 'composition' is a set of processes and practices that appears to resemble, not composition as it is practiced in the West, but improvisation.

'Music is no longer made to be represented or stockpiled,' Attali wrote in 1977, 'but for participation in collective play, in an ongoing quest for new, immediate communication, without ritual and always unstable. It becomes nonreproducible, irreversible' (Attali, [1977] 1989, p. 141).

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