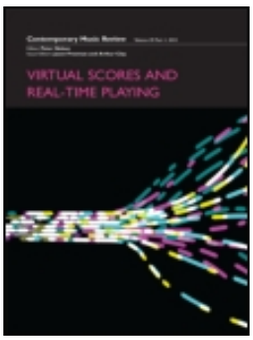

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Authorship and Improvisation: Musical Lost Property

Valerie Pearson

This essay discusses the problems of authorship concerning free improvisation. It looks at three areas: collaboration, education, and emerging processes. There has been a recent trend for introducing spontaneous and collaborative elements into contemporary classical music projects. The current essay examines problems concerning how to nurture, present and disseminate new forms within very established formats. Even though free improvisation offers a medium in which to develop complementary crossover skills between composition and performance, this essay will discuss the impossibilities for a composer or performer (working in their respective fields) to claim authorship of a collaborative performance between free improvisation and composition. It identifies the free improvisation performance as an ephemeral, emerging process that does not create a product—that is, it is a process resistant to institutionalised assessment and ownership.

Keywords: Art Product; Emergent Process; John Dewey; George E. Lewis; Inner Repository; Free Improvisation

Introduction—Definitions

I use the term *free improvisation* to describe an interactive, improvisational activity. I refer to a situation in which each improviser makes contributions which are informed by a unique, personal 'inner repository'[1] of concepts, techniques and tendencies, underlying all artistic and other behaviour. The 'work' is conceived and performed spontaneously in real time, making the reworking of ideas impossible. The process begins with no pre-established plan of what will happen, nor any rules for what is allowed or not allowed.

In contrast, a composition is created prior to the time of its performance. Any style or approach may be adopted and improvisation may be part of the work, but the discontinuity between the conceived plan for the work and its performance distinguishes it from free improvisation. These definitions suggest that free improvisation is not an accelerated compositional process. Any preconceived idea

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for an improvisational activity makes it impossible for the inventor to improvise the structure of the music, and improvisation becomes a technique rather than a formal discipline. The pre-conceived plan subsumes the improvisational element into a compositional framework.[2]

Collaborative Lost Property

> What about un-jazz improvisation—is there a new common speech? You look through catalogues of—I can't call them rock records, because that isn't what people are doing any more—if you look through a catalogue, there are people in France, in Japan, in Germany, in Australia, in Sweden doing something which isn't rock, and it isn't jazz, and it certainly isn't 'classical' music: what is it? (Childs & Hobbs, 1982–1983, p. 56).[3]

In 2008, I was invited by a prominent commissioning body to work collaboratively with a postgraduate violinist. The initial stage of the project involved participation in a one-hour improvisation workshop, and we were subsequently asked to devise a ten-minute work together, which would then be publicly performed by the violinist in a concert-hall setting.

This project was representative of the recent trend for introducing spontaneous and collaborative elements into contemporary classical music projects. This recognises the wider shift towards these activities outside the classical music world, but creates problems concerning how to nurture, present and disseminate new forms within very established formats.

The improvisation workshop was intended to introduce a way to lose our traditional composer and performer roles and discover ways to be co-authors. The time provision for collaborative work was three one-hour meetings; our collaborative decisions needed to be made very quickly, and required some form of improvisation in order to meet the challenge.

Whilst the violinist was eager to try out my ideas or imitate my playing, she was uncomfortable with the role of generating or exploring ideas independently. As might be expected with performers who are not in the habit of inventing or improvising music, she had never considered what kind of music she would like to create; she expressed no personal style or preference. These factors set the boundaries for our collaboration.

The difficulty I faced had to do with providing a composed element in a piece involving improvisation. If the violinist had been an experienced improviser we might have made a collaboration based around competing stylistic authorship. When the violinist tried to improvise around compositional frameworks she was only able to play a few hesitant notes between my composed sections. Therefore, I chose to pursue a collaboration between composition and free improvisation as a way to allow the violinist shared ownership. However, the differences between these two forms of invention made it seem impossible to share ownership of the work's structure, given the antagonistic needs of preconception and instantaneous creation. For a composer,

the loss of control over structural design takes away what is arguably the fundamental characteristic of their discipline.

I imagined that a solution to the problem of shared authorship might be to try to influence what I term the violinist's 'inner repository'. I selected musical materials from my own improvisations and taught them to the violinist, because they involved particular techniques that she was unfamiliar with. We kept examples that she preferred, which enabled her to contribute a personal element. Our final selection was four blocks of material, 'flutter', 'melody', chord' and 'speech', which are labelled on the first page of the 'score'. (See Figure 1. (The notation provides an aide-mémoire of what the violinist was taught aurally. The numbers in brackets indicate accumulated time, in seconds.))

I found ways to help her extend these through improvisation. For example, attaching a particular technique to the idea of 'speech' provided a model that she might easily imagine, imitate and alter. Each of the four blocks represents both an

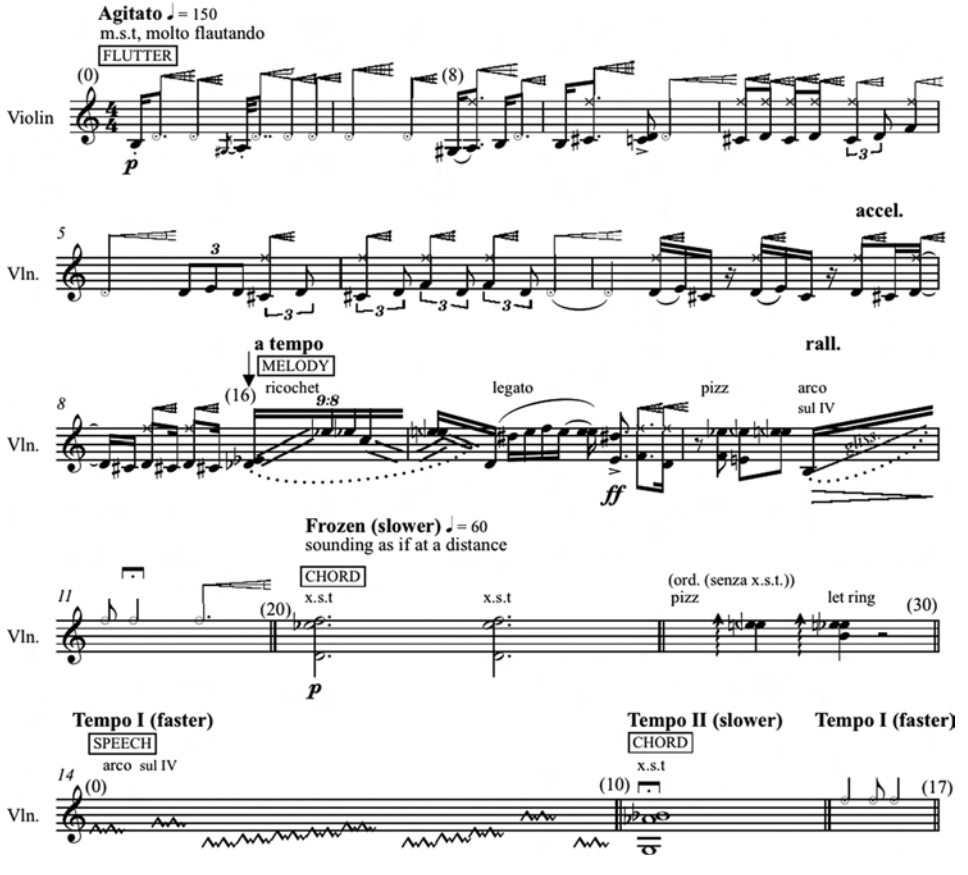

Figure 1 Final selection of materials that were used to generate the final collaborative work for solo violin. Copyright 2008 Valarie Pearson.

object and a playing technique, which function in a similar way to a noun and a verb, respectively. For example, 'flutter' might first appear as 'a flutter', but the performer could apply 'flutter' bowing strokes to one of the other objects. This provides myriad combinatory possibilities for improvisation that stay within the confines of the material. However, as our meetings progressed, the violinist remained uncomfortable improvising any aspect of the music, so I devised ways that would bring her idiosyncrasies into relief despite her playing prescribed material. I asked her to perform multiple layers of music at the same time. The impossibility of this forced her to make decisions about how to swap between lines, which elements to leave out and which elements she could combine. These decisions betrayed her taste, technique and style.

The violinist's role was to improvise between different combinations of object and technique; however, for the performance, she insisted on having fixed versions and created an aide-mémoire.

The project proved an impossible task to realise satisfactorily because the provisional framework was that of a traditional composer/performer commission (presentation of ideas, trial of ideas, refinement and performance) despite aspiring to nurture a collaboratively created work. I resisted the possibility of composing the entire work, which resulted in my time being spent devising ways to lessen my authorship and encourage the violinist's. What were the possibilities for collaboration in these circumstances? I attempted to infect and influence the violinist's inner repository in my own collaboration, as I saw that this did not impose any rules on how to proceed, but might influence how one proceeds. Though this was thwarted by the violinist's lack of improvisation experience, her contribution as a highly proficient classical instrumentalist preserved many of my composing familiars: the use of musical notation to communicate potentially highly complex and technically demanding material that could be played after little practice.

This case study reflects the larger situation existing currently in academic musical institutions which are trying to diversify into non-western classical music practices. The paths of music inside and outside institutions are crossing, and though this creates exciting new possibilities for music making, it raises questions about how artistic pursuits are nurtured and assessed, both professionally and financially.

Furthermore, a result of this crossing of paths is the need to solve the seemingly paradoxical problem of how to institutionalise music rooted in a non-institutionalised sensibility.

My contribution in this collaborative work is problematic with regard to receiving academic assessment, as I do not claim compositional authorship of a reproducible work—that is, a score that can be realised by any performer without requiring my involvement. Like similar collaborative works that are being created, performed and (well) received, it seems to fall within a current blind spot in academic products. The issues that cause problems concern the relationship between performance and composition, and the acceptability of the reproducible versus the unique.

Any performance of a composition is generally understood to be unique, whilst the work itself retains a permanence that allows its reproduction to undergo extremes of interpretation. For example, in the world of modern jazz there is the curious duality of an improviser 'owning' their solo within the tune of another, often absent, composer. In the performance of an open score work no two performances are likely to be the same, yet the concept of the work, and how that proceeds, is reproduced every time. These two examples highlight the composition as being a predetermined structure of initially chosen or generated materials. Whoever makes the decisions that create this structure is the composer, and whoever reproduces the work is the performer, regardless of the extremes that are possible within this definition, on either part, regarding control and contribution.

It is important to clarify these points (and compare them with the case study) in order to distinguish the particular relationship of the violinist and myself to our collaborative work. I did not compose the structure of the work before the performance, but instead shared this role with a performer who would structure the work during performance. The collaboration process, during which the performer's inner repository is influenced and shaped, ensures that the performer stays within my carefully constructed boundary of possibilities. The resulting work, therefore, is a unique product of our partnership and cannot be performed by another violinist. This makes it impossible for the work to function as a commodity.

In terms of housing the work within existing academic forms, if I had also been the performer of the work, it might have been understood successfully as practice-based research. This type of research acknowledges the performance's impact with the audience as a vital criterion for assessment and suggests that the work's possible reproduction is embedded in the performer rather than the score, consequently focusing less on the requirements of the 'composition' and more on those of the specific performance. There is no doubt that such a self-sufficient work would be considered 'mine'. However, it is implicit with academic research that one seeks out what is not already known, and therefore I would suggest that the process of creating the work would have begun by trying to design (for myself) a new (at least much-extended) inner repository, as I did with the violinist in my case study.

Ultimately, it is important to keep in mind that the work was commissioned by a project that set out a particular situation and criteria in which two specific people were involved. It is impossible to separate any aspect of the piece's development from this particular situation. If a different performer had been involved, the creative strategies would have been very different; in this respect, I wonder whether the project might be compared to a site-specific installation.

Site-specific works engender a dialogue with their surroundings and are therefore inseparable from their location. This is different from 'site-adjusted' works, which can be readjusted to exist in different locations because of a core, self-contained concept within the work itself.[4]

This condition of site-specificity could be translated into performer-specificity with regard to my work. I had to create a piece for a specific performer, and every

aspect of the work, as Serra (1994) puts it, is 'conceived for, dependent upon, and inseparable from' that performer (p. 202).[5] Therefore, to remove the performer is to destroy the work.[6]

In the temporal and ephemeral world of music it is often impossible for music installations to have a permanent existence. Temporary site-specific music installations are more common and are accepted academic works; when the installed 'performance' is over, works in this category continue to exist as academic products that can be intellectually 'owned' through recorded documentation and archive. It may be possible to apply these criteria to the violin work; it had a performer-specific element that led to a one-off performance that was subsequently documented through musical transcription, audio recording, journalist review and library archive.

Educational Lost and Found

> And you can't teach people to play AMM music. You could think about how AMM music works, but then what do you say? What do you actually tell people to do? I think a lot of it comes down to particular people being together at a particular time … It's a specific group of people … (Childs & Hobbs, 1982–1983, p. 44)[7]

Keith Sawyer, in his article 'Improvisation and the Creative Process' (2000), explores the relationship between improvisational performance and product-oriented arts, such as painting and musical composition, by drawing upon Dewey's model of 'art as experience' and Collingwood's model of 'art as language'. Sawyer argues that at the core of both theories is a theory of art as improvisation, and he compares how each can be applied to various improvisational activities. The results highlight the difference between 'improvisational creativity' and 'product creativity', which is particularly relevant when applied to the situation outlined in this essay.

Collingwood (1958) and Dewey (1934) suggest that there is a difference between problem solving—marked out by whether an artist has a plan which they will realise through an artistic medium—and problem finding (i.e. working with the artistic medium using improvisation, beginning without an idea).[8] It seems that in current academic circumstances, problem solving is more easily assessed. Sawyer (2000) comments:

> Although improvisational creativity has not been a subject for aesthetics, it may actually represent a more common, more accessible form of creativity. […] Creativity in interactional domains, including teaching, parenting, and mentoring, is recognised to be important to our lives and our culture. Yet in part because it does not generate a product, these improvisational interactions are resistant to aesthetic analysis. (p. 150)

The definition of problem solving can be applied to composition. A composition is the presentation of a problem and a solution, and constitutes a finished product. This

is a result of the working-out process, but not the process itself, which is omitted from the final work. The composition can be shared and realised separately from the composer.

Problem finding, on the other hand, is ephemeral, contingent and inseparable from interactive personal experience in the moment, and equates to free improvisation. The work that is presented is the process itself, which is consumed and produced simultaneously and is impossible to reproduce.

In 1995–1996, George E. Lewis taught a compulsory improvisation project, M133, at the University of California, San Diego (see Lewis (2000), pp. 99–106). Describing the experience of this course, he suggested that many of his students struggled with problem finding. Teaching establishments are concerned with the assessment of products and the teaching of craft. Lewis's students were used to presenting only their best, practised, fully worked-out solutions to problems. Free improvisation exposed the solving process, thus validating the possibility that anything could happen, a quality that was hard for some of Lewis's students to accept. The multi-tasking role of the improviser does not necessarily benefit from a high level of proficiency in instrumental or compositional skills (see also Sansom (2001), pp. 32–33). This was an understandably difficult change of circumstance for those who had invested their musical education into developing these, and Lewis (2000) commented on the difficulties the otherwise high-achieving students had in trying to come to terms with this fact:

> Of course, students challenged me to come up with fixed criteria for judgement. My position was that such criteria were unrealistic in this creative context, just as they are in other pedagogical contexts where musicality is being assessed. (p. 102)

Without a surrogate model for quality, some of Lewis's students seemed to be fixated by a fear that others were assessing their work as poor craft.

Composition is generally taught through a series of supervisions, in which a student is able to present a problem and receive help pertaining to its solution. The problem may require solutions that are not yet part of the composer's 'inner repository'. This process ensures critical supervision over the making of a work, and therefore a first-hand record of the student's ideas and skills of execution, as well as a history of debate in which the student has had the opportunity to prove the merits of their work. The finished work is a presentation of the solution that can provide evidence of any learning outcomes set by the supervisor.

In contrast, the teacher of the free improviser can offer only a post-mortem examination of any performance, without the opportunity to offer advice for revisions. The teacher cannot engage in the invention process. During the making of the work the improviser must rely on what is already within their 'inner repository'. Given that this distinguishes one improviser from another, and that it can consist of anything, the difficulties of an assessment based on comparison are great.

It seems logical, nevertheless, that if any objective assessment can be made, it might concern the improviser's ongoing enrichment and employment of their 'inner repository'. George E. Lewis replaced the mid-term-paper requirement of his course with a process journal (see Lewis (2000), p. 103). It is interesting to note that a journal is a personal historiography and a device of recollection and conscience, none of which matter to music making itself, but might provide 'ways in' for the teacher to chart the student's inner development.

In this author's experience, the majority of literature concerning free improvisation is biographical. Free improvisers suggest that they cannot describe or analyse fully what happens; AMM members have said that they spent many years performing together and never once discussed the music.[9] Lewis (2000) comments that what 'was new to the students was that there was indeed such a thing as a field of improvised music, where judgement tempered by experience could be a factor in evaluation' (pp. 102–103). He could validate his ability to assess their improvised work with his twenty-five years' experience as an improviser.

Given the empirical nature of free improvising, one may view the need for a written element to George E. Lewis's course as another example of an institutional need for an individually authored product. Lewis (2000) tells us that '[as] part of the midterm [examination] each student handed in a solo improvisation on tape, along with documentation as to how it was made ... ' (pp. 102–103). A recording is a common tool that institutions use to document assessed musical performance, but it may be problematic with regard to free improvisation. If an institution announces an appointed date for a recorded, assessed improvisation, what prevents students from reverting to problem-solving habits and practising and recreating what they imagine the examiners will award high marks to?

Phantom Products

Despite the ephemeral nature of free improvisation, audio recordings are often used as a misunderstood product of the 'performance'. They misrepresent the music as a fixed, repeatable product whose quality has been selected for promotion, and sometimes as a commodity that can be owned and sold. Audiences consume the recording as they would a conventionally designed musical product, and form personal favourites. Certain recordings are referred to as 'classic' tracks, despite their transient existence without the recording itself—they can never be repeated, and represent only a fleeting snapshot of the improviser's musical life. The fan of the 'classic track' may be disappointed when attending a live performance that does not match the expectation set by their recording, and might even overlook the essential aspect of process being the real product of the art form.

In light of these comments, the present institutional use of recordings to publish research and to document and assess oratory practices becomes problematic with regard to free improvisation. Not only might the recordings of free improvisation create an archive of untitled music which is impossible to recreate, they might be

recordings of music that has been 'recreated' many times. This attitude defeats the unique quality of the concert performance of free improvisation. Whereas those working in other disciplines can select versions of their art for presentation and performers can cancel performances of pieces they cannot yet play, the free improviser should not pre-determine what is made available to the public. Many improvisers acknowledge the problematic consequences of recordings to the art form, and identify the conscious selection of certain recordings over others as a form of legitimisation and a step towards compositional thinking.

Stepping Back into a Different River

In *Le Mystère Picasso* (1956) by Henri-Georges Clouzot, Picasso is filmed in the act of painting on a series of transparencies. The images form as if by magic; lines appear as Picasso explores the possibilities unfolding from each mark. Playfully, images are filled out—a goat's head is coloured, marked out and re-coloured. Every stage in the process creates a new image, but Picasso is always looking further, in a continuous act of creation. The goat after thirty seconds is different to, but no more valid than, the goat after twenty seconds. Images are lost altogether in the constant stream of renewal. The process destroys as it creates. The viewer is with Picasso in a continuously developing present moment.

Picasso's activity shows clear parallels with musical free improvisation, and the example dispels the myth that great artists are exclusively great problem solvers, demonstrating that improvisation is an essential, complementary creative act.

The distinction between creative process and resulting product was one of the central themes of American pragmatism. Dewey (1934) based his aesthetic theory on the distinction between *art product* and *work of art*: 'The *product* of art … is not the *work* of art' (p. 214). The work of art is the psychological process; it is 'active and experienced. It is what the product does, its working' (p. 162). Dewey's theories are rooted in the idea that art is expressive, a quality that operates through communication. Therefore, works of art are interactive and have a temporal dimension (Sawyer, 2000, p. 155).[10]

Each of these valuations describes a key element of free improvisation. Dewey (1934) goes on to suggest that it is in the process that the limits of the artist's preconceptions can be surpassed. An artwork will only be great if the artist finds a problem during the process of creation: '[t]he unexpected turn, something which the artist himself does not foresee, is a condition of the felicitous quality of a work of art: it saves it from being mechanical' (p. 139).

Dewey is describing results of the process that were not previously within the artist's repository, or within their range of predicted outcomes. He describes the situation of a problem being found—moments that may hinder continuation, or instigate a change of direction, for example. When Picasso makes a mark that obscures the clarity of the original image and suggests another, he seeks out a new path until another chance element presents a new problem.

In music, the free-improvisation process is most commonly associated with a group situation. The soloist interacts with his own music within his own domain, and can authorise every step and thus carry through ideas. The group situation is an interactive co-authorship. The mix of 'inner repositories' creates an unknown domain and an increased chance of surprise events. The music is collectively created, and emerges from the actions of everyone present. 'Although retrospective examination reveals a coherent interaction, each social act provides a range of creative options, any one of which could have resulted in a radically different performance' (Sawyer, 2000, p. 152).[11] Improvisation might not be just a problem-finding exercise, it might be an emerging combination of problem finding and solving. One improviser's musical contribution might simultaneously obscure an existing musical idea and instigate a new one, just as Picasso's mark affected the image. Perhaps the mentality of the improviser, their expectation at every moment, is to realise a constantly changing blueprint despite not knowing what it might be at the outset.

Picasso's improvising resulted in a number of 'completed' transparencies, which he insisted were to be destroyed after the filming. His desire to destroy the permanent results demonstrates that he considered the process of creation the real product of his improvisation. The process is the unique product of those who make it, but it has no permanence.

Conclusion

The composition performance is the product of a preconceived plan, whereas the performed free improvisation is a process of finding and solving problems; anything can be included, but the manner of inclusion cannot be agreed beforehand. These factors make it difficult to combine free improvisation and composition in their pure forms.

Improvisation challenges classical music education and institutions that have developed products that represent knowledge and are a provision for the authorship of ideas. Improvisation is built from what the musician already knows, and exposes their ability to search for and find new ideas. This is a reversal for the university student who is accustomed to a separation between research and creation, preparation and presentation, practice and performance. The ingredients are already there, but there is no recipe.

Whilst an individual is inseparable from their contribution to the group's free improvisation, the contribution is inseparable from the process. The permanent bond between the individual and their music is impossibly part of an ephemeral process that has no end product, and cannot be owned.

> EP: You can give people some sort of an insight into what it's like to improvise, but of course what you'd be encouraging them to do is to do their own improvisation, develop their own personalities. To teach anybody to actually play AMM music would be a negation of what AMM music was about. (Childs & Hobbs, 1982–1983, p. 44).[12]

Notes

[1] I borrow and extend Ed Sarath's use of the term 'inner repository'. See Sarath (1996), p. 7.

[2] Sarath (1996, pp. 1–19) writes in detail about the different temporal conceptions of the improviser and composer, providing examples for this essay. For other, sometimes conflicting, accounts of improvisation and composition, see Foss (1962); Kramer (1981); Nettl (1974); and Bailey (1992). For many different contemporary perspectives, from living composers, performers and improvisers, see Uitti and Nelson (2006). This is a collection of interviews, accounts and essays on the subject of improvisation. Similarly, Childs and Hobbs (1982–1983).

[3] Childs and Hobbs' question to interviewee Harold Budd during a discussion about Budd's experience of improvisation that is not from a jazz-derived background.

[4] The sculptor Richard Serra makes a distinction between these two types of work during his account of the destruction of his sculpture, *Tilted Arc*: 'As I pointed out, *Tilted Arc* was conceived from the start as a site-specific sculpture and was not meant to be ''site-adjusted'' or [...] ''relocated''. Site-specific works deal with the environmental components of given places ... The works become part of the site and restructure both conceptually and perceptually the organization of the site. My works never decorate, illustrate or depict a site' (Serra, 1994, p. 202). The United States government destroyed *Tilted Arc* on 15 March 1989—a public sculpture that had been commissioned by one of their agencies ten years earlier.

[5] See Serra (1994) p. 202: 'The specificity of site-oriented works means that they are conceived for, dependent upon, and inseparable from their location.'

[6] Serra, as cited in Weyer-graf-Serra & Buskirk, 1988, p. 40: 'I want to make it perfectly clear that *Tilted Arc* was commissioned and designed for one particular site: Federal Plaza. It is a site-specific work and as such not to be relocated. To remove the work is to destroy the work.'

[7] Barney Childs and Chris Hobbs interviewing Eddie Prevost and Keith Rowe, both members of the group AMM.

[8] Sawyer (2000, p. 154) quotes Collingwood (1958), pp. 15 and 22: '[Craft] involves a distinction between planning and execution. The result to be obtained is preconceived or thought out before being arrived at' and 'Art as such does not imply the distinction between planning and execution.' Sawyer (2000, p. 154) quotes Dewey (1934) pp. 138 and 139: 'A rigid predetermination of an end-product ... leads to the turning out of a mechanical or academic product' and 'An artwork will only be great if the artist finds a problem during the process of creation.' These ideas are specifically about the creative process and promote improvisation as a vehicle through which art (as opposed to craft) is created, even when this process will eventually lead to some kind of kind of finished art 'product' (the painting, the composition, the play, for example). In this essay, Dewey's and Collingwood's ideas are used as stimulants for further reflection upon how one may apply the concepts of problem solving and problem finding to different types of musical creation.

[9] 'Then we got, I think, to an optimum period where we would just go and play, and we didn't feel we had to analyse or even discuss—and you know from your own experience that this is completely true, that one would travel to a gig in a vehicle for maybe six hours and not discuss the music once, set up and play, then six hours back and still not discuss the music! And never talk about it again, except that someone might feel happy, and someone else might feel not so happy, and that went on literally for years' (Keith Rowe in conversation with Barney Childs and Christopher Hobbs: Childs & Hobbs, 1982–1983, p. 37).

[10] Sawyer also cites Dewey's comparison of the aesthetic experience to everyday conversation. See Dewey (1934), p. 63.

[11] Sawyer's comments on G. H. Mead's pragmatist theory of emergence are particularly pertinent in this context. Sansom's (2001) comments, which refer to musical improvisation

and Abstract Expressionist painting, do not mention this theory explicitly, but they describe its characteristics.

[12] Eddie Prevost (EP) is responding to Childs and Hobbs's questions about intuitive and non-systematic music making in the group AMM, and whether it would be possible to teach people to play music like AMM.

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