

Peter Johnston - 2011

Sounding the System: Improvisation, Creativity, and Contemporary Music Pedagogy

I

I will begin with a quote from Canadian pianist Paul Bley, whose work as a member of a group called the Jimmy Giuffre 3 is the subject of my recent research into the practice of free improvisation:

Speaking about improvisation is counterproductive, because if I explain it to you, I'm presumptuously assuming that I know best how it should be done, and then you don't have to come up with your own solutions. By telling you what to do, I am circumventing your creativity.

With these words in mind, I will argue here for the importance of including improvisation instruction in university music programs. To be clear, I am advocating for a non-genre specific understanding of improvisation, which is an important distinction in a climate where the concept is closely linked to jazz music, and by extension to the divisions of labour and distribution of power in music departments. Although I am a jazz musician, as were the members of the Jimmy Giuffre 3, the ideas I will explore here are crucial for the study, performance, and future of notated music. I say this not only because the experience of improvising has the potential to revive the levels of musicianship required of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven in their time, but because I believe that our job as music educators is to help students become critical, creative citizens, with the skills to respond to the shifting demands of the contemporary cultural field, and the disposition to generate art that reflects their political values and creative imperatives.

This writing is a response to an article by Maud Hickey titled “Can improvisation be ‘taught’?: A call for free improvisation in our schools,” which was published in the *International Journal Of Music Education* in 2009. In this insightful article Hickey raises two main points: that currently dominant teaching strategies inhibit students’ “creative musical growth,” and that improvisation cannot be taught; rather, “it is a disposition to be enabled and nurtured” (286). Hickey’s article attends primarily to improvisation pedagogy in early childhood education; my interest is in older students who already have some musical experience, but many of the observations Hickey makes are relevant to an analysis of teaching music at the university level. Rather than directly answering the question in her title, Hickey concludes by recommending future research to address gaps in the school music curriculum:

[We] need to collect pedagogical histories of the masters in the field in order to learn more about how they learned... Information gleaned from these studies should be made useable by current school music teachers. (295)

Taking this recommendation as a point of departure, my intention is to position the Jimmy Giuffre 3—a New York-based ensemble that was active in the early 1960s and which featured Giuffre on clarinet, Paul Bley on piano, and Steve Swallow on bass—as early “masters in the field” of free improvisation, and to present my ethnographic research into their rehearsal methods in such a way that it may be usable by educators and practitioners to enable and nurture creative musical growth.

The ideas I will explore today are not intended as a replacement for the methods traditionally used in teaching musicianship, but as a supplement that can aid students in making connections between the skills they acquire through these methods and the

mysterious next step of finding, in improviser/scholar George Lewis's (2000) words, "what musicians often call 'one's own sound', or the original creation of one's own musical material and lexicon" (83). The Jimmy Giuffre 3's rehearsal methods are instructive because they deal with very general musical materials, so they can be explored by musicians from almost any background and with various levels of experience. By nurturing an environment where students are encouraged to develop their "own musical material and lexicon" we can connect music education to deeper social issues by helping students to self-identify as producers of culture, rather than strictly as consumers of existing goods.

This goal of encouraging critical social engagement through music has a meaningful parallel in Ian Angus's (2009) recent writings about the importance of the humanities disciplines in our universities. Angus argues that the humanities offer resistance to the deepening conception of a university education as "simply an aid to the individual confronting the job market" (14), and that they foster "[the] ability to think meaningfully about one's experience, [which] allows a deeper judgement of the current situation and brings one's future actions into question" (19). This admittedly idealized view of the role of an arts education has particular relevance to the study of music at the university level, as the possibility of reliable employment as a classical or jazz musician is rapidly diminishing; we risk hobbling students by restricting their training to a trade school/skills-based model of education when the institutions that support that trade—such as symphony orchestras and jazz clubs—are disappearing at an accelerating rate. Angus rightly notes that we need creative thinkers to respond to these changes in our cultural landscape, and I argue that improvisation pedagogy can

fostering the same kinds of productive attitudes towards citizenship and subjectivity that he attributes to an education in the humanities.

II

The response to the challenge of teaching improvisation in an institutional setting has generally been confined to university jazz departments, within which improvisation instruction has coalesced around a standard repertoire of compositions that are reduced down to a series of chord-scale relationships students learn to negotiate through patterns and melodic phrases derived either theoretically, from the possible notes contained in a harmonic sequence, or from the solos of the masters of the tradition. Although this process is essential to learning to play within a particular style, few musicians would argue that the “rote regurgitation of prepared patterns” will lead one to the kinds of self-expression and transcendent experiences that are frequently evoked by musicians as the ultimate goal of a musical performance (Lewis 2000, 83). David Borgo attributes the ongoing tension between skill development and creativity to how the “music academy” frequently operates under the notion that “the process of learning ‘what’ and ‘how’ to improvise” occurs “prior to, and separate from, actually ‘doing’ it” (2007, 65). Hickey (2009) clearly addresses this point, suggesting that creativity emerges through “teaching thinking as a disposition rather than any one skill or set of skills to be learned. That is to think of teaching in terms of enculturation through exposure to cultural exemplars and the subsequent development of a disposition to understand” (286). The way forward that she proposes involves enabling and nurturing this disposition through what she calls “learner-directed activities,” or a process rather

than product-focused curriculum that will require teachers to develop alternative documentary forms and evaluative strategies to judge students' work (292).

To clarify further, I do not wish suggest that improvisation is, in the words of Alan Stanbridge (2008), an "ideologically correct" way of making music that we are ethically obligated to encourage our students to pursue; it has its limits like any art practice, but can add substantially to students' experience of what it means to be a musician (8). I also recognize the danger in presenting a particular ensemble as a "cultural exemplar," as I am doing here with the Jimmy Giuffre 3, for such an example might unduly influence students to try to recreate a particular sound-world rather than make their own discoveries. We must be conscious of how we use these exemplars to avoid inhibiting students from making their own creative judgments and discoveries. To respond to these challenges, it is necessary to establish a conceptual foundation of improvisation as an intentional, critical, and playful deconstruction and re-imagining of the sounds that come to us all through the music we absorb on a daily basis – which includes both popular music and music that is socially constructed as art – rather than as a musical style that can be learned and reproduced. Indeed, we must be wary of making improvised music a discrete stream within the academy in the way that jazz and classical music currently coexist, and which World Music might be heading towards, for the productive value of improvisation lies in the friction it generates when cross-pollinated with performance practices that are becoming increasingly classicized.

III

My interest in the Jimmy Giuffre 3 as a case study for improvisation pedagogy began with reading bassist Steve Swallow's (1998) liner notes for the CD reissue of *Free Fall*, the trio's final recording from 1962. He wrote:

From the moment we came together, the trio rehearsed several times a week, long and hard...We set about to subject all the unconscious, given assumptions in the music we played to stern scrutiny and reevaluation... We spent as much time talking as playing at our rehearsals, asking such questions as: How can we play at a given rate of speed, but without a fixed tempo? For how long is it possible to improvise without reference to a tonic pitch? What's the longest unbroken melody we can play?

I had the good fortune to interview Swallow and Paul Bley in 2006 to get further details about their rehearsal methods—Giuffre himself had lost the ability to speak by that time due to Parkinson's disease, and died in 2008. The particular pedagogical strategies that may be derived from the Jimmy Giuffre 3's description of their rehearsal methods hinge critically on a disposition for experimentation without attachment to the results, rather than on the pursuit of standardized skills that will enable students to function within a particular musical milieu. It is important to emphasize that the rehearsal methods the trio developed were not intended to generate coherent musical performances in the manner of indeterminate compositions, conducted improvisations, or theatre improv games. Instead, they are exercises that are intentionally removed from the performance context to allow the trio members to focus on particular musical questions. And unlike conventional notated etudes that serve a similar purpose, these ensemble exercises were not oriented towards mastering a particular skill or perfecting a piece, but were simply designed to broaden the trio's conceptions of what was possible when they played together.

I have chosen three particular examples from my research to illustrate the Giuffre trio's approach to learning to make music together. The conceptual foundation for the trio's work is summarized in Paul Bley's term "premises for improvising," which he uses to refer to treating "'high-level' aspects of gesture, interaction, and form" as materials for manipulation, as opposed to fixed systems of sonic organization, such as pre-determined compositional forms, the Western tonal system, or a steady rhythmic pulse (Borgo 2007, 76):

If you sense the band has roots all the way to the beginning of early jazz, when the band plays you can use these indications as premises for improvising. For example, the blues can be a premise. You don't need a particular piece, a key, or even to have twelve bars – you just need agreement on the premise, which leads the band to a certain feeling. A piece isn't a blues because it has so many bars or the usual progression, but because it has the right feeling, and this feeling is what you are really talking about in improvised music. The liberties you want to take with the basic premise are up to you.

Another important factor that determined their approach was Giuffre's notion – which he traced to his interest in chamber music – that the instruments in the trio should be equal-voiced, and not restricted to their conventional roles in jazz. From this operational framework, the Giuffre 3 would start with basic musical premises such as tonality, time, and register, and construct ensemble exercises to explore the full range of each parameter.

For the first example, Steve Swallow recalled that tonality was a recurring topic of debate, and they tried different ways to negotiate its boundaries:

We spent a lot of time talking about whether or not reference to a root note, to tonality, was inevitable – was it possible and/or desirable to play without reference to tonality at all? As a bass player I had a strong vested interest in roots, but Jimmy would throw down the gauntlet and say something like: 'Stop seeing that thing you're playing as a bass. Now, let's play for ten minutes, and you're not the bass at any time during those ten minutes.' So we'd do it, and I would get frustrated and say something like, 'I can't help it, I'm the lowest guy.'

When I play a note I hear what's going on on top of it, and if I sense that if I moved a half step down I would cause a V-I resolution to happen then it's virtually impossible for me not to do it.' And Jimmy would simply say, 'Well, don't do it next time and see what happens.'

Swallow's efforts to resist his natural tendencies to resolve notes in accordance with tonal conventions ultimately led to the tonally ambiguous performances we hear on their recordings.

The trio had similar ideas about manipulating time, and conducted a purposeful deconstruction of the regular pulse that typified jazz music of their time. As Bley describes it:

The three of us had all played a lot of music with steady time. When we started to work together we played a lot of free music without any time at all, and also a lot of music that went from time to no time and back... One was not better than the other. The trick is to have the flexibility to do what you want, when you want.

Swallow provided some detail on how they worked to develop this rhythmic flexibility:

We'd spend hours talking about how if you're not going to play with a fixed pulse, how many gradations of tempo can we conceive of and execute? Is there a tempo that exists between medium and fast, or medium and slow? Can you have very slow? Then can you split those in half? In addition to the question of whether or not we can play without reference to a fixed pulse, the question arose: can we each play a distinct pulse so that there are three clear pulses going on at the same time, without stumbling as we listen to each others' pulse? That would be several days worth of work.

One more example demonstrates how the Giuffre 3 worked towards developing the kind of collective, shared knowledge I refer to as ensemble musicianship. In this recollection, Swallow describes an exercise they developed to explore how the registers of their three instruments influenced their interactions:

As an exercise we would very consciously play in the same register, all of us clustered around middle C for ten or fifteen minutes. That would be the only given. Then we would stop and do the opposite. Paul would play as far above Jimmy as he could and I would play as far below Jimmy as I could, and we

would observe the effect of the three voices being separated by as much air as possible. And that would indicate to us that it was a lot easier to hear the music as counterpoint when there was separation between the voices. When we played right on top of each other it tended to sound like clusters and it was more difficult to distinguish the individual voices. Again, we'd ask the question: "Is counterpoint essentially more valuable than the other stuff?" The answer would be no, that each musical approach would have its place, and we now had a better understanding of how our instruments could work together.

Swallow's and Bley's accounts indicate that the intention of such exercises was to construct conceptual maps of potential musical relationships, and to develop a well of sonic resources that could be drawn on to suit the needs of particular musical situations.

IV

The examples derived from the recollections of the trio members are presented here as starting points for further exploration rather than a method in themselves, and I hope that the possibilities for curriculum development are clear. The creative manipulation of conventions of tonality, time, and ensemble roles mirrors Ian Angus's assertion that "genuine searching requires criticism of received truth and constituted powers, and demands the mutual criticism of students and teachers" (2009, 22). Hickey's argument for changing the music education system is contingent on her belief that current teaching methods fail to encourage and reward the kind of creative agency in students that enables productive criticism. The notion that it is not possible to teach creativity is a common theme in fine arts education, and Hickey (2009) reiterates this dictum in the firm assertion that "true improvisation cannot be taught" (286) Leaving aside the aesthetically problematic assumption that there is such a thing as true improvisation, based on my own experience and those recounted here by the members of the Jimmy Giuffre 3, it seems that improvisation is an embodied practice that is shared through

time and between participants; it cannot be reduced to and communicated through a fixed text and a teacher can't tell you how to do it, but it can be experienced and internalized given the proper conditions.

I hope that these pedagogical strategies derived from the work of masters in the field will inspire both experienced improvisers and those new to the practice to begin developing their own approaches to teaching improvisation that address the specific needs of their students. The exercises that might be reconstructed through Bley and Swallow's recollections should not be expected to produce interesting music in and of themselves, but if approached with the experimental, critical spirit that they and Giuffrè brought to their music, students can begin to use their discoveries to create music that represents the particular time, place, and people involved in the musical encounter.

To conclude, it is clear that a music education that includes improvisation can only go a small way towards generating a more critical, creative citizenry, for, as Alan Stanbridge argues, contemporary music is "poorly equipped to address or enact" an "extra-musical agenda or perform a socially transformative role" (2008, 10). Although the potential for generating large-scale social change through music is minimal, a disposition that recognizes that our situations – both musical and social – are mutable rather than fixed offers the possibility of pursuing local, gradual change. If we can foster situations where students are compelled to find their own solutions to the musical problems they encounter then they might begin to mobilize the resulting sense of agency in other parts of their lives to deal with the larger social problems of inequality and injustice that artistic activity alone cannot adequately address. Hopefully educators and students will recognize the simplicity and adaptability of the disposition revealed

through the words of these musicians, and will find ways of using these basic ideas to develop cultural forms that reflect the kind of world in which we want to live.

Works Cited

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