The Pedagogical Imperative of Musical Improvisation

Scott Thomson

Introduction

Historical accounts of free improvisation as a musical movement that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century generally coalesce around activities in specific, usually urban, locales. Reference to "the music" often points to the specific stylistic cachet or "sound" of scenes of improvisers and catch-all nomenclature, frequently with reference to geographical location ("British free improvisation," for example), serves to calcify identities that differentiate groupings of musicians with diverse practices that adhere loosely through networks of collaboration, dissemination, organizational affiliation and, most of all, proximity. A fundamental site for the cultivation of such networks is performance, where musical improvisation is given public presence and where improvisers' musical knowledge, aesthetic judgment, negotiation of difference, and sense of play circulate in the process of making collaborative music in real time. This process, I argue, is a fundamentally pedagogical one, in which musicians actively learn from their collaborators during performance. Thus, ongoing pedagogical engagement is a necessary trait of a responsive, responsible improviser. The nature of authority within this pedagogical model—the roles of teacher and student—resists fixity and, at its best, this authority circulates fluidly within any ensemble, a process that informs the relationships between players that are articulated and negotiated primarily through sound. "Authoritarian" musical practice, which circumscribes this fluidity, is rarely reconciled in successful group improvisation, a tendency that hints at the vitality and near-necessity of the pedagogical model I wish to develop here. An analysis of this model necessarily begins within performance and attends to the inter-musician dynamics within group improvisation. From here, I wish to examine how the micrological pedagogical process of musical negotiation during performance is mirrored by the heterogeneous practices that contribute to the mutable collective identity of a scene within a specific city. Performance practices, under these circumstances, intermingle with the other professional, often collaborative, activities that many dedicated improvisers engage: concert organization, promotion, community radio programming, concert audition, rehearsal, etc. These related activities provide an ongoing exchange of musical, professional, and social knowledge that emerges from musical relationships established in and around performance. These activities can also provide an environment in which inexperienced improvisers can begin their own pedagogy through the example of and collaboration with more experienced players. The burgeoning scene of improvising musicians in Toronto, the city where I work as a trombonist, is a very good example of how this process works, in my view. In the last section of this essay, I illustrate the relationship between two key sites of improvisatory pedagogy—"performance as classroom" and "scene as classroom"—upon which Toronto's creative music scene is developing its collective identity.

Improvisation, Composition, and Creativity in the Culture of Repetition

Any discussion of how improvisers learn to improvise must first address what improvisation is and, crucially, whether it is indeed any different from other (non-improvised) musics. The debate about the alleged difference between "free" improvisation and other musical practice has been a thoroughly contested one.[1] When considered thoroughly, the notion that musical practices without pre-established compositional or idiomatic imperatives will transcend performers' habitual, preplanned or intuitive use of compositional impulses—that the music can ever be exclusively "in the moment"—seems fatuous. Likewise, the idea that "composing" takes place in an essential, uninstantiated sphere of human thought and experience to be contrasted with the instantaneous nature of improvisation appears to be just as difficult to abide. When the analysis of these issues is pushed to rational limits, there is no justifiable difference, in theory, between composition and improvisation. Nevertheless, very few listeners actually confuse collective improvisation with genre-bound or otherwise compositionally directed music. The interaction and communication between players (and with audience members) is of a different nature, one that, at its best, brims with a sense of negotiation, an immanent risk of musical failure and a playful sorting out of individual and mutual musical priorities and differences. As British percussionist and theorist Eddie Prévost says, in contrast with compositional music, "[t]he problems involved with making improvised music are solved within performance. In other words, the music is made real by the creative input of the players" (172). Inter-musician dynamics become, in a "real" sense, the content of collective improvisations in a way that, I would argue, makes its methodologies identifiable in a general way. Furthermore, as Toronto bassist Michael Morse says, "learning when (as well as what) not to play [in a collective improvisation] is a key difference from other forms of music-making where such decisions are determined through convention." Silences and inactivity become invested with the same depth of intention as sounds do and are a constitutive element of inter-musician communication within an improvisation.

The dialectical nature of the improvisation/composition debate that emerges from these issues suggests the usefulness of a more phenomenological consideration of collective improvisation. What elements make group improvisation identifiable to the majority of listeners in contrast to composed or genre-based music? It is in response to this question that I wish to invoke the pedagogical imperative of musical improvisation. This model is by no means exclusive to free improvisation and can certainly be present in any musical practice. However, beyond simply being present, it is part of the fundamental nature of collective improvisation, as I hear it. In order to show how the pedagogical imperative functions, it is important first to consider its location within performance, and how improvising relates to the broad musical culture in which it is situated and with which it is in dialogue.

No theoretical description of collective improvisation will do justice to the many ways musicians interact, their methodologies, materials, histories, desires, etc. It would be very reductive to generalize about music as it has been made throughout time and throughout the world—indeed, improvisation was surely the working method of humankind's first group performance. Nevertheless, since "free improvisation" refers to a range of musical activities that have (re)emerged in the Western world during the second half of the twentieth century and maintains a certain cachet in contemporary culture, it exists, in its extremely varied form, and in a particular relationship with the rest of musical culture, and to the music industry through which most music is informed, mediated, and distributed.

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali characterizes the dominant musical mode during this historical period as one of "repetition." Within such an economy, musical practice is effectively *silenced* by a process in which musical "codes" are emptied of meaning by "the stockpiling of the simulacrum of usage" (Attali 134) through the predictability of repetitive musical form, content, and commodification by way of recording. Clearly, Attali's notion of repetition bears the influence of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's ideas of "standardization" that are formulated in essays like "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." As they see it, within the generic practices of cultural production under late capitalism, "[t]he constant pressure to produce new effects (which must conform to the old pattern) serves merely as another rule to increase the power of the conventions" (128). Attali's analysis of musical repetition examines the effect that the calcification of such conventions engenders. He contends that, due to the ongoing purgation of meaning by way of repetitive, saleable musical practices,

> [t]here is no communication possible between men any longer, now that the codes have been destroyed, including even the code of exchange in repetition. We are all condemned to silence—unless we create our own relation with the world and try to tie other people into the meaning we thus create. This is what composing is. (134)

Attali's "composing" is akin to collective improvisation in which musicians "[invent] the message at the same time as the language. Playing for one's own pleasure, which alone can create the conditions for new communication" (134). It is on these grounds that I examine contemporary improvisation and, in particular, the pedagogical basis upon which musicians "tie other people into the meaning" they create and share during performance. This practice bears an ongoing, ambivalent relationship with the repetitive musical culture that serves as a backdrop or, perhaps, a point of departure from which new musical meanings become conceivable, playable, and intelligible.

Technique, Education: Musical Ends, Musical Means

To start, I wish to differentiate the type of pedagogy that takes place within a group improvisation with more conventional musical educations in Western society. Most students learn to play music in a particular style or genre, often starting as children, and the goals of their education correspond with the established aesthetic criteria of the style in question. As a result, certain technical, formal, and methodological approaches are necessarily privileged while others are proscribed toward an effective duplication of pre-ordained models of musical excellence.[2] Instrumental *mastery* is an ultimate (though often tacit) goal within such an educational model and entails not only that virtually all of the techniques of the genre are available to the performer, but also that those that are outside the generic purview may be rendered technically impossible or philosophically inconceivable. Thus, conventional music education demands a process of both *mastery* and *exclusion*. This tendency is particularly trenchant in the case of European "classical" music, whose educational programs, it should be noted, usually take place within an institutional, empirically minded environment like a conservatory or university where pedagogical authority flows, unilaterally, from teacher to student. As Christopher Small says in *Music—Society—Education*, most young people learn to play music as a means to specific, empirical ends at the expense of personal creativity and expression. This process, he argues, is justified through the perpetual reinforcement of the supposed rational superiority of formal characteristics like tonal harmony that dominate the curriculum. Such formal material is not viewed fundamentally as the means to creative ends but as an end in itself to be mastered by young musicians.

The establishment and maintenance of the "mastery/exclusion" pedagogical model is by no means confined to institutional educational contexts. The noninstitutional (seemingly anti-institutional, even) processes of self-teaching engaged by musicians through the emulation of popular culture models—purveyors of repetitive, empty musical codes, according to Attali—can equally be part of a similarly teleological musical education that prepares the musician for sanctioned, repeatable musical tasks. In lieu of pedagogical subservience to the authority of a conservatory teacher, this mode of "self-teaching" instead grants such authority to culture industry exemplars (after Horkheimer and Adorno). In popular music (unlike a "classical" education, for the most part) it is entirely possible that performers' musical "tasks" will include idiomatic improvisation in which they play within an established idiomatic framework and sounds "appropriate" in its context. This process, though reflecting the musician's own creative, methodological, and philosophical priorities to a greater degree, is still likely to be implicated in the "mastery/exclusion" model that characterizes repetitive musical culture. Thus, the musical codes in question, whether produced by means of improvisation or strict duplication of canonical texts, correspond with Attalian repetition, and to the commercial priorities of musical culture at large.

In contrast, collective improvisation does not uphold dominant aesthetic or technical criteria that players must master as a benchmark of their "education."[3] As a working methodology, improvisation does not proscribe sounds, sound sources, or instrumental techniques and, though the priorities of each performer will inform the aesthetic goals of any performance, strict notions of technical excellence are difficult to locate and assess. The range of potentially musical sounds is broadly diversified, and criteria for excellence resist the empirical reference to mastery and exclusion. Both in the micrological context of performance and, more generally, in the stylistic identity of a local scene, certain aesthetic and formal priorities may emerge, often tacitly, through the practice of dominant, authoritative performers in ways that may limit, influence, or circumscribe other players' behaviour. However, compared to other musical practices, improvisation can provide the optimal conditions in which multifarious instrumentation and methodologies can be accommodated; not only are conventional, unconventional, and invented instruments permissible sound sources, but they can also be played in the same ensemble in countless ways and combinations. Instrumental techniques in collective improvisation are not necessarily valued for being "played properly." As Derek Bailey states,

> [a]lthough some improvisers employ a high level of technical skill in their playing, to speak of 'mastering' the instrument in improvisation is misleading. The instrument [. . .] is not only a means to an end, it is a source of material, and technique for the improviser is often an exploitation of [its] natural resources. (99)

Recourse to canonical, technical standards of excellence often represents a vestigial reflection on the role of the instrument in genre-based contexts to which conventions apply with more fixity. In the pan-idiomatic space that improvisation offers, such a perspective can validate the simple combination of generic codes, collage-like, by group members, resulting in "layered" group music where dialogue is less important than the execution of the genres in question. However, as trombonist and theorist George Lewis states,

> improvisation is about [. . .] interaction and behavior as carriers for meaning. On this view, notes, timbres, melodies, durations, and the like are not ends in themselves. Embedded in them is a more complex, indirect, powerful signal that we must train ourselves to detect. (*Voyager*)

Though empirical evaluation of musical sounds (including de-contextualized, genre-based "mastery/exclusion" criteria) provides only superficial or reductive means for the evaluation of improvisation, its pervasiveness points to an important relationship between an improviser's instrumental technique—his or her "vocabulary"—and the rest of musical culture.

In "Ephemera Underscored: Writing Around Free Improvisation," John Corbett expands on Attali's argument, providing a more nuanced theoretical account that articulates the transition from "repetition" to "composing" that is largely absent in *Noise*, and uses the practice of contemporary improvisers as evidence of how such a transition may be taking place. Corbett denies that improvisation is merely the combination of individual musical vocabularies in real time. If it were so, he argues, it would scarcely be different from other genres and, significantly, could be easily labeled, packaged, and sold (and, thus, wholly integrated in repetitive musical culture). Instead, he suggests that improvisers risk the unknown by simultaneously defying the musical codes of repetition while resisting the codification of the process by which they are defied. The improviser's task is a perpetual avoidance of stale musical models:

> Improvisation does not simply mean the death of language, however, for in the place of the dead language—the disfigured or defiled codes—a new one emerges, more vibrant than the last. Improvisation involves the permanent play of threshold and transgression. (224)

Thus, the improviser maintains an ongoing, playfully risky, negatively articulated relationship with the codes of dominant musical culture and with his or her ongoing methodology for refiguring them. In order to do so, improvisers actively and critically change their instrumental techniques. While the pursuit of technical mastery, upheld by genre-bound qualitative criteria, circumscribes a player's physical relationship with his or her instrument, an improviser refashions techniques based on immediate, physically satisfying ends without necessary recourse to predetermined, quasi-empirical "correctness." Thus, the player's physical presence in relation to the instrument becomes the basis of his or her musical subjectivity. The methodologies of collective improvisation demand this bodily presence so that new meanings can be made in collaborative musical performance. Such physical presence stands in sharp relief to the regulation of the physicality of technique in repetitive musical culture and, thus, restricts the subjectivity of musical utterance. These embodied subjectivities, as articulated through instrumental sound, become the substantive elements of the musical and human relationships on which collective performance is based and implicitly question the validity of the rationalist imperatives that exemplify "mastery/exclusion" pedagogical models. As Toronto vocalist Christine Duncan says, placing suitable emphasis on her intuitive, embodied process of musical learning,

> I have always acquired new musical skills primarily from 'on the job' training—learning by doing. From there, I endeavour to learn as much as I can about whatever I am involved in. My process is first intuitive and then intellectual. That feels more honest, especially since my instrument is part of my body.

Performance as Classroom

We can now consider the complex ways that musical subjectivities relate within a collective improvisation. As Corbett's analysis of the revision of instrumental technique may suggest, the absence of fixed-point, evaluative technical and aesthetic criteria in their mutual practice points to a vague, generalized methodological compatibility between improvising musicians. However, an improviser's bodily re-investment, their subjective re-disciplining of technique and code-transgressing methodology characterizes an improvising ensemble more in terms of the difference between players than similarity. Indeed, I argue that the negotiation of these differences—musical differences as a manifestation of human difference generally—is the salient sociopolitical motivation for successful collective improvisation. The notion of "success" I am invoking, here, may seem either subjective to the point of meaninglessness or like an appeal to the same type of rigid, idiomatic aesthetic standards that I have suggested free improvisation can shed. However, the notion of success in free playing that I am describing is by no means fixed; it is contingent on the interests of a given group and is determined as much by ethical and political concerns as by aesthetic ones. In fact, it may be more accurate to describe these terms as being conjoined as such. Without external, preconceived standards for artistic quality to which the group endeavours to adhere, a collective improvisation weds aesthetics with ethics and politics by positing the human relationships that are articulated through sound as the music's basic substance. As Christopher Small states in *Music of the Common Tongue*,

> [at] its best, free improvisation celebrates a set of informal, even loving relationships which can be experienced by everyone present, and brings into existence, at least for the duration of the performance, a society whose closest political analogy is with anarchism [whereby] each individual [contributes] to the wellbeing of the community. (307)

Small may tread perilously close to utopianism here. However, his criteria for successful collective improvisation—whether they are ever achieved (or even achievable)—emphasize the relationships that are the barometer of the "wellbeing of the community." Likewise, Christine Duncan emphasizes the vitality of dialogic relationships between players as well as the audience during an improvisation:

> Successful group improvisation is an environment in which everyone is *really* listening to each other and to their own impulses, and creating an atmosphere of dialogue together, which energetically includes the audience. If I bring my improvising skills to this environment with honest intention to collaborate and co-create, then there is a good chance the experience will be successful.

Such an environment in which collective aesthetics are cultivated and human and musical difference can be reconciled demands an ongoing, collaborative process of pedagogy that is the mark of a responsive, responsible improviser.

First, I will examine these relationships in terms of how musical authority circulates during an improvisation. I recognize that I cannot account for the innumerable and subtle ways that musical meaning is generated and perceived during performance and, as such, my analysis is, perhaps, frustratingly reductive. However, despite these obvious limitations, my analysis provides the relatively stable grounds on which my performance-based pedagogical

model can be established. Without pre-ordained aesthetic and technical criteria to which the members of an ensemble attempt to adhere, there is no standardized, explicit hierarchy through which authority is bestowed upon improvisers within a particular group.[4] In contrast, such a hierarchy is manifested in the conventions, for example, of "classical" orchestras, through the dynamic between the conductor and the ensemble or, more subtly, between the "front man" and rhythm section distinction prevalent in much twentieth century popular music. Despite the absence of rigid distinctions of authoritative roles, however, it would be grossly over-simplistic to suggest that all players in a free improvisation are always equal. The musico-social relationships in an ensemble are inflected by pre-existing social dynamics between players. These dynamics can be influenced by the realtive experience or reputation of group members in ways that grant them types and degrees of authority (due or undue) before a performance begins. Material considerations (whose gig it is) and the performance context (who is in the audience) can also subtly inflect the pre-performance group dynamic and inform musical behaviour during performance.

Once a performance begins, however, it is the primary site where authority is enacted, tested, and negotiated through the music itself, insofar as players generate meaning for each other and for the audience through sound. Any gesture (even ostensibly "negative" gestures—silences can be authoritative) within performance can convey meaning and, thus, allows musical authority to circulate. The way a gesture directs the intentions of the rest of the ensemble, to which it affects change in musical direction (or the sustenance of an existing direction), is a basic example of the enactment of this type of authority. These musical gestures are often characterized by their strength (*strong ideas*, gestures perceived as being invested with intelligible meaning), and the criteria for this distinction is as varied and mutable as the intersubjective priorities of the group in question. In place of predetermined aesthetic criteria that provide the basis for musical meaning in generic musical contexts, an improviser's strong gesture effectively posits the refigured musical meaning as a possibility for the group's aesthetic priorities at any moment during performance. Thus, the improviser enacts his or her individuated musical *micro-idiom* with each gesture, claiming momentary authority for its aesthetic and epistemological conception.

The responsibility (in the literal sense in which such authority impels a response) of the rest of the group once such a gesture is perceived is, effectively, to "learn" the proactive player's micro-idiom (in terms of its form and function/meaning) and to react accordingly, in a way that acknowledges a recognition of the strong, meaningful idea, and the momentary authority it engenders. This process represents the foundation of the pedagogical imperative through which a player works to understand and respond to others during performance; negotiable spaces between improvisers are founded and developed. A player's authority may last in one form or another throughout an entire piece, through an ongoing gestural leadership (akin to a solo with accompaniment), a process that demands a sustained pedagogical responsibility (and deference) from the rest of the ensemble. Often, though, individual authority lasts for only a moment before adhering to another group member's meaningful, authoritative (though often responsive) gesture through which a new micro-idiom is produced.

The fluid, nomadic mobility of gestural authority is the mark of a highly communicative, pedagogically engaged group. However, such a status is not an end in itself but, instead, provides the social context in which musicians can *play* in a group improvisation. With the establishment of the in-good-faith possibility that authority can flow easily between ensemble members, group members can then create musical environments in which the timing and the means for the transfer of authority (gradual, abrupt, comical, referential, confrontational, severe) are sociomusical elements that they can deploy to aesthetic and collectively meaningful ends. The establishment of openness and goodwill within a group allows for a playful process of the acceptance, deferral, simultaneity or disavowal of authority, and a pursuit of perpetual transgression of expected practice between improvisers that John Corbett calls "paradoxy" (236). Under these conditions, the group would be invested in an ongoing avoidance of formal or methodological fixity (including fixity at the level of authority-mobility). Like musical codes, themselves, after Attali, the modes of sociomusical communication within an improvisation, if executed predictably, can also succumb to conditions of repetitive musical culture and, thus, risk losing their transgressive tension through which new musical codes gain meaning.[5] With regard to the enactment of "paradoxy," Corbett states that "there can be no generalizations. It is the harbinger of heterogeneity. [. . .] It does not 'rule out' orthodoxy; it *outrules* (dethrones) it. Of it, we can give only an indefinite definition: paradoxy is an orthodox use of paradox" (236-7). In response to Corbett's assertion, the only generalization that needs to be made reaffirms the ongoing pedagogical engagement that such a process demands. As ensemble members play beyond the fixed territories of static musical form and methodology, they must remain committed to learning others' micro-idioms in an ongoing, variable circulation of musical meaning and mutable social authority.

The model of group interaction I have been developing verges, admittedly, on an idealized, best-case-scenario model for collaborative music-making that is quite rare indeed in actual performance. A more thorough (and realistic) analysis of improvisation must acknowledge how "authoritarian" gestures threaten the musical and social well-being of a performance. Such an analysis points to the real possibility of failure in any group improvisation. The fluidity of authority within a group can be easily circumscribed by gestures that fix social power in a domineering or negligent

way; the good faith that a group works to establish as a foundation for responsible and responsive play is under constant threat of being demolished in this way. Authoritarianism, from my own experience as a performer and listener, is commonly exemplified by a player's inability or unwillingness to listen to the other members of an ensemble, often coinciding with his or her unresponsive, soloistic musical contributions. This type of musical activity constitutes a very basic authoritarianism in which the player effectively suggests that "I have nothing to learn from you, but you have something to learn from me." Ironically, this attitude duplicates the social and aesthetic dynamic that, as I have suggested, improvisation can serve to question—the fixity of evaluative criteria and authority that pervades "mastery/exclusion" pedagogical models.

Certainly, since many improvisers play other, genre-based musics that, more or less, invoke these criteria, far from rejecting them wholesale (were that possible), they often introduce characteristic, generic musical material to improvised performance, linking their own, micro-idiomatic authority with the historical, genre-based knowledge that generates the aural and cultural identity of established musical genres. These gestures ostensibly invite other group members to join in, to delimit the range of collective activity to the codes of that genre. This is a very common development in my experience, and sustained episodes in one musical style last roughly as long as there is a basic, general consensus to pursue that course. However, group members' unwillingness or inability to respond in kind to the generic material can be viewed several ways: as a rejection of the generic codes (failure of idiom), as a perceived lack of authoritative investment of momentary meaning (failure of the micro-idiom), a playful appeal to simultaneous authority (an "Ivesian" layering of musical codes), inattention (non-responsive authoritarianism), or combination of the above in varying degrees.

Regardless, in these instances, the likelihood that the maintenance of the generic musical code by its initiator will remain or become musically meaningful is unlikely. Such a dogged determination to direct the rest of the group toward such stylistic confines can be a particularly egregious example of authoritarianism, since such material limits the potential fluidity of authority within the group. In general, perceived authoritarian behaviour is irritating (and when evoking moral responses, repugnant) to many improvisers who pursue improvisation in response to the excessive rigidity of their formal musical training, regardless of genre, and who tend to be particularly sensitive to the deployment of authoritarian musical power. Thus, authoritarian gestures within a collective improvisation represent failures not simply on a musical and aesthetic level. Instead, since collective improvisation offers the possibility for socially responsible negotiation of musical difference, such insensitivity represents an effectively antisocial negation of this possibility. While some performers and audience members may deem such a performance to be "good music," based on conventional aesthetic criteria, its failure on a social level undermines such a determination at the level of the music's methodological underpinnings and egalitarian motivations.

To further reinforce the pedagogical imperative within the social dynamic of performance, I refer once again to Eddie Prévost's vital work on the subject. In *No Sound is Innocent*, Prévost draws on his extensive experience as a practitioner to articulate the precepts of what he calls the "mobile logic of dialogical heurism" (3). An improviser must engage in a heuristic search for the means for interpersonal, dialogic communication within an ensemble that, in turn, requires the same heuristic investment from them. This type of self-reflexive search for suitable musical responses, without recourse to genre conventions, demands a disciplined, personal pedagogy that points to the social and political engagement for which improvisation provides a context:

> Within a meta-music the working of the market economy, and its high art/educational corollaries, have first to be understood, then superseded. Mechanistic hierarchy has to be replaced by more mobile social thought systems, where interchange of roles and moral authority are part of individual growth. (69)

Here, he echoes both Attali and Corbett by articulating the possibility improvisation offers for the transgression of fixed, hierarchical systems of thought and social/economic control. By invoking the need to supersede the "educational corollaries" of commercial culture, Prévost locates the pedagogical basis of dialogical heurism apart from traditional institutions of music education and states, instead, that growth can be cultivated only within performance. Indeed, in "Improvisation: Music for an Occasion," Prévost expounds the incompatibility of dialogical heurism and the teleological, "technocratic ideals" that dominate institutional education in a way that complements Christopher Small's critique of the empiricist bias in institutional musical education.

With Prévost's insistence on the moral framework in which in-the-moment, mutable musical authority must be grounded, he claims that collective improvisation is not merely a metaphorical model of social practice, but also that *it is social practice itself*. The "skills" the improviser learns and enacts through his or her practice are not fundamentally musical in a reductive, technically/aesthetically informed sense. As Toronto drummer Nick Fraser says,

> [M]y criteria for successful group improvisation [include] patience, assertiveness, confidence, being 'in the moment,' and listening. These are skills (of a sort) but they are not specific to free playing. In fact, they're not even specific to making music.

Fraser, like Eddie Prévost, locates improvisatory skill in a realm where "musical" priorities are framed in terms of social ones. These perspectives, I feel, go hand in hand with trombonist Roswell Rudd's comment about the pedagogy of improvisation in relation to educational institutions:

> The conservatories have a strong history of producing great readers, great interpreters, great yeomen, great bands people, great theorists, and even great composers, etc., but authentic improvisers is another story. A lot of them seem to come fully formed out of nowhere. (qtd. in Haines 41)

In fact, authentic improvisers emerge, not "out of nowhere," but from the social, pedagogical framework of improvisation itself. Intersubjective communication, articulated in the negotiative space created within performance, is contingent on the recognition of differences that defy objective, instrumentalist methods of reconciliation; "musical" methods give way to "social" ones in a piecemeal pedagogical moment. As guitarist Derek Bailey says, "improvisation is learned—perhaps acquired would be a better word—in pretty much the same way by everybody who is lucky enough to stumble on the right method" (7). Musical performance is the context in which such "stumbling" can occur, the sociomusical environment in which musicians can grow as sociomusical actors. In this sense, instead of signifying a set of sounds or methods that are empirically identifiable away from their moment of execution, "improvisation" refers to the deployment of a range of sociomusical skills *as they are being learned* within collaborative performance.

The Scene as Classroom

Local communities of improvising musicians can be considered, first of all, in light of the relationship between improvisation and Attali's notion of repetition. As a methodological priority, the ongoing process of transgression that exemplifies collective improvisation puts these scenes in a very strained, tenuous, possibly defiant relationship with commercial culture. However, with varying degrees of commitment, from full-time professional to day-job hobbyist, musicians continue to embrace the particular artistic and social challenges that improvisation offers. Many active players make their living playing and teaching other styles that no doubt form the core of their own technical and instrumental grounding in music-making generally. Some of them, in a rationalization reminiscent of the composition/improvisation debate discussed above, perceive no real difference between their more-strictly generic musical activities and their engagement with the process-based music of collective improvisation. Doubtless, musicians employ the same instrumental techniques (though likely in a re-disciplined and expanded way) and their background in other styles will necessarily present aesthetic possibilities that are available to them during performance as "generic" musical codes that they feel are musically productive. However, as I have stated above, the sociopolitical underpinnings of the process of collective improvisation distinguish it from other music by representing its core content. Thus, the difference between genre-based music-making and the "paradoxy" of collective improvisation can be best assessed by considering what skills and methods are particular to each type of musical practice and how these skills are learned.

I have made consistent reference to the distinctly goal-oriented pedagogical processes of much musical practice, and determination of these goals through external, aesthetic criteria (the "mastery/exclusion" model). I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the goal-oriented nature of much improvising, how some practitioners are determined to make "great music" based on personally or collectively constituted aesthetic standards with little relation to the market forces of repetitive musical culture. However, the inextricable nature of ethics, politics, and aesthetics in improvisation cannot be learned as an abstraction, away from the act of collective music-making and, thus, the improviser's "goals" cannot be sought outside of performance. Nick Fraser illustrates this point with the following anecdote:

> Alto saxophonist Brodie West, after a recording session, told me he wished he would play less (i.e. lay out more). This is not a skill that can be practiced outside of performance except in the sense that one is practicing 'not playing' whenever the musician is not playing. Perhaps, like this one, many of the skills required of improvised music are so specific to improvised music that they can only be practiced in performance.

For musicians who wish to improvise (of any age, trained in any style of music, at any level of technical proficiency), the network of performances within a scene presents a fluid environment for their improvisatory education. The identifiable "sound" of an improvising scene may relate to the pervasive authority of experienced, active players (a process that refers to the genesis of such authority within performance, as I have described above) and to how their

authority informs the pedagogy of less experienced players. However, the relationships between improvisers in a particular scene are mediated through the "extra-musical," organizational activities like curation and promotion of concerts, series, festivals, and recordings. Due to the economic realities of collective improvisation, most of these activities are undertaken by musicians who are implicated in an ostensible variation of the social networks that are cultivated within performance. Thus, these multifarious, often piecemeal organizational activities can elaborate and provide contours for the complex social relationships that are established within performance, and generate a sense of collective identity and momentum that defines a scene to players and audiences alike. To describe how such an environment can inform the pedagogy of improvisation on multiple levels of musical and extra-musical activity, I will examine the burgeoning scene of creative improvisers in Toronto as an increasingly trenchant example.

The Toronto scene can be characterized by a number of identifiable, though not necessarily discrete, sub-scenes that coalesce around particular methodological and aesthetic approaches and social allegiances. However, more concretely, these sub-scenes are characterized by certain infrastructural and organizational activities that give them a "public face." Seven examples of such activities are: the pan-stylistic improvisational/compositional music of the Rat-Drifting concert series and record label; the Friday night Leftover Daylight Series (since 2003), with its mandate for booking *ad hoc* groups opposite established composing/improvising bands, and curated by Joe Sorbara, Colin Fisher, Geordie Haley, and Rob Piilonen; the Sunday matinée NOW Series (since 2005), curated by Ken Aldcroft, Paul Newman, John Wilson, and Michelangelo Iaffaldano, with a similar booking policy to the Leftover Daylight Series; Glen Hall's annual 416 Festival of Improvised Music; the varied programming at the Tranzac Club, a bar in the Annex with a liberal booking policy that has benefited many improvising musicians; my own programming at Somewhere There, a performance studio in Parkdale; and Dave Clark's Woodchopper's Association, an improvising orchestra with shifting membership drawn from a pool of more than five hundred musicians. However, many Toronto improvisers move fluidly through these sub-scenes, and within other genre-based musical infrastructures and communities in the area. For example, Barnyard Drama, the remarkable improvising duet of vocalist Christine Duncan and drummer/turntablist Jean Martin, has a strong national reputation and circulates without strict affiliation through virtually all of the above infrastructures. Duncan and Martin also collaborate extensively with many Toronto improvisers.

Most active improvisers in Toronto are young (most are in their twenties and thirties), though more experienced "mentors" who remain active within the scene include baritone saxophonist David Mott, bassist Victor Bateman, pianist Marilyn Lerner, cellist Anne Bourne, and the members of CCMC: pianist/synthesist/visual artist Michael Snow, poet/sound-singer Paul Dutton, and composer/visual artist/saxophonist John Oswald. Though some of these musicians are deeply committed to music education, inside or outside institutions, their pedagogical influence is more typically an exemplary one that takes place in the negotiative environment of performance. None of these musicians is linked strongly with any of the aforementioned sub-scene infrastructures either, though many of them, particularly CCMC, have had extensive affiliation with the Music Gallery, Toronto's well established organization for non-mainstream music production and that, until the mid 1990s, was active in the presentation of the music of both local and touring international improvisers.

The decentred nature of the scene that emerges from this sketch may be a contributing factor to the ongoing perception that the Toronto community is less active and coherent than scenes in Vancouver, characterized by the New Orchestra Workshop; and Montréal, characterized largely by the Ambiances Magnétiques record label. This perception may be true, insofar as the respective infrastructures generate a national or international identity for the scenes in question. Thus, for better or for worse, if any "sound" is emerging as the dominant, authoritative model for Toronto creative improvisers, it is not yet identifiable. However, as a means by which to discuss the community-based nature of the pedagogical imperative that I am developing here, the emerging scene in Toronto (with no shortage of young, relatively inexperienced improvisers) provides a particularly useful model for analysis.

I have described how the communicative circulation of fluid authority within an improvising ensemble, diligently pursued against the pervasive threat of authoritarianism, provides the necessary social foundation for the aesthetic play of real-time, collaborative music-making. The ongoing process of pedagogy demanded in this micrological context bears a similarity to the decentred nature of the Toronto improvising scene. Without a dominant model for improvisatory practice, young musicians, as audience members or performers, are given the forum in which to deal with the multiplicity of practices and approaches around which the scene loosely coheres. Through collaboration, musicians engage in a system of subtle mentorship, in which players with varying degrees and types of improvisatory experience influence each other through performance-based pedagogy and during post-performance analysis that intermingles seamlessly with camaraderie (which, at points when financial motivations are absurdly low, provides a vital extramusical justification to continue improvising).

Within this network, musicians are able to learn their practice in the piecemeal fashion to which Derek Bailey refers, through which no dominant authoritative (or, moreover, authoritarian) model of improvisation and interaction is privileged, scene-wide. One of Toronto's most dedicated improvisers, bassist Rob Clutton (who circulates through most of Toronto's sub-scenes), likewise states that he has learned his improvisatory skills by

> trial-and-error, or maybe there's a more positive expression for it. My ideas about free improvisation are changeable like mountain weather, but part of the development of those skills comes from listening to others, the experience of improvising, and from certain aspects of traditional musics (with mutation).

Despite the fluidity of authority that Clutton's view epitomizes, particular players and types of practice in Toronto become identified with certain sub-scene infrastructures, a process that often reflects the curatorial priorities of its organizers. Active members of the Toronto scene generally understand, however, that curatorial priorities often have to do with the desires of organizers themselves for a context in which to perform. Typically, other concert series emerge based on the desires of other individuals or collaborative networks to perform and to curate on behalf of the scene as they value it. Thanks to the generally supportive nature of the community, organizers and curators of different sub-scene infrastructures often interact and share information about promotion, audience-building, programming, venues, government support, recording, etc., which represents another vital type of pedagogical relationship that circulates within the scene at large.

A further development of the identity of the Toronto scene has taken place recently and has fostered new collaborations with improvisers from the broader national and international improvising community. The Association of Improvising Musicians Toronto (AIMToronto) is a musicians' collective that was incorporated in 2004 that, as a centrepiece of its activities, programs and promotes the quarterly Interface Series, three-night concert programs that feature renowned guest improvisers in collaboration with AIMToronto member-musicians. Seventeen international improvisers including William Parker, Eddie Prévost, Lori Freedman, Joe McPhee, Michael Moore, Paul Hession, Jean Derome, and Dylan van der Schyff, have "interfaced" with, in total, more than one hundred AIMToronto musicians. Through the performance-based pedagogical work that constitutes such collaboration, Toronto musicians have developed their own socio-aesthetic improvisatory skills, while bridging the gap between the city's sub-scene identities—Interface curation draws explicitly from the breadth of Toronto's improvising community. An increasing sense of familiarity and solidarity throughout the scene has grown out of AIMToronto activities and has made large scale projects possible. As a key example, the Association formed an eighteen-piece creative orchestra to rehearse and perform the music of Anthony Braxton under his leadership in September, 2007. The formation of the AIMToronto Orchestra was an exceptional, watershed moment in the history of Toronto's creative music, and the best way to illustrate how the pedagogical imperative relates to this project is through a personal anecdote.

Leading up to our first rehearsal in August 2007 (to be coached by saxophonist and composer Kyle Brenders in anticipation of a later rehearsal intensive with Mr. Braxton), I was apprehensive about how well the orchestra would gel musically. We faced the daunting task of learning Mr. Braxton's incredibly challenging notated music and absorbing his thoroughly conceived improvisatory system ("language music") during an intensive three-week period leading up to our premiere performance. What if the orchestra simply could not improvise effectively together? Within the first few minutes of that first rehearsal, however, all of my fears were assuaged. As soon as the eighteen players began improvising together, lines of communication and collaboration—established through years of both long-term project development and *ad hoc* playing between orchestra members—were tangibly audible throughout the ensemble. Players were picking up and fluidly responding to others' micro-idioms openly and playfully, and within a surprisingly brief period, the large group was forging a coherent collective sound. Effectively, each of the orchestra musicians, through the pedagogical imperative of improvisation, had "studied" with virtually every other group member over the years leading up to the group's formation. As a result, the flow of authority and the establishment of multiple, mutable hierarchical structures within the orchestra—concepts that are key in Mr. Braxton's sociomusical "Tri-Centric" philosophy—were relatively easily fostered and established the foundation upon which we could really *play* both the compositions and improvisations. As a major project that will surely influence the long-term identity of the Toronto creative music scene, Anthony Braxton's collaboration with the AIMToronto Orchestra is exemplary as a tangible outcome of the ongoing pedagogical imperative of Toronto-based improvising musicians to which virtually all of the activities and process that I have described in this section have contributed.

Always Much to Learn

The scene of young improvising musicians in Toronto is still at a very early stage of development and, despite the positive examples like the AIMToronto Orchestra, its collective identity (the "sound" of the scene) has yet to be fully established. It is a scene in which many relatively novice improvisers (of which I consider myself one) are actively learning to improvise through ongoing performance and collaboration. There is an ever-increasing amount of activity

afoot within the scene that provides an ideal educational environment for its members who, through the pedagogical imperative, rediscover how there is always much to learn about and through improvisation. However, it is worth considering how other factors may contribute to both personal and collective development within such a music scene. Throughout this essay, I have described how the pedagogical imperative contributes to the establishment of such a scene as Toronto's. As I have proceeded, I have confronted the limitations of this essay's scope in search of a fuller, more nuanced consideration of the subtle and varied issues that an analysis of improvisation raises. Many of these issues are discrete areas for further study that, in combination with what is started here, will accrete into a larger, more developed work over time. Analyses of the role of the audience during performance; recording, media, and distribution; the network of festivals; "university" improvisation and pedagogy, etc. certainly demand a place in a more thorough investigation of the pedagogical imperative.

Beyond these areas for ongoing research, however, I have certain concerns about the work as it has already been developed that I feel must be signaled as areas for ongoing reflection and, possibly, reconsideration. I have presented the goal of the fluidity of authority within an ensemble as a model for socially and pedagogically engaged music-making, and cast the actions of musicians who fail to maintain this fluidity as "authoritarian." Though functionally accurate in the context of my theory, it seems overly harsh to attribute moral failure to a situation that relates just as likely to the all too human weaknesses like inattention, the formation of false assumptions, and misinterpretation that challenge all relationships, musical or otherwise.[6] It is difficult to fault the efforts and goodwill of improvisers who do so after hauling twenty kilograms of gear on the subway during rush hour after a long day at work to play for two audience members. Nevertheless, if my pedagogical model is to remain pertinent in any general way, such gestures will still be regarded as failures such that they limit pedagogical dialogue, the flow of authority, and the possibility of communicative play. Though the risk of musical failure is very real during an improvisation, whether attributable to basic human fallibility or not, the commitment to an unceasing process of sociomusical learning represents the socially engaged responsibility on which improvisatory success is founded.

Furthermore, my deployment of the complementary theories of Horkheimer and Adorno, Attali, Corbett, and Prévost may risk reducing the libratory potential of established musical genres and traditions (particularly those that are representative of minority cultures) to a homogenous condition of "repetition" within the political economy of music. Though I have flagged these issues within the text, I must emphasize that personal pedagogy in specific musical traditions, often involving the development of individual creativity and improvisatory skills, can certainly provide salutary models for expression and self-representation. As George Lewis argues in "Teaching Improvised Music: An Ethnographic Memoir," in reference to the education of jazz musicians:

> A complex interaction between notions of literature, orature, tradition, canonization, personality and innovation is seen by jazz improvisers as being directly linked to the nature of musical learning. This interaction, moreover, conditions the articulation of musical meaning, as an integral part of the transmission of culture. Thus, expressed as an uneasy relationship between "clichés" and "creativity," what is at stake in this debate is nothing less than the concept of originality itself. (83)

The micro-idiomatic pedagogical model that I have developed, in light of such a statement, runs the risk, I fear, of lauding a "short attention span" methodology that incessantly demands the discarding of previously used musical meanings and codes. Though I stand by my assertion that the pedagogical imperative demands improvisers re-invest their musical gestures with renewed meanings, I am wary of the suggestion that the sounds themselves cannot be repeated effectively and persuasively "as an integral part of the transmission of culture." The "complex interaction" between historical, culturally specific and creative elements and processes of music-making calls into question the straightforward condemnation of musical repetition. As I have stated above, there are many musical masters who have been able to transcend the generic pitfalls of repetitive musical culture by successfully navigating the close-knit relationship between musical histories, improvisation and genre conventions. These artists have re-invested musical codes with new, brilliant meanings that continue to challenge listeners' assumptions about art, politics, and the world around them. As part of the necessary, ongoing pedagogical engagement of responsible improvisers, the potential for such a creative relationship within culturally specific musical traditions and histories presents an even greater challenge in the endless project of individual musical growth and learning. The libratory potential of the pedagogical imperative of musical improvisation is just the beginning.

Notes

[1] See Bailey, Prévost.

[2] See Bailey, Corbett, Small.

[3] Since I first completed this essay in May 2005, most of my critical thinking about collective improvisation has involved a reconsideration of this statement. The well established network of recordings, labels, festivals, books, magazines, university courses, etc., that is dedicated to the history and sale of creative improvised music arguably (though increasingly less contentiously) reifies the "genre" of free improvisation and upholds certain "professional" improvisers as professional and pedagogical exemplars. While this reality does not flatten the qualified distinction between genre-based/composed music and collective improvisation upon which my argument hinges, further study demands a more thorough articulation of the relationship between the history and economy of free improvisation and the discourse of non-idiomaticism that tends to ignore or deny it. A more nuanced argument would examine the tensions that reside between improvisation as a *process* (pedagogy) and as a *product* (history, idiom, and genre), that I hope will properly contextualize and bolster the non-idiomatic claims upon which my "pedagogical imperative" theory is founded.

[4] This is a crucial point in my recent reconsideration of this piece. I now believe that there are (and can consider enumerating) many conventions that inform the behaviour of improvisers that have been fostered through the history and the economy of "free improvisation"—a set of rules that signify to audience members and to fellow performers what musical roles will be taken (and how authority may flow through an ensemble during performance.) These conventions, however, are fairly "soft" ones and are more easily overturned without the performers rendering the improvisation unintelligible than in more fixed idioms. Nevertheless, some musicians and groups cannot or opt not to overturn them, and are content to play "conventional" (idiomatic) improvised music. The presence of the pedagogical processes I am describing in such music is as likely as in any other idiomatic music.

[5] Here, I run the risk of re-invoking an Adornoite critique of cultural production and giving undue credence to the way the avant-garde can supersede and counteract the workings of the culture industry. Though improvisation provides a music-making context that can challenge the hegemony of dominant musical models, I recognize how compositional or genre-based music can also provide such a context. I think, immediately, of the varied compositional approaches of Duke Ellington, Jimi Hendrix, Steve Lacy, Stevie Wonder, and Anthony Braxton as fine examples of musicians who reconcile "repetitive" strategies with code transgression and creative dialogue. I do not wish to deny these musicians (and many others) their social/aesthetic "mastery," the way they so deftly navigate the codes of repetitive musical practice.

[6] I would like to thank philosopher and guitarist John Russon for this observation.

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