

**NOISES:  
FREE MUSIC, IMPROVISATION AND THE AVANT-GARDE;  
LONDON 1965 TO 1990.**

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

A study of free, improvised music in London and its practitioners. The dissertation is divided into a discussion of different conceptions of the avant-garde with particular reference to critical theory and post-modernism, and transcribed interviews with musicians, making up an oral history of free music. It includes material on the historical development of the avant-garde and the histories of jazz and contemporary composition. There are also considerations of the specific problems of music and language and the problem of methodology and elaborations of the musical/cultural concepts of noise, listening and silence, and also the idea of music as a form of prophecy.

The theoretical section outlines the pessimistic cultural/musical theory of Theodor W. Adorno and also discusses the work of Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger, Jacques Attali, Ernst Bloch, Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes, considering ways in which it is possible to go beyond Adorno. It is proposed that the avant-garde be regarded not as an element of elite or institutionalised culture but of contemporary popular culture and that culture be understood as a source of a polyphonic, dialogic diversity. Contra Adorno, jazz is considered as one form which has historically produced an avant garde and a multiplicity of form. The prehistory and path of development of free music are briefly considered an ideal-theoretical model of its character as an avant-garde cultural activity proposed.

The open-ended oral histories and discussions with musicians in the extensive appendices help reflect the multiplistic character of the avant-garde and provide many perspectives and discourses which support, conflict, and counterpoint the arguments developed by the author.

Two cassette tapes of recorded musical examples are included.

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

'A tree is a new thing at every instant; we affirm the *form* because we do not sieze the subtlety of an absolute moment.'  
(Fredrich Nietzsche, quoted Barthes 1976: 61)

'The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are non-conceptuality, individuality, and particularity - things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant.'  
(Theodore W. Adorno 1973: 8)

'Music becomes the superfluous, the unfinished, the relational. It even ceases to be a product separable from its author.'  
(Jacques Attali: 141)

This dissertation has two basic aims, which are, on the face of it, quite straightforward. The first is to provide a general theory of Free music (or free musical improvisation), and the second is to provide a historical account of a specific community or network of musicians who practice that activity, namely those in London between 1965, when the music first emerged, and 1990, the time of writing. These two problems are, for the most part, considered separately and form two distinct parts of what I nevertheless take to be a single piece of research.

The theory of free music researched and outlined below is based on the notion that Free music is one part of a critical contemporary avant-garde, whose character can to some extent be described with reference to aspects of the work of Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Attali. My perspective contradicts Theodore W. Adorno's pessimistic conclusion that critical avant-garde culture, and music, are finished, and that history has defeated them and drained them of any critical power and significance; and also Peter

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Bürger's more recent argument that the avant-garde is today dead.

As my thesis directly contradicts these pessimistic forecasts of culture's health and critical potential I will consider them in some detail. Criticism and appraisal of Adorno's view is particularly important, as it must form the basis for virtually any contemporary cultural understanding of music's situation, power and worth. Adorno is in all essential respects the Father of the sociology of music, transforming the intuitive recognition of music's fundamental sociality into a brilliantly rich tangle of ideas which has become a central pillar of C.20th European critical social philosophy.

Like all Fathers, Adorno must be overcome. We need to find theoretical and musical means which extend far beyond Adorno's, if the liberatory, utopian possibilities of music that he so clearly recognized and elucidated, are ever to come to pass, or rather, if we are to recognize them for what they are. I shall argue that many cultural forms, and free music in particular, contain the critical elements that Adorno felt had deserted culture. In this respect almost every aspect of the following thesis, including the theory of free music in the final chapter, may be regarded as a dialogue with Adorno, and as an attempt to either refute or extend aspects of his work, and to go beyond his suffocating pessimism.

To conclude this introduction, just one of these aspects is outlined in the following condensed form.

Adorno's kaleidoscopic studies on music, modernism and mass culture traced the rise of a cultural totalitarianism. Following Georg Lukács, Max Weber and George Simmel, Adorno described contemporary societies as stifled by an instrumental and rationalistic ethic and aesthetic, homogeneity replacing heterogeneity, identity replacing non-identity, every aspect of culture becoming *exchangeable* and

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defined by forces and functions outside itself. He saw the work of what he understood to be a *modernist avant-garde* as the only opposition to these trends, hence the oft-quoted line, 'art may be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering' (1984: 27). It is in of their expression of terror and suffering that developments in contemporary musical forms became a particularly important aspect of Adorno's work.

But for Adorno even the modernist musical avant-garde heralded by Schoenberg and Webern and later, by Stockhausen and Boulez, became victim to the reificatory, dehumanising trends that they opposed, allowing the monopoly of rationality, of exchangeable logic, inside their very technique. Two of Adorno's themes which stem from this critique, neglected in the existing literature, are the *death of music* - its lack of critical potential and impotence, and the *impossibility* of the composer, his ineffectiveness. Both are clearly intended as metaphors for a more extensive catastrophe which must finally include the death of the avant-garde, of the critical intellect and of culture itself. Here, a culture that seeks to be incommensurable becomes an appendage to a system of production and consumption, to a totalitarian rationality of means/end motives and relationships.

A problem with Adorno's work is that he fails to distinguish between modernist high culture and the avant-garde, in fact he treats them as synonymous. Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* is very critical of Adorno for this failure. Bürger distinguishes the avant-garde from modernism, and from other contemporary and historical aesthetic movements, by their opposition to the category of 'Art', which he argues had become institutionalised in bourgeois society. The avant-garde understood the partial, fragmented sociological position that this gave art and attempted to overcome this partiality by proposing for it a new role or condition. The aim of the avant-garde is thus no

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longer to *change art* but to *change art in order to change society*, i.e. to reunite art and social praxis.

I shall argue that although Adorno correctly understands the power of music, and something of the nature of avant-garde critique, he looks for the avant-garde in the wrong place; he looks precisely at the institutionalised sphere of high culture which, according to Bürger, the avant-garde seeks to destroy. Modernist *techniques*, like Schoenberg's are in fact quite uncritical of art's institutionalised role, and should not be directly linked with the avant-garde. Despite Bürger's more adequate conception of the avant-garde, he too is basically pessimistic, for associating the avant-garde too closely with the manifestos of Dadaism in the 1920s, he regards it as a historical movement no longer active or possible in contemporary society. I shall argue that Bürger, like Adorno, is finally interested only in art and culture which is contained within, or associated with, high cultural institutions. I will go on to argue that the avant-garde today is in fact more properly related not to high culture or modernism but to a contemporary form of *popular culture*, whose basis is non-institutional and dialogic, of which free music forms a part.

### A Note on the Interviews

The interviews, presented here as an appendix, form a mass of research material in their own right; an oral history of free music in London between 1965 and 1990. They may be understood in a number of ways - as some of the secondary 'raw material' for the thesis (the primary material being the music itself), as paralleling the themes and concerns of the thesis but using very different forms and discourses, or even, as a relatively independent piece of empirical research with its own aims and interests, approaching the same subject matter from a radically different methodological perspective. To some extent it is up to the

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reader what view they wish to take on it. My own view is that it is an intimately related piece of research material, which counterpoints the themes in the main thesis, both supporting and contradicting aspects of it.

However, the relation between the empirical and theoretical research is not unproblematic. Neither is it accidental. Given the fluid, unfinished and individual nature of the subject matter, too close a correspondence between the two might be unwelcome and untrustworthy. It seems to me that some space between the two is both necessary and desirable. The reason for this should become apparent in a reading of the interviews themselves; Free music is a practice which is ordered outside existing aesthetic, political and theoretical codes, an activity which consciously or unconsciously seeks to keep a step apart from all models of rational and theoretical thought. This is one of the central ideas explored in both parts of the dissertation, and it logically and inevitably creates a natural distance, even a mistrust, between its parts. As this mistrust of language, theory and rationality does seem to me to be an important part of what I have studied, rather than brushing over it I have tried to contain within the structure of the dissertation. The mistrust between Free music and words is further elaborated as a conscious theme in Appendix 1.

For the reader seriously interested in both the general theory of Free music and the musician's own oral histories and interpretations, or simply with an experimental bent, I would suggest reading the two sets of materials in tandem, along with listening to the recorded material, moving rapidly from one to another. In this way I believe the relationship between the different materials provided may be best appreciated.

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### The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters plus extensive appendices and is structured as follows.

Chapter 1 outlines themes in the history of the avant-garde and the history of contemporary music, which are explored in greater detail in later stages of the thesis. The aim of this chapter is to briefly sketch out a history of the avant-garde and a pre-history of free music, presenting both historical and theoretical material with which the reader may be unfamiliar.

Chapter 2 presents a history of Free music's development in London between 1965 and 1990, and explains some of its different styles and characteristics

Chapter 3 explores Adorno's theories of how people listen to music, the structure of contemporary composed music and the character of the avant-garde, and places them within the context of his social theory as a whole. Some criticisms of Adorno's position are also outlined.

Chapter 4 moves beyond Adorno to the two other major sociological theorists of the avant-garde, Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger, again their positions are described and some criticisms outlined. In the final part of the chapter the bare bones of an alternative theory of a *contemporary* avant-garde are drawn out.

Chapter 5 returns to music and to different concepts of listening. The idea of music as a form of *prophecy* drawn from a number of different authors is also explored. After a consideration of the specific character of contemporary and avant-garde modes of listening, the theory of *noise*, rooted in Attali's work, is explained and explored as an avant-garde form.

The concluding chapter pulls together material and concepts from all the other chapters into an original theoretical model of Free music *in general*, and of its specific features and characteristics. It is considered as a contemporary avant-garde form; practical, critical, dialogic

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and utopian.

Appendix 1 combines a brief discussion of the methodological problems of studying Free music, with a discussion of the overall relationship between the thesis and the interview research.

Appendix 2 comments on the methodology of the interviews, the sample, questions I asked and the method of editing, and also on an aborted attempt at participant observation.

The very long Appendix 3 presents the edited interviews themselves, while Appendix 4 contains details of the audio-material accompanying the text.

N.B. Throughout the text undated numbers appearing in brackets, e.g., (0.3, 1.9, 2.5), refer to specific tracks on the cassettes. Quotations given with simply a name and without date or page number are extracted from the interviews in Appendix 3.

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## CHAPTER ONE: THE AVANT-GARDE, HISTORICAL LINES AND CURRENTS

### Introduction

The material presented in this chapter represents some outlines of a pre-history of Free music. It has two functions within the thesis as whole; Firstly, it provides some necessary background information and historical context for the more theoretical and historical considerations of Free music in the main body of the thesis, and also for the interviews in Appendix 3. Secondly, it contains within it an initial attempt to lay the historical and theoretical basis for a theory of the contemporary avant-garde which is explored in greater depth in later sections. The sections are as follows; Dada, Surrealism, Contemporary Composition, Jazz and May 1968.<sup>1</sup>

### Dada

Dada alone does not smell: it is nothing, nothing, nothing.

It is like your hopes: nothing.

like your paradise: nothing.

like your idols: nothing.

like your politicians: nothing.

like your heroes: nothing.

like your artists: nothing.

like your religions: nothing.

(Manifeste Cannibale Dada, Francis Picabia, 1920, quoted, Ades 1974: 4)

Dadaism developed amongst a small group of artists and intellectuals in Zurich, and later in Berlin, Paris, Barcelona and New York, during and after World War One. It was an explosion of disgust at European intellectual traditions of rationality and formal order which the Dadaists saw as being responsible for the war and for the impoverished nature of social-life and culture in general.

## The Avant-Garde: Historical Lines and Currents

The painter Hans Richter writes of Reason as, 'a juggernaut, crushing acres of corpses... beneath its wheels'. (1965: 65)  
The attack on ideas was part of a wider offensive against the whole social, political and economic order, they called for the total destruction of society. Richter;

Everything must be pulled apart, not a screw left in its customary place, the screw holes wrenched out of shape, the screw, like man himself, set on its way towards new functions which could only be known after the total negation of everything that had existed. Until then: riot, destruction, defiance, confusion. (Richter *ibid.*: 48)

Dadaism was not exactly a movement, no general agreement being formed over the source and function of the word 'dada' itself, for example. It had a number of possible and contested sources but no single or particular meaning. The composer and poet Richard Huelsenbeck;

The word Dada symbolizes the most primitive relation to the reality of the environment; with Dadaism a new reality comes into its own. Life appears as a simultaneous muddle of noises, colours and spiritual rhythms, which is taken unmodified into Dadaist art, with all the sensational screams and fevers of its reckless everyday psyche and with all its brutal reality. (Dada Manifesto 1918, quoted Richter *ibid.*: 104)

In his own manifesto of the same year Tristan Tzara proclaimed:

The magic of a word - DADA - which for journalists has opened the door to an unforeseen world, has for us not the slightest significance.

DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING (1918 Dada Manifesto, Tzara 1977: 3)

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Reading Tzara's manifestoes we find Huelsenbeck's 'simultaneous muddle' fully expressed. The texts defies interpretation, the sentences both attack and celebrate, yet no programme is proposed and overall coherence is avoided. Despite this, an argument very clearly emerges

I am against systems: the most acceptable system is that of having no one principle.

Every man must shout: there is a great destructive, negative work to be done. To sweep, to clean. The clean lines of the individual materialise after we've gone through folly, the aggressive, complete folly of a world left in the hands of bandits who have demolished and destroyed the centuries. With neither aim nor plan, without organisation: uncontrolled folly, decomposition.

...protest with the fists of one's whole being in destructive action.

DADA; the abolition of memory: DADA; the abolition of archaeology: DADA; the abolition of prophets: DADA; the abolition of the future: DADA; the absolute and indisputable belief in every god that is an immediate product of spontaneity. (Tzara 1977: 5/9/12/13)

It is clear from Tzara's texts and much of the visual art produced, for example by Francis Picabia, Jean Arp and Kurt Schwitters, that this sheer negation and purposeless was in part a polemic device intended to shock and confuse the recipient. But Dada also implied, if rarely stated, a concrete *affirmation* of certain distinct human abilities, qualities and ideals. Richter;

Dada invited, or rather defied, the world to misunderstand it, and fostered every kind of confusion. This was done from caprice and from a principle of contradiction... However this confusion was only a facade... Our real motive was not rowdiness for its own

## The Avant-Garde: Historical Lines and Currents

sake, or contradiction and revolt in themselves, but the question, "Where next?". (ibid; 9)

And again, '...a raging *ant, anti, anti*, linked with an equally passionate *pro, pro, pro!*' (ibid: 35).

One aspect of this 'pro' was the elevation of the creativity in the passing moment to an absolute value, taking precedence over the art-object. The Dadaists thus pronounced themselves against Art and against philosophy. For them, unlike the Italian Futurists who predicted many of Dadaism's central ideas, all notions of progress and all ideals and utopian blueprints reeked of rationality and submission to ideas and structures which would pre-exist and thus hinder and limit pure spontaneity.

Dada not only had no programme, it was against all programmes. Dada's only programme was to have no programme... and, at that moment in history, it was just this that gave the movement its explosive power to unfold *in all directions*, free of aesthetic or social constraints. (Richter *ibid.*: 1965: 34)

Despite this contempt for the blueprint, and the primacy of the 'great destructive, negative work,' Dada inevitably implied a new unplanned society which would somehow emerge from spontaneity, a society without structure, constantly being spontaneously created and recreated in each passing moment. For Richter the logic of this process stems from a belief that, 'every child starts off possessing genius, until, under the influence of social pressures and the weakness of the flesh, he first misuses, then loses and finally despises it.' (Richter 1965: 69) So, in place of the intellect and anything which could have rational motives or logically structured schema the Dadaists argued for the power of the intuitive, and irrational, as values in themselves. They embraced meaningless and contradictory ideas and pioneered many new artistic processes;

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unpremeditated word association poetry, 'noise music', and experimental forms of collage, film, sculpture, photography and other visual arts. In all these forms chance, spontaneity, arbitrariness and improvisation replaced traditional rationalistic concerns with formal order and beauty.

So the most essential aspect of Dada avant-gardism lay in the celebration of the spontaneous creative moment, an obedience to impulse which was believed not only to be beyond rational or analytical elaboration but, equally, beyond socialisation or history, method or technique. This represented a non-official ideal of creativity for itself, not to exist within, be directed towards, or measured against, any philosophical, aesthetic, political or institutional order. The improvised poem, for example, was regarded not as an artistic artifact to be analysed and intellectually considered, but as an *action*, an immediate experience - the brute physical word in time and space.

Thus conventional Art, ideas and utopias were rejected less out of a sense of blanket negation - which was actually both a tactic and a posture - than out of a sense of their failure as institutionalised forms to match up to the Dadaists' standards of creative-spontaneity. Dadaism thus attacked not merely the specific languages of these forms but the very basis of their institutional existence, the conservatories, the galleries and academies, to return creativity to life, to the indivisible moment. In this they represent the very essence of the avant-garde in its historical perspective.

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### Surrealism

In Dadaism lay a profoundly contradictory essence; an emphasis on pure negation in the interests of liberation, the destruction of Art to free art, the destruction of utopia in order to allow it to spontaneously occur. The Dadaists split along the lines which this contradiction traces; one strand leading to nihilism - to pure negation and infantilism - and another towards a position of reconciliation with two important aspects of rational thought. Surrealism grafted onto Dada avant-gardism the notion that spontaneous creativity could have a rational goal other than itself - liberation - and the idea that the mind and the imagination existed not in isolation but *in history* whose conditions are not static but fluid. An inevitable, and inevitably uneasy, alliance with politics was forged. Surrealism may thus be regarded as the rational organisation of irrationality, that is, the submission of action not organised by rational means to a rationally deduced goal - political and economic liberation. In 1922 André Breton thus refuted Dada:

After all, there is more at stake than our carefree existence and our good humour of the moment... It seems to me that the sanction of a series of utterly futile 'Dada' acts is in danger of gravely compromising an attempt at liberation to which I remain strongly attached. (Breton 1978: 10)

In the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* of 1924 Breton provides the following definition of Surrealism:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner - the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern...

## The Avant-Garde: Historical Lines and Currents

In the course of the various attempts I have made to reduce what is, by breach of trust, called genius, I have found nothing which in the final analysis can be attributed to any other method than that. (Breton 1972: 26)

Breton proposed that through automatic writing one could be freed of the socialised, abdicate rational control and produce a monologue, 'unencroached by the slightest inhibition... as closely as possible akin to *spoken thought*' (ibid.: 23). He suggested that dreams are of equal importance to reality and, in a society where only minute hints of the vast capacity of the imagination were allowed to exist ('the mind is ripe for something more than the benign joys it allows itself in general' (ibid.: 39), must finally be of more importance.

The Surrealist Revolution was presented as a fusion of the two states - dream and reality, or future and present, - 'into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality' (ibid.: 14). This juxtaposition clearly represents an admission of the power of political realities which Dada would not allow. The admission that reality and the imagination were not completely independent spheres, but existed in a changing historical dialectic, further led Breton to see the necessity to engage in direct political action in order to change the conditions of reality so that the imaginative, and the truly *human*, could be allowed to exist.

All this went well beyond Dada's total contempt for society and its simple joy in spontaneity. For Breton, while spontaneity and creativity are still closely bound they are no longer synonymous; though all creativity is by definition spontaneous, not all spontaneous acts are by definition creative. So spontaneity is preserved as a central value but it is placed within a complex of ideas relating to a discourse of liberation which necessitates a *systematic* exploration of the imagination. Breton even provided a set of instructions for the production of

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automatic writing. (Breton 1972: 29, Willener 1970: 213)

Breton thus tied improvisation to a set of predetermined models, a grand-narrative, against which its products could be judged and should conform, if they were to be regarded as authentic. Improvisation and spontaneity thus became rationalistically employed goal-directed activities ruled by an aesthetic, political and philosophical discourse; they became ideologically institutionalised. Historically this move was represented by the entry to the leading Surrealists to (and their swift expulsion from) the Communist Party. Surrealism, as an ideological movement, might be said to have ceased to be an avant-garde movement at this point.

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### Rationality, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde in Contemporary Composition

By the beginning of the C.19th the basic institutions of European concert music were firmly in place, though the composer's shift from religious and court service to independent artistic specialist is not fully complete until the middle decades of the century. The institutional change and rigidification of composed music, which coincides with its becoming 'Art' (Durant 1989: 261), may be considered as the maturation of certain trends active since the C.17th; increases in the centralisation, specialisation and standardisation of musical functions. The institutionalisation included, the development of specialist conservatories for composers - separating them from instrumentalists - the overall standardisation in the basic instrumentation of the orchestra, the rationalisation of dynamics and timbre, the international standardization of temperament, the spread of the boundaries defined by musical notation (involving the marginalisation and elimination of the individual musicians's role of improvisatory embellishment) and the development of the specialist orchestral conductor (Weber 1958, Durant 1984: chap. 2). Alan Durant: 'Extended in these ways, the orchestra is transformed from an ensemble of musicians into a huge instrument or machine which the composer plays by notation'. (op. cit.: 38) Other similarities with industrial and bureaucratic organisation are noted by Small (1980), Durant (1989: 260), and Attali (1984).

It is arguable that after Beethoven's symphonies the structural and expressive means of European tonal harmonic composition begins to disintegrate, this trend finding particular expression in the emergence in his late string quartets and in the barely resolved harmonic dissonances in Wagner's opera *Tristan*. The tonal harmonic system - established by J.S. Bach and developed by C.P.E. Bach, Haydn and Mozart - from one perspective reaches to ever grander

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heights, but from another it begins to show signs of its own historicity. By late C.19th romanticism the orchestra and its expressive gestures grew bigger and bigger, almost as if to compensate for the impoverishment and exhaustion threatening its strictly harmonic resources. The rediscovery of J.S. Bach and the development of a backward-glancing self-awareness, in opposition to romanticism, of the classical canon as a historical institution with its own definite priorities and patterns of development, can also perhaps be seen as a symptom of stress and loss of confidence.

By the late C.19th/early C.20th. there were many diversions and departures from tonal-harmony, exploring new resources to supplant or replace harmony's previous basic architectural function. In France Claude Debussy abandoned the tonal-harmonic mathematics of composition; employing modes and timbre as structural resource and exploring ambiguous tonalities and irregular rhythms, while Erik Satie made flat repetitive a-harmonic piano pieces which seem to relate to tradition largely by their opposition and difference. In Germany Richard Strauss continued to employ Wagnerian expressive dissonance, freeing musical form from strict harmonic laws, and submitting it instead to psychological, expressive narratives. Gustav Mahler's musical stories, journeys and new sonorities seemed even stranger to classical logic. All this music suggested new possibilities inside or in the vicinity of tonality.

### Schoenberg's Modernism

In Vienna in the first decade of the new century the self-taught Jewish composer Arnold Schoenberg was the first to write pieces which, on the face of it, abandoned tonality altogether. Initially Schoenberg ordered his 'atonal' pieces through the use of purely expressive and intuitive techniques. Beginning without a traditional key, and without method, language or system, Schoenberg composed with a

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wholly new conception of 12 note harmony and melody which Adorno calls, 'free atonality'. Abandoning the hierarchy that tonal harmony had imposed on the pitches Schoenberg introduced to them an equality and lack of innate direction, which allowed pitch to be considered afresh, without traditional interpretive frames and correspondences; liberating expression from the clichéd gestures of late-romanticism. Amongst the German musical establishment the experiment initially met with little sympathy, many listeners finding the alien atonal intervals and clashing, dissonant harmonies repulsive. In 1919 Schoenberg set up the independent Society for Private Musical Performances, in order that the new music could be performed in a more conducive context.

By the 1920s the free atonal approach had developed a set of compositional rules, or principles, which came empirically out of the act of composition, and philosophically and spiritually out of Schoenberg's search for 'Universal Principles', and became the first phase of *serial* composition. One such rule stated that a note should not be repeated until the other eleven have been sounded, so preserving the equality of the twelve tones and ensuring that a tonal centre (and thus tonality) could not be suggested by the 'accidental' repetition of particular pitches. By this point Schoenberg was no longer concerned with overthrowing rules and systems, the 'method of composing with 12 tones related only to each other,' had become a way of integrating his discoveries into new rules and principles.

### Stravinsky's Post-modernism

The need for restriction, for deliberately submitting to a style, has its source in the very depths of our nature... Now all order demands restraint. But one would be wrong to regard that as any impediment to liberty. On the contrary, the style, the restraint,

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contribute to its development, and only prevent liberty degenerating into licence. At the same time, in borrowing a form already established and consecrated, the creative artist is not in the least restricting the manifestation of his personality. On the contrary, it is more detached, and stands out better when it moves within the definite limits of convention. (quoted Griffiths 1978: 73)

In France Igor Stravinsky developed a unique and personal mode of intuitive composition very different from Schoenberg's. Drawing from his native Russian folk sources he introduced a new rhythmic intensity into composition, disintegrating bar lines into a pulse with which he connected diverse musical fragments into his own informal imposed unity. By 1920, stepping back from the boundaries of tonality, Stravinsky was composing in a neo-classical style harmonically derived from C.18th music, repudiating what he perceived to be the excesses of romanticism, and finding no need of a new language<sup>2</sup> such as Schoenberg's. Stravinsky also experimented with mixed tonalities and collaged forms, even pulling direct quotes from other composers' works. Stravinsky conceived of the whole history of music as a potential resource, from which he abstracted and alienated models and fragments and, to use his own term, 'recomposed' them, often beyond recognition. Donald Mitchell argues that despite this reliance on past traditions for material Stravinsky was actually *less* dependent on the great classical tradition than Schoenberg, Berg or Webern, and, given his unique perspective on and application of historical means, was a 'tradition-less' composer of a completely new type. (Mitchell 1976: 103)

Before his death in the 1950s Stravinsky effected a strange turnabout, composing tonal music using serial method at least partly derived from Webern, and in his final compositions, with a 12 tone serial method.

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### Webern

Schoenberg, and his students Alban Berg and Anton Webern were, as Mitchell suggests, very concerned to locate and reconcile the 12 note system *within* the context of the European classical tradition; for example, classical thematic, formal and expressive techniques occur in all their work. But Webern, unlike Schoenberg and Berg, abandoned entirely many aspects of the expressionist heritage. Instead he expanded the element of systematic pre-determination to include rhythm as well as pitch. Alan Durant distinguishes between two phases of serialism. The first phase was, 'a set of procedures for composing within existing aesthetic definitions... (and) organising materials according to notions of artistic purpose carried over from conceptions of art and expression which surrounded tonal music' (1984: 49-50). The second phase differed, allowing the procedures themselves, rather than pre-existing artistic models, to determine the overall structure. Webern formed the link between the two; his tiny, perfectly formed movements constituting a quietly dramatic departure from many of the aesthetic principles of European orchestral and chamber composition. Notably absent from Webern's compositions was any easily decipherable correspondence to conventional expressionist rhetoric: while that sense of necessary forward motion, so definitive a characteristic of western music since Bach, was strangely undermined. In comparison with Webern's new musical world, Schoenberg's break seemed half-hearted and almost nostalgic.

### Serialism

1950s Darmstadt-based composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen (for whom Webern's music is, 'the yardstick,' {1955: 38}) Luigi Nono and Pierre Boulez (for whom it is, 'the one and only threshold,' {1955: 40}) developed integral-serialism or total-serialism through application of techniques emerging from an analysis of Webern's music, and

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also of Oliver Messiaen's modal/serial composition.

The appeal of Webern's work for these composer's lies in its freedom from conventional rhetoric and in its obsession with formal purity ('to the point of silence' {ibid.}). For Boulez Webern's purity enabled music to 'rehabilitate the powers of sound,' (ibid.) which overemphasis on structural harmony had previously obscured. Boulez found within Webern's composition the possibility of a completely mathematically ordered system which could embrace and equalise all the perimeters of music; pitch, rhythm, duration, attack and so on, hoping to 'eliminate from my vocabulary absolutely all trace of heritage,' (quoted Nyman 1974: chap 3) and discover a 'new language' completely free the of arbitrariness and the 'accumulated dirt' of conventional referential expressivity (Monk 1986: 303). For Boulez, not one to encourage compromise, diversity or dissent, any composer in the 1950s who did not see the absolute necessity of the serialist approach was simply 'useless'.<sup>3</sup>

### Varèse, Cage and American Experimental Music

One day I said to myself that it would be better to get rid of all that - melody, rhythm, harmony, etc (Christian Wolff, quoted Nyman 1974: chap 3)

For composers in the United States Webern's music also formed a threshold, especially in regard of its liberation of timbre and its suggestion of musical stasis. But they responded to it very differently from the Europeans. In Webern's strictly ordered music the Americans discovered the possibility of a music which, rather than regenerating, might abandon for good what they perceived as European-musical obsessions with expression, rationality, direction and form. For Christian Wolff Webern's music;

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is expressive only of itself: hence may extend and penetrate indefinitely; it need have no extra-musical (historical, literary, psychological, dramatic, etc.) reference. (Wolff 1957: 61)

The Americans were also inspired by the expatriate French composer Edgard Varése, whose 'organised sound' - employing tapes and sirens amongst other sources - transformed industrial and urban noise into components of the orchestra. Influenced by the *sounds* of Schoenberg, Stravinsky and Debussy, rather than by their structural orders, Varése's compositions are wholly rhythmic and sonic in construction. In his orchestral writing he abandoned the usual piano sketch and instead wrote directly for the sounds themselves (Cage 1960: 83). Varése's music thus had no harmonic or thematic structure which could be abstracted or analysed, standing or falling simply by its intense confrontational effect on the listener.

For John Cage, Varése's use of sheer sound and his disruption of demonstrable logic was an important influence. But for Cage, Varése's admission of noise into music also constituted a training and a tailoring of it; noise and music merging less of their own accord than under Varése's 'unifying signature': 'Rather than dealing with sounds as sounds, he deals with them as Varése.' (Cage 1960: 83-84) The criticism is fundamental, striking a new and alien note in the discussion of concert music; Cage is not only criticising the conventional or referential rhetoric of expressionism, but questioning the need for human expression in music per se.

Cage's extremism showed the influence of individualistic and iconoclastic figures such as Charles Ives, Harry Partch and the experimental attitude of Henry Cowell, who simply went ahead with music-making almost without reference to Europe. But Cage went further. Contesting and disrupting European humanist concepts of the self as a form, Cage attempted the impossible and contradictory task of

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organising sounds not as the composer would wish them to be but instead as they are, under the spell of only their own motivations. Noise without signature.

A sound does not view itself as thought, as ought, as needing another sound for its elucidation, as etc.: it has no time for any consideration - it is occupied with the performance of its characteristics: before it has died away it must have made perfectly exact its frequency, its loudness, its length, its overtone structure, the precise morphology of itself. (Cage 1955, quoted Nyman 1974, chap. 3 and Mellers 1987: 182)

In other words, one of Cage's aims was to bring noise to music *intact* - to turn music into noise, confusing their definitions and boundaries, making them formally indistinguishable. Christian Wolff: 'No distinction is made between the sounds of a 'work' and sounds in general, prior to, simultaneous with, or following the work. Art - music - and nature are not thought of as separated. Music is allowed no privileges over sound.' (Wolff 1960: 26)

Cage's music of the 1950s and 1960s often included great 'silences', and is at least in one case wholly composed of silence - the infamous 4' 33", in which the sounds of nature and life-activity were directly invited into the music's desanctified space and time. Cage often composed in an indeterminate manner using chance operations to determine, for example, the position of the sounds in the score, or even the actual pitches, being determined by methods employing tossed coins or the the I-Ching (see Cage 1957). Thus even when Cage's music became a heterophonic cacophony the questions of silence, and of selfhood, remained.

Cage, Wolff, Morton Feldman and Earle Brown experimented with many different forms of indeterminate and improvisation-directing notion, graphic scores, verbal directions, and with what Cage called 'performer indeterminacy'. (Cage 1960: 69) This is best understood as a

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sort of programmed or directed improvisation, which allowed the performer more freedom of action than strictly scored notation can allow.

However the traditional relationship between performer and score, was, in most cases, fully preserved in Cage's music. To this degree their avant-gardist departure from European convention may be seen to be primarily a linguistic critique of modernism, and, in most cases, to stop short of an *institutional* critique.

In the 1970s the first generation of experimental composers was followed by a wealth of new approaches to composition, improvisation and performance, by the Sonic Arts Union (Alvin Lucier, David Behrman, Robert Ashley, Gordon Mumma) amongst very many others (see Johnson 1989, Schaefer 1987, Sutherland 1989). Along with La Monte Young, Lou Harrison and Virgil Thompson, Cage and the experimental composers have also introduced many ideas and ideals derived from Asian musics. These in turn heavily influenced the development of a huge variety of Minimalist, process, meditational and 'New Age' musics, which typically owe little to European models. Many of these musics have challenged the division between classical and popular music<sup>4</sup> and have also drawn from jazz, rock and ethnic musics.

### The Disintegration and Institutionalisation of Serialism

Quoting the composers Henri Pousseur and Iannis Xenakis, Roger Sutherland suggests that the mechanistic models of 1950's European integral serialism go too far and for no real *musical* purpose, as the actual auditory effect of many early and extremely rationalised serial compositions did not characteristically reflect their totally ordered construction at all, on the contrary they often took on an improvisatory or even random surface appearance (see also Ligeti 1960).

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Though contemptuous of Cage's 'shameful' chance procedures, Boulez in his essay 'Alea' (1971) conceded that overemphasis on 'schematization' was an, 'even more poisonous and more subtle form of intoxication... a fetishism of numbers'. (Boulez op cit.: 46) He argued that *both* over-schematization and chance amounted to the same thing; an anti-humanistic 'refusal of choice' which replaced the composer's concern over, 'what *should* happen,' with an interest in, 'what *may* happen' (ibid.: 47). Boulez even admitted in this context that his own *Structures*, a centre-piece of total serialist compositional practice was, 'not total but totalitarian' (Monk 1986: 305). Boulez's response to the problem of anti-humanism in music was to reintegrate *aleatory* components into the composition, for example, allowing its parts to be performed in various different orders so that the performer is allowed an element of choice. But Boulez denies that performer choice should or could ever be allowed to go as far as creativity;

Instrumentalists do not possess invention - otherwise they would be composers. There has been a lot of talk of 'improvisation', but even taken in the best sense of the word it cannot replace invention.<sup>5</sup>

Boulez's musical concerns are thus overwhelmingly anti-avant-gardist; the maintenance of the division of labour, order and structure, and increasingly also with technology. This search led him to the founding and directorship of IRCAM, a musical/acoustic research centre set up in 1978 and funded by the French Government to the tune of some \$4M. annually (Smith Brindle: 201). Here Boulez welds musical and scientific research together seeking the musical language, and possibility of a pattern of pure managerial order, of the future.

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In the United States, Boulez's scientistic concerns are echoed with unequalled vociferousness by the Princeton University-based integral-serialist Milton Babbitt who advocates a most systematically rational submission of material to method, and strict adherence to the rhetoric of a 'scientific' language;

There is but one kind of method for the verbal formulation of 'concepts' and the verbal analysis of such information: 'scientific' language and 'scientific' method... statements about music must conform to those verbal and methodological requirements which attend the possibility of meaningful discourse in any domain. (Babbitt 1972a: 4, see also Babbitt 1972b)

Babbitt responds to the development of post-modern and avant-garde (post-, and anti-serialist) music as follows;

...an 'exhaustion' of the resources of the twelve-tone system in the relevant future is not only unforeseeable, but unthinkable... in its vastness of structural means, its flexibility, and its precision, the twelve-tone system cedes nothing to any musical system of the past or present that has engaged the mind of musical man. (Babbitt 1960: 121)

Responding to the lack of either audience or market for most of the music produced under his direction at Princeton, Babbitt calls for a strictly specialised institutionalised elite;

the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from (the) public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition. By doing so... the composer would be free to pursue a private life of professional achievement, as opposed to a public life of

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unprofessional compromise and exhibitionism. (quoted McClary 1989: 59)

But by the 1960s confidence in the completely systematic determination of the individual musical atom had largely passed in favour of systems of predetermination which sought to define overall compositional forms, shapes, areas and 'statistical' patterns (see Ligeti 1960), leaving individual atoms partially to chance, for example, works from this period by Stockhausen, György Ligeti, Krystof Penderecki and Xenakis. For all these composers music's timbral existence, its pure sound, became an important resource. Stockhausen developed the concept of 'moment form', in which Sutherland argues, 'sound events are to be appreciated for their individual qualities rather than understood as links in a causal chain or musical "argument"' (ibid.:23). For Stockhausen: 'The moments are not merely consequences of what precedes them and antecedents of what follows; rather the concentration on the Now - on every Now - as if it were a vertical slice dominating over any horizontal conception of time and reaching into timelessness.' (Stockhausen 1964 *Text II*, Cologne, quoted Sutherland: ibid) This emphasis brought about a decisive disruption to the linear model of logic and horizontal conceptions musical and historical time which had previously being an essential feature of European musical thought and listening.

### Musique Concrète, Electronic Music

Alongside serialism developed musique concrète and electronic music. Musique concrète is rooted in the recording and manipulation of natural or observed sounds, pioneered by Pierre Schaffer in the Radio France electronic studio, while electronic music deals with completely determined sounds from wholly synthetic electronic sources. Though the processes were different both fundamentally altered the relationships between composer and sound, in

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that they potentially abolished the performer, allowing the composer to have a direct relationship with the sound matter.

For Stockhausen electronic music seemed to offer the model of completely rational determination and rigorous control over every aspect of musical sound, even timbre, the texture of tone. But in practice this attempt at total-determination revealed the *impossibility* of achieving satisfactory control over the production of timbre, forcing him to rethink the whole concept of total-determination and to adopt a less systematic, non-serial method of composition which Sutherland argues to be *improvisatory* in nature. (Sutherland no date 2)

### The Composer and Improvisation

Throughout the 1960s Stockhausen also partially disrupted the relationship between composer, performer and notation which had been institutionalised in the C.19th and through serialism's ban on interpretation had been refined to an extreme, instead encouraging the performers to improvise, as he put it, 'intuitively' from written texts;

VERBINDUNG (connection)

play a vibration in the the rhythm of your body  
play a vibration in the rhythm of your heart  
play a vibration in the rhythm of your breathing  
play a vibration in the rhythm of your thinking  
play a vibration in the rhythm of your intuition  
play a vibration in the rhythm of your enlightenment  
play a vibration in the rhythm of the universe

mix these vibrations freely

leave enough silence between them.

May 8, 1968

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ES (It)

think NOTHING

wait until it is absolutely still within you

when you have attained this

begin to play

as soon as you start to think, stop

and try to reattain

the state of NON-THINKING

then continue playing

May 10, 1968

(Harvey 1975: 113, 115)

Clearly these texts, like some of Cage's notations and like many graphic scores, call for a great deal of interpretation from the performers who must very largely rely on intuitive or improvisatory faculties, for example, in the choice of specific notes and sounds employed. However it would be wrong to see the outcome of an interpretation of these texts as a *freely* improvised, as the improvisation that takes place is (at least in theory) within quite strict compositional guidelines. Improviser Hugh Davis, once an assistant to Stockhausen, comments;

The results are very different from the structures and relationships that arise in unpremeditated improvisation... ..one is very conscious of playing a definite composition... (and) one remains aware of the composer influencing the performance from a distance through the score. (Davis 1975)

So while Stockhausen was in one sense undoubtedly allowing the performer unheard-of liberties, in another sense his dominance remained absolute - he remained in control of his musicians even though not a single sound was specifically notated and the very fact of his *allowing* the performer freedom, suggests that he could - if he so pleased -

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withdraw this liberty. It is rather as if the performer was allowed more play on the leash than usual.

LITANEI - excerpt

...I am trying to reach the next stage,  
to connect you, the player,  
to the currents that flow through me,  
to which I am connected...  
so that through me you will be connected  
to the inexhaustible source that pours out of us in the form of  
musical vibrations...

ANKUNFT (Arrival) - excerpt

Give up everything, we were on the wrong track  
Begin with yourself:  
you are a musician.  
You can transform all the vibrations of the world into sounds.  
If you firmly believe this and from now on never doubt it, begin  
with the simplest of exercises... [describes meditation technique]

Quietly take your instrument and play, at first single sounds.  
Let the current flow through the whole instrument.  
Whatever you want to play, even written music of any sort, begin  
only when you have done what I have recommended.

You will then experience everything on your own. (Harvey 1975: 113,  
115)

Despite recognising the possibility of performer creativity these texts assume that the freedom of creativity is in fact the property of the composer in the first place. The composer offers creativity to the performer via methods determine solely by him ('through me you will be connected,' 'only when you have done what I have recommended' {my emphases}). Also, in the actual performance of these pieces the composer controlled the output of the individual

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performer's through a mixing console, spontaneously exaggerating and repressing them at will, and moving their positions in the stereo-mix. In terms of both musical and political relationships the composer was, in practice, still fully in charge of both the music's initial motivation and of its presentation to the listener. The institution of the composer remained intact.

Yet his victory was less than complete. For in recordings and performances of these pieces there were many instances in which the musicians seemed to deviate and follow their own logic, or perhaps those of the sounds, and leave the composer's concepts behind; a conflict of sounds and forms, of power, ownership and control. Trombonist Vinko Globokar, in an essay entitled *To Whom Belongs the Music?* questions to whom the royalties of such performances should go; to the composer who provides an often sketchy idea, or to the musician who creates the music? (Globokar 1983) Here the institutionalised function of the composer is questioned in creative, political and economic terms. Thus one of the outcomes of Stockhausen's *Intuitive Music* was the undermining of the institutionalised role both of the composer and notational codes through the realisation that the intuitions of musicians, and that *music*, could potentially do quite happily without him (see also Phil Wachsmann interview below). The composer was deflated and devalued, his power dispersed. Similarly, the composer Hans Werner Henze envisaged a utopian political situation in which composition is no longer a specialist activity but, 'something that all people can do'. (Henze 1982: 171)

The late 1960's and seventies saw attempts to realise this situation with the formation of Cornelius Cardew's *Scratch Orchestra*, containing many 'non-musicians' (see Roger Sutherland interview below) and the development of basically textless improvising groups in the world of concert music, for example *Gentle Fire*, *New Phonic Art* and *Musica Electronica Viva*. (see Johnson 1989, Sutherland 1989,

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and Sutherland's 'Free Improvisation', no date)

It was not long before Stockhausen, acutely aware of the contradictions and dangers that improvisation holds for the composer, abandoned his Intuitive Music (complaining about performer-inaccuracy!) and returned instead to more traditional notational and controlling procedures. Significantly, at the time of writing there are very few examples of contemporary concert music which contain any significant improvisational element. Notational techniques have been re-established and re-standardised. By his death Morton Feldman had returned to more or less traditional notation and even John Cage, who stills works with aspects of indeterminacy at both the textual and performance levels, has returned to traditional European notational forms. While the improvising groups listed above are defunct (see also Rohan de Saram interview below).

The basic allegiance of European concert music may thus be seen to be with modernist institutions and with modernist and post-modernist languages. The role of post-modern or avant-garde *institutional* critique, most particularly in the shape of improvisation, is very limited. With notable exceptions composition's overall institutional concern has been anti-avant-gardistic; with the maintenance of a strictly ordered division of labour, rational construction and with predetermined notational codes.

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### The Avant-Garde in Jazz

'A great deal of free jazz is in fact random, and it is random because the organising principles, those social ideas of freedom and expressiveness and brotherhood and love, do not have the same concreteness as pitch, chord, meter, time. What the avant-garde sometimes forgot was that the first thing the Lord did was not to pronounce freedom, but to make an ordered universe out of chaos.' (James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz*: 477)

That jazz developed around the beginning of the C.20th amongst black musicians in the southern cities of the United States, especially New Orleans, is partly due to the uniquely cosmopolitan national and racial constitution of that city. (Ostransky 1978: ch.1) It contained immigrants from England, Ireland, Italy, Germany, and slavic countries as well as Africans, including light skinned 'high class' French educated Creoles and the darker skinned 'American Negroes', whose ancestry had suffered the full impact of American slavery. A music was formed which fused American black music; work song, hymns, blues and ragtime, African elements; polyrhythm, polymetre, vocally-infected melody, as well as almost the entire musical of Europe; English folk songs, French marches; Spanish dance music, orchestral music and so on.

The cultural co-existence of New Orleans society was strictly stratified yet relatively free from conflict, in which black culture had a unique degree of independence and stability, thanks partly to the existence of an extended family ethic. (Sidran 1971: 41) New Orleans jazz reflects many aspects of the society which bore it: Combining western and African rhythmic elements it consisted of a joyous and exuberant, yet strictly thematic, improvised polyphony in which each instrument had a definitely delineated role. It was a stable and balanced form of collective interaction, whose elements remained within a strict hierarchic order.

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From its inception jazz was an urban black music in a foreign culture which brought together aspects from a multiplicity of different cultures. Ben Sidran argues that, 'Jazz is a product of a peculiarly black voice (blues) in a peculiarly white context (Western harmony).' (Sidran 1971: 33). He sees it as part of a wider process by which, 'black culture assimilated white culture by accepting its forms and drastically changing its content' (ibid.: 25). One specifically musical aspect of this may be found in the resistance to 'pure' pitch. The practice of the early jazz players, supposedly initiated by the legendary cornettist Buddy Bolden, differed from the European orchestral musician's practice of stating pitches and intervals cleanly. Instead they inflected notes; flattening or sharpening them, having them move, rise, fall or slur. In this and other respects New Orleans jazz may be regarded as an 'Africanisation' of Western tonality. To the Western aesthetic sensibility of the time such habits produced 'dirty' sounds, pitches between the European system of intervals, which were out of tune, explicitly of the body, and noise. The narrator in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* tells us:

We all know that it was the earliest concern, the first conquest of the musician to rid sound of its raw and primitive features, to fix to one single note the singing which in primaeval times must have been a howling glissando over several notes, and to win from chaos a musical system

...a barbaric rudiment from pre-musical days, is the gliding voice, the glissando, a device to be used with the greatest restraint on profoundly cultural grounds; I have always been inclined to sense in it an anti-cultural, anti-human appeal. (Mann 1968: 360)

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In jazz, 'that savage device' (ibid.: 360) was to become a part of the basic melodic language. Other attacks on Western musical ideals included wide vibratos, extreme tones; honks, squeaks and wails, and most importantly a vocalised, individualistic approach to the instrument that diverges greatly from the tonal ideal of homogeneity and rationality which underlies the conservatory musician's approach. In this, and in many other respects, the history of jazz may be sociologically conceived as a series of related attempts of a marginalised community to challenge, subvert and replace the institutionalised forms and codes of European music.

In the years between 1915 and 1945, the collectivism and stability which characterised New Orleans jazz, and society, were undermined; by crop failures, economic depression, the rebirth of the Klu Klux Klan, two world wars, and the displacement of the black community northwards. Lacking any political or economic power, blacks were easily made to bear the brunt of these crises. A system of cultural and economic apartheid developed which ghettoised black culture and music, creating an increasing sense of self-identity, independence and resistance to dominant cultural patterns. In later 1920s New Orleans and Chicago styles, and then in the 1930s swing orchestras and combos, these mostly took the form of attempts at co-existence or compromise. Thus Louis Armstrong brought an extremely Africanised and vocalised style to the trumpet yet also brought to the instrument a much more developed sense of tonal-harmony than earlier players. Sidran argues that he represented, 'the equipoise, the visceral balance between Western and Negro musical styles...' reflecting, 'The ambiguous position of black culture (in the 1920s) - not yet ready to abandon either the strength of cultural isolation or the hope for assimilation. (1971: 3)

Similarly, Count Basie and Duke Ellington's swing orchestras were built around an African sense of syncopation, and included call-and-response patterns

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traceable to work-songs and the black church, yet also heightened the importance of European notation and instrumental technique, and reduced the central role of improvisation. But by the 1930s black and white had fallen completely apart; single companies running separate racially-defined publishing companies and record labels, Ellington's orchestra even had two separate repertoire books - one for black audiences one for whites. (Sidran 1971: 74) The appeal for compromise, for the acceptance of the black in a white context, had failed.

In the 1940s bebop became the first self-consciously avant-garde jazz. Despite being rooted in the same combination of African and European influences as earlier forms, it constituted a decisive and radical break. Bop refused the social functions of earlier jazz forms: it was too nervous, loud and confrontational to be taken as a background for drinking or dancing, as rhythmic and harmonic freedom and complexity, freedom of improvisation, and sheer tempo were all vastly increased. To add to this the musicians seemed irreverent and rude, refusing to defer to the audience and rejecting the traditional role of 'the entertainer' that black minstrels and musicians had personified since slavery. Of course, the music was not accepted by the musical elite, added to which its complexity and modernism also alienated the beboppers from a large section of the black community. By virtue of their alienation and schizophrenia, and rejection by both elite culture and the market, they came to inhabit an insecure social sphere where avant-garde jazz musicians of all races and nationalities have tended to reside ever since.

Ideologically bebop can be understood in two almost contradictory senses. Technically and harmonically the music demanded an artistry which competed with that of European concert music and in many respects it may be understood as an attempt to pull jazz towards away from Entertainment towards Art. However the context of this complexity, the

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actual musical codes employed, were still resoundingly African (for example rhythm, the key role of improvisation, and blues tonalities). Bebop may thus be read both as an affirmation of European art music's institutionalised status (it was something the beboppers wanted to gain acceptance within) and as a denial of the authority of the musical practices and codes of that institution, replacing them with alien ones. Sidran writes:

Bop was based on the American tradition that the black man had to prove that he was *better* than the white man on the white man's own terms because it was only by being better that he had been accepted in the past... The bop musician began to learn the foundations of Western harmony with a vengeance and to apply them in radically inventive ways... Thus even as the black musician was struggling to beat the white man at his own game, he was attempting to extend peculiarly black idioms... (ibid.: 95)

Throughout the 1950's two styles of jazz predominated: Cool jazz, broadly speaking a white style, played mostly by West-coast conservatory musicians, and tended towards introspection and lay greater stress on a more European melodic sense, and Hard-bop; an important precursor of the Black is Beautiful movement, a New York black style of populist 'good-time' bebop, which displayed its African roots with pride.

In the 1960s a new avant-garde emerged amidst fantastic and bitter controversy; free jazz. Though every previous historical style had contained avant-garde aspects, most especially bebop, free jazz was the first avant-garde in the full sense that it was not a style or system, and did not seek to replace the existing codes or institutions of either jazz or European music with another code. Its challenge was, in fact, to any institutionalised artistic language at all and it proposed the absolute centrality of improvisation and rhythmic freedom, jazz's 'blackest' elements, emphasising

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the temporal, non-established and dialogic aspects of musical practice.

...the improvisation takes place entirely in action, in melodic action, but without following a theme, being obliged neither to keep to or depart from any *a priori* reference... At most, if there are norms, they are worked out in the course of the action - they are ephemeral - both rhythmically and melodically, or from the point of view of the overall atmosphere of the piece. We are as far removed as possible from pre-established *structures* - they are constantly being developed. (Willener 1970: 239)

Between them the free jazz pioneers, among them pianist Cecil Taylor, saxophonists Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, the bandleader Sun Ra, and then later Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp and Pharoah Sanders, challenged all the conventional rules surrounding tonality, melody and rhythm, freeing their music from key, bar lines, notation and composition. Many players utilised instruments in new and extreme ways, amplifying the African concept of music-as-voice, often with extreme emotional impact. For his part Ornette Coleman rejected the exclusive European system of objective temperament, proposing instead a free-aesthetic than was wholly collective and subjective, stating his aim as to;

to play whatever passes through my head and heart without ever having to worry about whether it's right or wrong... each being's imagination is their own unison, and there are as many unisons as there are stars in the sky.<sup>6</sup>

Free jazz was actually not a single style but many, it was individual, stressing the singularity of the musician's own voice within a collective improvisory context. Traditional instrumental divisions of labour, for example, those between rhythm instruments and lead instruments, disappeared, bass

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and drums became liberated from time-keeping, rhythm being instead negotiated by the whole group. Chicago-based Musicians such as Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell and Leo Smith took these experiments even further, proposing a 'Creative Music' ethos which went beyond either jazz or European music, experimenting with a wide variety of different collective, improvisational and compositional forms.

The conservatory-trained black pianist Cecil Taylor vociferously argued for the specific *blackness* of his free approach, and refuted any comparison's with modernist European composition, (Spellman 1966: 35) to which he declared himself resolutely opposed, arguing that their two aesthetics were 'totally divorced'. (Willener 1970: 256) Ideologically free jazz thus broke with jazz's tradition of ambivalence and compromise. For the first time black musicians declared complete opposition to white American and European high culture, asserting the superiority of their own forms, and specifically of improvisation over composition. This was a complete subversion of the aesthetic priorities, of all the rationalistic codes and institutions, of European art music.

Free jazz attempted to build a place for itself in the black community, outside both art and commerce. Many musicians, especially those in Chicago, led workshops for young players and tried to make the music less competitive and more accessible than jazz had traditionally been. Musicians also organised their own concerts - such as the *October Revolution in Jazz* - and clubs, and attempted to gain complete institutional independence with the formation of the Jazz Composers' Guild; a collective which sought to correct many injustices of the music industry. Largely as a response to saxophonist John Coltrane's pantheist religious conversion, the image of the jazz musician changed in this period too, temporarily transformed from 'bohemian drug addicts' to 'representative of the community' and also as

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political spokesmen for it. As saxophonist Frank Lowe put it, '...a musician of value or worth to the community. A musician to inform, a musician to raise kids by' (Wilmer 1977: 34)

Politically many of the black musicians adhered to a black-nationalist position, which to an extent the developments in the music itself had helped to preempt, a fact which minister Malcom X alluded to more than once in his speeches. Saxophonist Archie Shepp;

The Negro musician is a reflection of the Negro people as a social phenomenon. His purpose ought to be to liberate America aesthetically and socially from its inhumanity. The inhumanity of the White American to the black American, as well as the inhumanity of the white American to the white American, it is not basic to America and can be exorcised. I think the Negro people through their struggles are the only hope of saving America... (Kofsky 1970: 9)

### Black Music, White People

Though the vast majority of innovations in jazz have come from black musicians, white American musicians played their own variants of jazz from the earliest days. Berendt writes that in New Orleans and Chicago they tended to be technically better, more harmonically and melodically orthodox, and less individual. The same can be said of many of the white swing bands in the 1930s, which were very much standardised and Europeanised dilutions of the black styles. For the most part what passed as 'Jazz' throughout the 1920's and 1930's both in Europe and white America, was simply normal European dance music with a newly 'syncopated' beat, having very little to do with jazz at all. Perhaps the cool styles of the 1950s were the first legitimately white jazz styles. Musicians such as Lennie Tristano, Warne Marsh, Lee Konitz and Jimmy Guiffrie experimented with many

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new improvisational models, including free improvisation, and the first white American avant-garde jazz movement developed.

In Europe jazz, via the gramophone record, received a massive secondary audience, and since the 1930's Europeans have formed an important economic base for black American jazz styles. For the most part European musicians were content to imitate current or past black jazz styles, and to build their own variants of them (such as 'trad' and 'skiffle'). In the late 1950s and early 1960s a number of important changes came about. Firstly, a large part of the the black American free-jazz avant-garde actually became economically rooted in Europe, and it is arguable that since this time Europeans have formed the *primary* audience for many of the most radical and avant-garde developments in the music. Secondly, building from models constructed by the black-Americans, musicians in Germany, Holland and England developed their own original styles of free jazz, many of which then went a stage further, towards the development of new forms of free group improvisation, or free music, which no longer referred to jazz or to American music for its primary identity or meaning.

There is a sociological problem here. Throughout jazz's literature free jazz tends to be interpreted as a specifically and radically *black* form from which jazz's European elements have been entirely stripped. Yet it is precisely at this point that the music became perhaps more popular amongst white Europeans than black Americans, and is also taken up by European musicians, who, by departing from it, for the first time make an original and equal contribution to the jazz-tradition. How is this explicable? To interpret the interest of white Americans and Europeans as 'sympathy' with black political ambitions, as one commentator does (Sidran 1971: 144-145) seems naive and unsatisfactory, and surely overemphasises the historical importance of the black-nationalist perspective to free jazz

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- as do Kofsky (1970) and Jones (1963, 1967), for example, despite the undoubted importance of their contributions.

Recognising the limitations of the black-nationalist argument sociologist Alan Lewis (1987) tries to link free jazz instead to a global 'culture of modernism'. In my view Lewis makes the opposite mistake and fundamentally misunderstands the specific natures both of jazz and of modernism, subsuming a specifically black American cultural development under a European high-cultural category to which it is actually quite alien and opposed. A number of other attempts have been made to explain the music's intercultural appeal and its acceptance in Europe (see Williams 1983 251-257, Newton 1958, Cutler 1985: 54-55, Small 1987: 142, 317-319, 482) but most of these tend towards a stress on the the 'universality' of jazz's message. Few of the arguments within the literature go very far in explaining the social-logic of the music's *specific* acceptance in Europe at that historical point in the 1960s.

Iain MacGregor gives us one clue to the solution to this problem, reporting autobiographically on his own recognition that, 'Jazz made me understand how art is not artifacts but activity'. (1983: 21) MacGregor's insight allows us to link jazz, especially through its improvisational component, directly to the avant-garde. In all its phases jazz, as I have demonstrated above, has contained many avant-garde aspects which represent political and cultural subversion of institutionalised languages, codes and modes of organisation, improvisation is central to this. Through improvisation, jazz proposed the priority of a non-official, critical popular culture in opposition to high culture, or official culture, emphasizing spontaneity, freedom, perpetual change and and open-endedness. These avant-gardist aspects became purified in free jazz to the extent that it transcended the specific and radical historical 'blackness' of its standpoint. Free jazz, rather

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than being a narrow experssion of black-nationalism or part of a (European) 'global culture of modernism' became an expression of an international avant-gardism.

### May 1968

The strikes, riots, occupations and multifarious 'happenings' occurring in Paris in May 1968 were very largely inspired by the avant-gardist conviction that *cultural* action could be *politically* revolutionary. In this, as for Dada and Surrealism, the idea of political structure being an intuitive product of improvisation became essential.

Though the basic model for the New Left was a Marxist one, under the influence of Herbert Marcuse and others the agency of revolution was also expanded to include a number of 'marginal' groups having little stake in the dominant society. A number of different forms of action also came to be regarded as politically-legitimate. Drugs, music and sex, for example, could all be seen as celebrations of subversion of dominant ideologies, and therefore as revolutionary. The notion developed, in common with the perspective of the Futurists and Dadaists, that 'established society' was not, *and could not be*, centred, but was on the verge of fragmentation and collapse. The political and cultural imperative thus became the development of a new society spontaneously in the 'here and now' which would replace the old, in which improvisation, intuition and action would take precedence over received wisdom and structure. Alfred Willener writes:

...the double juncture between anarchism and Marxism and between politics and culture was probably one of the essential features of the May events...

We (also) felt that a kinship existed between May and various other movements, both earlier (Dada, Surrealism) and contemporary (avante-garde movements in jazz, the theatre, and the cinema) The

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first characteristic of this intersectional, politico-cultural, anarcho-Marxist current is to proceed from a total critique of established society, a critique that is also directed at the established opposition, to the *affirmation* of a new society that is experienced, here and now... a society that was non-established and intended to remain so. (Willener 1970: introduction)

Art and culture as institutional categories and codes again came under threat.

Culture is the general sphere of knowledge and of representations of the lived... Culture is the locus of the search for lost unity. In this search for unity, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself. (Debord 1983: 180)

The 'work of art' is no longer a finished closed structure (or product) but an open indeterminate process which never ends - a sort of perpetual potlach ceremony to which one brings as much as one takes (or more), in other words: LIFE. (Lebel 1967: 4)

This negation is synonymous with Dada's destruction of Art and with the Surrealist fusion of art and life. The alternative society and its spontaneous mode of constitution is also very similar to Tzara's, placing in improvisation the trust for the construction of the new society and the demolition of the old. This emphasis on improvised action centres on a concern for authenticity which, like Breton's automatic writing, proposes that structure should come from action unmediated by conscious thought or restraint. Like the Beat writers in North America of a generation before there is a desire to spontaneously experience present-time deeply and fully, for oneself, for complete involvement in reality, keeping free from contamination by received ideas, from all that has passed and from all that is to come;

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Our every moment crumbles into bits and pieces of past and future. We never really give ourselves over completely to what we are doing, except perhaps in orgasm. Our present is grounded in what we are going to do later and in what we have just done, with the result that it always bears the stamp of unpleasure. (Vaneigem 1970: 86)

We can begin to understand part of what was behind the acceptance of free-jazz by many of the students and their sympathisers. Free jazz was experienced and interpreted by them as a symbolic sonic representation of the new society, and also an indication of the possibilities of a basic unity of perspective between 'marginal' and critical groups in different societies. Vaneigem makes these links clear:

...spontaneity is immediate experience, consciousness of a lived immediacy... Consciousness of the present harmonises with lived experience in a sort of extemporisation. The pleasure this brings us - impoverished by its isolation, yet potentially rich because it reaches out towards an identical pleasure in other people - bears a striking resemblance to the enjoyment of jazz. (Vaneigem 1970: 150)

Willener, as well as noting the conscious political orientation of many of the free jazz players, argues:

The revolutionary activities of the students put the emphasis on the individual, who redefines his roles, invents others, and rejects the adaptation of a 'play' that he himself did not write. By practising collective improvisation, the students rediscovered procedures that had been practised at earlier times and in other places, and sometimes drew inspiration from those examples...

Free jazz presents, in a general way, not only the problem of the present oppression of the blacks and of the search for an identity that young blacks share with many others, of different origin, but also that of the alternative - too often dismissed as

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utopian in the pejorative sense - of future non-oppression, of the absence of an imposed order. (Willener 1970: 230,260)

So, although free jazz was historically and socially bound to a black nationalist perspective, it was also structurally, philosophically and politically allied with the development of the contemporary avant-garde. Free improvisation or free music emerged when jazz's remaining generic and formal aspects were either modified or stripped away. Though its sources were predominantly Afro-american it was thus initially a European, and later a truly international, avant-garde music.

It should be made clear that I am not attempting to situate free jazz or the avant-garde solely or wholly in the context of May 1968, that is rather one point at which they meet, and is one historical source of a free music which goes beyond jazz. Historically the inception of free music certainly has links with May 1968 and similar events throughout Europe, it comes in fact from the same era of disruption and reformation. However it is also a form that has its own specific characteristics and which, unlike the politics of May 1968, survives to the present day, May 1968 being just one facet of its much longer and more complex path of development.

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## CHAPTER TWO: FREE MUSIC IN LONDON 1965-1990

Firstly, the inevitable disclaimer. Free improvisation is not a form, genre or method but a process. As such it cannot really be said to have a history, rather it establishes itself on the basis of where it is, which might be very different on different occasions:

It has no characteristics that one could group together to give it a 'face,' to pin it down, to own it. It is not a genre and has no history. Its point of origin is indeterminable. (Corbett 1986: 20)

This section, having little to do with the experience of making or listening to music, may also be said to have little to do with Free music. In order to ease this a little, some audio-material is provided (see Appendix Four), along with some commentary, though in the end these recordings too are inevitably *representations* of free music rather than actual examples of it. In this context the tape is a document which records the trace of an object, it should not be mistaken for the object.

Free music, that is, musical improvising not requiring jazz or any other historical genre for definition,<sup>7</sup> seems, retrospectively to have had the aura of historical necessity around it. That is, it developed in a lot of different places at around the same time, mainly in pubs and clubs in places such as Sheffield and London, and also in Cologne, Berlin and Wuppertal, Chicago and Amsterdam. It is the nature of the beast that an absolute date cannot be given but 1965 is better than most, though guitarist Derek Bailey cites coming across some form of free improvising in 1957 (Bailey 1980: 101) and 1967 might be more accurate - as by then the specifically jazz-like elements of the music seem to have been more thoroughly stripped away.

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In Sheffield in the mid-1960s the group Josef Holbrooke played a modally based open-form of jazz improvisation influenced by Bill Evans and John Coltrane, and also by Karlhienz Stockhausen and John Cage. (Bailey 1980 102-110) How quickly or slowly the process came about is difficult to say - there is no recorded evidence - suffice to say that one day the musicians decided that it was no longer jazz, but something else, Derek Bailey (see interview below) calls this Free Music.

In the '60s the move from jazz to free music was almost implicit... We found that what that music meant was to stop playing that music and do something else.

You see jazz is about getting a certain atmosphere, a kind of fantasy element that's in almost all music, and I don't think free music deals with that at all. I don't think it's got anything to do with atmosphere, I think it's dumped that. But jazz, like Indian music, is a whole world, it's a kind of aura that people can slip into, it's a trip. I don't think free music offers that, it can't turn you into whatever you want to be, it's not going to dump you in 42nd street in 1945, it's not going to put you in some kind of Flamenco bar, it's not going to have you sitting with a woman in a nightclub or on the banks of the Sienne in 1890... all these kind of fantasies. You don't have that programmatic element to it, because nobody knows what the fuck it's going to be anyway. Most people who play it, I believe, don't set out to recreate something, they just set out to play. (Derek Bailey)

In London John Stevens (see interview below), Trevor Watts and Paul Rutherford (see interview below) formed the Spontaneous Music Ensemble (SME) who were based at the Little Theatre Club, opening January 3rd 1966. Again this was initially a free jazz group, this time inspired more by Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler. The SME focussed on and distilled one aspect of jazz - collective communication

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through improvisation. Jazz's harmonic, melodic, thematic and rhythmic contents and instrumental division of labour were laid aside, its emphasis on technical virtuosity relegated to the sidelines;

Being in tune, as closely as possible, with all the people that are around you and at the same time never contributing to the extent that you couldn't hear what the people around you were saying. So nothing you had to say was more important than an awareness of the whole... And it doesn't matter what it sounds like. You're listening to the interaction and that's what you're giving over to the other people... It's got nothing to do with how brilliantly someone plays the saxophone or the drums or whatever.

The thing that matters most in group music is the relationship between those taking part. The closer the relationship the greater the spiritual warmth it generates, and if the musicians manage to give wholly to each other and to the situation they're in, then the sound of the music takes care of itself. Good and Bad become simply a question of how much the musicians are giving, that is the music's form. (John Stevens)

The SME also encouraged many 'non-musicians' to take part in their music-making, emphasising a workshop over a performance approach, nevertheless its aesthetics and methods especially under the influence of John Stevens were very tightly and clearly adhered to - it was a highly orchestrated anarchism<sup>a</sup>.

There were these people around who weren't skilled musicians to the degree of an Evan Parker or a Kenny Wheeler. So I thought, 'Mmm, well, I'll play with *them*,' and find ways where we could have an experience together within the potential of their own skills or lack of them. Ha ha! We actually did the Montreux-fucking-jazz-festival, I took this team of people who were scared shitless... (John Stevens)



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This said, a lot of the SME's recordings document a highly virtuosic music. *Ten Minutes* (1.1) is an example of a combination of extreme instrumental virtuosity with a collective attitude in which a division of labour (say between soloing and accompanying instruments) has completely disintegrated. The collective dynamics including stop/start patterns, parallel lulls and crescendos, the development of a group centre to which all the activity responds and helps define - this partly takes the form of a never-quite defined rhythmic pulse. The music shows two immediately perceptible levels of development; rapid note-to-note altercation and the overall shapes, concentrations and contours which seems to result from this activity.

Many of the musicians associated with the SME during and after this period developed their virtuosity to a remarkable degree - saxophonist Evan Parker being perhaps the most striking example of this. To some extent this represented a change of emphasis in free group music.

The notion of an *egoless* way of playing, I think that that was discovered not to be an accurate way of thinking. You see I think there was the feeling that if you, if we, could play totally for the group, could play in a way that was a response to what was there already, in a certain way in a deferential response to what was there, then this was more truly collective. But there's a kind of naive quality to that thinking because if everybody adopts that line then there's no music, because there's no starting point, because nobody wants to assert themselves enough to say, 'the music could start here'.

I discovered that asserting myself was part of the discipline and part of what was required. In the end it was more interesting for me to acknowledge that I was doing this because I wanted to do it and that there are certain things that I would *like* to happen. As long as I remain sensitive to the things that other players would like to happen there's actually nothing wrong with me guiding

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the music in a particular direction for a certain part of the time.  
(Evan Parker)

The Little Theatre Club, and later also The Old Place, based at Ronnie Scott's jazz club, introduced many musicians to improvising and to each other, amongst dozens of others; vocalists Maggie Nicols (see interview below) and Julie Tippetts, bassist Marcio Mattos (see interview below), guitarists John Russell (see interview below) and Roger Smith, and trumpeter Paul Shearsmith (see interview below).

The Musician's Co-operative developed as the need for a representative body became clear, its membership was drawn mostly of jazz-trained virtuosi to organise concerts and attempted to secure funding and resources independently of the commercial music or jazz worlds, who were either perceived to be uninterested or unsuitable (e.g. see Riley 1972). Some particularly important groups of this period were pianist Howard Riley's trio (with drummer Tony Oxley and bassist Barry Guy), The Music Improvisation Company (Bailey, Parker, percussionist Paul Lytton, vocalist Christine Jeffrey and Hugh Davis, live electronics) and Iskra 1903 (Bailey, Guy and trombonist Paul Rutherford). In addition to extended and extreme technical explorations and modifications (e.g. extended drum-kits, multiphonic saxophone techniques, new guitar plucking and tuning methods) these groups explored ever-widening degrees of sounds and dynamics, developing new interactive group methods. *Improvisation 5* (1.2) and *Incision 1* (1.3) reflect two aspects of these virtuoso 'styles'. *Improvisation 5* (1.2) illustrates a more 'lyrical' approach than the SME and perhaps an even greater unity between the note-to-note procedures and the overall shapes that these interactions leave behind them. An expanded range of dynamic possibility and textural exploration is evident, and although this allows more individuality of line to develop the musicians are still intimately bound together throughout; this is

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still an emphatically collective music. In *Incision 1* (1.3) this collective approach is even more clear, the two lines remain interlocked throughout, at times creating the illusion of a single line, or two cores of a cable. The emphasis here, partly but not wholly because it is a later recording, is less on exploration for its own sake than on the development of a specific language and syntax. Though these recordings chart movement towards a more virtuosic professional improvisation the SME's more collective utopian aims remained influential throughout this period.

Almost all the early free improvising groups engendered interest from the mainstream record labels in this period and produced albums, which, however were not heavily advertised or promoted by the record companies, and once the initial pressings were sold or remaindered most fell almost immediately out of print.

By 1968 international contacts had developed and British musicians performed alongside German, Dutch and American improvisers in the *Total Music Meeting* in Berlin in 1968 and 1969, performances with pianist Alex Von Schlippenbach's Globe Unity Orchestra, and with saxophonist Peter Brötzmann's infamously extreme *Machine Gun* octet. Though many areas of compatibility were discovered national differences were also highlighted - these are often caricatured with the clichés that the Germans sounded aggressively expressive, the British spikey, cold and severe, and the Dutch theatrical and wacky. C.F. Atton (1989), for example, calls these general descriptions 'gross and stereotypical'. Though these simplifications are heavily distortative they did, and do, refer to real differences in that German improvisation often owes more to the expressionism of the free jazz tradition, and the Dutch owes more to music-theatre pastiche and post-modernism, while British musicians characteristically tended to explore the least-charted musical regions. However these differences pale beside the importance placed on the processes of free

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improvisation, and in many cases these and other different styles and methods have been successfully combined in actual performance.

The late 1960s also saw more international interaction with the arrival in Britain of a number of South African jazz musicians who brought a completely different attitude to the music (2.1, 2.2). Musicians such as bassist Johnny Dyani, saxophonist Dudu Pukwana and drummer Louis Moholo (see interview below) participated in free improvisation, bringing to it a new rhythmic impetus, and also, along with British free-jazz players, such as saxophonist Elton Dean and pianist Keith Tippett, helped to found a specifically British/South African form of free-jazz. Pianist Chris McGregor's big band, The Brotherhood of Breath, combined South African musicians with British players from both free-jazz and free improvising backgrounds (see also 2.2). Many of these musicians recorded for the Ogun label set up by the South African bassist Harry Miller.

### The People Band, AMM, The Scratch Orchestra

Independently of the free music 'mainstream' other groups initiated developments of their own, they did not form a united front of any kind, although many had in common with SME a questioning of the role of instrumental technique and training. The People Band (see Beresford 1977), who came together around 1965 set about some remarkable performances proposing an anarchistic 'anything goes' aesthetic which for a period they maintained with remarkable consistency. Performances stated when they started and finished when they finished, audiences joined in, noise and chaos ensued and were welcomed: 'They admit Chaos frankly... they move around in it freely without fear and make their own patterns.' (Beresford {ed} 1977: 16)

AMM was a free jazz group who very quickly stripped away the jazz language and made very different investigations into chaos and order; these were thorough, meticulous and

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daunting. For a long time this group (drummer Eddie Prevost, saxophonist Lou Gare, guitarist Keith Rowe, cellist Lawrance Sheaff, and later also composer Cornelius Cardew, piano) - inhabited a sphere all their own, having little connection with the other strands of free improvisation. In *The Crypt* (1.5), for example, there is an emphasis on sonic intensity and the development of long-term shapes (more adequately illustrated on 1.6) to the extent that the sound-field almost seems static. Individual sounds, which include both traditional instruments as well as radios, household objects and everyday materials, merge into a mass in which the barriers between music and noise are placed under severe stress. In many ways their many-layered orchestral approach shared more in common with the improvising groups that emerged from contemporary composed music, for example New Phonic Art and Musica Electronica Viva, than with other British improvised music. In 1971 Cardew wrote of sessions that the group held in the tiny music room at the London School of Economics five years earlier;

This proliferation of sound sources in such a confined space produced a situation where it was often impossible to tell who was producing which sounds - or rather which portions of the single room-filling deluge of sound... as individuals we were absorbed into a composite activity in which solo-playing and any kind of virtuosity were relatively insignificant. (Cardew 1971)

In 1969 Cornelius Cardew, along with Micheal Parsons and Howard Skempton, formed the Scratch Orchestra which was to explore all sorts of models of composition, graphic and indeterminate scoring, controlled and more-or-less free improvisation. Initially its membership was made up of music students from Cardew's composition class at Morley College but quickly came to include a hundred professional, amateur and 'non-musicians'. The Orchestra was a performance organization that also stressed the need for musical

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research 'through direct experience' (Sutherland no date 2: 10). Roger Sutherland (who was himself a member, see the interview below) records that in the twelve months following December 1969 the Scratch Orchestra gave 50 concerts in venues of all different sorts - indoor and outdoor, both urban and rural, in London, Cornwall and Wales.

### The Influence of Maoist and Socialist Perspectives

By 1971 the 'benign anarchy' (Sutherland *ibid.*) of the Scratch Orchestra had begun to disappear as Cardew and others became Maoists, revising earlier perspectives and questioning the function of the orchestra. Along with pianist John Tilbury and Keith Rowe, Cardew proposed that music must be put directly to work for the proletarian revolution, that its class-ideological perspectives must be made explicit. Under this line of fire not only the anarchy of AMM and the Scratch Orchestra was rejected but 'bourgeois' avant-garde or experimental music and culture *per se*. A split formed in AMM along Maoist/humanist (see Eddie Prevost's scathing letter to his colleague Rowe in *Microphone 6*) and The Scratch Orchestra itself disintegrated, most of its members drifting off to explore other areas, and what was left of it took a much more conventional professional musical approach. Cardew abandoned free and experimental music, condemning it as 'bourgeois' and instead took to composing socialist-realist works employing popular and 'proletarian' folk and rock forms which would communicate the desired message. He later formed the rock band Peoples Liberation Music, proclaiming,

Our music, as socialists (and as working people), must be music that embodies our experience of struggle, is useful in the struggle, and promotes the revolutionary world outlook of the working class. (Cardew 1975: 13, also see Sutherland interview below)

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Tilbury criticised Stockhausen's music in much the same spirit, arguing that because it encouraged the performer to discover, to quote the composer, their 'inner selves' and 'what they have forgotten about themselves,' that,

on the contrary (it is) a vehicle to *intensify* the audience's feelings of separation, isolation and alienation from their fellow beings. "Discover what they have forgotten about themselves," exemplifies the old romantic yearning for a paradise lost. (Tilbury 1981)

Similarly Rowe, in an article, which begins and ends with quotes from Mao, accused John Cage of attempting,

to liquidate the flames of struggle in the world... to sow confusion and promote disunity, and in doing so (to) definitely support the most oppressive class in the world's history - U.S. Imperialism. (Rowe 1972)

These notions were also expressed in a somewhat more sophisticated (and literate) manner by other musicians. For example trumpeter Gerry Gould wrote in 1975;

Improvisation in music is a living developing art form which seeks consciously or unconsciously to confront society with a picture of the great turbulence breaking through the surface as a result of rapidly sharpening class conflict...

The surfacing of the contradictions within the capitalist system provide a very fertile breeding ground for many new forms of artistic expression... Collective improvisation is one of these...

The development of music can only proceed by turning to the progressive forces in society. The revolutionary upsurge of the working-class throughout the world must provide the impetus for great changes in consciousness... Musicians and all performers must turn consciously to the advanced section of the working class. Real

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development in all forms of art can only come with the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system. (Gold 1975)

For other musicians too the politics of improvised music became an important issue, though often in a manner which reflected more directly on the character and process of actually making the music, and the social relations that are thus formed. Evan Parker wrote in 1972;

Group Improvisation... offers an escape from a composer's inevitable intentions forced on the hierarchically inferior performers (drones?) and leads to a unique sound event made by a group of equal individuals working in social equality in relation to the unique environment (acoustics, listeners etc) of the performance. (Parker 1972)

He ends this article with the slogan. 'No composers - no leaders - no hierarchy.' (see also Parker 1975, Prevost 1975). It is in a similar sense that Christopher Small refers to improvisers as, 'attempting to restore lost communality to western music'. (Small 1980: 175)

The 1970s generally produced both consolidation and diversity. The absence of serious record-company interest in free improvisation (or in free jazz or jazz of any other kind) led to the formation of musician-run Incus Records, following the example of the German Free Music Production and the Dutch Instant Composers Pool (see ICP 1976, Forst {no date}, Noglik 1989). International contacts became more and more important at this time, many of the musicians relying more and more on European performances for their livelihood.

For a time in 1972 a magazine *Microphone* was set up which included coverage of the music though this quickly folded. Many new musicians and groups followed, some from a jazz background, but often had classical or rock roots, for

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example multi-instrumentalists Steve Beresford (see interview below) and Clive Bell, guitarists Fred Frith, David Toop and Peter Cusack, percussionist Paul Burwell, and violinist Sylvia Hallett many of whom had attended Stevens/SME workshops. These musicians, who collectively (and rather against their wishes) became entitled the 'second generation', (Ansell 1985a) drew from diverse musical sources with equally diverse results, frequently employing elements drawn from popular and ethnic musics and passages which 'referred' to and collaged these and other forms in a way that was quite unlike the originating generation.

The new developments did not come about without conflict, especially over the importance or instrumental technique and the attitude towards group playing. Beresford angered some with his disruptive approach to group playing and performance, and by implying that he became a free improviser because, 'I'm a failed classical pianist and I'm a failed jazz pianist, basically'. (Lake 1977: 15) The conflicts led Evan Parker, along with the American musicians Anthony Braxton and Leo Smith, to decline to play with Beresford at the 1977 Company Festival. Parker later criticised Beresford for, as he saw it, playing the piano badly on purpose; 'What do you mean in a performance where you play the piano like a child, when you have a perfectly developed technique?' (Beresford and Kieffer {eds.} 1978: 4) Beresford's response that he was interested in being 'funny', and also in 'awful and embarrassing', (ibid.: 7) did not help clear the problem up.

The new players also differed from the first generation in that they developed a much more performance-oriented approach, sometimes employing performance attitudes which seemed to owe something to music-theatre and Dadaism. In *Not So Dumb, Deaf and Mute, Herione* and *Party Political* (1.7 a,b and c) a great variety of sound-sources and styles can be heard contrasting and confronting each other, strung

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together with a fragmentary, surrealistic logic. There is much less concern with conventional instrumental technique or in the search for a new language than with collective exploration, conflict, contradiction and juxtaposition, and also in pastiche and parody, clearly discernible in Beresford's warnings against the dangerous ideologies of greengrocers and electrical wholesalers as the final piece closes. The anti-virtuosic, performance-oriented aspect finds particularly radical expression in Hugh Metcalf's *My guitar is a Virgin* (1.8). Traditional instrumental virtuosity plays virtually no part all in this music, which seems to relate to conventional musicality almost entirely by its nihilistic opposition to it.

These musicians co-existed, for example, with Chamberpot, which included violinist Phil Wachsmann (see interview below) whose chamber-music approach lay in completely the opposite direction, towards a complete avoidance of reference to any recognisable conventional musical form at all;

The music was ardently non-tonal, post-Webern, in order to avoid cliches or the regurgitation of other music... no octaves, avoiding tonality. The thing was that in those days as soon as you hit a concord or a long-pedal the music would automatically start sounding like something else... If someone used a tonal tune or something like that, it polarizes everything that everyone else does towards it. It's like talking to someone with a one-track mind. (Phil Wachsmann)

In 1976 members of this very diverse group came together to form the London Musicians Collective (LMC), which for the ten years between 1978 and 1988 ran a permanent venue and rehearsal space in which members organised their own performances. Many of these musicians were also involved in running, and recording for, Bead records and producing *Musics* and *Collusion* magazines, both of which focussed on

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writing about music by musicians (*Impetus* magazine also covered improvised music for some years in this period). Since the early '70s musicians collectives have also functioned intermittently in other parts of the country, for example Bristol, York, Sheffield, Leeds (Steele 1975), Manchester, Lancaster, Breton and Stoke on Trent.

Alongside the LMC other musicians - such as saxophonist Lol Coxhill, vocalist Phil Minton (see interview below) and percussionist Roger Turner also developed distinctive and individual free improvising styles. Throughout this period any notion of 'British Improvised Music' as something with any specific characteristics or common objectives dissolves, and it makes more sense to see something like a co-existent diversity, a plurality which included conflicts, particularly over the issue of instrumental technique, language and group dynamics. (See, for example see the discussion over technique in Beresford and Kieffer {eds}, and also Lake 1977, Atton 1989, and the Beresford interview below.)

The Feminist Improvising Group (FIG) - Maggie Nicols, vocals, (see interview below) Georgie Born, cello Lindsay Cooper, reeds, and others - brought a very new attitude to the music, which included theatricality, new levels of intimacy between performers and audience and a new awareness of the politics of performance in all its senses. This group did not record, but at least some aspects of their legacy can be heard on *What's This?* (1.14) where Maggie Nicols and Julie Tippetts achieve a level of personal and musical intimacy and immediacy quite distinct from that of other improvising styles.

The original generation were still highly active through the '70s: Derek Bailey and Evan Parker increasingly enjoyed international reputations as virtuoso soloists (1.4 and 1.9, see also 1.10), performing in Germany, Holland, Italy and other countries. Barry Guy set up the (rather inaccurately named) London Jazz Composer's Orchestra who combined free-

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improvisation with contemporary composition (see the 1987 recording, 2.4 and 2.5) while Eddie Prévost, John Stevens and Trevor Watts all took collective improvisatory models into a number of other genres, including free-jazz and jazz-rock (for example 2.9, see also 2.6).

In 1976 Derek Bailey formed Company, a group with fluctuating personnel drawn from many different countries and musical backgrounds, and often not free-improvisers 'by trade'. Bailey's aims here are very different from those of SME, AMM or from most regular improvising groups. Far from attempting to explore and refine a particular language or mode of interaction his stated interest is to prevent a definite language occurring and hardening, to explore free music's diversity, ambiguity and flexibility to the full. Something of this is audible in his duets with clarinettist Tony Coe (1.12 and 1.13). This was the product of a 'one-off' encounter, in that they do not regularly play together, Coe being mainly known as a jazz tenor saxophonist. Although the two seem to play together with intimacy and sensitivity, they achieve this by a strictly maintained separation; rather than merging they retain their separate identities, freely weaving different lines which occasionally meet, though never in a forced way. In this sense Bailey's guitar style is often described as 'abstract' or 'distanced' (e.g. Litwieller 1985: 262). This proposes a very different model of action from the SME, in which individual differences are more easily allowed and welcomed.

The 1980s saw many of the 'second generation' moving into other areas, though many also retained an involvement with improvising. For example David Toop became a journalist, Steve Beresford became involved in pop music and television soundtracks amongst other things (2.14 and 2.15), Paul Burwell co-founded the performance-oriented Bow Gamelan Ensemble, while British Summertime Ends (2.7 and 2.8, see also Fred Frith, 2.13 and 2.14) and Accordions Go Crazy play mainly postmodern blends of various ethnic and popular

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musics sometimes joined together with aspects of free improvisation. Younger musicians also appeared, many of whom seemed to return to earlier approaches, to 'ethnic' traditional musics, and to free jazz; for example those based around John Russell's Quaqua (2.15 and 2.16) and the Chris Burn ensemble, percussionist Steve Noble (see 2.19 and interview below), pianist Alex McGuire, the Ubiquity Orchestra, saxophonist John Lloyd, the musicians around Dreamtime (see Roberto Bellatalla interview below), bassists Paul Rogers and Gus Garside, pianist John Law, drummers Mark Sanders and Dave Fowler, singer Francine Luce and trumpeter John Corbett. Musicians based in Oxford, Sheffield and Manchester also developed their own individual approaches.

The 1980s also witnessed an increasingly visible international improvising scene, particularly in the USA (see *The Improviser*) and also the USSR, (see Feigin 1985), to the extent that generalisable national and regional variations are much less obvious and significant than in the late 1960s, and even the 1970s.

The original generation also survived more or less intact, though styles had hardened in some cases. Also the radical nature of some of the older improvisers has, inevitably, declined tending towards consolidation rather than experimentation and also towards less extreme tonal languages. For example AMM (see 1.6) continue but with a much more refined language, a more clearly formal approach a more developed division of musical labour and frequently an increasingly reliance on pitch as an organising factor. These processes can also be heard at work for example in the three recorded solos (1.9, 1.10, 1.11) all of which contain more conventional rhythmic and harmonic patterns (both Bailey and Parker relating almost directly to J.S. Bach in places) than earlier performances. As against this mellowing a sort of free improvising fundamentalist 'classicism' also began to develop, the textural harshness and group interplay of the Russell/Durrant/Butcher trio (1.15 and 1.16) for

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example, clearly relate to earlier styles for example of SME and Iskra 1903, the collectivism of Smith et al (1.18) to the SME, and the noisebound orchestral approach of Morphogenesis (1.17) and Conspiracy, to AMM.

The aspect of consolidation also seems to be emphasised by the formation of the Association Of Improving Musicians, a musician-run organisation whose aim is to, 'raise the profile of their music, improve the well-being of all improvising musicians as well as drawing attention to the value of this creative approach to the community at large.' (AIM 1983, see also Small et al 1984).

The 1990s sees the continuing survival of the initial generation, and international recognition for some of them plus a very diverse set of groups indeed. Many younger players work with an amalgam of influences drawn from previous free-improvising styles, free jazz and other sources. Steve Noble and Alex Ward, reeds, (1.19 also see interviews below) seek to unite separate lines which nevertheless remain separate, this approach draws from the separation that the individual instruments maintain in jazz improvisation - though the division of labour is by no means as definite - and also to the more open, distanced approach pioneered by Bailey. Yet the music also has elements which mark it out as very different from Bailey's own playing. There are, for example, many references to particular improvising musicians (e.g. the American saxophonist Anthony Braxton, the Dutch drummer Han Bennik) of the direct kind that all but never appear in Bailey's playing. In the case of post-modernistic groups such as Klang, and also Stock, Hausen and Walkman, apparently any musical material that comes to hand is useable. The latter, while retaining a definite relationship to traditional free improvising practices, draw upon radically different contents, including the ruthless violations and recomposition of fragments of other recordings. (1.20, 1.21) For younger musicians, free

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improvising has thus become a tradition, something they have grown up with, can refer to, and even parody, and by so doing extend in new directions.

As this music is still being formed I would not like to try to define it any further other than to say that all aspects of the music's history are still currently represented and there are also new developments which do not relate in any clear way to any particular historical style.

Performances are usually organised and advertised by musicians, mainly take place in arts centres, small theatres, restaurants and most commonly in back-rooms and upstairs rooms in pubs;<sup>9</sup> at any one time there are between two and ten of these venues operating regularly in London; audiences are typically between two and fifty. Occasionally there is some Greater London Arts or local arts financial support for these weekly clubs.

Today, as ever, it is virtually impossible to make a living out of free-improvising in Britain and many musicians are forced to do other work - musical or non-musical, and/or claim social security benefits in order to survive. Many also teach or take workshops in some capacity or other. Many musicians spend half or three quarters of their working lives abroad, touring and performing at festivals in Europe and elsewhere in over the world.

Free music is more than simply marginal, it exists at a level of permanent economic crisis which has never alleviated since the music's inception twenty five years ago.<sup>10</sup> Thus, one of the best-known and most internationally successful British improvisers can still comment,

Sometimes I look at the charts or the things that people write about music and I realise how totally insignificant what I do is to the vast majority of people. It has no effect, resonance or impact for anybody other than a fairly small group of people. (Fred Frith)

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Its existence has been almost entirely non-official and subcultural, outside of institutionalised culture, and outside of any established musical market.<sup>11</sup>

You work through a community of like-minded people, you don't necessarily have to go through an agent to get a gig. You can set up a large network of musicians and people who are interested in music and help each other organise things. That's the way I work, in the States, or in Japan or in Europe, it's just the same. (Fred Frith)

Like any sub-culture, free music's true history is largely private and invisible. It is not what has been outlined here, but something more localised, individualised, fleeting, uncertain and unstable; its social structures are fragmented, informal, fluid and invisible. This not only forms and informs its means of production and distribution, but also the character of the music itself.

In the proceeding chapters, in order to comprehend the character and significance of Free music, which I have largely avoided doing here, and before trying to theorize its avant-garde aspects, I will consider in some detail some different conceptions of the role and character of the contemporary avant-garde and of contemporary music in C.20th European thought, culture and society.

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### CHAPTER THREE: ADORNO AND THE DEATH OF MUSIC

In this chapter I shall introduce Adorno's sociological and philosophical studies of music, locating them in the context of his general theory. I shall discuss *The Philosophy of Modern Music* in some detail and offer a critique which disputes many of his central conclusions.

#### Adorno's Typology of Listeners

In *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* Adorno addresses the problem of musical reception. The opening lecture of the *Sociology* consists of a typology of listeners, which he insists do not refer simply to 'tastes and preferences' but to, 'the adequacy or inadequacy of the act of listening,' 'A premise is that works are objectively structured things and meaningful in themselves, things that invite analysis and can be perceived and experienced with different degrees of accuracy' (1976:4).

1. An 'expert listener' is fully conversant with the technical aspects of music and able to follow the 'purely musical' content of the piece, 'self consciously' and 'structurally' hearing each note in its relationship to the whole and each whole in its relationship to a wider tradition of which it forms a part:

Spontaneously following the course of the music, even complicated music, he hears the sequence, hears past, present and future moments together so that they crystallise into a meaningful context. Simultaneous complexities - in other words, a complicated harmony and polyphony - are separately and distinctly grasped by the expert. (1976: 4/5)

These listeners, likely to be of a small elite of professional musicians, as listening subjects, are able to enter the musical world more or less completely.

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### 2. Similarly, a 'good listener',

makes connections spontaneously, and judges for good reasons, not just by categories of prestige and by arbitrary taste: but he is not, or not fully, aware of the technical and structural implications. Having unconsciously mastered its immanent logic, he understands music about the way we understand our own language even though virtually or wholly ignorant of its grammar and syntax. (1976: 5)

3. A 'culture consumer' has no experiential or theoretical grasp of music but uses it as part of a process of self-definition. This refers particularly to the classical music listener for whom music is a reflection of social status, a 'cultural asset'. This listener spends more time deciding what to buy than listening and learns to understand music through studying biographies of the great composers and books of criticism rather than through the direct experience of its immanent structures. Adorno argues that this group appreciates the accuracy and precision of the performance, that is the *show* rather than the music that is actually performed. Adorno understands this listener to be *fetishistic*; mistaking means for ends, and *atomistic*, sitting in wait for the big tune, the grand gesture, oblivious to any relation these parts may have to the piece as a whole. This group are elitist and conservative, opposing both the popular and the new.

4. An 'emotional listener' is a subject who cannot produce relations of immediacy with objects. In listening they do not hear the actual sound - its structures and forms - only its trace, the effect that it leaves this has on their own consciousness. In *The Recording Angel* Evan Eisenberg finds such a listener in Thomas who privately acts out violent passions miming to recordings of operas;

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For Thomas, music is not structure but 'pure passion'. And Thomas's repetitions of music are not so much architectural as obsessive or incantatory, in the manner of ecstatic religion. (1983: 44)

For Adorno, such a listener hears music encoded through the distancing effects of abstract and stereotypical response categories. This listener finds in music an emotional release which is denied them in everyday life and language. Entrapped within themselves music produces an emotional fantasy world where repressed, unutterable, feelings are allowed some free play. But the repressed feelings stay internalised and unrealised, they are never genuinely exorcised. So listening is limited to reminding the listener of what they have lost, without offering any possibility of it being regained. Listening stimulates all that remains of the memory of a destroyed ability to feel.

A subtype of the emotional listener is the 'sensus listener' who refuses structural listening feeling such an approach would be cold and unemotional, for them, the essence of music would be destroyed by contact with structural appreciation or understanding. This listener is superstitious, regarding music as *magical*, offering physical and spiritual immediacy.

5. The 'resentment listener' opposes both the pure subjectivity of the emotional listener and the pretensions of the culture consumer. For this listener the central value is that of *authenticity*, which comes from musical cultures which have endured the passage of the centuries and entails close fidelity to the original techniques of performance. Here Adorno was referring to the burgeoning interest in Bach's music and to the Early Music movement, both of which he understood to be regressive negations of modernism. Here authenticity is defined by the *distance* of the aesthetic object from life and from current musical practice. This listener backs away from their own society, from the flux

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and doubt of present time to past time, to sealed and finished eras. In this act Adorno argues that they compensate for the impossibility of individual subjectivity in existing society by identifying with the music of societies in which social structures were entirely self-justificatory, which existed without questioning by any subject, by the authority of God himself; 'the resentment listener tends to a spurious rigor, to mechanical suppression of his own stirrings in the name of shelteredness in the community'.<sup>11</sup> (1976: 10)

6. The 'jazz listener' attempts to dissent from reified 'official' culture, but in a manner that finally subordinates them to it and confirms its rule. Narrow harmonic and melodic forms, the predominance of the beat and syncopation, in what Adorno (dubiously) understood to be jazz, suggested to him a return to a 'pre-artistic barbarism' (1976: 14). For this listener an ideology of rebellion and radicalism coexist with musical elements which merely reflect the preponderance and reification of technique in advanced industrial society as a whole. In *Perennial Fashion: Jazz* Adorno argues that despite having an ideology of spontaneity jazz's basic direction was actually towards the, 'rigorous exclusion of every unregimented impulse'. (1967a: 122) The jazz listener is likened to the sadomasochistic personality which gives the appearance of rebellion whilst in fact conforming.

Similarly, the apparent gratification of desire represented by the jazz soloist's erotic release and emotional expression is in fact the frustration of gratification. The jazz solo is a trick; the impression of a freely improvised individual statement disguising its reality as a scripted act which is at no point in its development truly undetermined or non-identical:

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...the so-called improvisations are actually reduced to the more or less feeble rehashing of basic formulas in which the schema shines through at every moment. (They) conform largely to norms and recur constantly, the range of the permissible in jazz is as narrowly circumscribed as in any particular cut of clothes. In view of the wealth of available possibilities for discovering and treating musical material... jazz has shown itself to be utterly impoverished. (1967a: 123)

Adorno argues that despite all appearances the jazz listener regards a particular performance as more *unique*, more *authentic*, in direct relation to the extent that it *conforms* to the restrictive demands of the idiom. Thus the adrenalin thrill of the strange rhythmic twist or the occasional dissonance in the jazz solo are not celebrated because they contain the trace of genuine rebellion but because the listener knows that the soloist will not follow the *logic* of these deviations. The fate of the deviation, its unconnectedness, highlights the all-pervasiveness of power and the impossibility of voicing real opposition to its monologue, finally confirming the very *pointlessness* of individual assertion, which in the end is always submerged by a return to collective conformity. Adorno calls this *psuedo-individualisation*.

7. Adorno's final category, which he describes with typically grim irony as quantitatively 'the only relevant one' (1976: 14) is the 'entertainment listener' - 'the type the culture industry is made for, whether it adjusts to him, in line with its own ideology, or whether it elicits or indeed creates the type' (1976: 14). This listener shares common features with the both the resentment listener and the culture consumer but is most closely allied with the jazz listener, lacking only the jazz listener's libertarian ideological pretensions.

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The structure of this sort of listening is like that of smoking. We define it more by our displeasure in turning the radio off than by the pleasure we feel, however modestly while it is playing... If the culture consumer will turn up his nose at popular music the entertainment listener's only fear is to be ranked too high. He is a self conscious lowbrow who makes a virtue of his own mediocrity... His specific mode of listening is that of distraction and deconcentration, albeit interrupted by sudden bursts of attention and recognition... (1976: 15)

On the structure of mass entertainment music Adorno writes:

Standardization exists from the overall plan down to the the details. The basic rule... that governs production everywhere is that the refrain consists of 32 bars with a 'bridge', in part initiating the repetition, in the middle. Also standardized are the various types of song... Above all it is the metric and harmonic cornerstones of any pop song, the beginning and the end of its several parts, that must follow the standardised schema. It confirms the simplest fundamental structures, whatever deviation may occur in between. Complications without consequences: the pop song leads back to a few basic perceptive categories known ad nauseam. Nothing really new is ever allowed to intrude, nothing but calculated effects that add some spice to the ever-sameness without imperilling it. And these effects in turn take their bearings from schemata. (1976: 26)

To help complete Adorno's typology we must also propose a further type; the 'technical listener', implied, but not stated, in Adorno's typology and by his discussions of total serialism. This listener shares the exclusiveness of the emotional listener but manifests it in an opposing direction, he is the 'expert' stripped of all intuitive and spontaneous faculties. Like the resentment listener this listener excludes any sense of subjectivity, emotionality or sensuousness from listening at all; his sole concern is the

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apprehension of structure. The technical listener follows the manifestation of the theme, the tone row or conceptual precepts through the piece, hearing less sound than *pure form*. Music becomes the stripping down and working out of strictly rational developments, an experimental production process. For such a listener, 'The parallel to science is total.' (Attali: 113)

Clearly the typology is not simply intended to describe different possible relationships between listeners and tones. It is genuinely a *sociology* of music in the sense that Adorno is interested in the ideological qualities of listening and in their relation to the formal structure of different genres of music, which are taken to virtually determine the listener's active or passive relation to them. These relationships of listening are viewed as being symptomatic of much broader historical relationships between individuals and social structures and critical-philosophical relationships between subjects and objects.

Before examining Adorno's perspectives on musical structure any further, we need now to explore the sources and nature of his overall social and cultural theories.

### Reification, Rationalism and Lukács

The term reification has its roots in Marx's critique of 'commodity fetishism' in *Capital*.

Commodity fetishism describes the process by which the laws of exchange in the market economy take on the appearance of being naturally evolved, rather than socially created. In the same way, commodities take on the appearance of having an objective external value 'in themselves' which is determined by exchange. Rather than the commodity being valued by the amount of human-labour objectified in it, labour, which Marx regarded as the source of all value, becomes defined in terms of the value of the commodities it produces; workers thus become an 'appendage' to capital, to

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their own objectified labour, the social relations of production between them taking on the 'phantom objectivity' of relations between things.

Reification may be defined as this process of the transformation of human action into structures which are, or which appear to be, independent of human action - the perception of the movement of the non-living as autonomous. The word may also be used to describe the transformation of active subjects into passive objects, of human beings into things, whose capacities for self determination disappear to be replaced by external determinants.

In *History and Class Consciousness* Georg Lukács took Marx's concepts and applied them beyond economics to the capitalist-culture as an entirety. Incorporating elements drawn from Weber's theory of Rationalisation and Simmel's *Philosophy of Money* he recast the concept of reification as the mystified consciousness pervading the whole of capitalist society; a society which perceived its own structures of activity, in ignorance of their historical roots and dynamic character, as static and independent.

Lukács' argument was that the bourgeois-class had risen up against the traditional authority of the religious and metaphysical myths of feudal society and replaced them with rationalistic humanistic philosophy. But by the beginning of the C.20th century this Age of Reason had begun to crumble. The bourgeoisie was by now itself a defensive ruling class and had everything to gain from propagating systems of perception and discourses which justified existing social-structures and denied their transitory historical character. Rationalism, once liberatory, became transformed into a repressive reificatory system of thought. Lukács view, which was to be taken up by Adorno and the Frankfurt School, was that Rationalism had assumed a monopoly of justificatory validity over action in *all* spheres of social activity. That which had liberated humans from the tyranny of tradition now subordinated them to the products of their own hands and

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minds, to the machine, to money and to the commodity. The result is that value or worth throughout the whole of society becomes calculated by the extrinsic, exchangeable and fetishistic terms describe by Marx.

Lukács' argument was that thought which resisted this movement, non-reificatory thought, was only historically achievable from a group which had an objective interest *and* opportunity to change society, which was equipped and willing to challenge economic and political structures and therefore their ideological objectivity. This group was the proletariat, who through their collective subjective experience of capital's objectifying, dehumanising tendencies, had a historically unique vantage point from which to confront reificatory and rationalistic ideologies. The concept of proletarian revolution was thus philosophically perceived as a promethean reclaiming of history, not just for the proletariat but for all humanity, a process of demystification which would show that as social structures had been built by humans so too could they be pulled down and replaced by humans.

### The Frankfurt School

A more thorough fusion of these two ideas, rationalisation and reification, came as intellectuals gradually gave up faith in the proletariat as the agent of a revolution through which demystification could occur and also with the degeneration of Marxism in the Soviet Union. This fusion was achieved in the work of Adorno and Max Horkheimer from the Frankfurt School of social philosophy and led them to take up many perspectives which were similar to those held by Lukács. Lezak Kolokowski's characterisation of them as 'Lukács without the proletariat' (Kolokowski 1978) illuminates something of their essentially pessimistic vision of contemporary society; political revolutionary zeal became replaced by cultural pessimism and political despair.

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The Frankfurt scholars argued that reification could not be understood simply as a result of commodity-production and market structures but in fact had come to exist *independently* from them, as a political and ideological structure, as Max Weber had argued. Unlike Lukács, or Marx, they could not believe in the power of the proletariat, or in their historically privileged position, in breaking down its progress.

### Adorno and the Culture Industry

Adorno held that the economy and society of the mid-C.20th western industrial world differed in essential respects to those societies analysed almost a century earlier by Marx; capital having developed and concentrated to the point where traditional delineations between social spheres - economy, polity and culture - previously fundamental even to the least deterministic sociologies, were no longer possible to determine. These spheres become locked; permeating each other and congealing into a totally administered state-, or monopoly-, capitalism. Adorno viewed this merging as taking the form of the rising monopoly of economic rationalism and *the ratio* generally over all spheres of social life. He argued that the twin prongs of the market and bureaucracy pinned the subject down to a degree whereby the concept of the individual actually becomes an empirical falsehood. External forces increasingly control and restrain individual humans, transforming them into a passive mass. Power moves from the visibly to the invisibly political, as policing shifts from the political and economic to encompass the cultural sphere.

Escaping the tyranny of Nazism Adorno and other German intellectuals thus found themselves in the United States facing a commodity fetishism/fascism they understood to be part of the same authoritarian phenomenon.

From this experience developed the need for a sociology of culture, in particular a sociology of the relatively

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recent development of mass culture and of the possible forms that opposition to it might take. Mass Culture has several basic prerequisites:

1. The development of a certain level of affluence, entailing a level of production which produces disposable income and leisure time in which to engage in consumption,
2. Modes of mass production and distribution.
3. The development of an instrumental economic (profit) motive amongst the producers, commissioners and distributors of cultural forms, forms previously ideologically insulated against the market
4. The development, largely from the world of advertising of a 'commodity aesthetic', saleability (quantity) replacing traditional conceptions, for example of beauty, expressive truth or formal adequacy (quality).

Together these form a 'culture industry', which David Held (1980: 89) argues has two primary functions; to sell particular commodity-objects and to manufacture an ideology of goodwill, of affirmation, not simply towards any specific product but towards the industry itself, towards the aesthetic/ethic of consumption and finally towards society per se.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that mass culture is not a genuine expression of any authentic urge or quality, in the sense that popular culture or folk culture might once have been, but an expression of the urge to standardisation; products such as pop songs, cheap novels or films differing only in detail, all fundamentally saying the same thing in the same way. Culture thus becomes 'pseudo-individualised' and the consumer is

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transformed into a pseudo-individual with only the superficial appearance of personality: a fake. In consuming individuals choose from a vast stock of cultural items, which they perceive as being different and which through their appropriation - and identification with - become an expression of their own difference, of their personality. But Adorno and Horkheimer argue that they are actually selecting amongst identical items whose fundamental functions are economic and ideological, the inauthentic individual personality itself becomes ideological:

The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions (op. cit.: 167).

Alongside production, leisure, as consumption, becomes mechanised too. The worker, dehumanised and humiliated in labour, escapes to leisure, and - at the movies or listening to the radio - into fantasy. But there is no escape, for in entertainment they are constantly assailed by the same information and the same means/end rationality that directs economic production. So for Adorno and Horkheimer mass culture mirrors this rationality and reproduces an identical will towards mechanisation, standardisation and equivalence in the actual structures and process of consumption themselves.

As soon as the film begins, it is quite clear how it will end, and who will be rewarded, punished or forgotten. In light music, once the trained ear has heard the first notes of the hit song, it can guess what is coming and feels flattered when it does (ibid.: 125).

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Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work. It is sought after as an escape from the mechanised work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again. But at the same time mechanisation has such power over a man's leisure and happiness, and so profoundly determines the manufacture of amusement goods, that his experiences are inevitably after-images of the work process itself. The ostensible content is merely a faded foreground; what sinks in is the automatic succession of standardised operations (ibid.: 137).

The rhetoric of mass culture is that of political populism and of democratic opposition to the elitism of traditional culture, but Adorno and Horkheimer argue that this is purely ideology; perpetuating an illusion of choice between identical products in market situations which are monopolistic and oligopolistic. Under this illusion of freedom the culture industry reflects socio-economic reality, mimetically representing it to be the only *possible* reality. By product-standardisation the industry elicits a standardised response, masking experience in cliché; 'Response is semi-automatic, no scope is left for the imagination.' (ibid.: 127) The culture industry is depicted standing above and against the individual; dominating and directing them in every way.

The effect of standardisation is not limited to the specific forms of the culture industry, indeed, strictly speaking it is not a matter of *form* at all; potentially any cultural object, however apparently sophisticated or critical, could fall under its monopolising tyranny. Even high culture or the culture of an oppositional avant-garde could be assimilated. Here Adorno and Horkheimer went well beyond the crude dualism of romantic, aestheticist and vulgar-marxist critics of bourgeois culture, arguing that even the most apparently 'autonomous' or critical artistic practices might fall prey to the forces which they oppose. They argue that under mass culture *no* object retains any

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inherent or unique value; all phenomena are reduced to the single dimension of the ratio - the value for which they can be exchanged. Art becomes reduced to whatever in it which can be made recoverable in some other form (e.g. the cultural status that possession or appreciation of it confers).

The use value of art, its mode of being, is treated as a fetish; and the fetish, the work's social rating (misinterpreted as its artistic status) becomes its use value - the only quality which is enjoyed (ibid.: 158).

So from the culture industry is born a mono-dimensional and profoundly *political* culture: Political not because it is a passive ideological reflection of another structure - for example ruling class ideology - but in the sense that structurally it is itself no longer even *distinguishable* from political domination.

### The Authoritarian Personality

Adorno and Horkheimer's argument has a further degree of sophistication, for, despite his cultural degradation, the individual is never quite portrayed as wholly determined by external forces. Although Adorno and Horkheimer do sometimes write as if history is simply imposed on its helpless individual victims, the individual is always awarded some measure of responsibility for their situation as well. Though the ideology of the consumer's 'choice' has been cracked open to reveal products that are all the same, Adorno and Horkheimer do also recognise that the illusions of choice, and of the possibility of satisfaction, are *actively* adhered to. The ideology of consumption is internalised by subjects who positively desire - and produce the conditions for - the affirmative, authoritarian culture which denies them.

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the existence of trash expresses inanely and undisguisedly the fact that men have succeeded in reproducing from themselves a piece of what otherwise imprisons them in toil... symbolically breaking the compulsion of adaption by themselves creating what they feared. (1978a: 225)

The characteristics of this socio-psychological knot or 'constellation' are explored in *The Authoritarian Personality*, co-edited by Adorno.<sup>12</sup> This text traces connections between the authoritarian personality and the specific cultural and historical conditions which are said to produce it, and which are produced by it.

The basic structure of the authoritarian personality is *regressive*; suffering characteristics such as ego-weakness and narcissism. The authoritarian self seeks to avoid contradictions and problems, and desires of the world a definite, given reflection of itself; a clearly deliniated externally-reflected identity. The personality develops a fear of, and hostility towards, freedom and autonomy, and a dependence on a figure of authority to direct it and to translate the world into black-and-white issues and clearcut solutions. The authoritarian self seeks a culture that is fundamentally reassuring, which bores rather than challenges or provokes, and which disguises problems rather than confronting them. Most importantly the authoritarian personality demands a clearly defined mass in which to hide submerge its fear of disintegration and lack of any independent sense of self-hood.

### Adorno's Concept of the Avant-Garde

For Adorno, the victory of reification and a psychologically regressive authoritarian culture is not complete or unopposed, despite their totalising influence. Confronting them stands negation in the shape of what he understands as a *modernist avant-garde*. As the economic, the political and the cultural melt into one, culture, even though it too may

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be almost completely reified, increasingly becomes the vital sphere of resistance; 'Art could be the only remaining medium of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering.' (1984: 27) For Adorno art could still produce phenomena that were incommensurable and inexchangeable, specifically through the production of forms which demanded *praxis* from the recipient, whose structures and identities cannot be known prior to experience of them. Art therefore contains a space for a non-identical subjectivity; a humanity undefeated by exchange and standardisation. For Adorno avant-garde artists and intellectuals are thus culture's final stance, the human subject's last critical voice, though even that might be no more than a gasp. This confrontation between avant-garde modernism and modernity is a thread running throughout almost all Adorno's work and is explored in depth in his studies of 20th. European composed music.

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### Adorno's Philosophy of Music

In *The Philosophy of Modern Music* Adorno emphasises the difference between Schoenberg's music, which he considered avant-garde, and Stravinsky's, which he considered reactionary. For him they do not simply represent different compositional schools, but distinct and dialectically-opposing responses to the totalitarianism of mass culture. Aside from simply mimetic (pop) music or music which he regarded as simply nostalgic (neo-romantic music, early music, the Bach revival and most English music) these two trends, for Adorno, represent extreme variations on perhaps the only *possible* responses to modernity. His discussion may therefore be understood as a discussion of the essential aspects of modernist art and culture per se.

Thus Adorno speaks of society through music, but he does not do so simply in an allegorical or metaphorical manner; for him the musical composition 'is' society in a very real way, in its technical and formal processes and structures. Musical structure's 'immanent' assault on the senses and intellect, its 'material' mirror precisely the composition of elements within the social constellation.

### Schoenberg

Reflecting on the historicity of the tonal harmonic system, Adorno argues that its inevitably consonant harmonic resolution, reflects less a joyous unison than a 'resigned agreement' freed from the threat of dissonance. His modernistic criticism of post-late-romantic tonal music is that all the inherent possibilities emanating from its initial postulates had already been exploited: 'Once a line of possible innovation has been exhausted, it is quite futile to go on in the same direction. At that point innovation has to be given a new direction or shifted to a new dimension.' (1984: 33) Tonal-structural principles thus become clichés, transparent even prior to the creative act. The composer does not explore and is not creative, adding

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nothing to what he finds. The composition, freed from the tensions and demands placed on it by expression and material, is structured arbitrarily, any structural essence being lost and replaced by preconceived identity; relating only in a stereotypical manner to the subjective expressive needs of the composer, and only obliquely to the, 'inherent tendencies of the material'. In death as in life the expression of the subject and the expression of the material are as one.

Adorno argues that in the initial, 'heroic' period of free atonality Schoenberg had sensed the expressive exhaustion of the traditional harmonic material and submitted the processes of composition to his subconsciousness instead. In the manner of the psychoanalysed patient he gave form to the expression of dissonance. Free atonality thus opened a new and mysterious bank of possible material, also offering the composer the freedom of imagination and expression beyond the perimeters of the previous, known, system. New categories, forms, continuities and hypotheses were created: 'The spontaneity of musical observation obscures everything once learned and recognises only the imagination...' (1973: 123).

### The Concept of Material

Schoenberg's transgression of accepted musical boundaries in order to free expression is not regarded by Adorno simply as a product of individual, or subjective, desire but as *historical* and *objective* process.

If expression were merely a duplicate of subjective feelings, it would not amount to anything... A better model for understanding expression is to think of it not in terms of subjective feelings, but in terms of ordinary things and situations in which historical processes and functions have been sedimented, endowing them with the potential to speak. (1984: 163)

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By allowing the musical atom its own impulses, its 'immanent formal law, the compulsion of its structure,' (1978a: 70) Adorno accords an *objective* historical authority to the 12-tone material over and above the manner in which any individual composer might seek to employ it. The notes have their own life, their own impetus; The composer does not choose their meaning. This is not because he believed, as Webern perhaps did, that in liberating pitch from the keynote Schoenberg had once and for all uncovered the natural or material *essence* of the note which society had sought to deny. Rather, using a specific concept of the 'material' he argues that the musical system is historically determined by the overall level of technical and social development, which is autonomous from the composer.

There are inescapable constraints built into materials, constraints that change with the specific character of the material and which determine the evolution of methods. (1984: 213)

The concept of 'material' goes beyond both 'raw material' and any notion of a 'musical system', and may be better understood in comparison with the collection of materials, practical skills, principles and knowledge necessary to construct a building; 'This concept is not synonymous with content... Material refers to all that is being formed' (1984: 213).

The demands made upon the subject by the material are conditioned... by the fact that the 'The Material' is itself a crystallisation of the creative impulse, an element socially predetermined through the consciousness of man. As a previous subjectivity - now forgetful of itself - such an objectified impulse of the material has its own kinetic laws. (1973: 33)

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In his opera *Wozzeck* Alban Berg tried to combine the new 12 tone material with older, tonal harmonic forms. For Adorno this constitutes a denial of the 'kinetic laws' of the material, *Wozzeck* thus, 'negates its own point of departure,' refuting, 'the impulses of the composition - alive in its musical atoms,' which, 'rebel against the work proceeding from them.' (op. cit.: 31). For Adorno 12-tone material implicitly negates the formal harmony of the work itself and denies the possibility of resolution or preconceived form. Unlike the dissonance in the tonal harmonic composition - which its form, and return to the key-note, must finally resolve - the atonal dissonance has no keynote to return to, and no form or order to which it can turn, for resolution. For Adorno the twelve tone system is a system which *actively resists form*. Where traditional form thus proposes harmony, resolution and the possibility of satisfaction, the new music represents the objective suffering of a subject for whom the world has made harmony, resolution or satisfaction, along with community and expression, impossible. For Adorno the 12-tone method was not one method amongst others but the historically objective, uniquely valid musical material, expressing the objective state of contemporary subjectivity and sociality.

### Stravinsky

Adorno sees Stravinsky's music as, 'a rebellion which from the very first impulse was not concerned with freedom, but with the suppression of impulse'. (ibid: 209) He argues that, instead of developing new processes and structures appropriate to a new historical constellation, and recognising the absolute validity of atonality, Stravinsky respected the outlines of existing forms, concealing their objective exhaustion by filling them with new contents; breaking any unity between the form and the atom of the work. For Adorno this constitutes a complete abandonment of the historical material's inherent formal tendencies. The

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composition becomes merely a absolutely subjective collection of dead forms. Like an abandoned skin, 'The work is silent where it has been deserted and turns its hollow interior outwards' (1973: 119).

Adorno argues that, by his reliance on the displaced emptiness of previous form Stravinsky, like the 'resentment listener', responds to the loneliness and speechlessness of the subject by the comforting reproduction of past communal forms. As the composer refuses to look outward he also refuses introspection; failing to perceive his own repressed expressive impulses, refusing to face suffering, amusing himself instead with memories and fantasies of other worlds which he convinces himself to be living in. Adorno thus perceives Stravinsky's use of primitivistic and folk forms in *Le Sacre du Printemps* and *Petrouchka* as rooted in;

the anti-human sacrifice to the collective - sacrifice without tragedy, made not in the name of a renewed image of man, but only by the blind affirmation of a situation recognised by the victim (1973: 145)

Drawing heavily on the socio-psychoanalytic concepts formed in *The Authoritarian Personality* Adorno brands this an example of 'infantilism'; the regressive subject simply reflecting the arbitrary imposed unity of authoritarian power. Expression is abandoned, cognition becomes stifled: the subject, alienated from its historical objects and imagining absolute liberty in its restraint, feels the weight of its own history setting around it.

Adorno regards Stravinsky's later neo-classical compositions as a total subordination to a reified culture, by using montage techniques the work becomes constructed of the play of surfaces, cunningly arranged into new orders, surprising, delighting and affirming the listener, for what seems new is actually known all along; the composer is wholly disengaged from any historically dynamic function,

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constantly rearranging the surfaces of what is already known. In the montage Adorno argues that all problems and contradictions are uncritically accepted. Juxtapositions of heterogeneous and contradictory elements are combined into a superficially formal totality which for him constitute art's final abandonment of any independent or critical stance.

conflicts lose their menace. They are accepted, but by no means cured, being merely fitted as an unavoidable component into the surface of standardised life... The realm of reification and standardisation is thus extended to include its ultimate contradiction, the ostensibly abnormal and chaotic. The incommensurable is made, precisely as such, commensurable, and the individual is now scarcely capable of any impulse that he could not classify as an example of this or that publicly recognised constellation. (1978: 65)

The virtuosity of Stravinsky's play with form; 'The primacy of speciality over intention, the cult of the clever feat, the joy in agile manipulations,' (1973: 172) is understood to be the reflection of a form of fear which Adorno also finds in the products of the culture industry, of which Stravinsky's music is finally no more than a highly sophisticated reflection:

Music, which has become the victim of its own confusion, fears - in the face of the expansion of technology in the late stage of capitalism - that it might necessarily fall victim to the contradiction between itself and technology. Music escapes this momentarily by means of a ballet-like leap, but in doing so becomes all the more deeply enmeshed in its own dilemma... (Stravinsky's) music is concerned with types of human attitudes which view the ubiquity of technique as a schema of the entire life process: whoever wishes to avoid being crushed by the wheels of the times must react in the same manner as his music does. (1973: 194)

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Adorno regards Stravinsky's formal play as a refusal to confront the history as it is sedimented in the most advanced musical material. He regards Stravinsky's compositions as expressions of a subject who is irrevocably fragmented and torn, but who refuses to acknowledge the suffering imposed in it by the authoritarian culture; finally it expresses neither the historical determinations of the subject or the 'material'.

Adorno finds in Stravinsky's refusal of expression or formal innovation an, 'outspoken sado-masochistic pleasure in self-annihilation'. (1973: 166) Music expresses an, 'adjustment to the blind totality,' '...pride in the negation of the human being through agreement with the dehumanised system,' and, 'vindicate(s) insanity as true health.

### Serialism

Adorno does not stop at this dichotomy between Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Tracing the development of free atonality to serialism he discovers an extraordinary mutation. After the initial consciously experimental period Schoenberg gradually increased control over his materials in the search for fundamental principles with which to construct a new system. The basis of the new order was the the series. But, unlike thematic variation, on which tonal-harmonic forms were based, in serial works the series was generally impossible to actually determine through listening.

A system which dominates nature results. It reflects a longing present since the beginnings of the bourgeois era: to 'grasp' and to replace all sounds into an order, and to reduce the magic essence of music to a human logic. (ibid.: 64)

So by a dialectic twist the modernist composer finds himself producing within a system which reflects in exceptionally pure form the very arbitrary technical rationality that

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Schoenberg's earlier music had criticised:

Twelve tone rationality approaches superstition per se in that it is a closed system - one which is opaque even to itself - in which the configuration of means is directly hypostatized as goal and as law. The legitimacy of the procedure in which technique fulfils itself is at the same time merely something imposed on the material, by which the legitimacy is determined. The determination itself does not actually serve a purpose. Accuracy or correctness, as a mathematical hypothesis, takes the place of that element called 'the idea' in traditional art. (ibid.: 65)

Thus the inherent tendencies of the musical material, of sounds, lose all power of determination in a manner far more radical and systematic than even Stravinsky's eclecticism could ever achieve. Adorno argues that the post-war serialist composers attempted,

to replace composition altogether with an objective-calculatory ordering of intervals, pitches, long and short durations, degrees of loudness; an integral rationalisation such as never before envisaged in music. (1988: 102)

### Serialism and The Dialectic of Enlightenment

With serialism the clarity of the progress of the Dialectic of Enlightenment from subject, mind and movement to object, material and stasis, thus emerges in a clear pure form; reflecting and anticipating its totalising movement throughout culture as a whole.

It is important to understand that this is not something *done to* music, a crime committed against culture by alien external economic or political forces, but something which occurs within music's own structures and processes - a consequence of its material. It is only in this complex and interactive way that music's homologues can be said to be social *reflections*.

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Thus, for the radically-modernist composer, these social reflections - unlike those of the culture industry or Stravinsky - are not mimetic but *structural*. The composer does not wring his material to squeeze out its social significance, nor consciously attempt to construct a sonic picture of society. On the contrary, he rejects and leaves society, his music rejecting any function in it, and in his isolation searches within his material in order to discover its own impulses and motivations. For Adorno the clearer is his concentration and perception of these atoms the clearer society becomes revealed in the resultant models:

Music will be better, the more deeply it is able to express - in the antinomies of its own formal language - the exigency of the social situation and to call for change through the coded language of suffering. It is not for music to stare in helpless horror at society. It fulfils its social function more precisely when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws - problems which music contains within itself in the innermost cells of its technique. (quoted Jay 1984: 136)

In this way the ultra-rationality that sits at the core of the serial technique may be seen as a microcosm of the logic of means/end rationality per se: in the subject's desire to demonstrate total superiority over nature it employs techniques which abolish both itself and nature. Rationality is placed above both subject and object and becomes its own justification, gaining an, 'irrational quality, its catastrophic blind spot'. (1976: 180) This puts the composer-subject in a wholly new relation with technique. Before a means serving a separate and distinct subjective expressive end technique now becomes simultaneously means *and* end.

Clearly Adorno places the composer in a difficult position, either he responds uncritically to the distortions of a technocratic, authoritarian culture and succumbs to its

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empty categories, like Stravinsky, or, like the serialists, he responds to the rigorous internal requirements of musical material whose very essence lies so close to the impetus behind society's cultural condition that the music itself becomes a subjectless object. The latter course is that proposed in the interest of the integrity of the artist - the demand on him to produce truth rather than predetermined, identical (and dead) beauty. But at the same moment the futility of *either* response is recognised, for both finally fall prey to the ubiquity of technique, and in both the subject is abolished.

In music, culture reveals itself frozen, unable to speak or move, awaiting its own death.

### Death of Music

Adorno examines this death both philosophically; as a process emerging from music's own determinations, and sociologically; in terms of the marginalisation of the composer and his work:

It is easy enough to imagine this late form of Schoenberg's ascetism, the negation of all facades, extending to all musical dimensions. Mature music becomes suspicious of sound as such... The inclination to silence, which shapes the aura of every tone in Webern's lyrics, is related to the tendency stemming from Schoenberg. Its ultimate result, however, can only be that artistic maturity and intellectualisation abolish not only sensuous appearance, but with it, art itself. (1967b: 169)

The collective support is modest, and a composer's social situation remains in jeopardy in spite of it. He lives almost solely on payments that are branched off from society's wealth and doled out to him, so to speak, as tips. A sense of superfluity, no matter how repressed, gnaws at every product. Now and then one compensates by forced activity... (1976: 186)

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Adorno chases music, and himself, into a corner; he describes the composer, who contains within him everything of the artist and intellectual in general, as impotent and unable to have any affect on society at all. Even if he tries to intervene directly into political life, as did Eisler for example, Adorno argues that he betrays himself by using art not as a unity of means and end but as pure means towards some extrinsic end, thereby falling prey to the very monopoly of means/end rationalism that it sets out to oppose: 'In art, direct protest is reactionary.' (1984: 31). The best that can be done in this situation is for music to become a fragmented sphere of uselessness, a shelving of utopia where purity is defined through sheer negativity and refusal to compromise, by its insistence on lack of social function. Any attempt to *cohere* with reality must be resisted, for in reality the subject is extinguished and if music cannot revive it, at least music, by abolishing itself, can record the crime committed. It is thus the recording of the subject's suffocation that the new music now takes as its impetus;

...twelve tone music, by force of its mere correctness, resists subjective expression... In its present phase the subject seems so fixed that what it might be able to say is already said. Horror has cast its spell upon the subject and it is no longer able to say anything which might be worth saying. In the face of reality it is so impotent that the very claim to expression already touches on vanity...

The possibility of music itself has become uncertain. It is not threatened as the reactionaries claim, by its decadent, individualistic, and asocial character. It is actually too little threatened by these factors. That certain freedom, which it undertook to transform its anarchistic condition, was converted in the very hands of this music into a metaphor of the world against which it raises its protest. (1973: 112)

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For Adorno then the avant-garde is a probably-doomed ultra-modernist elite, a last vanguard of Culture, whose work opposes society in all its aspects. The critical spark it maintains being defined by its very incomprehensibility and distance from sociality. In the near-silences of Webern's music he perceives not simple the death of music, but a sigh that he interprets as potentially announces the dying breath of the subject as a historical entity.

## Adorno and the Death of Music

### Criticism: Adorno and the Art Institution

Adorno's theory contains three particularly significant assertions. The first is that society is to be found sedimented in musical structure, the second is that critical culture is the solely the domain of a modernist avant-garde, and the third is that music, the avant-garde - and hence critical culture and subjectivity at large - are doomed. The second two of these I regard to be demonstrably false, the first fatally limited. The question of modernism and the avant-garde will be dealt with in the next chapter, here I will concentrate on the first and third assertions; the sociality of musical structure, and the death of musical critique.

Though Adorno's assertions regarding the marginalisation of European composed music and the composer may well be accurate, to read into them the death of *music*, or of critical culture as a whole is quite another matter, yet that is exactly what he implies. But his perception of music's death stems less from the atoms of music itself than from the narrowness of Adorno's classification of those noises worthy of the term music. Adorno generalises in a manner quite unlimited by any consideration of the actual social and institutional basis of the single music he is studying, and of the effects these might have on its forms. In narrowly focussing only on European concert music composition he examines only a music given status and visibility by the patronage of ruling classes and the church throughout the centuries.<sup>13</sup> Adorno takes quite for granted the historical institutional and political superiority of this European (German) tradition over all others and in doing so fails to see how the ideology of traditional aesthetic autonomy, of music's distance from social life, which he is so keen to counter, is deeply rooted in these same structures. In certain essential ways Adorno therefore fails to understand that music's sociology is never confined

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to musical structure, but occurs within a much wider institutional context as well.

By considering these broader aspects of music's social existence it is in fact possible to separate the death of the traditional composer discussed by Adorno from the fate of subjectivity or music per se, and see it instead as a uniquely instructive phenomena.

### The Conditions of Music

If the structure of music, like any form of knowledge, is not simply internal and free from external pressures and forces, it follows that music's historical meaning cannot be deduced purely from its structure, yet this is more or less what Adorno attempts to do. Rather music must be understood to be mediated by what Alan Durant (1984) calls the *conditions of music*. Similarly Attali writes; 'The representation of music is a total spectacle. It also shapes what people see; no part of it is innocent. Each element even fulfils a precise social and symbolic function.' (Attali 1985: 65) So music is never purely sound; it is played in specific contexts, channelled through specific technologies and present at specific symbolic junctures. Meaning is reliant to a large degree on these processes of production and dissemination and, in the case of European concert music, on the institutional structures on which its claim to validity and precedence - i.e. its *political* dominance - rest. Adorno argues as if all of these patterns and structures can be ignored, as if music can be abstracted from the surroundings in which it it is played and heard, having significance only through its own internal logic which is somehow structurally linked to the *zeitgeist*. But the pathways through which societies channel music always have an effect, and, as Small (1987b) argues, the context of performance can completely transform the symbolic meaning of any particular piece.

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By paying attention to these institutional relationships we can begin to understand other ways in which music can be seen as a microcosm of society. For example, music has its own complex patterns of hierarchy, authority and division of labour - the institutional relationships of music's production, performance and consumption. In these patterns can be found reflections and responses to social life often very much more direct than those discussed by Adorno, for whom society enters music in only a coded and indirect (though nonetheless decisive) manner. Small (1980, 1984), for example, discusses how the organisation of the music and the relationships between the musicians represent models or ideals of community, and he is interested in these not as factors of secondary interest after the music, but as part of *what is heard*, as part of music's true form and content. Musical institutions vary from the purely technical (systems such as tonality and serialism) to the procedural (the process of composition, the arrangements of performance etc.) and stretch beyond the performance into educational institutions and funding bodies as well. These mediating modes are then themselves structured into human organisational relations of labour, creativity and production.

Even if we restrict our attention purely to the performance of music, surely we cannot argue as if music simply travels untouched through notation, the musician, the instrument, the concert hall, or the compact disc player? These conditions and institutions inevitably become a part of the music and, at least as much as the notes themselves, they come to direct the meaning that pieces of music and musical idioms have in society as a whole. The musical institution is 'in' the sound, and mediates between individuals and musical sounds at every stage of the creative and reproductive process; the sound, or its structure, cannot be analysed separately from it. The

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institution that produces the sound is a part of its very form.

### Some Aspects of the Institutionalisation of European Concert Music

Two quick sketches:

1. The history of European composition may be viewed as a struggle for emancipation. Firstly from the body, from dance, then, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, from religious and ritual applications, and in the past century from private patronage, and with serialism and post-serialism, from the market itself. With the latter the composer at last achieves the full autonomy which had been the ideal since Beethoven; state funded, the composer owes nothing to anyone, he has no responsibility, and his work no apparent social function; certainly he experiences little of the old creative tension between the demands of his sponsor and audience and the demands of his creative soul. But such freedom is akin to being cast adrift, the composer is also finally isolated and impotent. There is no longer even a commonly agreed stock of permissible musical material, and the modernist composer must write his own language - arbitrarily define his own material - before he can employ it, a double alienation.

The subject that has freed itself of all the constraints and rules of creation finally finds itself thrown back into an empty subjectivity... The total protest against any and every element of constraint does not take the subject to the freedom of creation but into arbitrariness. (Peter Bürger 1984: 67)

2. The history of European composition may be considered from the perspective of advances made by the composer over the musician. Its drives have lead it, for example, towards the institutionalisation of the musical text and the

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institutionalisation of the composer himself, and against the freedom of musicians to improvise, embellish, interpret, within a fluid structure. The practical forms this has taken include the increasing standardisation of instrumental technology and the elimination of those aspects of music more difficult to centrally direct - tone, individual phrasing, non-specific pitching and so on. These developments bring about the submission of the musician to ever more detailed notation; all this has allowed music to be conceived less and less as a collective experience and more and more as an individually creative act.

The C.19th composer can thus be regarded as an ideological model of the Enlightenment liberal ideal of the individual subject, defined by his distinction and difference to the mass. Thanks to the domination of this ideology of the subject C.19th music, along with art and creativity in general, themselves became 'autonomous' from the mass, and another expert specialism in the division of labour. As part of this process creativity and subjectivity became highly revered, but on the condition that they were situated only at the head of a hierarchy and counter-opposed to the mass and to the collective.

In the following extraordinary passage Adorno himself suggests reasons why these two aspects of composition's history - its emancipation from social-function and opposition to collectivity - may contain the seeds of this music's collapse;

The fact that music as a whole, and polyphony in particular... have their source in the collective practices of cult and dance is not to be written off as a mere 'point of departure' due to its further progress towards freedom. Rather this historical source remains the unique sensory subjective impulse of music, even if it has long since broken with every collective practice. Polyphonic music says 'we' even when it lives as a conception only in the mind of the composer, otherwise reaching no living being. The ideal

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collectivity still contained within music, even though it has lost its relationship to the empirical collectivity, leads inevitably to conflict because of its unavoidable social isolation. Collective perception is the basis of musical objectification itself, and when this latter is no longer possible, it is necessarily degraded almost to a fiction - to the arrogance of the aesthetic subject, which says 'we,' while in reality it is still only 'I' - and this 'I' can say nothing at all without positing the 'we'.... Actually music has its origin in this perspective and, portraying it in turn, cannot go beyond it in any positive sense. This antinomy detracts from the powers of modern music. Its paralysis manifests the anxiety of the composition in the face of its despondent untruth. This form convulsively attempts to escape such anxiety by submersion into its own law, which at the same time, however, heightens its untruth. (1973: 18)

Adorno here places the responsibility for the 'untruth,' marginalisation and death of modern music squarely with its lack of genuine reference to any - except a purely theoretical - collectivity. He is clear that this implicit collectivity refers not simply to some vague sociological aspect of music's past historical development but to its, 'unique sensory subjective impulse'.

But this alienation from human beings does not apply to all music, it is in fact quite specific to composed European concert music. The reason Adorno can see no way past music's 'I' that fantasises of being 'we' is because he refuses to break philosophically or politically with the institutional context of European classical music and most particularly with the institution of the composer, of the autonomous individual subject. For him this model of the subject is not simply one model of subjectivity but the only *possible* embodiment of subjectivity itself. He refuses to consider other options - rejecting, for example, any model of collective production as 'psuedo-reconciliation'; as nostalgia, or as socialist-realist fantasy.

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Individuation along with the suffering it involves is a fundamental fact of society. By implication society can be experienced only by the individual, not by groups. To try and undergird experience with an immediate collective subject is to engage in subterfuge, condemning the work of art to being untrue.

If art, for the sake of a higher social truth, reaches for something more elevated than subjective experience (which is within its reach), then it will end up with less, and the higher objective truth it falsely takes for a standard evaporates before his eyes. (Adorno 1984: 367, 368)

We might take this critique as a perfectly reasonable challenge to socialist-realism, which seeks to express an abstract higher collectivity than that which society presently allows. However it cannot be applied to all collective modes of production per se. By simply regarding the terms 'individual' and 'subjective', and 'collective' and 'objective' as basically synonymous, Adorno makes no allowance for alternative possibilities, for example of a model of production which combines or collects isolated individuals together. This is not an *idea* of collectivity, or an abstract artistic model, but a practical basis of production, it is not, like the 'higher objective truth' of socialist-realism, a conclusion but a starting point. It is not a form or structure, but a *method*.

So Adorno is surely wrong to confine modern music to death, negation and functionlessness. The composer's isolation and impotence are not the only way for music to be conscious or critical of society and, anyway, finally have little to do with either the state of contemporary music or with the state of contemporary subjectivity. For subjectivity is not an individual resource, but is *enacted* only in association, subjectivity is created between people, it is a function of collectivity. Subjectivity is a function of social praxis, and as Adorno himself argues, radically-

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collective models of production are implicit in the fundamental polyphony, or polytheism, within the very atoms of music's material.

### Conclusion

Adorno fails to see that the death of the composer as an individual creative subject is the death of an artistic-ideology of autonomy, and cannot be read as indicating the death of subjectivity, individuality or creativity per se. Regarding the composer as synonymous with music Adorno exposes a prejudice that undermines his whole understanding of critical and avant-garde culture. His pessimism in fact comes not from any genuine insight into the historical state of the avant-garde but from a completely misplaced emphasis on, and faith in, the institutions of *high-modernism*. At root his theories of music's purely-structural critique, and of its death, and his elitist high-cultural championing of a uniquely valid musical-material, a uniquely valid art-institution, not forgetting a uniquely valid ('expert') mode of listening, are theories of institutional-modernism. In essence Adorno's perspective is not only not avant-gardistic, but positively *anti-avant-gardistic*, for he was resolutely attached to precisely those institutions that the avant-garde, historically, set out to destroy. Yet only when it leaves behind these same institutions and the artistic codes, can culture begin to realise the praxis that Adorno sought for it.

Against Adorno's model, but in agreement with many of his aims, we might therefore expect a contemporary avant-garde to go beyond the individualism of high-modernism, and the bureaucratic and hierarchic institutionalisation of composition, and to contain an enacted collectivity, improvisation, and dialogism in the very germs of its method and material.

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## CHAPTER FOUR: THEORIES OF THE AVANT-GARDE

In the last chapter I outlined Adorno's social/musical theories and explored some limitations of his approach, suggesting an alternative model of the avant-garde, which has still to be clarified. In this chapter I shall discuss and criticise Poggioli's and Bürger's theories of avant-garde art and culture, along with Adorno's, and develop what I believe to be a more accurate and valuable theory of the contemporary avant-garde.

### Poggioli's Theory of the Avant-Garde

In *The Theory Of The Avant-garde* Renato Poggioli describes the avant-garde as, 'a historical concept, a centre of tendencies and ideas... this means treating it not so much as an aesthetic fact as a sociological one'. (op. cit.: 3) He understands the avant-garde as a collection of activities which share some common social ground but never cohere into a stylistic school with unified objectives; 'the particular poetics of various movements in the avant-garde do not lend themselves to study under the species of a single aesthetic concept...'. (ibid.:5) He warns against the tendency (which he sees as Anglo-American) of compounding the avant-garde with modernism per se, quoting Massimo Bontempelli's definition of the avant-garde as, 'an exclusively modern discovery, born only when art began to contemplate itself from a historical point of view,' (ibid.: 14) but stresses that the avant-garde must also be delineated and considered distinct from the modern. Indeed he speaks of, 'an essential antithesis' between modern art and the avant-garde. (ibid.: 125)

Poggioli finds the prehistoric sources for the avant-garde prior to the French Revolution of 1848, quoting a Fourieriste text *On the Mission of Art and the Role of Artists* by Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant. The text uses the term 'avant-garde' to postulate an interdependence between art

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and society, and most particularly between, 'the most advanced social tendencies,' and the artist as, 'initiator' and as 'forerunner and revealer'. This suggests a link between social revolution and advancement in the techniques of artistic form and perception, based on a radicalism which at source, Poggioli argues, 'is not cultural but political'. (ibid.: 9) The term avant-garde cropped up again as a term of derision in Charles-Pierre Baudelaire's notebooks, by which time it seems to have lost the cultural reference, instead indicating purely political activism and propaganda. The words occur again in 1878 in the title of a political journal edited by Mikhail Bakhtin.

Poggioli argues that it was with the rise and fall of the Paris Commune that the term avant-garde once again took on the broader meaning, designating, 'separately the cultural-artistic avant-garde while still designating, in a wider and more distinct context, the socio-political avant-garde'. (ibid.: 10) For this historical moment, he argues, the two seemed to march together, at least until the demise of *La Revue Indépendante*, when, 'the divorce of the two avant-gardes took place'. After this the expressions, 'the literature of the avant-garde,' and, 'the art of the avant-garde,' came into use and the secondary meaning of the term became primary.

Poggioli argues that the idea that there is some organic link between cultural and political avant-garde revolutionaries is false, the two really sharing no more in common than a militaristic analogy. He admits the fascination that the C.20th avant-garde artists have had with communism but, rather weakly, rejects this as mere flirtation, emphasising instead the aspects of avant-garde which bear closer relation to libertarian, anti-political or anarchistic ideas (however, Poggioli's stereotypical total identification of communistic or socialistic ideas with a totalitarian complete hostility to the individual or to the idiosyncratic rather distorts these ideas.)

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Poggioli uses the term *avant-garde* proper to refer to Italian Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and associated movements, though he argues that many aspects of these movements can be linked to earlier forms, one of the main and most contentious theses of his book being to demonstrate a 'parental bond' between the *avant-garde* and the Romanticist rebuttal of Classicist art. His 'theory' of the *avant-garde* rests largely on this demonstration of precedent and parenthood, and on the construction of two pairs of linked 'moments' which are said to comprise the major characteristic of the *avant-garde* 'movement.' These are 'activism' and 'antagonism', and, 'nihilism' and 'agonism':

*Activism* is a positive, spontaneously creative moment, and develops not so much out of concern for the fulfilment of long term goals or strategies, but for, 'no other end than its own self, out of the sheer joy of dynamism, a taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm, and the emotional fascination of adventure'. (ibid.: 25) The militaristic imagery of the *avant-garde* thus indicates the activist minority initiative rather than the populist movement, is concerned less with mass action or orchestrated campaigns than with the adventurist raid into unknown, contested and hostile territories. Poggioli argues that, '*avant-gardism*, in many cases, is more concerned in motion than in creation,' (ibid.: 29) and cites as examples Italian Futurism's obsessive *modernolatry* and concern with the clear and immediate gesture; Marinetti's, 'aggressive action, the racing foot, the fatal leap, the smack and the punch'.

*Antagonism* is a negative moment which engenders the spirit of hostility and opposition and takes a number of forms. But;

The innumerable expressions of this antagonism can be reduced, almost without exception, to the lowest common denominator of nonconformism. (ibid.: 31)

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He describes the avant-garde style of argument as;

...a polemical jargon full of picturesque violence, sparing neither person nor thing, made up of more of gestures and insults than of articulate discourse. (ibid.: 37)

Such aggressive antipathy may be directed, for example, towards the uninitiated public in general (the *Little Review* advertised itself as, 'Making no compromise with public taste') towards social and cultural tradition or towards the structure of social classes.

Poggioli sees avant-garde artists as literally classless or 'outcast,' forming caste-like, culturally oppositional groups independent of traditional family or class ties. But he does not view this chosen status as a response to any democratic motive, quite the opposite, quoting Bontempelli he proposes that they form an 'aristocratic' group, born from opposition to the bourgeois principle of equivalence. (ibid.: 31,39) At its most extreme the antagonistic sense of opposition extends even beyond such merely socio-historical boundaries and is, 'elevated to a cosmic, metaphysical antagonism: a defiance of God and the universe.'

The taste for action for action's sake, the dynamism inherent in the very idea of movement, can in fact drive itself beyond the point of control by any convention or reservation, scruple or limit. It finds joy not merely in the inebriation of movement, but even more in the act of beating down barriers, razing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in its way. (ibid.: 26)

He calls this extreme moment of antagonism, the sadistic expression of joy at transgression *nihilism*, arguing that it is specific to avant-gardism and historical in character. The essence of avant-garde nihilism, he says, 'lies in attaining nonaction by acting, lies in destructive, not constructive labour'. (ibid.: 62) He quotes Mayakowsky ('I

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write *nihil* on anything that has been done before,') but cites Dada as the only part of the avant-garde where, 'the nihilistic tendency functioned as the primary, even solitary, psychic condition; there it took the form of an intransigent puerility, an extreme infantilism'. (ibid.: 62)

*Agonism* is a prophetic, masochistic moment considered by Poggioli to be historical and psychological in character and an existential aspect of modernity per se. He characterises it as the experience of separating the present from past history in order to attach it to the future, of being a precursor for a revolution still to come. Agonism represents a heroic sense both of present defeat and future victory. 'Agonism means tension... a hyperbolic passion, a bow bent towards the impossible, a paradoxical and positive form of spiritual defeatism.' (ibid.: 66) Bontempelli; 'the very spirit of avant-garde movements is that of the sacrifice and consecration of the self for those who are to come after... (they are as) men destined for the slaughter so that after them others may stop to build.'

Agonism is an explicit component of futurism and the Italian Futurists' worship of what they saw as the cleansing violence of progress and The New. Poggioli sees the futuristic sense of being the first-in-a-series as counter-balanced by a sense of decadence, of being the-last-of-a-series, owing something to Romanticism.

These four moments, alongside qualities such as obscurity and unpopularity, dehumanization and iconoclasm, voluntarism and cerebralism, abstraction and purity, (ibid.: 226) for Poggioli describe the essence of the avant-garde's state of *alienation* from culture, which for him is finally rooted in the Romantic stereotype of the artist as bohemian. This entails alienation from the class structure, alienation from the cultural hierarchy and alienation from current technical, formal and stylistic concepts of art. In opposing class structure and culture hierarchy the avant-garde fights

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a battle of two fronts, opposed both to the bourgeois and the proletariat, and, 'against articulate public opinion, against... traditional and academic culture,' (ibid.: 123) and against mass culture.

In sociological terms this alienation is expressed by a 'aristocratic' classlessness amongst both avant-garde artists and their public alike. Each develops as an independent intellectual elite, which Poggioli counterposes against the *intelligentsia*, and argues are, 'not socially but intellectually and psychologically determined'. (ibid.: 88) Thus, 'we are dealing with categories of individuals, not social classes'. (ibid.: 91)

Poggioli argues that despite, and even because of, their elitism and 'aristocratic' individualism the avant-garde and its public are clearly distinct from the classical scholar or *mandarin*, arguing:

the public for a work or an art 'of exception' is formed, almost by spontaneous generation by means of single and independent joinings of isolated individuals, a group emerges that is not easily determined geographically or socially, individuals who end up finding, in the object of their own enthusiasm, reasons for community as well as for separation. (ibid.: 91)

And,

the public that understands is not formed within a socially or intellectually privileged order, the unique repository of knowledge and taste, but away from any centre, an almost unforeseeable diaspora of isolated intelligences. (ibid.: 92)

Poggioli quotes T.S. Eliot's tragic description of contemporary culture being, 'limited to the ambience of a group... cut off from any organic relation with society as a whole, and finally being extinguished'. (ibid.: 93) Thus any particular centre of avant-garde culture is transient, is

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necessarily dynamic, fleeting and impermanent, though he distinguishes between the shortlived character and inevitable extinction of any specific group, and the nature of, 'the avant-garde in general,' which he regards as being constantly reborn.

...each specific avant-garde is destined to last only a morning. When a specific avant-garde which has had its day insists on repeating the promises it cannot now keep, it transforms itself... into its opposite... The movement becomes an academy. (ibid.:223)

Formally and technically Poggioli regards the avant-garde expression of alienation as defined by experimental rather than creative processes, whose emphasis is more on the character of means and activity than what is actually produced. He also emphasis the element of purity and abstraction from anything known or institutionalised, either in Art or society. In these spheres he understands it as quite distinct from romanticism

### Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde

Bürger underlines much more specific targets for the 'nihilist' antagonism of the avant-garde and enables it to be situated in a much more dynamic historical context. It is essential for Bürger's thesis that the relationship between the avant-garde and the preceding era be understood. Like Poggioli he sees the link as fundamental but unlike him he stresses the essential *discontinuities* between the avant-garde and Romanticism, especially as represented by Kant and Schiller's aestheticist schools of art criticism, which he sees as the basis of late C.18th art's status. For Bürger, aestheticism enabled art to develop for the first time a philosophically (and by implication, socially) 'autonomous' status. This frees art of all its traditionally subordinate roles, for example to the church or to the prince's court. Economically art becomes free labour, and aesthetically, it

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becomes free to represent only itself, for the first time art's absolute content is art, it is 'about' nothing but its own beauty and formal perfection. So aestheticism/romanticism, which develop alongside, 'the rise of bourgeois society and the seizure of political power by a bourgeoisie that had gained economic strength,' (ibid.: 43) actually create for the first time art as a distinct institution (Art).

Bürger understands Kant's theory of Art as defining an objective aesthetic sphere, independent of the life and institutions of society where 'delight' is independent of all individual or social interest or desire. He perceives in Schiller's aesthetics an even more decisive renunciation of the world. For Schiller art is the only possible remaining sphere where man can regain the wholeness that history has torn from him, so it must struggle to escape every aspect of social bondage, bondage which finally stretches even beyond history to encompass the sensuous and the material as well. Art must escape into the realm of a pure-idealism.

Bürger stresses that the autonomy of art is not to be seen as a historical reality in the sense that it produced art works that genuinely reflected universal beauties or objective truths free of any particularistic social interest or ideology. However, he also argues that it is not to be simply rejected as a fiction or bourgeois ideology earlier, instead he argues

The *autonomy of art* is a category of bourgeois society. It permits the description of art's detachment from the context of practical life as a historical development - that among the members of those classes which, at least at times, are free from the pressures of the need for survival, a sensuousness could evolve that was not part of any means-end relationship... What this category cannot lay hold of is that this detachment of art from practical contexts is a *historical process*, i.e., that it is socially conditioned... 'autonomy' is thus an ideological category that joins an element of

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truth (the apartness of art from the praxis of life) with an element of untruth (the hypostization of this fact, which is result of historical development as the 'essence' of art). (ibid.: 46)

Bürger understands the avant-garde specifically as an attack not on any particular style or type of art, but on this 'autonomy,' on Art as an institutionalised activity.

With the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism. Dadaism, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde, no longer criticises schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution, and the course of its development in bourgeois society. (ibid.: 22)

The term 'institution' here refers both to the material, to particular productive and distributive mechanisms, and to the ideological, to, 'ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works'.

(ibid.: 22) Herbert Marcuse argued that even an art that protests against society can, through its autonomy, end up supporting it. Bürger take this idea, along with Habermas's (rather bland) conception of bourgeois art as a sphere for the fulfilment of economically residual needs, and argues that ideologies such as aestheticism serve a potentially political function, by regulating and limiting the effect that any particular work might have and by bracketing off and segregating certain human needs.

All those needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life, because the principle of competition pervades all spheres, can find a home in art, because art is removed from the praxis of life. Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are excluded from life as it were, and preserved in art. In bourgeois society, art has a contradictory role: it projects the image of a better order and to that extent protests against the bad order that prevails. But by

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realising the image of a better order only in fiction, which is resemblance (*schein*) only, it relieves the existing society of the pressure of those forces that make for change. They are consigned to confinement in an ideal sphere. (ibid.: 50)

Bürger understands the force of avant-garde critique to be directed, beyond art, against two aspects of bourgeois society in particular; means/end rationalism and the progression of the division of labour. In the first they were adopting an essential element of the aestheticist program but in the second they were criticising the very social specialization of function which allowed art the autonomy to make its criticism. So they accepted the aestheticists' rejection of the world but objected to the institutional separation and marginalisation of that criticism.

Bürger argues that the increasing specialisation produced by a progressive division of labour brings about a 'shrinkage' of experience. The concept of shrinkage is borrowed from Walter Benjamin and describes a process whereby specialists, including artists, develop an increasingly limited ability to translate the experience of their disciplines into a more generalised 'praxis of life.' It is to the crippling of the aesthetic experience through its alienation to such an 'autonomous' sphere that the avant-garde objects. Their ambition is thus to destroy art *as an institution* and to transfer creative and transformational activities to the life praxis. This sphere of praxis is to be very firmly distinguished from existing economic, political or culture orders, within which the avant-garde sought no function at all, rather 'life praxis' denotes a sphere where action opposed to means-end rationality can not only flourish, but more importantly, where it could play *an active critical historical role*, enacting initiatives which would have direct consequences *beyond the artistic sphere*. Thus the avant-garde intend,

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'the sublation of art in the praxis of life': i.e., to create an art not to be integrated into the existing social praxis, but to be the site of a new mode of praxis, to this extent it is *political* and *prophetic*.

Bürger argues that the attacks of the avant-garde take the form of radical techniques such as chance, allegory and montage which sought to 'shock' the public out of the old mode of receiving art and into the new, more dialectic mode: 'to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient's life praxis'. (ibid.: 80) For Bürger these techniques constitute a renunciation *both* of the organic work *and* the material, in the sense of the implicit determinations of the atom discussed by Adorno. Clearly this constitutes a complete renunciation not only of traditional art but also of modernism as, for example, Adorno understands it.

Bürger understands the avant-garde critique of art as vital for any understanding of developments *since* the avant-garde, and makes five major points about the complex situation of art and the avant-garde today. These relate to the avant-garde's success, its failure, the false sublation of art, and the institutionalisation and *death* of the avant-garde:

By specifically revealing art's claims of autonomy and interest-free universality to be *institutionally backed* they destroyed the idea that a single school or technique could present a, 'claim to universal validity'. Bürger thus credits the avant-garde with breaking down art's search for a singular essence or 'material', and the introduction of a more heterophonic culture, in which a plethora of techniques, languages and styles could co-exist with equal (in)validity. He *implies* (but does not state) that with the avant-garde we might historically locate the advent of an explicitly *post-modernist* culture.

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Bürger argues that the avant-garde was as a contradictory endeavour which can ultimately be demonstrated to have failed, *and necessarily so*.

(the) attempt to reintegrate art into the life process is itself a profoundly contradictory endeavour. For the (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance. (ibid.: 57)

*False sublation;* Bürger argues that although this absorption of art into life praxis was understood by the avant-garde to be a progressive negation of art's autonomy, it has in fact occurred in the culture industry where art has been 'falsely sublated' into a purely material, means-end praxis. It is thus not so much the avant-garde as means-end rationalism - commerce - that today offers the greatest threat to art's autonomy, endangering even that narrow band of independence and social criticism that the aestheticists fought so hard to achieve.

*Assimilation and death;* Bürger argues that the historical avant-garde, through their assimilation into institution of art (e.g. the galleries, the art-market and Art History) has become a part of institutionalised art. Furthermore he argues that once this challenge has been made and assimilated it can no longer be repeated. Referring to Marcel Duchamp's Ready-Made objects attempt to 'shock', he argues,

It is obvious that this kind of provocation depends on what it turns against: here, it is the idea that the individual is the subject of artistic creation. Once the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the

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provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite. If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it. Such adaptation does not eradicate the idea of individual creativity, it affirms it, and the reason is the failure of the avant-gardist attempt to sublimate art. Since now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as institution is accepted as *art*, the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic. (ibid.: 53)

and;

Nothing loses its effectiveness more quickly than shock; by its very nature it is a unique experience, it changes fundamentally: there is no such thing as expected shock. (ibid.: 81)

So having being once employed the tactic cannot be repeated. He argues for example that Andy Warhol's soup cans contain no critical potential whatsoever, and nothing that enables them to be distinguished them from art which merely obediently adapts to a contemporary artistic institution and/or market.



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### Problems with Poggioli's Theory of the Avant-Garde

Poggioli is concerned with the avant-garde purely as an *art* movement and undervalues its *political* component. Although he quotes Bontempelli's suggestion that one source of the avant-garde lies in its unique recognition of its own historical condition, (Poggioli: 122) he fails to recognise that the avant-garde developed from this insight a *critical sociology* of art which led them to understand the aesthetic and the social as inextricably linked. With Surrealism this link expanded to include the directly political as well, which Poggioli too easily dismisses as peripheral to the concerns of avant-garde movements. Whether in explicit or implicit form the political in the broader (i.e. not necessarily party-political) sense of a critique of power is inherent in all avant-garde movements. In failing to understand the politics of the avant-garde Poggioli also fails to appreciate fully the character of its specifically political attack on the actual category and institution of art itself, and thus on romanticism and modernism.

Bürger's theory highlights a weakness present in both Adorno and Poggioli's theories of the avant-garde; both fail to distinguish avant-gardism from modernism in any satisfactory manner. Poggioli finally credits the avant-garde with little more than a sharpening up of the attack on classicist art made by romanticism, skirting around the issues of historical development and failing to give sufficient weight to important differences between the romantic and avant-garde attacks on art.

Jochen Schulte-Sasse argues that Poggioli's theory really amounts to little more than a theory of *linguistic unconventionality* which in essence is no different from conventional modernistic elite-verses-mass theories (see, for example, Clement Greenberg's influential 1939 essay 'The Avant-Garde and Kitsch').

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Poggioli's criteria are historically too unspecific; his arguments cannot accomplish what must be the primary task of a 'theory of the avant-garde': to characterize with theoretical accuracy the historical uniqueness of the avant-garde of the 1920's. (1984: x)

In Poggioli's defence, this criticism almost certainly goes too far. In several points of his description of the avant-garde defines features which go beyond a modernistic critique of conventional artistic language, even his perhaps inappropriate notion of the bohemian in fact goes further than this. With Poggioli's observation of the priority of motion over creation, process over product, extreme antagonism (breaking down barriers not to replace them with anything ones but almost for the hell of it), alienation from social and cultural hierarchy, decentredness and transitoriness, he describes less a modernist 'art movement' than an avant-garde in the sense meant by Bürger, i.e., these features together indicate criticism not of specific historical languages but of the artistic institutionalisation of language, of the principle of the code, per se. This said, it must be admitted that Poggioli's theory is not really a theory at all, but a very useful description of historical and universal aspects of the avant-garde, which finally lacks strictly definitive features.

### Problems with Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde

Bürger takes a step forward with the dialectically opposing notions of institutionalisation and life-praxis. These allow him to draw distinct dividing lines between modernism and the avant-garde; modernism uncritically accepting the art-institution though challenging its language and contents the avant-garde challenging the entire institution itself.

This exposes an important contradiction in Adorno's work which centres around his notion of the material, on which the avant-garde's claim to sole critical-priority rests.

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Bürger argues that in fact the avant-garde is wholly opposed to the - basically elitist and institutional - idea of a unique historical material and introduces the montage and a plethora of materials and styles in order to undermine precisely this notion. (Bürger 1984b: 120) This enables us to see that Adorno's bottom line is in fact an ultra-modernist and 'anti-avantgardist' stance which, Bürger argues, is witnessed by his savage criticism of Stravinsky's (post-modern) use of montage. This concurs with my own criticisms above that Adorno is finally on the side of the European high-cultural institution, for all his insight into its decrepit state.

However, there are several basic flaws in Bürger's theory, roughly these can be deduced from; 1. His theory of the death of the avant-garde, 2. His *concept* of the avant-garde, 3. The *institutionalised* character of his theory, and 4. His concept of life-praxis. I will examine these in some detail here, using criticism of them as a basis for a more comprehensive theory of the contemporary avant-garde.

### Bürger and the Death of the Avant-Garde

Bürger's argument that the avant-garde has failed, and *must* fail because the fusion of art and praxis is inherently contradictory, is flawed in that he confuses the two different forms of praxis which he earlier very clearly delineates; life-praxis and material praxis. For if 'life-praxis' is understood to be the critical sphere he that he discusses (which may or may not be artistic in character) it is difficult to see how social criticism, 'wholly absorbed' in this critical sphere would lose the capacity to criticize material means-end praxis. Yet precisely this confusion is the basis of Bürger's argument. The attempt to unite art and life-praxis, remains inadequately theorized and remains unchallenged by Bürger's work.

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Even if we agree with Bürger that a 'false-sublation' of art into material-praxis has occurred, it is difficult to see why this *necessarily* rules out the historical possibility that a 'genuine' sublation of art into life-praxis may also have occurred, or could potentially occur in some other sphere. Similarly, simply because institutionalised art continues to exist and persist and has swallowed up the avant-garde of the 1920s does not mean that the avant-garde has finished or failed in its attempt to define a *new* sphere of activity. Also, his disqualification of Andy Warhol from the ranks of the avant-garde does nothing at all to demonstrate that the avant-garde no longer exists, or that it might live on in some other form aside from 1960s 'neo-dadaism'. This being so his reports of its death could well be exaggerated.

### Bürger's Concept of the Avant-Garde

Bürger's definition of the avant-garde leads him to a very narrow view, which he actually shares with Adorno, of the avant-garde as *purely negative*. For Bürger the avant-garde is more or less limited to montage-form and defined solely by its negation of the institution and the art-work. This is all very neat and tidy but, I must argue, it bears little empirical relation to *any* avant-garde movement past or present. Bürger actually abstracts an argument of the historical avant-garde - the negation of art - some of its *propaganda*, and takes it to be not only a historical reality, but its single definitive feature.

So Bürger's concept of the avant-garde is basically inadequate; the avant-garde is not wholly reducible to an attack on the institution/montage form or to the politics of 'shock'. Here Bürger reverses Poggioli's error - seeing the avant-garde as wholly tactical and political, as if it had no aesthetic motivations at all. But, as Richard Wolin emphasises, Surrealism, for example, 'very much maintains allegiance to the principles of aesthetic autonomy'. (Wolin

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1985: 15) Bürger's theory defines the avant-garde so narrowly that it has hardly any relevance to Surrealism at all, being entirely based on Francis Picabia's and Marcel Duchamps' brands of Dadaism. But even in respect of Dadaism the notion of sheer-negation must not be understood as a realistic historical description of the movement. In Picabia's and Duchamps' hands it is a piece of rhetoric, a shock-tactic, which does not even go so far as to fully characterise their own works. Thus the historical description of the 1920s avant-garde as purely negative must be rejected as inadequate, simplistic and onesided. Hans Richter, for example, writes, 'The new ethic took sometimes a positive, sometimes a negative form, often appearing as art and then again as the negation of art,' and again, 'in spite of all our anti-art polemics, we produced works of art'. (Richter 1960: 9, 59) And even the most cursory glance at the whole lines of avant-garde innovation from Kandinsky and Picasso, through Schwitters to Surrealism and the early phases of Abstract Expressionism, surely leads us to deny this thesis of sheer negation. Alongside the ethic of aggression and contradiction the avant-garde in all its phases is also characterised by a concern for freedom and formal abstraction which can properly be described as aesthetic, though certainly not as *aestheticist*, and is in fact an affirmative, and even a *modernist*, moment of the avant-garde.

This argument is perhaps less decisive than Bürger's, and certainly less glamorous than Duchamps', but it is more accurate. The point is not to try to prove that the historical, or contemporary avant-garde is definitively either for or against art, it is rather to recognise that their essence was in fact contradictory, there was *no definitive view*, the avant-garde, past or present simply does not offer clearcut definitions of the sort Bürger's theory, and most of the debate that has surrounded it, seem to require. It would be much more accurate to say that the

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avant-garde *problematized* the relationships between Art (as in institutionalised aesthetic activity), art (aesthetic activity) and life-praxis, than to say that they offered any single, coherent or definitive blueprint.

We begin to see another reason why, for all its weaknesses, Poggioli's book is not quite so useless as critics - for example Schulte-Sasse (1984) - are apt to imply. For all its failures it is descriptively-directed towards a historical reality in a way that Bürger's simply is not, and it expresses the mess of contradictory urges that characterises the avant-garde, much more accurately than Bürger who wishes to reduce the avant-garde down to a theoretical formulation.

Bürger's erroneous concept of the avant-garde becomes still more clear in his attack on Adorno's idea of the 'material', which we outlined in Chapter Three. Against Adorno we can agree with Bürger that the avant-garde criticises the exclusiveness of this concept, but Bürger then goes further; arguing that through the montage the avant-garde seeks to strip the material of its independent motivations and directions, employing it instead in a purely practical - tactical and political - manner.

Artists who produce organic work treat their material as something living. They respect its significance as something that has grown from concrete life situations. For the avant-gardists, on the other hand, material is just that, material. Their activity initially consists in nothing other than in killing the 'life' of the material, that is tearing it out of its functional context that gives it meaning. Whereas the classicist recognises and respects in the material the carrier of a meaning, the avant-gardists sees only the empty sign, to which they can impart significance. The classicist correspondingly treats the material as a whole, whereas the avant-gardist tears it out of the life totality, isolates it, and turns it into a fragment. (Bürger 1984: 70)

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Here Bürger equates the life of the material, the historical determinations that matter holds aside and above any particular desires or determinations of the subject purely with its 'functional context'. But Adorno's notion of material does not depend on conventional or functional context in this way at all: it is rather a matter of endowing an object with the capacity for 'speech' *aside* from any social or historical or conventional context which might restrain it. For example, Cage's avant-garde use of atonality denies the conventional functional context of the note, and from its own determinations allows new contexts to develop, it is never at any stage an 'empty sign' waiting for the composer to 'impart significance', quite the opposite. Or, to take a very different example, André Breton's 'automatic writing' might take the word from its functional context but it does not seek to deprive the word of its own determinations; on the contrary it is precisely those determinations - its essential polytheism - that automatic writing seeks to liberate. So although the avant-garde undoubtedly constitute a postmodernist refutation of Adorno's idea that an epoch has a single uniquely valid material, they do not deny the concept of material *per se*, replacing it entirely with strategic-motivations, any more than they deny aesthetics *per se* and replace them entirely with politics;<sup>14</sup> rather they make the material a problem and they make it multiplistic.

The problem partly derives from Bürger's apparently unambiguous description of the 'art institution', which I have so far taken as read;

the productive and distributive apparatus and... the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works. (1984: 22)

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Bürger is surely correct to include within the institution both the material institutions of production and reception, say, of composition and performance, and ideas about content, meaning and form. But in including phenomena of such different orders he also, unavoidably, allows *the space* between the material institution and the institutionalised idea. In effect the two do not necessarily match.

A good example of this can be found in the compositions of John Cage: formally much of Cage's work entirely subverts the European musical institution of 'the work' in that different performances of a single piece might use different materials and take on very different forms; so to the extent to which Cage's work departs completely from classical and modern ideas of form it must certainly be described as avant-garde. However the institutional relationships between composer/text/performer and audience are likely to remain very much intact, so to this extent Cage, *because he has retained the institutional domination of the composer*, is much closer to the modernist who seeks to fill the old positions with fresh blood than the avant-gardist who wants to do away with the positions as completely as possible.

The problem also occurs in the work of Kurt Schwitters whom no-one could deny a place in the avant-garde. Unlike, say, Picabia, Schwitters displayed no contempt for 'Art,' and his introduction of new materials such as cut-up newspapers and bus tickets cannot be seen simply as subversion: Schwitters wanted his collages to look *beautiful*. So in this case an avant-garde concern with action free from code or sign developed free and abstract forms which have a fundamental link with some of the purely-aesthetic concerns of *modernist* art.

A final example; Webern's attitude to sound - liberating it from the conventions of musical and expressive codes - might be regarded as an avant-garde element but within a compositional institutional framework that is basically modernistic in orientation.

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By distinguishing the institutionalised code and the art institution in such ways we are able to see that the two are not always synonymous - thus we are able to discuss avant-garde, modern, or post-modern *elements* within an overall constellation, which we may or may not be able to categorise. This means that many other factors, ignored by Bürger, are able to come into play, the whole issue and definition of the avant-garde becoming far more complex, but also far more realistic. We may thus see the avant-garde as containing both modern and post-modern elements while being reducible to neither.

So, in practical terms, the avant-garde is a conceptual mess. It does not make sense in terms of the discussion that Bürger wants to shackle it with, and it certainly does not slot easily into any any place within the contemporary discussions regarding modernism and post-modernism - most of which is a debate between different institutional positions. The essence of the avant-garde lies less along any single line of argument or formal practice than on a whole series of contradictions and dialogues over negation and affirmation, pro-art and anti-art, aesthetics and politics. The notion of a strictly definable, 'pure', avant-garde is thus a nonsense. Above all the avant-garde is a point of conflict, contradiction and synthesis.

### Bürger's 'Institutionalised' Perspective

Bürger's own perspective might be seen as an institutionalised one. In defining the avant-garde purely by its negation of the institution Bürger tends to see it only in the light, and in the terms of, the artistic institution. Perversely, he fails to recognise that, for the most part, the avant-garde exists not so much in declared public opposition to art institutions as entirely independently from them. This is related to his purely theoretical approach to cultural study - he lacks any interest in the actual sociological character of the avant-garde of the sort

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Poggioli employs.<sup>15</sup>

So Bürger's theory of the contemporary state of the avant-garde is based on a serious methodological error. It is precisely because the avant-garde is *not* wholly institutionalised, not wholly part of Art History, that Bürger is blind and deaf to it. His error is in fact identical to that of Adorno; neither can see any way out of critical culture's impasse - between the art institution and commerce (material-praxis) - precisely because each searches for the non-institutionalised only within particular high cultural historical institutionalised frameworks - neither bother looking beyond the art gallery, theatre, university or concert-hall. They are staggering about in a graveyard trying to convince us that there is no life *anywhere else either*.

Furthermore, to enact avant-garde culture one does not to have any relation to those historical avant-garde traditions examined by Bürger (and by myself in Chapter One), nor even know of them, nor have a conscious relationship *of any kind* to an art institution. The avant-garde stresses activity, not relation to any particular historical or theoretical formulation.

I never thought, 'this is avant-garde,'... I didn't even know the word, I didn't even know that expression...

You see, what you were saying about spontaneity, Dadaism and all that stuff, was that an influence or whatever, I didn't know anything about any of that stuff. My involvement in 'art', if you like was an applied thing... it was a very personal creative thing that I was involved in. (Free music drummer John Stevens)

Many avant-gardists may be ignorant of, or profoundly indifferent to, what the sociologist or theorist regards as their history, and may view their activity as an affirmation of *itself* and *themselves* rather than as

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opposition to any art-institution. It is rather the institution itself which is more likely to interpret any decentralised independent praxis-oriented activity as hostile. From the perspective of the institution the avant-garde appears to be only an attack on itself, it sees only the avant-garde's negativity and its own disintegration. But this does not make opposition to the institution either the motor nor essence for avant-garde activity. Ignorance of it, or as in the case of bebop, rejection by it, might be just as important.

Finally, Poggioli's maybe careless characterisation of a non-institutionalised avant-garde as marginal, multifarious and disparate is more accurate than Bürger's, which seeks only neatness and delineation, and which finally sees the avant-garde only from the point of view of the institution itself. Most importantly, the reason that Bürger's attempt to theoretically institutionalise the avant-garde fails is that it rests on the idea that the avant-garde is dead. This assumed death allows it to be dissected and delineated, and made coherent to the very process of theoretical codification and institutionalisation it opposes, by its transformation into a unified historical movement with definite goals and priorities.

But, if the avant-garde is not dead, then not only Bürger's theory, but the whole attempt to neatly divide contemporary culture along post-avant-garde, and by implication post-modern/modern lines is doomed. A living critical culture is not so clearly theorisable and ordered, it is incoherent, disunified, discontinuous, and not in any real sense a movement. A contemporary avant-garde would refuse to congeal into such neat patterns.

### Bürger's Concept of Praxis

Bürger fails to sufficiently explore his concept of life-praxis, a failing which is witnessed by his own apparent confusion between the terms life-praxis and material-praxis

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in his discussion of false-sublation. Strangely, Bürger's pessimism seems almost entirely grounded on linguistic confusions such as these, which are not quite the dialectical aphorisms with which Adorno liked to express his hopelessness, more a simple failure to clearly define and differentiate his terms<sup>16</sup>. In fact once he has developed these concepts he does not quite know what to do with them and ends by effectively accepting a weak (basically a Habermasian) version of Adorno's thesis that the aesthetic survives as a sphere for the fulfilment of needs excluded from rationalistic society as whole; a prejudice that consigns any contemporary avant-garde manifestation either to aestheticist-nostalgia or to the direction of market forces (material-praxis). The issues of *how and with what* precisely the avant-garde responds to institutionalisation, its affirmative currents, and what they seek to put in its place - i.e. of the character of life-praxis and the *affirmative* role it might take in avant-garde aesthetics and politics - remain wholly undiscussed.

### Towards a Contemporary Avant-Garde Theory

It is now necessary to examine further and to redefine some of the basic concepts necessary to a theory of the avant-garde. These are autonomy, popular culture and praxis.

#### Autonomy

'It speaks to people's desire for some sort of autonomy or creativity, for social connections that aren't preconcieved.' (Free music vocalist Maggie Nicols)

It is far from inevitable that a culture freed from social utility or commerce necessarily seeks the shelter offered by the academy or the museum: autonomy and Aestheticism are not identical. There is also a sense in which a culture that achieves a level of relative autonomy from the

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determinations from the major centres of economic, political and cultural power can attain a level of genuine critique. As Adorno argued, critical culture through its very escape from social utility becomes both a repudiation and a product of the social. There is then a need for a notion of the autonomy of the critical-aesthetic which is quite different from that Bürger describes in C.19th Aestheticism - which place the art-object beyond all human and historical reach.

I wish to propose a new model of a cultural-autonomy which is grounded in history, an *autonomy of praxis*. This concept is intended to delineate a sphere for a critical culture clearly within history, but never reducible to it, in that the sphere is not merely formed by history but takes an active and critical role in it and seeks to effect it. Strictly speaking this is not a sphere at all - a sphere is defined by clear boundaries - this is more a space, a indeterminate gap. It is this indeterminate aspect of the critical culture of the avant-garde that enables us to characterise it as autonomous, and its resolutely historical grasp of this condition that makes it 'grounded'.

So, by attacking the art institution and denying its language the avant-garde is not opposing artistic autonomy per se. Quite the contrary; it seeks to *preserve* autonomy by attacking institutionalised-artistic autonomy and linking its own forms and practices to the experiences of a multiplicity, a *collective subjectivity*, a social praxis.

To further explore these notions - collective subjectivity, grounded autonomy, praxis - we need to consider the apparently obscure and largely-ignored relationship of the avant-garde to contemporary popular culture. In Art History, as for Adorno, the avant-garde is generally seen as a technically advanced extension of institutionalised elite-culture. I am arguing that this is an error; what actually sustains the avant-garde in all its phases is the common ground that it shares with contemporary

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popular culture, though these terms are in no sense synonymous.

### Popular Culture

We must be clear; by contemporary popular culture I mean to refer neither to *Neighbours* nor to Morris dancing. Firstly we must make a distinction between traditional popular culture - folk culture - and its more contemporary manifestations. Secondly, I would like to maintain some aspects of the unfashionable traditional distinction between mass culture and popular culture which rests largely on the issue of critical potential; mass culture is mimetic and uncritical; monophonic, while popular culture is dialogic, critical and heterophonic. However in its traditional forms, i.e., Clement Greenberg, T.S. Eliot, Soviet Socialist Realism, and to some extent Adorno, the distinction between popular and mass culture is simply an elitist one which completely ignores the active consumption and interpretation of culture, favouring instead over-deterministic and rather archaic notions of structure and content. My perspective is different from these:

Today the distinction between the mass and the popular can no longer be regarded as absolute, and is certainly not a matter of form, they are best seen as symbiotic; between the two - both within and without the mass media - a contested space is formed, a kind of everyday battleground.

So when we refer to popular culture we do not refer predominantly to an artistic culture, though that is also an element, but more to decentralised forms; to everyday dialogues such as slang, patois, subversions and reversals of meaning, humour, to pleasure taken in difference, and in the rhythm, flux and flow of social interaction, and the conflict these continually experience with purely-formal and predetermined discourses and practices. What we refer to in fact are aspects of *everyday human action and interaction* - this is ultimately what is meant by popular culture, and

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more specifically by life-praxis.

The avant-garde is dependent on popular culture thus defined in the sense that it takes everyday sociality as its impetus. It is with this experience of collective (inter-subjectivity) that the avant-garde opposes centralised institutionalised cultural forms. So the avant-garde should not be understood as pure negation, because, in its procedure and sources it also proposes positive models and utopian ideals of social praxis, and it does this from the most practical and active of perspectives.

This model of contemporary popular culture finds some striking parallels in Mikhail Bakhtin's work, particularly in his study of the festive and folk sources and imagery in Rabelais' texts, *Rabelais and His World*. Here Bakhtin proposes a quite new model for the understanding of Medieval folk culture, a model which, by implication, extends far beyond that specific historical period. His is a profound and optimistic vision of 'the popular', almost entirely in opposition to Adorno's.

Bakhtin makes a fundamental distinction between Official Culture, characterised by the Christian Church and its abolition of pleasure and the body, and Popular or Folk Culture, which is characterised by the Carnival; an unofficial time span which overturns all legislation and hierarchy. Between the two there is a structural relation beyond their specific historical characteristics. The formal characteristics of Official Culture and Popular Culture are not specific to the Church and the Carnival, and each may take many different forms at different times.

Official Culture stresses the permanence and invariability of the world, and attempts to construct and alienate a single completed discourse which judges and characterises it. This discourse emphasises stasis and hierarchy, and is constructed at a distance from all that moves and mutates, denying time and that which exposes

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its flow; all that is unfinished. The changing seasons, conception, birth, growth, ageing, decay and death, even the movement of food through the body, eating, digestion and defecation, are all silenced. The body itself is excluded, as lowly, dirty and crude, and if it appears at all, like The Virgin, it is sealed from the passage of time and physical functions - unageing, impenetrable and closed, the body is a carrier of the pure light of the untainted soul.

Against this Bakhtin characterises Popular Culture as proposing, 'a completely different, non-official, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations'. (op cit.: 6) The world of the Carnival turns the official world upside down and inside out, it mocks and parodies. Characterised most explicitly by the *Feast of Fools*, which carnival elects fools to kings, sees priests uttering obscenities and blasphemies of every kind, and riding through the town pelting the populace not with biblical quotation but with handfuls of dung.

This experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretence at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. (ibid.: 11)

Two specific carnival symbolic forms that interest Bakhtin are universal-laughter and the grotesque image:

Bakhtin argues that official culture is characterised by a seriousness and formality, 'combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain(s) an element of fear and intimidation. (ibid.: 90) The carnival's forms on the other hand - its spectacles, rituals, spoken and literary parodies, patois, obscenities and slang - are characterised by a universal-laughter at the world. This

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laughter overturns the world and word, makes connections between their disparate, fragmented parts, it is ambiguous and ambivalent, and alleviates fear;

Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivety and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. (ibid.: 123)

The *grotesque image* distorts known bodily forms, in opposition to the smooth, sealed and finished classical representation of the body it emphasises those aspects of the body which are open to the world, protrusions, apertures and reproductive organs, exaggerating the marks, warts and imperfections which bear witness to the passage of time. For Bakhtin the essence of the grotesque lies in the representation of mutation, of flesh dying and being born; witnessed for example by the representation of the ancient pregnant woman, disfigured by time, and by her proximity both to birth and to death.

The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (ibid.: 24)

What both laughter and the grotesque share is a refusal of any presented, static, and completed image of the world and its forms, everything is reduced to the form of the physical body, everything is born, moves, mutates, and dies. The

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effect is the radical questioning of the represented and the known, and the dissolution of all permanent hierarchy, of all the lines that divide society and give it form. And this dissolution is by no means merely symbolic or representational, for, abstracted from hierarchy and authority social experience itself changes and explodes;

People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought: they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind. (ibid.: 10)

Bakhtin thus describes a radically new model for a critical culture, a culture whose origin and destination rest not on representation of a given order or ideas but on the *lived experience* of new ones, quite aside from the languages of politics or of art.

the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to a borderline between art and life. In reality it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play...

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everybody participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While Carnival lasts there is no other life outside it. During Carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom... (ibid.: 7)

Clearly Bakhtin's image of Popular Carnival culture is rooted in eras prior to mass production and the opposition he draws between official and popular culture does not include contemporary mass culture into the equation. Thus we cannot uncritically transform his theory into a basis for a theory of contemporary popular culture or the avant-garde.

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However, as the Carnival proposes a new relationship between art and life, it may be conceived as a prototypical form of the avant-garde and shows us the manner in which the contemporary avant-garde might still find their roots and sources in popular culture, even though that culture is today seriously weakened. Carnival enables us to see that the concerns of the avant-garde do not represent sheer modernistic innovation, as Adorno argues, but actually a rediscovery, a reorientation to the world that is as old as the separation of culture to a sphere independent of life.

### Praxis

What is meant by praxis, or life-praxis, in this context? By praxis we refer to dialectical interaction between subjects and between subjects and objects - to labour, to creativity and to collective action. As Mihailo Marković and the other philosophers of the Yugoslav Praxis group (Marković 1974a, 1974b, {ed.} 1979) have argued, social-praxis is not a purely objective or descriptive concept, but one that also contains critical and evaluative components. Praxis-oriented social actions are those which reveal individuals and groups capable of subjectively determining their own history and actions rather than simply being determined by objective forces external to them. A means of overcoming reification and alienation, social-praxis reveals both the social and the individual to be processes in motion.

Viewed from historical and collective perspectives praxis may be perceived as the source of both language and subjectivity. It is in order to fully recognise this that classical individualism, of which Adorno's modernism forms perhaps the last brilliant and tragic expression, must finally be abandoned. The individual as historical actor and creator does not stand alone but disintegrates into the collective, multiplistic and polyphonic networks of social life. Yet this does not announce the death of subjectivity; rather in the notion of praxis we discover radically new

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senses of subjectivity and individuality. This view of a communicative network as a product of practical, free acts bears something in common with that proposed by Lyotard:

The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. the social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. it is fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules....

That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction. (Lyotard 1984: 40-41)

The heterophonic quality of the avant-garde, its search for other routes, for an anarchistic pluralism of codes, paths and voices, is one manifestation of these senses; and its radical nature is that it is less a blueprint or individual line of vision, than a *many-sided conversation*. Without the admission of this indeterminate chaos unity cannot be organically achieved, only falsely identified, declared and imposed. True synthesis is possible only on condition of the admission of difference. The critical currents, on which the avant-garde depends for sustenance, are not one but many and continually interact with reified patterns and habits; there is a praxis between the mass and the popular, a dialectic.

It is the freedom and conflict that this dialectical-praxis contests and maintains, rather than any utopian purity, that characterises the contemporary avant-garde, and we must develop an inclusive rather than exclusive perspective in order to perceive its existence. For the contemporary avant-garde is not specific to any particular institutional or social sphere, but rather the most extreme and ambitious moment of a phenomena - desire for social-

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praxis - that runs repressed, challenged, contested and demanded - in multifarious lines throughout the whole of culture. There is no aspect of it that is specific to artistic culture, for there is today no such thing as an artistic problem that is not at the same time a human and social problem. It is to this complexity of experience and lack of division between different spheres of experience that the contemporary avant-garde attest.

### Conclusion

Briefly: against Adorno and Bürger I have argued that the avant-garde, far from being a thing of the past, is, in some sense *everywhere*; infiltrating contemporary culture in a mass of activities and guises. For all its undoubted continuing *economic* and *political* marginality the avant-garde is in another sense almost epidemic. I have;

1. Delineated the avant-garde within (or rather without) the context of the modernist/post-modernist spectrum, finding in it a modernism-derived concern for aesthetic/political autonomy and a post-modern concern for both formal and social polytheism and multiplicity;

2. Clarified and expanded Bürger's notion of the artistic institution, to include, for example, the idea of a code, and proposed that that the artistic-institution and the artistic-code, should be analytically distinguished, because rather than simply just reflecting each other they may in reality conflict;

3. Explored the notion of a dialogic popular culture as a source for the avant-garde. And;

4. Developed the meaning of 'praxis', its collective essence, and its relationship say to commercial and to purely artistic activities.

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Autonomy from code, polytheism, non-institutionalisation, dialogism, collectivism, praxis: Together these concepts form a more adequate, though no doubt still incomplete, theory for a contemporary avant-garde. Yet in no sense should any of these be taken for granted, i.e. viewed as static. Rather each defines an area of dialogue, a discursive aesthetic/political region that is contested and debated throughout avant-garde manifestations and practices. The avant-garde is thus not something which is pure or which proposes any single line or point of perspective, but a site of conflict, contradiction, synthesis and negotiation. Taking everyday life and experience as a source the contemporary avant-garde propose a dialectic, transcendental culture which is ubiquitous, open-ended, incommensurable, unfinished...

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## CHAPTER FIVE: MUSIC, LISTENING, PROPHECY, NOISE

### Introduction

Before theorising the contemporary musical avant-garde in any further detail I would like to consider some of the specific implications and possibilities of music as a media. Of particular importance is the possible significance that the avant-gardist attempt to undermine the institutional codification of language may have within the context of music. I will examine the particular relationship between codes and listening, and the character and meaning that states of listening which seem to go beyond the code might have. These issues are considered in two ways; within the context of music and listening as a whole and within the more specific context of contemporary music and the avant-garde. My discussion initially focuses on the concepts of *listening* and *prophecy*, and moves into a theoretical consideration of the concept of noise.

### Listening

'Knowledge in general cannot be reduced to science, nor even to learning... what is meant by the term knowledge is not only a set of denotive statements, far from it. It also includes notions of "knowhow," "Knowing how to live," "how to listen".' (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 18)

'...at times, he kind of mulls things over. Sometimes he stops, listening.' (Derek Bailey on solo-trombonist Paul Rutherford, Bailey 1987: 42)

To listen. What does that mean?

Roland Barthes considers three modes that the act of listening can take. He begins by distinguishing *listening* from *hearing*.

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Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; *listening* is a psychological act. It is possible to describe the physical conditions of hearing (its mechanisms) by recourse to acoustics and to the physiology of the ear; but listening cannot be defined only by its object or, one might say, by its goal (1985: 245) .

Here Barthes suggests that, unlike the dispassionate *facts* of hearing or not hearing, listening is an *act* whose condition and function might vary greatly over time and space. It is situated and subjective, and neither a physical nor formal fact. He delineates three general types of listening. The first he labels *alert* listening.

Alert listening is a form common to most living beings, the power of hearing is used to orientate the being, to mark out boundaries, to distinguish friend from foe, the comfort offered by the recognised, familiar sound, and the threat of the unfamiliar. From the general capacity for hearing a selective process occurs through the 'filtering trajectory' of the ear, through which undifferentiated sounds and noises become coded into information; the alert listener, 'transforms noise into index' (ibid.: 252).

The second form is *deciphering*. Here the ear is searching for messages, signs and codes, 'Here, no doubt, begins the human (ibid.: 245).' By which Barthes seems to refer to the creation of language, through which listening becomes a hermenutic process. Here sound does not simply indicate or suggest a presence, but a meaning, something lying beneath or behind the sign. Barthes links this to religious motivation; listening for the Voice of God, the priest listening to confession. This urge to decipher brings subjects into direct relation, perhaps for the first time, indeed Barthes suggests that this is a precise point from which the subject originates - a point of unity and origination behind the voice, deduced and produced through active listening.

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The third form of listening differs from the other two in that it is not an act which seeks to transform incoming information into a system of classifiable signs. Barthes calls this psychoanalytic listening and designates it to be an entirely modern form. We might understand it as the basis of a specifically avant-garde mode. It is an act made, in Freud's words, in, 'calm, quiet attentiveness - of "evenly hovering" attention'. (quoted *ibid.*: 253)<sup>15</sup> Avoiding deliberate concentration this listening seeks to free itself from signs and discourses. Considering the unknown the ear is open to information from which meaning may emerge long after the listening act, or not at all. Barthes endows this form of listening with an ability to recognise an *other* outside any conventional form of code, classification or psychology. Beyond language the voice is received both abstractly and erotically, in both its vagueness and in its concrete physicality, creating new modes of discourse and new links between speaker and listener:

Listening, then involves a risk: it cannot be constructed under the shelter of a theoretical apparatus, the analysis is not a scientific object from whom the analyst, deep in his armchair, can project himself with objectivity. The psychoanalytic relation is effected between two subjects. The recognition of the other's desire can therefore not be established in neutrality, kindness, or liberality: to recognise this desire implies that one enters it, ultimately finding oneself there. Listening will exist only on condition of accepting the risk, and if it must be set aside in order for there to be analysis, it is by no means with the help of a theoretical shield. (*ibid.*: 256)

This new form of listening produces a new relationship between subjects. The sign is no longer to be understood as an indicator, nor as the relayer of a message from sender to receiver. Instead the process of listening, abandoning a conception of pure thought or knowledge, must be taken to

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include *context* and *medium*, itself becomes a substantial degree of what is comprehended. As for the psychoanalytic counsellor, a great deal of what is communicated through the relationship are actually the relationship - the process and context of transmission - itself. The message cannot be alienated from this.

Listening grants access to all forms of polysemy, of overdetermination, of superimposition, there is a disintegration of the Law which prescribes direct, unique listening; by definition, listening was *applied*; today we ask listening to *release*...

In the second place, the roles implied by the act of listening no longer have the same fixity as in the past; there is no longer, on one side, someone who speaks, gives himself away, confesses, and on the other, someone who listens, keeps silent, judges and sanctions... (ibid.: 258)

Thus through listening an institutional relationship, a relationship of power, becomes dismantled. The new listener seeks not to have a recognisable code confirmed, nor to have The Truth revealed, but rather an autonomous space in which to *exercise* the listening praxis and *explore* understanding. Barthes compares the new and the old listening processes by contrasting of a piece of traditional European classical music, which exists to be *deciphered* and a piece by John Cage which, 'compels the subject to renounce its "inwardness"' (ibid.: 259).

### Listening and Liberation

Barthes suggests that not all listeners are necessarily sociological in the sense that they can be categorised *within* social codes and indexes. We might develop from the notion of psychoanalytic listening an ideal type of listener who is a-sociological or anti-sociological. For this listener music explores a seam or limit to society which listening does not simply highlight but can begin to unpick.

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Such a listening<sup>17</sup> is non-institutionalised, and may be exercised by either the expert or the amateur, may know everything about the techniques of the music's production or next to nothing. This listener essentially hears sounds not filtered and delinated through a spectrum of conventional technical knowledge or language but *in spite* such knowledge.

This listener scans the music and listens not to find his own self in the sounds, not as a source of identity or confirmation, but as a hint of the infinity beyond social identity, beyond self and society. The listener's consciousness may be experienced as disintegrating, dissolving into the sound; stateless, ageless and egoless, without weight, colour or taste, the body weighing the balance of the sounds without judgement or prejudice. In such listening Samuel Beckett's Molloy finds a rare poetic moment, a breath of freedom from the divisions between his subjective and objective faculties:

And that night there was no question of moon, nor of any other light, but it was a night of listening, a night given to the faint sougning and sighing, stirring at night in little pleasure gardens, the shy sabbath of leaves and petals and the air that eddies there as it is does not in other places, where there is less constraint, and it does not during the day, when there is more vigilance, and then something else that is not clear, being neither the air nor what it moves, perhaps the far unchanging noise the earth makes and which other noises cover, but not for long. For they do not account for the noise you hear when you really listen, when all seems hushed. And there was another noise, that of my life become the life of this garden as it rode the earth of deeps and wildernesses. Yes, there were times when I forgot not only who I was, but what I was, forgot to be. The I was no longer that sealed jar to which owed my being so well preserved, but a wall gave way and I filled with roots and tame stems... (Beckett: 46)

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Through listening subject and object, listener and sound dissolve into one, their distinction is transcended and no longer valid. Schopenhauer: 'we lose our selves entirely in this object... we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist as pure subject, as pure mirror of the object...' (Quoted Eisenberg: 198)

Such modes of perception are most often interpreted as being *cosmic* or religious in character, and the characteristic ability of sound to produce such modes is a frequently cited element in Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi texts (see, Khan 1983, 1988, Govinda 1960, 1966, Berendt 1988). For example, when asked by Devi, 'What is your reality?' Amongst Shiva's one hundred and twelve replies may be found;

Bathe in the centre of sound, as in the continuous sound of a waterfall.

Or, by putting fingers in the ears, hear the *sound of sounds*.

Intone a sound, as a-u-m, slowly. As sound enters soundfulness, so do you.

In the beginning and gradual refinement of the sound of any letter, *awake*.

While listening to stringed instruments, hear their composite central sound; thus *omnipresence*.

Intone a sound audibly, then less and less audibly as feeling deepens into this silent harmony.

Imagine spirit simultaneously within and around you until the entire universe *spiritualises*.

(Reps: 154)

And so on. Henry Thoreau writes of the experience of sound;

All sound is akin to Silence; it is a bubble on her surface which straightaway bursts, an emblem of the strength and prolificness of the undercurrent. It is a faint utterance of Silence, and then only agreeable to our auditory nerves when it contrasts itself with the former. In proportion as it does this, and is a heightener and

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intensifier of the Silence, it is harmony and purest melody.  
(quoted Eisenberg: 168)

The cosmic point of view is expressed most directly by the Sufi mystic, Hazrat Inayat Khan. For him music is the original language and, 'reaches farther than any other impression from the external world can reach,' (1959: 5) a manifestation of the music that lies underneath all language and form;

What we call music in our everyday language is only a miniature, which our intelligence has grasped from that music or harmony of the whole universe which is working behind everything, and which is the source and origin of nature. It is because of this that the wise of all ages have considered music to be a sacred art. For in music the seer can see the picture of the whole universe; and the wise can interpret the secret and the nature of the working of the whole universe in the realm of music...

What makes us feel drawn to music is that our whole being is music; our mind and our body, the nature in which we live, the nature which has made us, all that is beneath and around us, it is all music; and we are close to all this music, and live and move and have our being in music. (1959: 7,9).

Such ancient insights obviously sit strangely in the context of contemporary western thought, yet they are important. Although it may not be especially valuable for an understanding of the avant-garde to see music as an embodiment of Heaven or as attesting to a state before or after history, these traditions do help us to understand some ways in which music has traditionally functioned as an embodiment of an ideal relation to the world; a state of undivided receptivity to a perfectly fluid social landscape, where nothing is fixed, in which the listener explores and is explored by sounds.

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This ideal, which is comparable with the avant-gardist escape from code, is thus not one that is founded by the avant-garde but something that has been lost and rediscovered by them, and situated within a radically new, wholly contemporary, God-less, worldview.

In *Profane Culture* Paul Willis discovers elements of such an ideal relationship between sound and listener amongst a group of hippies, he finds the following attitude towards identity;

The hippies did not live in a world of personal certainty and had a far from certain grip on their own identities. Where in the 'straight' world this is a cause for concern, for the hippies it was a source of richness and a base for expanded awareness... Fundamentally they could never believe the world to be real, but they were in no sense *doomed* to this fate, they welcomed it as a profound insight... a state of ontological insecurity was welcomed as liberation, and not feared as a disease. (Willis 1978: 85)

Willis finds this philosophy of indeterminacy fully present in the hippies' music, which, along with hallucinogenic drugs, formed a most important part in the construction of their own identity. He finds;

A music which both attempted timelessness and an abstract, complex shape, was marvellously formed both to mirror and momentarily complete this promethean attempt to encompass a post-capitalist timeless mysticism. (ibid.: 169)

We can interpret the homologies that Willis uncovers as examples of how, for the listener attached to the ideal of absorption, the sonic order may become more all-encompassing than the social order, and thus experienced as *more real*. This listener finds in music a moment of immediate fullness and presentness, a self-transcendence and social transcendence that hint at possibilities beyond existing

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social and historical forms. Thus influenced by music the listener has, 'scrapped the critical path of conventional time, and held the moment for itself. He is forever in an exotic land, even when most at home.' (ibid.: 91) Similarly Evan Eisenberg writes of Clarence, an interviewee whose absorption into music leads him to give up everything, perhaps including his sanity, that at least, 'he has been spared the most common and pernicious nostalgia, nostalgia for the here and now.' (Eisenberg: 16)

### Listening as a Problem

'People slip from consciousness, plunge into deep sleep and have false and whimsical dreams for the note's duration, inwardly adding touches of colour to things that are buried or have not arrived in a vague, crepuscular manner.' (Bloch 1985: 226)

The liberatory mode of listening is an *ideal* mode and difficult to achieve or maintain. It remains to consider a more specific and more realistic condition for listening within the contemporary world. With what specifically might an avant-gardist mode of listening struggle?

The contemporary listener hears music mangled and fragmented by personal and public timetables, by high culture, commerce and by social-function. Eisenberg describes something of the social context for this, what we might call a post-modern contemporary listening;

The city is no place for *listening* to records. Half the time one has to use them as shields against other people's sounds. Music becomes a substitute for silence...

Even in a quiet apartment, one is somehow aware of a hundred competing time structures - the business day, the schedules of radio and television, the neighbour's lifestyles and *their* music. So even an empty bone-white loft falls short of a *tabula rasa*.

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Stravinsky called music, 'the sole domain in which man realises the present'. But living in the present is (contrary to vulgar opinion) nearly impossible in a modern city, which always hungers for the future and eats the past. (1987: 36)

For this listener music offers a sphere of absorption, autonomy and praxis which is both a retreat and a *challenge*. For example, Willis writes of the hippies;

The elements of surprise, contradiction and uncertainty in their music - the elements which made it almost threatening to the 'straight' listener - were precisely the elements prized by the hippies. They *wanted* to be undercut, *wanted* to be surprised and made uncertain. (Willis 1978: 159)

Homologously Willis notes, 'In a real sense the hippies were insecure, but instead of this being an *unavoidable* evil... it was welcomed and experimented with.' (ibid.: 113) Perhaps experiencing the incompatibility of the form of music to those of everyday social life, the insecure contemporary listener develops a highly ambivalent relationship with music. Music represents both damnation and salvation. Acting out a struggle with the tones, music is perceived not as code or structure, nor even as organic streams and rivers of sound, but in alienated snatches, in a patchwork of glimpses, peaks, distractions and silences; echoes of an illusive totality.

Although monism described a goal for consciousness this goal could never be reached and permanently inhabited. It was forever hovering just out of grasp, none the less real for its retreating nature. (Willis: 87)

The contemporary listener seeks unity and connection but has fragmentary attention; he tries to centre and focus the ear, it grips the sound for a moment then flies elsewhere, into

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distraction or thought, alternating between sound and concept. Rootless and unattached, the ear roves through the music, one thing here, another there, then a relationship, a distraction leading the mind somewhere else until a feature of the sound catches it again.

Struggling between conflicting senses of sound and of selfhood, between inner and outer worlds, through music subjectivity becomes haunted by its own potential for unity.

### Fear of Listening

'The modern free-form jazz played by guitarist Derek Bailey at Basingstoke's Haymarket Theatre on Saturday was not appreciated by the audience most of whom asked for their money back before the interval.

Billed in error as a classical guitarist, there were only 51 in the audience when the curtain opened. By the interval only eight remained, to make an all-time low for the theatre...' (From a Basingstoke local newspaper, reproduced in *Musics* magazine, December 1975)

'There was one amazing gig... this guy, the landlord, comes up and says, "Get out! I've never heard such a load of fucking rubbish in all my life, get out now!" Really horrible bloke. Then we had a funny one the other night... a guy came up from downstairs and said, "You're driving out all my regular customers, can you please stop?"' (Phil Minton)

Listening, as Barthes argues, involves a risk, it is an adventure fraught with difficulty and danger, and not everybody who hears music wants to follow it. The listener seeking absorption is engaged in an enactment of a highly personal dialectic between subject and object. A drama of distance between actual and ideal states, music becomes a weapon applied for the achievement of a state of autonomous receptivity that Ernst Bloch calls *pure hearing*.

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And it is a weapon that can backfire, for, momentarily unhooked from any guiding concept, the listener enters what Attali refers to as a world of 'fantastic insecurity,' (Attali: 146) and, risking all sense of selfhood and sanity, may experience a very real sensation of repulsion and fear.

Eisenberg writes of his own fear of listening:

It is easier to listen to great music in a concert hall than at home, for two opposed reasons. First, in a concert hall one has to listen because there is not much else to do. Second the burden of the music is shared and so easier to bear, as a pulpit sermon is less onerous than a personal rebuke. One is not singled out, one is not called on to change one's life, any more than the fellow in the next seat. At home one must either ignore the music to some degree or else bear its full weight alone... I am afraid to be alone with great music because I am afraid to be alone with my inner self, with my potential self, with the self of the world.

It follows that I cannot find refuge from music in silence. Actually, the fear of music and the fear of silence are the same. (Eisenberg 1987: 167)

Eisenberg describes the listener as fascinated by music but afraid of it, for music, or rather the experience of remaining receptive to its 'full weight', describes an enlightened insanity, a world of impermanence and chaotic pure form unlimited by history's codes and institutions.

This terrifying, but resolutely human, world of listening threatens the conditional and limited nature of the conventions from which the formal-self is moulded; proposing, *prophesising* new orders of interaction and praxis, new modes of relation, autonomy and self-hood. It is such listening which the musical avant-garde seek to prize open, demanding, 'the renunciation of the customary crutches of listening... not mere contemplation but praxis'. (Adorno

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1967b 149/50) By changing, by *freeing*, listening from the indexical the avant-garde seek no less that to change those fundamental structures of perception by which the world is perceived and ordered.

### Music as Prophecy

'...the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions.' (Plato, *The Republic*, quoted Attali: 34)

In Adorno's work we found *structural homologies* between music and society. For Adorno, these homologies go beyond reflection, viewing music's form as a reverberation of emergent or already entrenched social and historical structures. Music is heard by Adorno *as history*, as an echo and prediction of historical dynamism and stasis; which might amplify certain essential historical patterns and thus preempt certain social structures.

For Nietzsche the discovery that in Greek lyric poetry, a prototypical form of all Western literature, 'language is strained to its utmost *to imitate music*,' reveals a similar historical relationship between music and language, which is further extended to reveal the limitations of analytic, as opposed to aesthetic, comprehension:

we have pointed out the only possible relation between poetry and music, between word and tone: the word, the picture, the concept here seeks an expression analogous to music and now experiences in itself the power of music. (1909: 52)

Again, the ethnomusicologist John Blacking (1987: 263) quotes Alfred Schutz; 'music is a meaningful context not tied to a conceptual scheme. Yet this meaningful context can be communicated' (1951: 76). This 'meaningful context' is music's freedom, its unmediated *hereness*, and the

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'conceptual scheme' representing normal, ideological and linguistic (indexical) structures. Blacking thus finds that this context is not merely a representation of society, but a source of new social logics and of *social change*:

What is important and unusual, and presents a challenge to sociology, is the fact that music-making can be more than a totemic emblem: it can be a means of transforming individuals and social groups... Individuals have the capacity for making *musical* sense of the world and that they can, through certain kinds of musical performance and tuning in with others, transform abstract structures of cognition and affect into social and cultural forms. (Blacking 1987: 263/4)

An example of such a transformation is found in Ben Sidran's study of Black American music and speech, *Black Talk*. Sidran's argument is that jazz's avant-garde in the 1940s and 1960s did not so much *reflect* black radicalism and black nationalism, as actually *preempt* it. And further, that because of the unique importance of music and the peculiar domination of oral over literate culture, in Afro-American history, the structures and contents of bebop and free-jazz were the major contributory factors in the pre-linguistic and preconceptual construction of specific ideologies.

My basic assumption is that black music is not only conspicuous within, *but crucial to*, black culture. It has often been asserted that music - its place in society and its forms and functions - reflects the general character of society. It has however rarely been suggested that music is potentially a basis for social structure. Yet I contend that that music is not only a reflection of the values of black culture but, to some extent, the basis on which it is built...

Black music can be seen as a function and, to some extent, a cause of a peculiarly black ontology. (Sidran 1971: XXII)

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But it is the economist Jacques Attali that makes the point most fervently, elevating listening into an attempt to develop the foundation for a new understanding of the relation between economy and culture, a new discipline:

For twenty five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible...

(Music) heralds, *for it is prophetic*. It has always been in essence a herald of times to come...

Music makes mutations audible. It obliges us to invent categories and new dynamics to regenerate social theory, which today has become crystallized, entrapped, moribund...

It is thus necessary to imagine radically new theoretical forms, in order to speak to new realities. music, the organisation of noise, is one such form. It reflects the manufacture of society; it constitutes the audible waveband of the vibrations and signs that make up society... (Attali: 1985: 3/4)

Attali's argument is thus that music is in some sense capable of going in advance both of social-structures, and of ideas, ahead of the categories of linguistic comprehension and expression. For Attali the musician thus always speaks of society and its codes, languages, and institutions; speaking either for them, or against and beyond them.

With various degrees of directness, Adorno, Nietzsche, Blacking, Sidran and Attali's interpretations of music may all be read as questioning the dominant status of the language of analysis, and even of language per se, in understanding social change. Attali particularly reverses the conventional relationship between object and discipline entirely, arguing finally that music can actually help us understand us more about society than traditional sociology can tell us about either music or society.

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The utopian moment in contemporary avant-garde music lies precisely in this ability, through the creation of listening, to go beyond the codes and institutions of existing order, and in this way to prophesy and to lay the ground for, other possibilities which might later become manifest as thoughts, concepts and social-institutional forms. This transgressive, prophetic moment is not specific to the contemporary avant-garde, indeed, it is an idea probably as old as music's distinction from language, a rediscovery.

What (free improvising musicians) are posing... we're having to reinvent many of the ideas which have been lost - purposefully lost, pushed into the dustbin - in order to sort of regroup ourselves and find our way back to a kind of human existence we feel is, *must be*, preferable to what seems to be dominating now. So it seems to me that it's a kind of reinvention... to build up again a new culture... a culture which is based on a sense of what Marx called *species being*; where human beings can express themselves fully, reveal themselves fully. If people do all those things clearly our society as we know it will crumble.

Clearly music does have a power, and that can be a power to change... Music is so powerful it's capable of deadening, it has the power to be controlling, to put people to sleep, to discipline. But it also has the power to *enervate*. (percussionist Eddie Prevost)

The notion that disruptions and changes to musical systems are not simply reflective of social and historical patterns and structures, but actually pre-emptive of them, dates from the meditations of the Greek ancients on the *Harmony of the Spheres* and in Indian culture forms a mystical basis for both the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*.

In its traditional forms the recognition of music's power to predict often takes the form of a warning; a departure from music's codes is a departure from God,

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Church, or Empire. As one C.20th clergyman more plainly put it; 'Nigger music comes from the Devil' (quoted Godbolt 1984: 29).

For the more sophisticated - for example Plato, Cicero, Plutarch of Chaeroneia and Hermes Trismegistus (see Godwin 1986, 3-15) music and its harmony constitutes the unique soul of all the arts and media, its forms representing the order and workings of the entire cosmos. In the C.20th these notions have been rediscovered, for example by Hazrat Inayat Khan, Karlheinz Stockhausen (ibid.) and Anthony Braxton (Lock 1988), for whom music-making explores a harmony that is lost to history but lies ahead of it. Typically the presentation of these ideas tends to blur the boundary line between music and harmony as actually existing spiritual/material phenomena, and simply as metaphors for a harmonised and stable society and humanity.

It might be argued that in these ideas, most especially in the case of the Greek *musica theoretica*, music became a purely rhetorical quantity, and that the idea of prophecy does not directly refer to actual sociological practices of music-making or noise-making (*musica practica*) at all. However the widespread dispersion and sheer persistence of such ideas must lead us to conclude otherwise. For at least two and half thousand years music has haunted intellectuals of many different nationalities, schools and persuasions, and has led them to make quite extraordinary claims about it, all of which posit music in a situation of *beyondness*.

There are many contemporary manifestations of this idea, some of which I will consider here, before considering the specific character and potential of prophecy in contemporary avant-garde music.

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### Modern Sufi Mysticism

A significant aspect of contemporary musical/prophetic ideas is that they refer to music less as a static ahistorical order than ancients; instead music is something that *moves* and changes, sounds not only projecting their own movements but heralding the movements of phenomena external to them as well. For the Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan this is reflective of a great spiritual and material essence behind form in general,

The philosophy of form may be understood by the study of the process by which the unseen life manifests into the seen. As the fine waves of vibrations produce sound, so the gross waves produce light. This is the manner in which the unseen, incomprehensible, and imperceptible life becomes gradually known, by becoming first audible and then visible; and this is the origin and only source of all form. (1983: 32)

So between the sound and the sign, between music and form, there is always a gap or time lag. For Khan, who of course is essentially engaged less in sociology or philosophy than theology - if these distinctions are today still meaningful - it is this formless aspect of music which is important. For him, 'there is nothing that can touch the formless except the art of music which in itself is formless'. (1988: 29)

Music seems to be the bridge over the gulf between form and the formless. If there is anything intelligent, effective, and at the same time formless, it is music. Poetry suggests form; line and colour suggest form; but music suggests no form. It creates also that resonance which vibrates through the whole being, lifting thought above the denseness of matter... (1984: 134)

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Khan is clear, actually to the verge of blasphemy, that, as a tool to assist the soul to rise above form, 'I not only say that music is superior to art and poetry, but in point of fact excels religion.' (1984: 119)

### Ernst Bloch's Utopia

'Something is lacking, and sound at least states this clearly. Sound has something dark and thirsty about it and blows about instead of stopping in one place, like paint.' (Bloch 1985: 197)

Like Adorno, whom he undoubtedly influenced (Drew 1985), Ernst Bloch asserts music's essential sociality. This comes about as music goes beyond mere subjective expression, and becomes close to the, 'subject-based *hearth and driving force of events*,' (ibid.: 208)

Composers turn music not only into an expression of themselves but also an expression of the age and society in which it originates. So naturally this expression is not just romantic or quasi-freely subjective. Any number of *human tensions* are added to the tension of the fifth to create a more complicated cadence and thus the history of music. *Social trends themselves* have been reflected and expressed in the sound material, far beyond the unchanging physical facts and also far beyond merely romantic expressivo. (ibid.: 200)

For Bloch, music's transcendence of the subject also takes it beyond society; its essential sociality lies in its transcendence of the social, and more specifically, of the linguistic; music moves ahead of that which can be stated. 'Musical expression as a whole *is the viceroy for an articulate utterance which goes much further than is currently understood*.' (ibid.: 207)

To explore this idea; music, for Bloch, originates in a cry, the cry of yearning for the beloved, a cry which denotes lack (ibid.: 196). This lack is the nearest music

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has to an object, which is thus negatively defined as a space, an 'unsayable' (ibid.: 132) absence. 'The note states what is still silent in man himself.' (ibid.: 196) So, the actual essence of the cry is unknown even to the subject that emits it, it is an indicator of the possibility of something which exists beyond knowledge, an echo of a utopia to come. In listening to music then the subject hears voices which resound in a highly unusual way, Bloch calls this *visionary hearing or self hearing* (ibid.: 207); 'This agitated life now *listens* to itself, as a shaped longing and urging in itself.' (ibid.: 193)

In his philosophical history of music Bloch argues that European music since Wagner has overcome its historical concern with the sacred order, and then the rational order and developed into an open-ended song, beginning from a known place but ending uncertain of where it is or has been. Finally he suggests the possibility of a fourth path, an 'open-system', beyond the 'straight line' of modernism: (ibid.: 14) the culmination and end of musical history which could engender a pure unrestrained *hearing* free of theory, language and ideas. 'The song closes, then, with something new, unending or unfulfilled. It travels without arriving, the sense being in the path it takes.' (ibid.: 96) In this stage the note is neither of God nor of any purely structural means, but is freed in all its relationality, to go where it will - a mirror and a vehicle, 'the supreme aura of receptivity'. (ibid.: 92)

This process, the note's freedom, is not necessarily as mysterious as it may at first appear, for the first line of Bloch's book is, 'We hear only ourselves' (ibid.: 1) and he argues that the composer, and the performer too, 'is simply his own listener in the last instance'. (ibid.: 130) In fact far from awarding the note the cosmic significance that Khan does, Bloch argues that,

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The fact that a note has consequences to which one must yield has no basis whatsoever in the note itself. It is a question of ascertaining with our ears in which direction the phrase would like to turn, how long it needs to cadence, and at what point it will gather its strength for an ascent. And none of this would ever be possible without a sympathetic, energetic bracing of the will, which retains sounds, draws them along with it and anticipates just those consequences which do not yet exist musically. (ibid.: 116)

Bloch argues that this process of, 'learning-from-oneself, feeling-oneself-expressed, human outstripping of theory,' through the note represents the, 'interpolating of a fresh subject,' who, through hearing, through being able to listen to itself, will understand itself in a new way. Thus at the end of music's history lies an, 'interior realm of all that is hearing itself, moulded sound, as simply the aura of the listener reencountering himself'. (ibid.: 130)

Bloch varies to the extent that he regards this utopia - 'the birth of the core, the sonorous, not yet existing, undesignated core of all things, a struggling birth on the hearth of music' (ibid.: 131) - as a religious goal ('not to be realised on Earth' {ibid.: 133}) and this relates to an ambiguity over how far self-hearing is an individual or collective process. But he finally regards it more as a historical next-stage to which music is attesting and exploring, arguing that due to its, 'incomparable proximity to existence,' music's major allegiance is less with Heaven than with the world, though,

this is not to the world which has already come into being but the world circulating within it and... just lying ahead in futurity, anxiety, expectancy. Music's connection with this world means that it is nothing less than a seismograph of society. For it reflects any cracks beneath the social surface, expresses desires for change, and is synonymous with hoping... The self will constantly encounter disorder below the surface or diagrams of another order,

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in which awareness is no longer amenable to any object but an alien one. That is music's place in the world and the place of the world in music... (ibid.: 227)

### The Avant-Garde: Noise as Prophecy

Attali develops a theory which helps us distinguish a specifically avant-garde form of contemporary musical prophecy - music as noise, Bloch's God-less, 'open-system'. He argues,

as a mode of immaterial production (music) relates to the structuring of theoretical paradigms, far ahead of concrete production. It is thus an immaterial recording surface for human works, the mark of something missing' (Attali 1985: 9)

If Bloch falls midway between mystic and revolutionary Attali's sympathies are firmly with the latter. '(Music) heralds, for it is *prophetic*. It has always been in its essence a herald of times to come.' Echoing Plato he argues that, 'every major social rupture has been preceded by an essential mutation in the codes of music.' (ibid.: 10)

Music is prophecy. Its styles and economic organisation are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things. (ibid.: 11)

Attali proposes four historical codes or orders of music, which, resting on different technologies, give music four distinct sets of determinations. Attali argues that each of these orders suggests the next, developing from *Sacrificial Ritual*, to *Representation*, to *Repetition*, and finally, to *Composition*. He argues that the general ordering of music's

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production and consumption, throughout these epochs, 'is ahead of its time and precedes a general level of social evolution as a whole.' (ibid.: 32)

The first of these codes or networks of music, Sacrificial Ritual, refers to pre-feudal society where music functions in a decentralised manner, disseminating myth and social symbolism. The second, Representation, develops with the onset of property owning and commercial classes and sees music becoming a centralised spectacle and commodity through the institution of the concert hall.

The concept of representation logically implies that of exchange and harmony. The theory of political economy of the nineteenth century was present in its entirety in the concert hall of the eighteenth century and foreshadowed the politics of the twentieth. (ibid.: 57)

In Representation Attali finds a drift towards Repetition. 'Already in the eighteenth century, music-turned-commodity was announcing the future role of all commodities...: a spectacle in front of silent people.' (ibid.: 81) Repetition develops with recording technology and mass production and individualises reception. In Repetition power and order become imperceptible, and music bares witness to powerlessness and death. *Composition*, a mythical or utopian stage which actually relates to the process of *free improvisation* more than to any form of conventional composition, develops as a critical negation of repetition which is no longer able to produce anything. 'Composition' presupposes a musician who is finally freed from all economic and ideological function.

Attali thus finds the germs, 'not (of) a new music, but (of) a new way of making music,' (ibid.: 134) which he understands to be a, 'demand for a truly different system of organization, a network within which a different kind of

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music and different social relations can arise'. (ibid.: 137) Attali understands the social function of Composition to be that of *noise*, a noise which frees listening and opposes repetition and silence.

### Silence

'...the music... spins off at ever unpredictable tangents, baffling silence long enough to earn another merciful reprieve.' (Biba Kopf, on a performance by members of AMM, Wire Magazine, April 1990)

Silence comes to an object or discourse which has been extracted from a process; which seeks to be a pure order, lacking dialogic and dialectic components. In Bürger's language it has been divorced from *life-praxis*.

Bürger's understanding of the logic of aestheticism is an example of the process of silencing; a cultural institution which refuses to understand its own historicity. For him, such forms include actual organisations; such as educational establishments and funding bodies, and also specific ideas and technical languages. However we can expand this silent relationship between a form and its 'conditions' and apply it to cultural codes in the broadest sense of the term. Any institutional form, code or language that does not contain some conception of its own construction or functioning, of its conditional and situated nature, may thus be understood to be silent. Thus aestheticism for example is silent in that it limits its contents to art; art contains art contains art, which defines itself against life, and whatever is life cannot also be art. Similarly the 'objectivity' of many academic disciplines can be understood to be a form of silence - a refusal to consider how knowledge is employed or conceived. For example, 'objective' sociologists might find their work being used by governments, physicists and chemists by the military; any ideology of value-freedom or objectivity they

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might hold, or simply a passive refusal to reflect, may be conceived as silence.

Silence is a precondition of ideology. A totality is constituted by its limits, by what it excludes, and silence refers specifically to a denial of a form's own position within a network, and the exclusion from itself of the trace of its formative processes or excreta.

### Silence and Repetition

'...the three "R"s, the three "R"s; Repetition, Repetition, Repetition...' (Mark Smith of The Fall. *Bingo Masters Breakout EP*. Step Forward Records)

For Jacques Derrida an act becomes a sign when it loses its uniqueness, when it becomes repeatable. A code thus based on signs is an imitation or representation of something that happens it presupposes the death of the original:

Not to want to maintain the present is to want to preserve that which constitutes its irreplaceable and mortal presence, that in it which cannot be repeated. To consume pure difference with pleasure. (1978: 246)

For Derrida, 'the menace of repetition is nowhere else as well organised as in the theatre,' (ibid.: 247) through its, 'classical forgetting of the stage, which is, 'violently erased' from the action upon it. (ibid.: 236) He quotes Anton Artaud:

...an expression does not have the same value twice, does not live two lives... all words once spoken are dead and function only at the moment in which they are uttered... a form, once it has served, cannot be used again and asks only to be replaced by another... (from *The Theatre and its Double*, quoted ibid.: 247)

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Through his reading of Artaud's writings Derrida seeks to show how his Theatre of Cruelty subverts repetition and representation by attacking the traditional sociological, hierarchical structure of relationships between author/creator, actor/interpreter, text/representation, which produce the play: 'The theatre of cruelty is not a *representation*. It is life itself, to the extent that life is unrepresentable.' (ibid.: 234) The appeal is for a transparent, 'pure visibility' which enable a critique of the,

...general structure in which each agency is linked to all the others only by representation, in which the irrepresentibility of the living present is dissimulated or dissolved, suppressed or deported within the infinite chain of representations. (ibid.: 235)

For Attali, silence is identical to repetition in Derrida's sense of the word. A series of signs become codified into a repeatable pattern - a purely ideological order: ideological because it reflects the order of *something else*, and loses any unique value of its own, hence its silence. With Attali we thus encounter the possibility of a silent music, silent not because there are no sounds but because the sounds have been stripped of any independent signification. The sounds speak, but not of themselves. Attali: 'Silence in sound, the innocuous chatter of recoupable cries.' (Attali: 124)

According to Attali repetition in contemporary music takes innumerable forms, and is even its essence. The first of these forms is technological, and is independent of genre and external to the music's actual form and content. Recording, and the media of mass reproduction and dissemination form a 'network of repetition' which enables the music-object to be infinitely presented. Reproduction and repetition thus enable the reificatory transformation of music from its historical condition as a social relation into that of the commodity.

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Another form of repetition derives from Adorno's critique of mass culture, this is the repetition in music's content and most particularly in its formal structure: the development of the commodity is accompanied by the development of particular forms and genres of mass produced music. In pop music, Attali argues, nothing but the finest details ever change, repetition is its only meaning.<sup>18</sup>

Attali argues that these repetitive codes of contemporary music are instituted predominantly through the elimination of noise. We can find this process at work, in quite a literal sense, in the procedures of the modern recording studio, in the use of recording techniques that are employed almost independently of genre, and which in many cases, take on a determinative power all of their own.

In the contemporary digital sound studio each tone is characteristically treated separately, and, filtered of all impurity and ambiguity, is situated in a void. Sounds no longer mingle or move, but hang, noiselessly abstracted and delineated from each other and from anything which might betray the context of how they came to be there (birth, growth) or where they might be heading (decay, death). The singer no longer breathes, the spittle is removed from the mouth of the saxophonist, the drum loses its undertones and reverberations - its very voice. The rhythm, which is no longer of the body, neither drops nor accelerates; each monotonous stream of sound travelling at a uniform parallel rate and distance, neither edging closer together nor further apart, pulling ahead nor falling behind. The *third voice*, that uncontrollable - almost independent - voice formed by the interaction of two or more tones which find themselves in close vicinity, and is the source of all polyphony, is strictly outlawed. Likewise, all unrepeatable 'ghost' tones, harmonics or unpredictable patterns of vibration which could gather together any form of commentary on, or rebellion against, the overall pattern of stasis, are

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stripped away.<sup>19</sup> Lacking tension or dissonance of any kind the overall sound-product becomes homogenous; an subject-less evenness which denies listening, which is impossible to hear, impenetrable and silent. The studio strips sounds of all noise and context, creating tones without birth or death.

We finding a striking parallel for this silence in Bakhtin's description of artistic depictions of 'the official body' during the Renaissance;

the body was first of all a strictly completed, finished product. Furthermore it was isolated, alone, fenced off from all other bodies. All signs of its unfinished character, of its growth and proliferation were eliminated; its protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities (signs of new sprouts and buds) smoothed out, its apertures closed. The ever unfinished nature of the body was hidden, kept secret; conception, pregnancy, childbirth, death throes, were almost never shown. (Bakhtin 1968: 29)

Likewise, the perfection of the musical code, its alienation from birth, growth, decay and death, completely replaces its own movement and denies the possibility of listening. Attali argues that this unlistenibility is precisely the point, and that the fact of the music-object's existence, its perfection, and the 'stockpiling' of time that it represents, become a 'substitute' for its use;

Replicated man finds pleasure in stockpiling... There is no longer anything to prompt him to interiorize the act, to experience its fortuitous, vague reality. The absence of noise (of blemish, error) in the stockpiled object has become a criterion of enjoyment. (ibid.: 125)

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For Attali music's silence and the repetition at the heart of its form, content, and means of dissemination, announce and reflect the death of the social codes and political orders of the society that produces it.

It has become a means of isolating, of preventing direct, localised, anecdotal, non-repeatable communication, and of organizing the monologue of the great institutions. One must then no longer look for the political role of music in what it conveys, in its melodies or discourses, but in its very existence. Power, in its invading, deafening presence, can be calm; people no longer talk to one another. They speak neither of themselves nor of power. They hear the noises of the commodities into which their imaginary is collectively channelled, where their dreams of sociality and need for transcendence dwell. The musical ideal has become almost an ideal of health: quality, purity, the elimination of noises; silencing drives, deodorising the body, emptying it of its needs, and reducing it to silence. Make no mistake: if all of society agrees to address itself so loudly through this music, it is because it has nothing more to say, because it no longer has a meaningful discourse to hold, because even the spectacle is now only one form of repetition amongst others, and perhaps an obsolete one. In this sense music is meaningless, liquidating, the prelude to a cold silence in which man will reach his culmination in repetition. (ibid.: 122)

In music Attali thus discovers the historical pre-conditions for a society characterised by silence and repetition, in which nothing ever happens.

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### Noise

'You see, I'm not really into music, I'm into noise.'

(Clive, an audience member at a performance by  
Morphogenesis, London 1990)

'Noise: loud outcry, clamour, shouting, confused sound of voices and movements; any sound, especially a loud or harsh or undesired one; irregular fluctuations accompanying but not relevant to a transmitted signal.' (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1982)

By noise Attali means to suggest all of these, and also a weapon of pain or death, a drug, the chaos before The Word, and the raw material from which the (social) stuff of music is drawn, to which dissonance threatens to return. His most frequent use of the term is to indicate, 'a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission' (1985: 26). An example of this would be the interruption of a telecommunications code or frequency through the use of a pirate signal or scrambling device. Similarly Durant argues that the dissonant occurs only in opposition to an instituted code which defines the consonant.

I would like to establish a yet more site-specific context for the word noise than Attali, who it seems to me uses the word too vaguely, for the contemporary avant-garde may be understood as noise in a rather more precise and subtle manner than simply regarding it as a relatively random form of interference or disorder.

We find parallels for a more precise context, for example, in the specific disturbance known as 'noise' caused by random heat circulation in the circuits of computer and radiocommunications networks. Similarly, in audio technology the *signal-to-noise ratio* indicates the quantitative relationships between signals intentionally emitted and those produced as byproducts of the machinery and process of

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emission.

So in this context noise does not simply represent dissonance - unintended and unwanted information that threatens and interferes with a form or discourse - but is *itself a consequence of the code which it threatens*. If dissonance is interference - that which is alien and external to a form - noise is interference that seems to be alien yet *whose source is actually internal* to it. For Durant, dissonance is thus, 'exactly what for one particular society could not be stated'. (1984: 66) In illustration: jazz, rock and roll, punk, Arabic music, modern music, live electronic music and free improvisation have all been, and still might be, condemned or praised as noise. They are noise not simply because they transgress a code in some abstract fashion, but because they concretely speak of matters - frustration, freedom, chaos, God, hate, love, sound, plurality, the body - about which the code that condemns them wishes to be silent, which might expose or interrupt it's hegemony.<sup>20</sup> Attali: 'Today every noise evokes an image of subversion.' (ibid.: 122)

Philip Larkin wrote of the pioneering free jazz saxophonist John Coltrane;

(his) wilful and hideous distortions of tone... offered squeals, squeaks, Bronx cheers and throttled pencil-slate noises for serious consideration... Much of this was no doubt due to the fact that Coltrane was an American Negro... His ten minute solos, in which he lashes himself up to dervish-like heights of hysteria, are the musical equivalent of Mr Stokely Carmicheal. (Larkin 1985: 187)

Such dissonant noise, as outcry, distortion, disorder, or interruption, is to be distinguished from chaos. Chaos is of nature; unspecific, neither free nor unfree, whereas noise is always site-specific and social and political in its definition, constitution and institution. Larkin did not hear Coltrane's writhing tenor as simply random, meaningless

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chaos, he heard a specifically and precisely 'Negro American' noise.

Noise is 'the other', the underbelly of the institution, the price of its functioning; it is, 'all that has been repressed'. (Adorno: 1984: 27)<sup>20</sup>

Attali foresees an avant-gardist mode of music-making - 'Composition, nourished on the death of all codes' (ibid.: 36), which has noise at its centre.

This bears disparate relation to any conventional form of composition. For Attali not only dismisses classical-composed music, which nostalgically repeats the music of a different society, wholly abstracted from noise, but, far from following Adorno's modernism, Attali finds no liberation of noise in the abstractly dissonant codes of academic music either. He argues that modernism seeks to avoid repetition by developing a critical code divorced from life-praxis and noise. Relying on such codes, modernism is thus, 'Not a major rupture, but sadly, boringly, a simple rearrangement of power, a tactical fracture, the institution of a new and obscure technocratic justification of power in institutions.'

Cage's avant-gardist composition comes nearer to the condition of noise.

When Cage opens the door to the concert hall to let the noise of street in, he is regenerating all of music: he is taking it to its culmination. He is blaspheming, criticising the code and the network. When he sits motionless at the piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, letting the audience grow impatient and make noises, he is giving the right to speak back to people who do not want to have it. (ibid.: 136)

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### Cage and Noise

Cage's infamous 4'33" - which requires the performer to make no sound at all for that, or some other, time - is easily and often regarded simply as an iconoclastic joke. But, as Attali recognises, Cage is quite serious, his music, even the compositions with sound and melodies, provides noises which highlight the space and silence between them; listening to the noises of life that fill it.

If there were a part of life dark enough to keep it out of a light from art, I would want to be in that darkness, fumbling around if necessary, but alive

and I rather think that contemporary music would be there in the dark too, bumping into things, knocking others over and in general adding to the disorder that characterises life (if it opposed to art) rather than adding to the order and stabilised truth beauty and power that characterise a masterpiece (if it is opposed to life).

And is it?

Yes

it is.

(Cage 1961: 46)

Cage proposes a listening beyond any code or language of art, a listening to the world which collapses the boundary between what is music, noise and chaos. In leaving the audience with the noises of themselves, the interference of their own minds and bodies, Cage collapses discourse, returning disorder and noise into the very atoms of music. His silence is an enablement; a direct challenge to the fear of listening, it proposes the abandonment of all form;

Our poetry now  
is the realisation  
that we possess nothing. Anything therefore



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is a delight  
(since we do not possess it)  
and thus need  
not fear. (Cage 1961: 151)

Cage portrays music's conventional codes and order as excuses to avoid life and the noise of the world, enabling listening a shallow opening within a safe, alienated institutional sphere as opposed to a genuine receptivity, an opening up to the world not as a concept or code but as it exists in its noise and chaos; its immediacy, birth, death, sound and stink.

### 'Composition'

For Attali, even Cage's music is not quite noise in the sense he intends, for even when he abandons the notated score and all of music's language Cage still by and large maintains the institutional composer/performer/audience relationship, and thus the political-economy of representation and repetition. Attali foresees instead

One last network, beyond exchange, in which music could be lived as *composition*, in other words, in which it would be performed for the musicians's own enjoyment, as self-communication, with no other goal than his own pleasure, as something fundamentally outside of all communication. (ibid.: 32)

For Attali such a conception of music-making proposes a new and radical conception of labour beyond ritual, performance or product, in which the producer is no longer estranged from his production;

The goal of labour is no longer necessarily communication with an audience, usage by a consumer, even if they remain a possibility in the act of musical composition. The nature of production changes... In composition - the absence of exchange, self-communication, self-

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knowledge, non-exchange, self-valorization - labour is not confined within a preset program...

To compose... is to locate liberation not in a faraway future... but in the present, in production and in one's own enjoyment. (ibid.: 143-144)

Attali envisages in 'Composition' a music which entirely relativises code, language and technique, in which the interactional context of production and the product - social and musical praxis - are one and the same thing. This avant-garde music, in Attali's sense, and in my own more specific formulation - would be noise, or rather would allow noise into its atoms to the extent that any distinction between musical sound and noise would be provisional and impermanent - a product of its total human and auditory situation.

There is no communication possible between men any longer, now that the codes have been destroyed... We are all condemned to silence - unless we create our own relation with the world, including and try to tie other people into the meaning we thus create. That is what composing is. Doing solely for the sake of doing, without trying artificially to recreate the old codes in order to reinsert communication into them. Inventing new codes, inventing the message at the same time as the language. Playing for one's own pleasure, which alone can create the conditions for new communication. A concept such as this seems natural to the natural in the context of music. But it reaches far beyond that; it relates to the resurgence of the free act, self-transcendence, pleasure in being instead of having. (ibid.: 134)

### Noise and the Grotesque

'The thing was completely exploratory and open-ended, you had the feeling you were in a laboratory. You had no idea what was going to happen. The players and the music seemed open to virtually any kind of phenomenon that it might absorb, social, acoustic, or otherwise: aircraft noise,

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noise from the street could legitimately become part of the performance. It was like a vast acoustic terrain whose dimensions were limitless, and whose perspectives were constantly changing.' (Roger Sutherland on early performances by AMM)

In my own formulation of the term, Noise in music is a celebration of the conditions and means of its own production, a byproduct of all that surrounds and informs its construction. Wholly recognising and expressing its context, it is unique, indivisible and always in motion. Hiding nothing, noise makes perceptible the forces and processes of music's formation and explodes the possibility of music being satisfied with any permanent language, form or state. Noise submits music to the world.

We again return to Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque bodily image for a parallel;

the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed completed unit: it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking or defecation. This is the ever-unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly, two links shown at the point where they enter each other. (Bakhtin 1984: 26)

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Two links; birth as dying. Though we should be careful not to push the analogy too far there is a similarly grotesque element to noise. Noise stresses precisely these same features, or their sonic equivalents.

Music is always dying, recognising this, noise refuses to abstract, and opens music's structures and textures to time and to all that is around it - recognising its conditionality and impermanence, and the inevitability of death. Like the grotesque, noise sees birth and death, growth and decay as single, indivisible moments. Noise thus represents not horror or nausea at the world's motion, transience and invincibility, but a joy and acceptance which seeks to allay the fear of the inevitable decay and loss of all that is formed; Cage's 'we possess nothing... and thus need not fear'. Noise, in music, and as a general feature of the avant-garde, is thus concerned with dialogic life's very possibility, beyond existing orders and codes, within a constant motion of birth, death and mutation.

to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the variety of different elements and their reapproachment, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions, from established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (Bakhtin *ibid.*: 34))

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### Conclusion

The concept of noise, and the metaphor of the grotesque, allow us to envisage a new model of cultural activity which we may regard as an aspect of a contemporary avant-garde: a mode of music-making which is fully expressive of its own construction and context; which becomes the people who play it, becomes the time and space in which it is played. It would be a music which has no form, in which, to quote Roland Barthes, 'all musical doing will be absorbed into a *praxis* with nothing *left over*'. (Barthes 1985: 266) It has no distinct boundaries or permanent and inherited codes, divisions between art, culture and life dissolving into the unfinished, the ambiguous and the fluid. This model is a space in which to function, an opportunity for exploring, exploding and diminishing the distance between individual subjectivities. Such a music would abandon all score, notation and structure, be spontaneously composed, improvised, a music which is freed from genre, institution and history. A *Free music*.

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## CHAPTER SIX: A THEORY OF FREE MUSIC

### Introduction

In Attali's model of 'Composition,' Bakhtin's 'carnival,' and my own development of the concept of 'noise' we have discovered the same utopian elements that I have described as characteristic of avant-garde culture - autonomy from code and form, polytheism, non-institutionalisation, dialogism, collectivity and praxis.

Free music, to the extent that it *attempts* (let's not cloud the issue with questions of success) to go beyond institutionalised art, and continuously problematises the processes of institutionalisation and codification, may be understood to be a part of a wider group of contemporary avant-garde activities in the sense that I have described and theorized the avant-garde in the chapters above; a reaching for a moment beyond the cultural institution where; 'The form and function are mutually connected, and nothing more.' (Lo et al.: 1979: 94)

Free music as a whole should not be confused with the particular history of free music in London. Above, and in the appendices, I have merely provided a rough outline of a few historical strands of a much broader and even less defined international diversity of movements and activities. It is beyond sociology to capture this mass of activity fully, and it would be pointless for it to try.

Bearing this in mind I would like to draw all the strands of my research - music's sociality, the avant-garde, listening, prophecy, 'Composition', noise and carnival - into a loose theoretical exposition of some aspects of Free music. In this context the terms, 'Free music', and 'freed music', should be understood as *idealizations*, as ideal-models which single out particular aspects of an activity in order that its uniqueness might be perceived more clearly.

## A Theory of Free Music

Though in Chapter Four above I defended Poggioli's sociological and descriptive account of the avant-garde, his is not a method that I shall attempt to emulate here. I will not attempt to present any sociological or structural model of Free music or the avant-garde. The reasons for this are contained in Poggioli's own work; 'the avant-garde do not lend themselves to study under the species of a single aesthetic concept'. (Poggioli 1968: 5) Similarly, Free music or the avant-garde cannot be contained under any single sociological or structural concept either. They are not unified aesthetic or historical movements, any overall or general theory would thus be an inaccurate one, an attempt to provide a general theory of exceptional cases. Again we might refer to Poggioli; 'We are dealing with categories of individuals, not social classes.' (ibid.: 91) His characterisation of the avant-garde audience might thus be extended to cover the avant-garde as a whole.

single and independent joinings of isolated individuals... not easily determined geographically or socially... away from any centre, an almost unforeseeable diaspora of isolated intelligences. (ibid.: 92)

This, it seems to me, is about as far as traditional structural idiomatic sociology can go in describing Free music. To go beyond this both less abstract methods (the interviews in Appendix Three) and a more abstract theoretical models seem more appropriate.

Finally, many of the points made below might also be applied to other musical, and non-musical, practices. Free music's uniqueness is that it concentrates its concerns into such a narrow area, that it achieves extraordinary depth and breadth of insight, not only into its own practice but into much more general and even universal aspects of its media. Thus there are individual points in what follows which might

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be seen to refer not only to Free music but to music-making in general. Though they are not specific to Free music, perhaps Free music is amongst the first historical practices to fully reveal them.

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Codes:

If you play free music you have done it; you break with something that is a preconceived idea and start again. (Roberto Bellatalla)

It isn't (organised), that's the whole point... Improvisation, by its very nature, should always be a no-mans-land, should always be uncatagorised. (Paul Rutherford)

A freed music, though it may need to break with completed musical languages, from the sign and the code in their institutional form, is not necessarily free from all outside reference. Though it might seek to free from all reference, a free music - if it were logically consistent - would also be one that allowed all life into it, which rejected no sound, noise or action *in principle*.<sup>21</sup> So even in its freedom signs and codes - conventional musical elements, tunes, cliches, harmonies - may appear within it but generally only in a fragmented, grotesque, or mutated manner - this might be in the manner of a montage, and it might be in the manner of a synthesis; 'it is diffuse. Like ants stripping a carcass, it works from the inside and outside of codes'. (Corbett 1986: 61)<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, the music might veer away from the sign as completely as it can - seeking complete non-referentiality and non-identity;

I can understand why people wouldn't like it... it's got no catchy tunes or rhythms, it doesn't rest on references... It's got no particular point of reference to what they consider to be music. (Paul Rutherford)

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I take it upon myself to try to be completely free of any reference to anything... I don't even want to relate to music at all. I want nothing to do with either past or future. (trumpeter/composer Leo Smith, Wilmer 1977: 114)

It might even veer from one strategy to its opposite in the space of seconds. It can use any materials available.

Freedom, praxis:

The actual process of playing is one of the few areas where you can actually feel freedom. You can feel your being... (Eddie Prevost)

If I sing jazz standards it's me, it's my voice, and I express myself because I'm singing, but I feel a structure, I feel it closed, shut, I feel enclosed, restricted, if you do a solo within that then you move but around you nothing gonna move. In improvised music it is different, the structure in improvised music is the musician himself, is ourselves, there is no limit except the musician's potential for creativity, that is the structure of improvised music. (Francine Luce)

Though free improvising may be free from preconceived structure as such, individual and group *styles* certainly might develop and harden - identities, personalities - and here the pedant may declare unfreedom, and abandonment to structures every bit as pre-conceived. But we do not need to be pedantic, freedom has no law against regularity and is anyway never absolute. No single thing is free, freedom *per se* is for philosophers, it means nothing. Guitarist Davey Williams; 'Free improvisation is not an action resulting from freedom; it is an action *directed towards freedom*.' (Williams D 1984) So my interest in Free music is more practical - freedom is relative, the absence of, or attack on, particular knots. A freed music connects with, and is

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born from, life-praxis; it is this remaining tie, this denial of its autonomy, its rooting in the very textures of social life, that constitute its freedom.

Praxis constitutes the very atoms and forms of Free music, it has its source in a collective life that begins with the personality and musicality of the player; the uniqueness of his or her *perspective* and potential for absorption and expansion into the life that surrounds them.

The ramshackle virtue of improvisation is that *by definition* it creates and allows plurality, *by definition* each player is expected to bring his own personality, his own being, his own modes of expression to the music... you're expected to try and become creative *in your own way*. (Eddie Prevost)

The tradition is that you're you. (Evan Parker)

It is thus not from any systematic principle of order but from the dialogue of these separate individual perspectives, and of their specific synchronous coexistences, that a freed music takes and makes, discovers and employs, structures and patterns; It is individual,<sup>23</sup> situated, its essence lies in its expression of its own motion between states, position, and situation, towards others. No overall objectivity or narrative<sup>24</sup> or closure is sought.

In improvisation... history is... liberated from the notion of a 'final state' (utopia) implied by linear evolution; there are no ends to the means. It is cut free from its residence in institutions (scores, records, standards, idioms) and allowed to exist at the local level. (Corbett 1986: 55)

(Music) is so malleable, it really is like sand, you have to make it stick, naturally it doesn't stick. You can just form it and then

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it's gone and I think that's a great attraction. I think to make it stick is actually a kind of heresy. (Derek Bailey)

There is no *thing!* And nobody must make any thing out of it as well. There's no thing, there's nothing! Just play! (Louis Moholo)

A freed music implies that from culture's multiplicity and fragmentation a new type of order is possible. Its task is not simply the development of a new *code* of music, or even of many codes, but, through the interaction of its *individualised* codes, it asserts the possibility of a permanent flux and movement without definite starting or finishing points - a music no longer distinguishable from social interaction - which in fact represents more clearly than any sociology the dialogic essence of social interaction.

These people, the players, are the music. Their personalities, their musical predilections... the relationships discovered and developed between each other. (Derek Bailey 1988)

How people agree with one another, how they disagree; some become friends after a contact of a moment, some in many years cannot become friends... Sometimes there are two people that disagree, and there comes a third person and all unite together. Is that not the nature of music? (Khan 1983: 46)

Improvising is a way of incorporating disagreements, part of the health and life and vigour of the music comes from the possibility of expressing two different points of view at the same time, within the same piece of music, as long as each allows the other room and recognises their existence. It's like... I don't know... like a non-verbal debate...

Either/or always disenfranchises the minority. In a situation where a majority get their way a minority don't get their way and that's to do with either/or approaches to problems. In addition to

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either/or you always have the possibility of both, or sometimes one, sometimes the other. Or an alternation that is so fast that it amounts to the same thing. This kind of thing, these kinds of thoughts, happen in improvised music. (Evan Parker)

This praxis, this multiplistic social life in Free music is not simply an *idea* of life, or an artistic or abstract concept or representation of any kind, but the music's own unpredictable, unresolving, dialogic *process*; 'It is life itself, to the extent that life is unrepresentable,' 'It is life itself... shaped according to a certain pattern of play (Derrida: 234, Bakhtin 1984: 7).

(Free group improvisation,) in terms of the experience of the collective, is not an *idea*, it's a way of being involved with each other; an activity which allows for it to go in whatever direction it goes in. It is not based on an idea, it's an experience that we re-experience and re-evaluate. (John Stevens)

It's not only musical you see; it goes much further than that. Music is what you live, every day, every moment and when you go and play is just the moment that you open these doors and project it. (Roberto Bellatalla)

The sort of issues that happen in my life, in terms of human relationships and everything to do with how one lives, are the same things that happen in the music. (Phil Wachsmann)

In an improvisation you have to be prepared for all sorts of directions that are unseen and also for taking away your own sense of direction. Maybe you personally would like a certain direction but somebody else does something and the direction alters. So that in itself is very close to life, I think, more so than a written composition. Life is a continual interaction between what one person would like and what is imposed on them from the outside... That aspect comes across very forcibly in improvisation because

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one's sense of direction is often being turned towards other channels and one is forced to think along different lines. You may, to a certain extent, guide it - but only to a certain extent.  
(Rohan de Saram)

For me it is really the music that represents life. When you play sometimes you are *in communication* in a way that is just like the real things that happen in life. So when I'm singing I'm the same as I am in life, talking with people or whatever... there is no difference in the way we interact, that is the same, I feel.  
(Francine Luce)

The music's form - sonic interaction - is thus made indistinguishable from its *noise* - personal interaction. There is no distinction between what the music is and the way in which it is made. The sounds and byproducts of its own process, structure and order, and the consequences of its movement, are tangible in its sound, and in the modes of listening it enables and encourages.

What improvisation suggests is that it is possible to find musical pleasure not only in not knowing where you are in a piece of music but also a 'decentred' listener: in false starts, contradictory reactions and labyrinthine routes through the music's haphazard and unresolving patterns. (Durant 1989: 277)

### Time, Dialogue:

In an improvisation one is more naturally a part of the exact time in which one is working or playing. (Rohan de Saram)

Every product of dialogue recognises a whole greater than itself, for it is made in the context of a pure-immediate present. The utterance made in the context of dialogue does

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not pretend to conclusion or permanence - rather it is a statement amongst other statements made in time. It is only moving, changing time that can complete the dialogic utterance.

As a dialogic practice Free music is thus rooted first and foremost in the uniqueness and difference of present-time; and it is the present which lies at the bottom of every mode of noise, listening and music-making. It is the fact of this present, the immediate experience of its unrepeatable colours, textures, and mutations that allows the listener to hear the potential of the future as something beyond the determinations of the past.

In such a way we might conceive of a freed music as an unending melody, derived of a permanent focus on the here-and-now. The melody begins by taking the world as it presently is and, by the depth of its absorption in it, pulls it towards an uncertain future, whose lack of immediately perceptible relation to the past might even be daunting (fear of listening).

It is unpredictable, it is uncontrollable. (Roberto Bellatalla)

Nobody knows what the fuck it's going to be... (Derek Bailey)

Beyond any harmony or order, the melody does not know where it is going, or what it is doing, even its origin may be uncertain. It considers each sound as it occurs, and listens to its directions (directions that are finally not ideas but experiences). Bakhtin writes;

The present, in its so-called 'wholeness' (although of course it is never whole) is in essence and in principle inconclusive; by its very nature it demands continuation, it moves into the future, and the more actively and consciously it moves into the future the more

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tangible and indispensable its inconclusiveness becomes. Therefore, when the present becomes the centre of human orientation in time and in the world, time and world lose their completeness as a whole as well as in each of their parts...

Through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness. No matter how distant this object is from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present. But meanwhile our present has been moving into an inconclusive future. (Bakhtin 1981: 30)

In the collaboration between time and dialogue Free music makes explicit to the listener something that is unique neither to itself, nor to the avant-garde: but is the core of all music, and all dialogue - aside of their particular history or identity:

The freed note points to the impossibility of its satisfactory coding or completion, it knows no distinction between birth and death and is always mutating, moving ahead, throwing change back in the faces of the listener with indisputable finality; it is *implicitly* dialogic, and reveals itself to have *always been so*. This is the nature of the sounding tone, the nature of music, beyond any history.

Improvisation should keep music moving. Apart from being the most natural way of making music, improvisation is keeping musical dialects going... it should always be in a state of constant flux or movement... (Paul Rutherford)

It's like a perfect match, an expression of perfection, a perfect fit between what you're doing and the way that you're doing it. (Derek Bailey)

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Although dialogue may be seem to be central to other forms of western music too (one thinks of Mozart, the opera, sonata form, the string quartet) and even to all music, as well as literary forms such as the novel (Bakhtin 1981), its existence in free improvisation takes a unique and radical form. In Free music dialogue is not an idea, and Free music does not merely *represent* dialogue or institutionalise it into an artistic form, for example through the interactions of themes or subject-matter. In Free music dialogue is actually a basic condition of production. So although there is no opposition between the now 'classical' model of dialogism outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin in his studies of the novel and that I have explored in Free music, there is a difference. The novel or work contains dialogic and collective *components*, and can be apprehended in a dialogic manner. However in these examples dialogue is mediated by the process and conditions of production and reception, and by the temporal space between them. Free music on the other hand, lacks these mediations, it contains human interaction and dialogue at its roots, as the very *process* of its indivisible formation and reception. In this it is unique, and the relationships between the player (and listener) and the tone, and to present time and the known, are quite new and quite different from those in any conventional or compositional genre.

Language, the note as prophecy:

Music is not a thing and has no object or idea separate from itself which it represents or communicates, it is a process, a becoming, which things, languages and thoughts, can follow and attempt to objectify. Through music, language can discover something of its own roots and limitations, entering into researches for its own transcendence, for Barthes this is the discovery of *writing aloud*, which he

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describes with an astonishing grip on its immediacy and sensuality;

*writing aloud* is not phonological but phonetic; its aim is not the clarity of messages, the theatre of emotions; what it searches for... are the pulsational incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can here the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony; the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language. A certain art of singing can give an idea of this vocal writing...' (Barthes 1976: 66-67)

A certain art of singing? More than this surely. Barthes, for once, slightly understates his case. For like Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* what he describes is language's own search for a full blown musicality, its transcendence to the condition of sound. Similarly Poggioli understands the attempts of the historical avant-garde to find new languages as a search for, 'speech which aspires to make itself the verbal equivalent of music'. (Poggioli: 198)

But how can this be so? Following music, language inevitably finds is that it cannot keep up with sound, it loses all sight of own history, determination, or origin, it turns into gibberish, as if it were tied to nothing. In music, writing discovers a measure - its own transcendence - which it cannot meet and glimpses its own limit and the inevitability of its failure to describe what is perceived. A language in pursuit of the note - if it transcends mere philosophy or philology ('pursuing butterflies with a sledge hammer' {Govinda 1960: 28}) - discovers a gulf between itself and experience.

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The note vibrates:

The note reverberates inside the self, it is indistinguishable from self. Music is the musician listening to himself, his own sounds echoing back off the world; Bloch's, 'note sung by human beings and conveying human beings' (Bloch *ibid.*: 92).

The first note you hit; that is the note that controls you. You just follow... there are so many forces that you don't even have to play. The music just plays itself. The drums just play themselves sometimes. (Louis Moholo)

We are not talking about the actual or supposed scientifically measurable aspects of the note's movement and reverberation - its physics and chemistry, source, projection and reception in the ear - but of the note which reverberates inside the *person* of the listener, as objectively as its science projects it through the air and the room.

When you are playing an instrument you vibrate along with it, quite literally - you vibrate. Now that goes much further than these notes or these scales. Just one note, just one, can help you understand a lot of things, if you are ready to enter this world of vibrations. (Roberto Bellatalla)

The use of single tones in prayer or mediation relates directly to this knowledge. The note in the context of its being free to lead is not just an idea, nor even purely a symbol - though it is also both of these - but an integrated physical, emotional and intellectual force in which self and sound merge. (Hamel 1978, Govinda 1960, 1966: 29-31) The note sinks into the listening mind taking it to its roots and edges, mystery and material fact merging disconcertingly into one; an indissoluble subject/object experience whose meaning lies beyond any particular history or culture. It is

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to this essential aspect of music that Free music, improvisation, provides a uniquely acute focus, and can absorb itself fully, without references to law, score or genre.

...suddenly everything else disappears and... you're in a space where you're not aware of operating the instrument, and the thing is just flowing out. (Pete McPhail)

You would very often be playing and be immersed in these kind of waves of sound. You'd be in the middle of it, consumed by it... suddenly maybe you'd just identify one particular element and you'd wonder for a moment where it came from... often you would actually stop playing and realise it was you... (Eddie Prevost)

In this blurring of sound and self, a life entwined with noises, lies all of music's reputation as magic, mystery, prophecy, prayer and sermon - reputations so broad that no sociology can ignore them.

Through threatening code and form the sound threatens identity, the origin of form, too. The more closely it dissects the present, picking at its threads, losing its associations and bonds (its selfhood), the more firmly it grasps the possibility of a future; a future which refuses to be separated and alienated from this proximity to the difference and uniqueness of present time. This future refuses to leave experience in order to become a utopia or an ideology.

But this process of self-liberation is by no means unproblematic or straightforward: Beethoven; 'thousands conduct a love affair with music and still do not have their revelation,' (quoted Bloch *ibid.*: 226) and Attali; 'the dangers are immense, for once the repetitive world is left behind, we enter a realm of fantastic insecurity'. (Attali *ibid.*: 146)

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It is an exploratory discourse... It could potentially be traumatic, it's more like an encounter group, it's a process of discovery or exploration. (Roger Sutherland)

And we just did it, just improvised. And I just thought 'Shit! What am I *doing*?... I thought I was going crazy, I just wanted to stop and say, 'What am I *doing*?' (Francine Luce)

The code does not give up easily. Undermined by noise thought ratiocinates; 'What am I *doing*?' Rushing between music and language, thought divides, dissects, categorises and delineates its rapidly blurring and collapsing concepts. Yet as it does so it loses its object, becoming embroiled in itself - its remaining image of subject and object is that of division and disintegration, an image which is finally languages' own noise; its own structure and process. The ratio alone, refusing to stay with the sound, is lost to all nature and intuition, and turns in on itself. It seeks a truth, a permanence, a *self* as concrete, secure and immobile as the whole manhood of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, which nothing of this world or its history can crumble, this is the ratio's root, its desire.

But the note, and the world, refuse to acknowledge such security, whose text noise, like Avalokiteśva's more gentle lute-song of impermanence,<sup>25</sup> at all times threatens to destroy. It finds no peace, the noise of its disintegration will not abate. A Free music is as a soundtrack to this collapsing selfhood.

I don't think it's a loss of identity; it's actually a different kind of identity. (Eddie Prevost)

As all of the note's internal motivations today lead it towards the overthrow of code, concept or signifier the freed note in some sense becomes a source of enlightenment, or liberation, that is finally perceptible everywhere. For,

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as Cage perceived with such finality, the note reaches out into life and noise, where unbeknown to the listener it has resided all along; 4'33" is not simply a celebration of silence, but the recognition that *where there is life there is no silence*.

We possess nothing. Anything therefore is a delight. (John Cage: 1961: 151)

Life is good. The dog-shit in the street, tin cans, just the physical experience of life being there and continually affecting your senses. (Steve Done)

Sounds always give the human away; only silence, a discourse without noise - which is not at all the same as stillness, peace and quiet, or not speaking - is death. Though the threat is clearly apparent, contra Adorno, music has not yet come to this.

Finally:

So a freed music is not a code, an idea, a language or a theory; struggling free from history and social function it is an, 'occasion for experience' (Cage 1961: 31), the experience perhaps of Bloch's history which has not yet come to pass.

Despite what might appear to be my mysticism I am not here proposing a theology of music. Perhaps we must even depart from Bloch, Plato, Khan et al, and even Attali; for nothing guarantees that the intimations of the musical experience will come to pass, that they will become historical experience. Its promises and blueprints are rarely as clear as this.

A free music, for all its apparent inwardness and refusal to compromise, is essentially a music which projects outward. Refusing the condition of art, its notes heading

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out past the boundaries of the indexical or the purely-aesthetic into the world and into history. It is dialogic and open-ended, but less because it allows for the possibility of divergent interpretations - which it does - but more vitally because it is inherently provisional and unfinished and points outwards to orders, sounds and noises other than its own. Each of its statements contains a question.

Improvisation is always a questioning activity. (Paul Rutherford)

It does lead people to improvise, to ask questions... It's about getting people who haven't had a chance before to realise that they should have better expectations out of their lives... That is not just a link will politics, that is *the whole thing*, that is what it is all about. (Paul Shearsmith)

I think the music already deals with and solves problems that the politicians haven't even formulated yet. (Evan Parker)

Some people say that AMM play the music that should be played all the time in the world they would like to exist. (Eddie Prevost)

### Conclusion

Unreduceable to any politics or sociology this process of questioning is rather one sphere for pre-logical, proto-political, experiment and of the construction of sonic and human structures, patterns, possibilities and orders. It is less a site of prophecies or blueprints than a centre for research, selection and rejection, conflict, compromise and complicity; containing capacities for the exploration of insecurity, neurosis, withdrawal, intimacy, distance, synchronicity, misunderstanding, freedom, unity and joy. If the potential of the individual in a collectivity is its form, then these struggles and researches are its content, or part of it. It is the sound of individual and collective

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lives being chosen and lived; at its most miraculous it is that life being aware of itself in present time and space, taking hold and changing its own direction.

Free music does not take us to any distant temple or deity, nor to any trustworthy sense of society, self or personality, but to the sounds of speech, nature, traffic, of pulses beating - sounds simply of life - out of which all music is born and returns. After all the theorizing and idealisation it finally seems to be a surprisingly mundane and resolutely practical activity. Yet it finds something extraordinary in music's noise and process; a knowledge that stillness has potentially contained all along: that the solitary consciousness is not unconnected and alone, and not yet exhausted, but *of* the world in the profoundest sense; born of it and capable of forming a unity with it that is without compromise.

This, radically, is the function of a critical culture, and is what music, stripped down to its atoms, *is*, and has always been.

A freed music is one cultural form which confirms the imagination and the world still rich in possibilities for revolutionary change and transcendence.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. For reasons of space this chapter covers a great deal of material in a very short space of time, and many broad generalisations and simplifications are made, I would thus ask the reader to bear with me.

The sections on jazz and the European avant-garde are both made up of material drawn from much more extensive and detailed research (unpublished) by the author, in which many of the issues and movements discussed are explored much more thoroughly. Thus neither should be regarded in any way as comprehensive commentaries on these historical developments, and I feel that the jazz tradition especially provides material for a much more extensive and more sociological analysis than has yet been written, or than I am able to provide here.

2. The distinction between language and style is discussed in Mitchell 1963: 97.

3. Roger Sutherland (no date 2) reports that this attitude may be understood as a desire for a new and completely rational historical start after the irrationalities of Fascism and WW2., reporting that for Stockhausen, for example, any regular rhythm recalled the sounds of marching jackboots.

4. Though the extent to which the challenge has been successful is highly debatable, for a 'pro' view see for example Claire Polin's 'Why Minimalism Now?' in Norris (ed) 1989, and for a more critical view of the accomplishments of minimalism see Born 1987.

5. From *Conversations with Celestin Deliege*, London 1976, quoted Durant 1989: 278.

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6. From the film, *Made In America*.

7. The distinction between free jazz and free improvisation is a difficult and contentious one which is not maintained by all musicians or commentators (e.g. Carr 1973, Atkins 1976). However the development of the music since the 1960s has clearly shown free music to be a line of development quite independent from free-jazz, though there are still many contexts in which free jazz and free improvisation can mix. Analytically the distinction remains fundamental even though in practice free-jazz and free-improvisation often forms something of a continuum.

8. Observation Notes of a Search and Reflect Workshop led by John Stevens 02/09/87:

"The strength or poeticness of your statement, in terms of you knowing where you are within the structure, that is, in a sense what rhythm is about. You should want to be absolutely sure of that and that's what we're practising. We're letting the music take care of itself, we're not interested in how it sounds. We're practising a particular sort of discipline. But it does produce music and the music's alright, the more we leave it alone the better the music is. Let us concentrate on what we need to concentrate on, OK?"

Impressions and Comments:

Negotiated sound balance, everyone must be able to hear each other no one should play either too loudly or too quietly. No tuning. Sit in a circle. No keys or pitches are specified, instead players are requested to use notes of their choice. It is possible that everyone present could end up playing in a different key or in no discernible key at all. Pitch, harmony and melody, the basis of western music, play very little part in these workshops at all. The

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emphasis is rather on rhythm, listening and responding, on the possibilities of a collective.

The workshop features a very wide range of musical backgrounds, ages and instrumental skills, featuring highly skilled professional musicians playing alongside, and on equal terms with, others who have been playing their instruments for only a few weeks

The earlier pieces are very simple but require a high degree of concentration. These are used to develop an empathy of purpose amongst a very heterogeneous group. Improvisation is introduced only when this empathy has been through the use of exercises. These exercises demand a high level of concentration and application of mental and physical energy towards the execution of usually minute musical tasks. For example, projecting the shortest possible note as clearly as possible, this is equally challenging for the professional musician as for the beginner.

The emphasis in all the pieces is on the *action* and *process* of producing sound within a collective environment, rather than on any finished product, this means that musical success is based on no standards separate from the pleasure of taking part.

When improvisation is introduced it is through the technique of 'scribbling' in which Stevens seeks to get the player to play without concentration or application, to rub their fingers loosely and carelessly along the instruments. He may ask them to think about something else, to have a conversation, or to try and read something while doing this. This produces a random flow of sound comparable to a stream of consciousness or automatic writing, it is frequently very difficult for a highly skilled musician to regard their instrument in this apparently careless and unmusical manner. But scribbling is not really a technique in itself so much as a preliminary stage, a freeing from habit and expectation that enables the player to forget about his own sound. The next stage is to introduce Triangle. This is an exhausting

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piece which makes extreme demands on the players concentration.

Three players are asked to sit in a triangle and after a silence has been established, to start scribbling. If they do this as instructed they should be able to ignore their own sound and concentrate completely on the other two players, who will be sitting opposite them like a pair of stereo speakers. When the player is confident that s/he can really hear the other two they should try to allow themselves to hear the group as a trio of which they form a third. But they should not consciously interact or make any musical decisions at all, these things should naturally and unself-consciously emerge out of the process of listening. At this point it will often be found that the player starts listening to themselves only or starts making conscious choices, which amounts to the same thing. They are told that if they sense this happening they must return to the initial stage of ignoring their own stream of sound. The piece builds up using three triangles, themselves arranged in one big triangle. Here the player is asked to hear the individual sound of each of the three trios and the collective sound simultaneously, this calls for a concentration of listening or *aural sight* that few can maintain for more than a few minutes, if at all.

This piece can lead quite naturally into free improvisations in which the players may, if they desire, return to their more conventional ways of manipulating the keys or strings of their instruments. What matters is not the process of scribbling as an instrumental technique but the ability, through the experience of scribbling, to see oneself as part of a collective operating creatively yet selflessly as no more or less than one third of that collective. The aim is thus to encourage the player to be able to hear both their own and others' activity almost objectively, while at the same time being subjectively completely involved in the process of music-making. This

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experience causes many strong reactions amongst the participants.

Particularly dominant or submissive individuals, or particularly experienced or inexperienced instrumentalists often seem to find it either extremely worrying or liberating in roughly equal measure and almost everyone present has something to say about their first experience of playing in this manner.

An alternative to Triangle is Ghost, which also explores relationships between each individual and the group. In this piece each player takes a solo in a preconceived order, while the others 'ghost' the soloist's movements at a low enough sound level to be able to hear every nuance that is played. In a large group, say of 25 people this is extraordinarily demanding, especially if the lead instrument is played very quietly. It gives experience at accompanying, of playing quietly so that another voice can be clearly perceived and focussed on, and also the chance to solo completely freely, to temporarily lead the rest of the group.

It should be noted that Stevens as an individual is very dominant in these situations, and quite autocratic about achieving a collectivity of the particular character he has in mind. Whether this is a matter of faith or dogmatism is a question I would not be happy to attempt to answer.

9. Since 1988 the London Musician's Collective has not had a venue of its own so has resorted to hiring other venues at which performances, festivals and workshops are presented. Since shortly after its inception the LMC has had an annual Arts Council and then Greater London Arts grant, this has helped to keep it running, but has never been enough to allow for any great expansion of its activities. The LMC has never, for example, had enough to pay a full-time administrator. In the financial years 1989-90 the LMC had 120 musician-members, two part-time employees and received a

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grant of around £16,000. Aside from concert fees which for performances in Britain are generally minimal - barely covering expenses - some musicians occasionally manage more realistic fees for professionally-promoted performances for example on the Contemporary Music Network or the Outside In festival at Crawley, and there is also the Arts Council's Improvised Music Touring Scheme. In the financial year 1988/89 the Improvised Music Touring Scheme administered a total budget of £20,000 which was distributed amongst 9 different groups (comprised of 41 musicians in all) to help them fund national tours (Mitchell P 1989). Derek Bailey's annual Company festival also receives some separate funding as do other occasional and ad hoc events and funding from the British Council is sometimes available for overseas performances. At the time of writing the government's plan to cease supporting a national arts-funding body places almost all these sources of finance under threat. This may be expected to lead to a move towards privately funded performance-orientated events, probably with little improvised content and a further de-professionalisation of the musicians.

The music is regularly recorded and made available on a number of musician-run record labels, most notably Incus, Matchless, Bead and Leo. In addition to this many privately-produced and distributed cassettes also appear. But media coverage of recordings, performances or any other aspect of the music is limited.

10. All the indicators are that the situation is getting worse in each of its real, measurable terms, except perhaps audience figures which from my own purely informal survey I would say have risen between 10% and 20% since the research began (this is more an estimate than a measurement, also with figures that are so small and irregular these observations might easily have no long term significance).

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11. There are occasional reviews in The Guardian, the very occasional television program on Channel Four and since the axing of Charles Fox's Radio 3 programme Jazz Today virtually nothing at all on national radio and very little on the independents. London's Jazz FM ignores the music completely. In general the mainstream music press provides no mention of the music, though Wire, the Canadian Coda and Cadence magazines and Contact journal provide reviews of recordings, which do also appear occasionally in the more mainstream jazz press.

12. The theory of the Authoritarian Personality has also been explored in some detail by Erich Fromm. (e.g. 1974)

13. Jacques Attali writes, 'many musicologists reduce the history of music to the history of the music of the princes' 1985: 13.

14. Bürger's purely political interpretation of the avant-garde is taken to a further extreme by Stewart Home in his polemic book on the contemporary avant-garde, *The Assault on Culture: Urban Currents From Lettrisme to Class War* (1988, see also Home 1989a and 1989b). Home sees the avant-garde as purely an 'assault' on art and culture and virtually denies Breton and the whole of Surrealism a place in the avant-garde at all, offering the rather unresolved formulation; 'if Surrealism had been a movement in its own right, rather than being a degeneration from Dada, any claim that it belongs within the Utopian tradition would be open to question'. (1988: 5) However Home includes groups such as Class War whose only link with the avant-garde is contempt for art, or in fact for any kind of aesthetic. Here contempt for Art as an institution becomes contempt for aesthetic activity per se, basically denying any life that the material itself might have. For Home an avant-garde 'cultural worker' must explicitly denounce art and the idea

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of creativity in all its forms. The book tends to document only the most garrulous strands of the avant-garde. The mass of people who include - but are not exclusively made up of - writers, musicians and painters, who have challenged art's institutionalised status *immanently, i.e. simply through their activity*, through their work or actions, without recourse to the revolutionary political tract, are ignored or accused of aestheticism. The sole remaining link between politics and culture seems to be the transference of the accusatory pedagogical rhetorical style, perfected by Lenin, into a domain which includes art and culture.

Home's idea of a 'pure' anti-art rests on the notion that to call one person an artist is to deny the creativity in ordinary people living ordinary lives. Thus the term 'artist' is seen to be irrevocably tied to a traditionally mystical and elitist conception of genius and creativity, in which the artist is separated from the 'mass' through possession of/by genius. In recognising such a figure the viewer/listener/reader admits their own ordinariness and inability, and art takes on a more or less directly repressive political function, confirming the oppressed individual in his status.

In order to counter this situation Homes proposes the ideas of Plagiarism and of an Art Strike. Through plagiarism the traditional artistic notion of creativity, as a mystical, angelic or devilish forces that the individual cannot produce or control, but can merely succumb to, is placed under question. Against this a celebration of reordering, or plagiarism, is proposed, 'cultural workers' reorder the objects and discourses (the empty signs) they find and re-presenting them in new structures enabling new meanings and interpretations of basically familiar elements.

The Art strike, which is basically a publicity stunt, is based on the classic avant-garde shock-tactic. This tactic, that of the overstatement of opposition and overturning accepted reason, has been a powerful weapon throughout the

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whole history of religious, political and cultural heresy and was employed extremely effectively by the early avant-garde who attacked an elite of producers, critics and purchasers who had high and exclusionary social status.

But it is arguable that this tactic of transgression is no longer valuable today, precisely because it no longer shocks. To be possible transgression has to have clear boundaries which it can attack and this is no longer very clearly the case in contemporary culture, whose insatiable desire for newness requires it to break down cultural barriers and distinctions, e.g between high and low, between art and advertising, by itself. The shock tactic today thus rests on a false premise, in that the art it knocks down is a straw man. Shock feigns violence to barriers which nowadays hardly exist - thanks not so much to the vociferousness of the avant-garde as to the assimilative power of the market. Admittedly Class War, an anarchist group based around the paper of the same name, have capitalised on such media-shock, for example, by physically threatening 'The Rich' but it is difficult to see how the threat of art's suicide would have any comparable effect. For example, the only reasons bricks in the Tate Gallery were so shocking to the mass-media was not the violence they did to elitist notion of art or the artist (indeed, they tended to support these) but the purely economic fact of the price tag. How can you shock a public that is bombarded with shocks every day and who anyway probably no longer gives a damn about art? This idea of shock is rooted in the vulgar-marxist notion that somehow, 'the bourgeoisie needs Art for its own justification', which today sounds very anachronistic.

So on the one hand Home's theory proposes an opening to the world, a utopia of freedom from specialisation (look at everything, there is no line between art and life...) and on the other a closing (look at everything... except art). This conclusion rejects not just simply Art but art, not simply

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Genius but genius, not simply Creativity but creativity, not simply individualised forms but also collective ones. The nihilistic/transgressional strand of avant-garde activism represented by Home, and also the post-modern avant-gardism of Hal Foster (see 'For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art' in *Recordings*), finally renounces any genuine interest in the material at all - in the colour, the line, the sound, the inflection. Instead of trying to build the immediate relationship within an overwhelmingly mediated culture, they settle for a reordering which is no longer strictly interested in the material or the implicit power of its relationships at all, but in the pure *politics* of its relationships - the way it is taken up, divided represented and employed in discourse. In this way, rather than proposing warfare on an alienated aesthetic Homes declares warfare on any aesthetic component at all - abandoning the longings of materials and subjects alike, submitting both entirely to tactics in exactly the way that Bürger describes. This seems to renounce completely the drives that led the historical avant-garde, constituting culture's final and complete surrender to the very rationalistic and functionalist ideologies that anti-art supposedly sets out to deny.

15. This is compounded by Bürger's almost total emphasis on the visual arts, which, in the period since the 1960s has certainly been amongst the most institutionalised of all artistic spheres. But, even if Bürger's theory of the institutionalisation and death of the avant-garde could be demonstrated to be largely accurate in the case of the visual arts, this would still not give us reason to assume that it could be applied to culture per se in the way that Bürger proposes.

16. For another example of this see type of confusion see also Burger, 1985: 130

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If the avant-gardist demand for abolition (of art) turns out to be realisable, that is the end of art. If it is erased, i.e., if the separation of art and life are accepted as matter-of-course, that is also the end of art.

Here again the lack of any precise definition of the different orders of the terms 'art' and 'life' leaves one not with an impression of the depth and profundity of Bürger's insight, but recoiling at its very superficiality and destructiveness.

17. Explored in Hamel 1978.

18. It hardly needs to be said but Attali's perspective on popular music is extremely simplistic and he does not do very much justice to this vast and complex area. His view is really only of interest for the rhetorical way in which it functions in his argument as a whole. Any serious study of popular music would have to go far more deeply into the problems his theory presents, though this does not seem necessary within the context of the present study.

19. On the politics of the studio, and its treatment of sound, see Paul Thérberge's, 'The "Sound" of Music: Technological Rationalisation and the Production of Popular Music,' 1989, Steven Struthers' 'Technology in the Art of Recording' in White (ed) 1987, and John Mowitt's completely incomprehensible, 'The Sound of Music in the Era of its Electronic Reproducibility,' in Leppert and McClary (eds) 1987.

20. Adorno's interpretation of the public rejection of Schoenberg's music illustrates the idea of noise as a byproduct.

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For Adorno, Schoenberg's method of composing abstracted and applied a level of technical integration to music, which mirrored the increasing domination of technique in society at large. In doing so Schoenberg produced a code of dissonance - of noise - which, he argues truly attested to society's and subjectivity's actual historical structure and condition. Thus for Adorno, dissonance is 'the truth' about harmony; 'the negativity of modern art is the epitome of all that has been repressed by established culture'. (1984: 160, 27) Richard Wolin writes, 'by virtue of its "sinister" qualities, dissonant art is the only art that retains the courage to call society by its actual name. It steadfastly refuses to pass over the anguish in silence'. (Wolin 1979: 103) So the reason that the bourgeois concert-going audience responded so negatively to modern music was because it presented them with their own noise, 'all that has been repressed,' the cost and consequence of that social order's functioning.

So for Adorno the hostile and uncomfortable reception that modern music mostly received was not, as the composers argued, because the audience had yet to understand the new language but precisely because they *did* understand it, and recognised the challenge it threw at them. This is precisely the character and function of noise in the sense that I intend it.

However, if we remember that music is not simply made up of its technical languages and expressive codes and also includes institutionalised relations of labour and productivity - the same relations that Derrida and Artaud point out in the theatre - we find that modernism; Schoenberg's music, serialism or most of what follows it, does not typically include these in its language. The orchestra for example is taken to be simply a medium to which the sound-language is subjected, having no determinations of its own. To this degree the serialist work, and modernism in general, is silent: in its form it

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contains only the barest of references to its own social construction and reproduction.

21. In practice very definite rules, codes and laws may develop in response to certain playing situations. A debate has ensued amongst improvisers over precisely such points see for example Prévost 1975, 1982, 1985, 1987, Small 1980: 175-181, Small et al 1984, and Durant 1988. From his playing experience with the group AMM Prévost asserts the following 'fundamentals';

- A. that each performer must *make* or attempt to make his place within the *music*.
- B. he must observe the rights of others to do the same

If the performer fails on the first count then he will be gradually excluded from the proceedings. (Prévost 1975: 12)

But this model of group democracy is not one accepted straightforwardly by all improvising musicians. Steve Beresford for example often works with a 'neurotic' style which accepts and considers precisely this issue of exclusion, go to the extent even of disrupting the possibility of any common ground or language of the sort proposed by Prévost.

It's an interesting word 'ground' isn't it? I mean, you're implying a basis... You seem to be saying that there is some point somewhere where you can say 'yes, that's working now... I don't think that any of the music that interests me would have come about if people were worried about common grounds and yardsticks. (Lake 1977)

22. Corbett's dissertation *She's Got You: Writing Around Improvisation* represents one of the few attempts to come to terms with free improvisation theoretically. His theoretical basis is a Barthesian post-modernism which concentrates on

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the problem of improvisation as a text or non-text, and, more interestingly, in the role of the body in relationship to the instrument in free improvisation, and particularly how this relates to the question of technique;

technical facility is... a strategy by which the performer and instrument are both denied presence in the performance, one by which they are disavowed as the writing of culture and thus one which protects written (inscribed) music and the discipline of the body against exposure and detection. (1986: 47)

23. See also Corbett 1985: 48;

Structure is not abandoned, it is individualised. It exists not at the level of the 'score' or 'tradition,' but in the friction between the player's body and culture.

24. For the meaning of narrative in this context see Lyotard 1984: introduction.

25. The reference is to the white buddha figure in the region known as the 'heaven sphere' or 'god realm' of the Tibetan wheel of life, whose music is said to rouse even the gods from complacency. (Govinda: 239)

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## APPENDIX ONE: THE INTERVIEWS AND THE THESIS

### The Problem of Improvisation

The sociology of music, which remains something less than a discipline, has examined many different aspects of musical activity. We find analyses of the notated composition (McClary 1987, Subotnik 1987), the arrangement of the orchestra (Small 1987b), the meaning of lyrics (Frith 1987) and of the development of instrumentation (Weber 1948, Dasilva 1984). We also have studies of the legal aspects of copyright (White 1987), of relationships in recording studios (Struthers 1987), of the everyday worlds of jazz musicians (Becker 1963, White 1987, Christian 1987) and so on.

In such a manner sociology has tended to concentrate on the tangibles of music, on institutions, on physical objects such as scores and instruments, on the attitudes of musicians and on a myriad of other features of the social worlds that surround music. 'In a sense, the sociology of music can only circle around its object of study; it can never quite touch it. It is not really about music at all, but about everything that goes on around it; girls, money, alcohol, meanings, dreams, the social statuses of audiences...' (Hodgkinson: 3) Thus, if I were proposing to study popular music I could begin with a wealth of literature (for example Chambers 1985, Durant 1984, Frith 1983, 1987 a+b, Street 1986) and then go on to launch into a consideration of whichever aspect interested me most - formal conventions, the recording process, advertising and marketing, the funding structure of the record industry, ideology, and so on. If, on the other hand, I were to study some aspect of European concert music I could begin with a pile of scores and a mass of information from musicology or look at the institutional arrangements of that music's production, at the changing historical roles of conductor and composer, orchestra and notation and so on. American

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jazz and the traditional and folk musics examined by ethnomusicologists, also have a close relationship with social structures that is frequently clear and explicit. Even 1960s free jazz is accessible to us in terms of various cultural and political parallels and because we can link it very clearly to a definite community and ideology.

Attempting to study free improvisation we find alarmingly few footholds for the sociologist to grip onto, because, in Hodgkinson's sense, nothing much goes on around it. We find no significantly established market, few formal modes of production and distribution and little in terms of structural regularity in the music itself. Improvised music offers us no score to play with, no composer, no conductor. Hierarchical relations are absent or kept to a bare minimum. There is no structure to be abstracted and conceived as independent, no object that we can analyse on paper. Certainly there are some regularities and institutional arrangements but in the main these are very ad hoc and it would surely be erroneous to take them to be essential.

The only attempts I have come across to abstract and analyse improvised music in some or other structural manner (e.g. Jost 1975, Pressing 1984, 1988) are highly problematic. By notating and analysing improvisations as if they were compositions they employ frameworks which, though informative, systematically distort the essential nature of their subject-matter.

Relatedly, David Sudnow's *Ways of the Hand: The Organisation of Improvised Conduct* is an ethnomethodological study of learning and playing jazz piano improvisation. The text studies literally the ways of the hand; the author observing, or questioning how far observation is possible, his hands learning the patterns and skills of a language and making that language their own, in the sense that they finally gain a measure of independence, 'the fingers making music all by themselves' (op cit. xiii). The text is not

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without an obscure interest yet I sense that in the end the hands are learning a very *definite* language which is in fact very largely known before-hand - finally the writer watches his hands developing into 'jazz hands' which are engaged less in improvisation than in identical, 'orderly conduct.'

Bearing in mind the scale of the problem it is perhaps not surprising that there is very little writing about free improvisation or any other sort of improvisation. What there is mainly consists of writing by musicians themselves, for example, *Musics* and *The Improviser* magazines, essays by drummer Eddie Prevost (1975, 1982, 1985) and guitarist Derek Bailey's book, *Improvisation: Its nature and practice in Music*. On the problem of improvisation Bailey writes:

there is an almost total absence of information about it. Perhaps this is inevitable, even appropriate. Improvisation is always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description; essentially non-academic. And, more than that; any attempt to describe improvisation must be, in some respects, a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of voluntary improvisation which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation.

...the essence of improvisation is probably as elusive as the moment in which it first finds its existence. A circumstance which is wholly appropriate. For, in all its roles and appearances, improvisation can be considered as the celebration of the moment. And in this improvisation exactly resembles the nature of the music. Music is essentially fleeting; its focus is its moment of performance. There might be documents that relate to that moment; - score, recording, echo, memory, - but only to anticipate or recall it. (Bailey 1980: 1, 153)

Clearly if we take this seriously there is not much to go on. What avenues might still remain? Presenting a radio broadcast by his group Company, Bailey provides us with a

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clue in the following comment;

These people, the players, are the music. Their personalities, their musical predilections, their instrumental attitudes. the relationships discovered and developed between each other are the forces that guide the making of the music. (Bailey 1988)

In his book Bailey comments that musical and personal interaction, 'are virtually identical, and absolutely inseparable'. (1980: 113) He quotes the composer Gavin Bryars;

in improvisation... in the act of the music being made there is no discrimination between the music made and the people making it. The music doesn't exist elsewhere as some general concept. (from Bailey 1980: 135)

So granted that we cannot get too close to the act of improvising itself, the most realistic history of the music that can be constructed is through the musicians that play it.

### Musicians

Historically the musician has always been an exceptional figure, shaman, magician, witchdoctor, preacher and teacher, and also mystic, outcast, beggar and tramp. These are figures onto whom communities have projected conceptions of good and evil, mythologies of past present and future, aspirations and fears and models of community, individuality and sexuality.

The musician, like music, is ambiguous. He plays a double game... If an outcast he sees society in a political light. If accepted he is a historian, the reflection of its deepest values, he speaks of society and he speaks against it. (Attali 1985: 12)

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Of course sociologists have studied musicians before, for example see Howard Becker's classic study of jazz musicians (1963). But in this and other cases the point from which the sociologist embarks has not being an interest in music or a preparedness to learn from it. Rather the musician tends to become a pawn in the researcher's theoretical armoury through which other concerns are developed (for Becker the self-definitions of a deviant group). But my concern here is not with musicians as signifiers of ideological-patterns and social structures but simply as makers of particular musics who through this making have lived through and developed specific individual and collective musical and social experiences and understandings.

### The Interviews: Introductions and Conclusions

The first thing I'd like to say is that I think the interview is useless as a source of reliable information. (Derek Bailey)

...it's the language of poetry, or religion, or high philosophy, but not the language of the interview. (Evan Parker)

Look, I'm planning a solo gig before Christmas... that will be my statement, and an interview can never get there. (John Russell)

Ah no! My name is this, I was born by the river, you want me to do all *that* stuff? (Louis Moholo)

The interviews presented below are intended as an independent piece of empirical research, and are not necessarily intended to support my own thesis or understanding of improvised music. Partly they are intended to situate the essentially academic, institutional, discourse of the thesis in the context of other differently situated voices and meanings. This is not the same as

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wanting to simply *illustrate* my own argument or point of view with the interview data, what Plummer (1983) callsthe anecdotal approach. Although I have employed this method, extensively in Chapter Six, this was not the main purpose of collecting the interview material. Instead the interviews form a mass of information and argumentation in their own right. Sometimes the interviews do seem to support the thesis, sometimes they explicitly refute it, and sometimes they do not seem to refer to it at all. If they illustrate anything of the thesis it is the diversity and multiplicity of discourses which I have argued is at the centre of the music. In the end I have collected, edited and structured this information but I have not chosen to interpret it in any systematic or orderly way. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, interview material is individual and arbitrary, representing interpretations rather than facts. Thus even if every aspect of every interview corresponded entirely with my thesis that, in itself, would not constitute proof, as I could quite easily have spoken to the musicians on different days, or spoken to 24 different musicians and come out with a different picture. Thus strictly speaking the interviews speak for themselves, and represent only themselves; they cannot be understood to directly attest to any theory of free music's practice or any objective history of free music in London, nor can they really be said to be representative of any wider community. It is for the reader to make of them what she or he will, and to measure the extent to which they think their contents match, differ, or relate at all, to my thesis, or to their own ideas and interests.

This said, it will not do any harm for me to outline some ways in which certain parts of certain interview seem to relate to my thesis and to tentatively suggest ways in which the thesis might be self-critically reconsidered in their light. Rather than going through a tedious demonstration of how the interviews *support* my thesis (for

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example showing a marginalised, fragmented, network of individuals working collectively in a non-institutionalised dialogic manner distinct from both high culture and the culture industry etcetera, etcetera...) I would prefer to very briefly comment on some aspects of the interviews which seem to oppose the thesis or which might encourage critical and creative reflection on it.

### The Interviews and the Thesis

As the quotes which open this section make clear there was some concern amongst several of the interviewees about the validity of the interview as a method of gaining information or understanding about improvisation. For John Russell it 'can never get there,' for Evan Parker it is the wrong language, while Bailey calls it, 'useless'. Phil Wachsmann also expressed reservations. This was often part of a wider concern expressed over the attempts to use words to convey something about music.

I think the way in which you play with other people is fascinating. I don't know why but it is, and I like it, but I don't have the vocabulary to deal with it.

It's not got much to do with words... I think music works differently to words... If you use words to describe a book then there is always the reference point of words in it but if you use them to describe music, it doesn't work like that. There's a referential aspect of music which is purely musical. (John Russell)

Ideas, words... (what) we're doing here, we're trying to discuss, describe a process which, by definition, doesn't use any of these things. Much of the understanding, and this is where it gets embarrassing sometimes, is quite intuitive. Much of the understanding defies conceptualisation... (Eddie Prevost)

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There's no one word for it... I've asked people for explanations of what happens. I thought that maybe I'm just stupid and can't speak, you know? It's difficult to put it in words... I don't have the gift of really explaining this music. Sometimes it's hidden to us as well. (Louis Moholo)

Though I have tried to contain something of this distrust of language within the thesis itself, there is another way in which this clearly undermines the legitimacy of both the thesis and the interviews. What this has meant in more practical terms is that using words I have been unable to get particularly close to *practice* of Free music, and have had to more or less forsake analysing concrete examples. In fact the essence of what I have tried to study seems inaccessible to the word, this is why I have had to resort to an abstract and rather idealised mode of theorisation. This pragmatic response to the problem is the best I could come up with, but might be unsatisfactory both from the point of view both of the musician and of the social-scientist.

The above problem is closely related to another tendency amongst certain interviewees, notably Ward, Bailey, Russell, Done and Noble, to refuse to link the music up to anything outside of music at all, whether that be language, politics or art;

Do you think you can include ideas (like surrealism) that come from the arts, when your talking about improvising? I mean most of those people come from a middle class background... Also I wouldn't want to connect it up with politics or anything like that. When the Miners' Strike was on all these people we're saying, 'Oh well we should be doing something to support them'. I just think that's bollocks. I mean, most Miners would probably tell you to Fuck Off if you started playing. (Steve Noble)

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I don't actually think music does anything... it's never had any impact outside of itself. It never leads me onto related topics.

I mean I'm not very interested in politics, so it could be said that that might be why I don't see any political aspects to it, but I am interested in philosophy, and the more I learn about music and the more I learn about philosophy the more I'm convinced that they have nothing to do with each other whatsoever.

The strongest effect any piece of music has ever had on me is to make me want to hear more music. (Alex Ward)

I can't really deal with all the kind of sociological, religious connotations attached to artistic practices. I have such an aversion to that kind of shit...

I think you could work out a great story about improvisation visavis survival in a non-improvising world, in an increasingly regimented, overseen, directed authoritarian world. I think you could make up a very good argument for improvisation being an essential lifeline for our species. All that might be right you know. But I'm not going to do that... it isn't an argument I've got any time for, I have enough trouble just playing the guitar. (Derek Bailey)

These ideas clearly oppose the whole underlying narrative of my thesis which is that music is social, that music *affects and is affected by society*, that it has consequences which reverberate far beyond what we might normally conceive as the musical sphere. So, regardless of the way in which I have employed sociological and critical discourses to try and understand the practice of free music, most particularly in the concept of the avant-garde, I have to accept that at least some of the musicians I spoke to who practice free music do not see it that way at all, and might find that most of what I have written has no resonance with their own view of their activities whatsoever. I could even go so far as to suggest that for some of the musicians, abstract intellectualisation and sociological theorizing might be

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exactly a part of what they see themselves as opposing.

There was also another tendency, which seemed to accept the possibility that music has many reverberations outside of music, but nevertheless that words, or a rational discourse were not necessarily the best way to understand them.

It's very hard to get words to express what words can't express, and when you talk about the music alluding to 'something else,' that 'something else' may equally be the kind of thing that doesn't succumb to a verbal description any better than the music itself does. With this kind of discourse I think the best people are the ones who just drop into poetry and refuse to talk analytically.  
(Evan Parker)

So when the old guys - jazz players I mean - used to go, 'Well, I just play man,' maybe that was the best possible answer. Playing is very funny stuff and it's never been analysed adequately. (Derek Bailey)

There is a very deep thing when one is improvising... one does go to the very fundamental things which can hardly be put into words.  
(Rohan de Saram)

So between the thesis and the interviews I have to accept that there are many points of conflict, conflict between the various discourses, and finally *media*, that myself and the interviewees employ.

Also, at least one of the interviewees explicitly opposed the idea of free music being a part of the avant-garde.

My interest is in modernism, in taking things further. The dadaist approach, or the nihilist approach, is okay in its historical perspective, but I don't really approve of iconoclasm for the

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sake of it. I don't want to be seen as something out-on-a-limb avant-garde. (Steve Done)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the interviews reveal that the idealistic theoretical model in the thesis, should be situated within a realistic and historical context. The thesis focuses on the potential of free music, but for all the idealisation free music came about and continues within the context of real people living their lives and playing music, clearly all sorts of additional practical, political and personal factors influence the music which I have not discussed;

I sense that there's a danger you might make too neat a set of correspondences between political thinking and musical thinking, and there are important differences. Even within a nominally collective situation there are mechanisms of authority which guide the music, determine it.

I know what you mean. You're saying that because you move the prearranged material, you move the composer from the picture, that means everything comes about cooperatively. But there are still certain things that you can't remove... You can't idealise beyond a certain point, there are certain realities involved.

Ideally the institution becomes transparent and becomes only a natural consequence of everybody being what they want to be together, and all wanting the same thing. But that's totally idealised and I haven't spent 20 years in an idealised world, I've spent 20 years in the real world. And I know that there are egos, there are fights, there are disagreements, there are power-plays, there are unpleasantnesses, there are ambitions... there were rows inside the groups, people fell out... (Evan Parker)

## Appendix One: The Interviews and the Thesis

### Conclusion

As far as the relationship of the interview material to the thesis is concerned, the criticisms and dissent expressed in the interviews suggest both that my theoretical emphasis on free music as a contemporary avant-garde cultural practice is both well placed and inadequate. The thesis selects and prioritises one aspect out of a complex mass of activities and practices and possible interpretations. While much of the interview material might be interpreted as supporting this view there are also many points where the thesis and the points of view represented in the interviews seem to conflict, there are for example points of view which would appear to owe more to traditional modernism, relatively conventional post-modernism or anti-avant-gardism, than avant-gardism as I have described it.

However even these direct challenges to the thesis do not provide us with unsurmountable problems, rather we simply need to place an even greater emphasis on the importance of dialogue and of the simultaneous presentation of a multiplicity of voices and perspectives for both freely improvised music and for the contemporary avant-garde in general. No one idea or theory could ever hope to broadly characterise, or even keep up with, the musical practices and the musicians I have studied; that will only be possible when the creative processes of the music are exhausted and dead. As there is no indication of this occurring in the foreseeable future my own thesis should not be seen as in any sense a final word, it is no more than another step in a continuing dialogue to which free music perpetually bears witness and attests.

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## APPENDIX TWO: METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The first research method I tried was a fairly informal mode of participant observation. Through attending performances and workshops, playing saxophone myself, and generally being around the musicians I hoped to get more of an idea how the musicians interpreted the music and of the contexts in which it was performed. I will quote just one entry in my research notes from this period (October to April, 1986-1987), recorded at a performance organised by Paul Shearsmith at the London Musician's Collective in Camden on the 11th of April 1987;

...the next performer is the acoustic guitarist Roger Smith. He is seated, tall and lean with thick round glasses and a severe haircut. He plays sheets of melody, sometimes changing direction abruptly and unexpectedly. As the noise from the audience gets louder he plays more quietly. Behind him a drummer begins to set up his kit, crashing and banging an inadvertent percussive accompaniment. He does not appear to notice that there is a performance underway. In return the guitarist ignores him but a few members of the audience shout out complaints at the distraction.

After 8 or so minutes of this the guitarist stops and shouts to the back of the audience to ask whether anybody knows where his partner is, apparently this is supposed to be a duet. A messenger is sent to the The Engineer public-house and a woman takes the opportunity to announce that the pub has been boycotted by the LMC because the new barman is '...err, sexist and racist and that sort of thing'. The guitarist continues. The audience is very noisy now and it is not clear whether or not the guitarist is actually performing or just filling in time until the other man arrives. He seems quite unconcerned about the noise drowning him out. The other man (Jez Parfitt) arrives, walks to the performance area and gets out a baritone saxophone. The guitarist continues and the other man next takes out a cricket bat. He begins to rub this down and chats to the man setting up the drumkit. The audience gets a little

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quieter and the man takes out a cricket ball which he bounces up and down on the bat accompanied by titters from the audience. He continues, his eyes focussed intently on his own movements and the bouncing ball.

After some minutes he stops, takes out another ball and drops the pair of them onto the piano keyboard for a minute or two, apparently quite randomly. Then he walks over to the saxophone and plays that for a while. Then they stop. After some applause and a very long pause they continue, the guitarist as before, the second man reading outloud from a book about cricket. He reads something about googlies, leg breaks and the particular skills of certain great players. For a moment the guitar and voice blend organically together and the piece ends. There is a very long pause...

This was the final participant observation note I made.

Reading through the account there is a sense that the author is really outside everything, and using writing to maintain a barrier between himself and what is happening, he is observing but he is not listening, not understanding. There is a sort of voyeuristic pleasure gained from reading the account; all is related in an insulated manner, from a safe interpretive distance. But perhaps the essence of the event is not the fact of it experienced as an outsider, recorded and stored for future analysis, but the specific existence of its musical events - the *click, click, click*, of the bat and ball - in that place and time. It is all too easy to forget that these events were, before anything else, exercises in music, in order to find something that might be analysable and which could be written down. The notes transformed the musical event into *something else*, music itself seemed to escape me, or at least my pen.

So, I began to regard this method of observation as too distanced and abstract. Such a research method seems to befit the police informer or secret agent better than the sociologist and represents the exercise of a certain form of

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social power. Most of the people I was writing notes on knew that I was making a study but they had no idea of the form that it was taking or, in the case of audience members, that I might be making notes on *them*. As Paul Willis writes in *Learning to Labour*; 'The (participant observation) method is patronising and condescending - is it possible to imagine the ethnographic account upwards in a class society. The silences and enforced secretcies of the method are ultimately political silences.' (op. cit.: 195) Though Martin Nicolaus almost certainly overstates his case he sums up something of the situation:

The more adventurous sociologists don the disguise of the people and go out to mix with the peasants in the 'field,' returning with the books and articles that break the protective secrecy in which a subjugated population wraps itself, and makes it more accessible to manipulation and control. (Nicolaus 1969: 155, quoted Phillips 1973: 3)

So I decided to discontinue the type of observation I was engaged in and to exclude any information gained from private or unnegotiated sources. I did carry on attending performances and playing myself but the relationship between these activities and thesis-research was not very clear.

I was surprised and encouraged to read of another researcher in a remarkably similar position. John Chernoff Miller writes of his fieldwork exploring African drumming:

At that point, when it no longer made sense to think of writing about what I was doing there, I was moving into a level of involvement with African social life that went way beyond the limited participation practised in most ethnographic research orientations. Ordinarily a social scientist is taught to keep a certain amount of emotional distance from whatever he is observing, and his detachment enables him to separate selected aspects of a situation in order to achieve a more objective perspective.

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However, when a researcher, in building his analysis, uses his own emotional responses to gain access to his material, he is using a technique called participant observation... (Miller 1979: 8)

So in this sense perhaps I have remained a participant observer all along, but on a very different basis from where I began. Participation and observation instead of being 'employed' as 'techniques' have rather formed a general context and backdrop for the construction of the thesis.

I decided on the exclusive use of the interview technique because it was a more open and honest manner of conducting research than formal participant observation. Interviewing also appealed to me as a way of generating information which I hoped would balance out the academic discourse and my own ideas, the dissent expressed in Appendix 1. might be seen to demonstrate something of this process. Thus the content of the interviews was fairly open, in that the musicians could set as much of the agenda as they wanted, though I did ended up asking most interviewees the following questions, or variants upon them.

*How did you come to play/improvise music?*

*Do you regard yourself as a jazz musician?*

*Do you think free improvisation is linked with politics?*

*Do you have a particular philosophy or theory of free improvisation?*

*Why do you play free improvisation/what aspects of the experience of free improvisation interest you?*

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Most other questions and topics varied between interviews, were more specific to the individual interviewees, or occurred spontaneously out of discussion. After the first interview, with John Stevens, I wrote in my research notes;

I went in with no questions or preconceived ideas of the form the interview would take, though I did want to find out about his perspectives on his own career and background, on authority and politics and on women in improvisation. As it happened these almost all emerged quite naturally out of the conversation. The interview started very slowly (partly because I was very nervous) but developed to be very open. John did almost all of the talking though I did try to direct him towards my specific areas of interest in one or two places.

In at least one interview, I believe this lack of prepared questions irritated the interviewee and came across as a form of incompetence or lack of adequate preparation. But in general the notion that I would offer the interviewer a free space to talk about more or less whatever they wished as well as pointing them towards some specific areas of interest seemed to work quite well and was popular.

My sample was quite informal and helped by a fairly intimate knowledge of the musicians and their work. The choice of interviewees was directed by three main considerations, who I had access to, and a concern to represent as much of the variety of styles of playing, instruments, and social characteristics as possible. The study thus includes four drummers, a percussionist, five guitarists (one of whom is a multi-instrumentalist), four reed-players (all of whom play at least two instruments) two trombonists, a trumpeter, three singers (two of whom also play trumpet), two bassists, a cellist, a pianist/multi-instrumentalist, and a violinist. Many of the players also play other instruments and use electronics or synthesizers as well. Between them they have performed, recorded and

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created in an extraordinary range of contexts, amongst them; pop, rock, soul, rhythm and blues, blues, bebop, hard bop, bossa-nova, swing, free-jazz, free-rock, free-funk, contemporary/chamber jazz, live-electronic music, electronic tape music, serialism, indeterminate composition, graphic scores, contemporary composition, classical-orchestral, chamber music, string quartet, disco, Easy Listening, English-folk, salsa, reggae, dub, traditional African music, Contemporary African music, skiffle, brass bands, minimalism, experimental-rock, marching bands, church choirs, Indian classical music, Japanese classical music, Sri Lankan classical music, film and television soundtracks, composition and arranging, dance, mime, drama, visual art, ceramics, writing, radio and television broadcasting, record and book publishing, instrumental teaching, workshop teaching, and all of course have a degree of involvement, ranging from marginal to almost total, in free musical improvisation.

The social characteristics of the interviewees included an age range between 16 and 60, an 8:1 male/female ratio, 21 whites, an African, a French-Afro Caribbean, a Brazillian, an Italian, an Asian, a non-sighted person, an architect, a management consultant, a school-teacher and, as far as I could tell, a roughly 4:1 working class/middle class ratio, 18 English, one Celtic and one Jewish.

There were five other musicians I would particularly have liked to interview as well, but for one reason or another I did not get the chance. These are pianists Keith Tippett and Akemi Kuhn, saxophonists Dudu Pukwana and Trevor Watts and bassist Paul Rogers.

While transcribing the interviews I found that there was still a lot of creative, interpretive work to be done in translating the voice into text. Punctuation, for example, is used in a completely different way in speech than in writing, speakers very rarely use full stops, commas are

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ambiguous and there are no capital letters at all! Also, even though I tried to type them up initially as fully as possible, I did find it necessary to delete some sections, again quoting from my notes on John's interview;

I have made some summaries, missed out sections which were very repetitious, or which simply did not translate into print and I have missed out many of my own comments, which were made in order to encourage the speaker and to show that I was listening rather than being of any intrinsic interest. There were also many pauses which I could not indicate without interrupting the flow of speech beyond all possibility of interpretation. Although there can be no guarantee, it is hoped that these decisions have enabled me to preserve and clarify 'intended' meanings rather than distorting them...

Apart from pauses I also cut many hesitations, 'like's, 'y'know's, 'uhm's and 'ah's, from the transcript, though I did include some in order to maintain something of the rhythm and feel of somebody speaking. As I got more idea of what I was interested in and more experienced at transcribing I included these less and made more brutal cuts in the text. All these decisions were basically pragmatic.

On request I showed transcripts of their interviews to John Stevens, Evan Parker, Roberto Bellatalla, John Russell and Louis Moholo. John Stevens and Roberto seemed very pleased and John regarded the transcript as valuable to himself as a representation and rationalisation of some of the problems he was dealing with over that summer. Evan seemed generally quite satisfied, though he questioned my inclusion of the pauses and 'uhm's and 'ah's, expressing a concern that, as I remember it, 'sociologists only seem to do that when they're interviewing someone from a working class background'. Similarly, Louis asked me to tidy-up his interview, taking out some of the pauses and hesitations, some material we both felt too personal to print, and some

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factual errors. John Russell asked me not to use the interview and we arranged to record a second one.

Originally I had intended to present the interviews in full on the basis that this would maintain the integrity of the interview as a unique event. But the 'raw' interview material totalled over six-hundred pages and the most time-consuming problem was to find a way of cutting down this material to around a third of this length, as I have done. Initially I set out to do this by generating a structure which could help select and separate out different topics of conversation, for example Musical Background, Employment, Politics, The Playing Experience, Avant-Garde, (there were 57 in all) and group together the information on those topics from different interviews. This structure was intended to be a mode of categorising, storing and presenting the information in a form that was relatively concise, coherent and convenient. A broadly similar method to this is used for example in *Nam* (1986) Mark Baker's oral history of American troops in the Vietnam war in which he effectively breaks up his individual interviews into the chronological categories Before, Enrolement, Training, Arriving, During, Leaving and After.

However I found this fragmented the interviews too much and tended to cloud many of the differences between people I was talking to, and also obscured some very powerful homologies that I felt some of the interviews implied between their personalities and the music they played. To pick out four, Evan Parker, Derek Bailey and Paul Rutherford and John Stevens. Although they helped to forge a musical revolution together they are very different people, with different understandings of themselves, their music and their lives, they also play very different music. I wanted to reflect something of this diversity of experience and attitude in the individual interviews, and to maintain their internal coherence seemed the best way to do this.

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The form I finally decided on is similar to my first idea but has involved a much more rigorous editing process which I hope has not distorted the information too much. The format is loosely based on that used by Tony Parker in *Life After Life: Interviews with Twelve Murderers* (1990) and *A Place Called Bird* (1989). Like Parker, where possible I have edited out all my own questions and contributions to the discussion completely. Where they seem directly necessary to an understanding of the interviewee, for example in the John Russell interview, I have left them in.

### Life History, Oral History

The interviews were conducted on the basis that music and life is irreducibly intertwined. We do not have to restrict our question to the musician strictly to musical matters because we are no longer interested just in music but in the person, in individual lives which have music at their centre. These concerns have led me to an interest in the life history research technique whose aim, according to Ken Plummer, is to, 'attempt to enter the subjective world of informants, taking them seriously on their own terms and thereby providing first hand, intimately involved accounts of life,' (1983: 14) reminding us of Malinowski's aim to, 'grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of the world'. The life-history technique basically involves getting, or letting, the interviewee give an account of their own life on their own terms, not necessarily as something to be analysed as a 'case-study' but as a sociological story in its own right, of value in itself. Of course this does not construct itself within a specifically sociological discourse, but it does offer other qualities:

Here are real concrete experiences. Abstractions, logical systems, philosophical meanderings are bypassed and one is confronted through the personal document with the very substance of

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experience. But note what this brings with it. It does not bring with it the isolated individual; rather it brings with it an immediate awareness of the relationship of the individual's body, the individual's definition of a situation, and the groups with which the individual is persistently engaged throughout life. (Plummer 1983: 54)

Of course this is an idealised model (no recorded, transcribed and edited material can be regarded as completely unmediated). But Plummer also distinguishes different levels of integration in which interview material can be harnessed by sociologists. He notes the following categories (1983: 108-14):

1. The Comprehensive Life Document which grasps the account of the totality of life into a full biography or autobiography, and in doing so foregoes analysis, an example would be *The Autobiography of Malcom X*, by Alex Haley.

2. The Limited Life Document which presents more highly edited personal accounts which refer to a single major theme, such as sexuality, crime or employment. Again, an example is Parker's *Life After Life: Interviews with Twelve Murderers*.

3. The Comprehensive Topical Document which relates to a particular theme affecting a particular period of the person's life. For example a period of alcoholism or the period preceding a suicide attempt. An example of this is Baker's *Nam*.

4. The Limited Topical Document. As above but more condensed, characteristically many of these might be included in a single study. Examples are Parker's *A Place Called Bird* and Studs Terkel's *The Great Divide* (1988).

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Plummer also notes a continuum between;

- a. The 'raw' un-edited account, which is virtually never used.
- b. The various 'life document' categories above.
- c. Systematic thematic analysis, 'when the subject is more or less allowed to speak for him or herself but where the sociologist slowly accumulates a series of themes partly derived from the subjects account and partly derived from sociological theory.' (1983: 114) An example is Roger Graff's highly structured study of policemen and policewomen *Talking Blues* (1990).
- d. Sociological accounts employed, 'anecdotal evidence', i.e. quotes from the interview, as support.
- e. The purely sociological account which does not directly quote from the interviews at all but instead paraphrases them through the sociological discourse.

Appropriately, this second set of categories is quite useless as pre-interview schema but they are useful for understanding what has already occurred. Of them the method I have already arrived at comes somewhere between 2 and 4, and between b and c, the precise proportions varying between interviews and interview, depending on the interviewee's interests, my questions and the character of the occasion. I have also used sections of the interview material in the thesis as 'anecdotal' material (d).

I am not suggesting that I have used a pure or ordered life-history technique, indeed some of the musicians did not seem interested in talking about themselves at all, but this is one way of understanding the material that follows and the way that I have constructed it.

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Finally, some explanation and apology should be made for the many references to musicians, styles and particular compositions, groups and recordings which, for the reader not well versed in the subject matter, might make some parts of the interviews rather incomprehensible. My feeling was that these references must be left in the text to provide concrete musical information and historical reference points, but to provide an explanation each time an individual or record is mentioned would either break up the text unreasonably or leave a huge set of footnotes which finally would probably enlighten the reader very little anyway. A careful reading of Chapters One and Two and close listening to the recorded material will help the reader knowing little about the context of the discussions gain some orientation. Aside from this the interviews are left open for reading and interpretation, some readers will find certain sections meaningful and others of no interest at all, this is inherent to the nature of the interview technique and not something that I think is a problem.

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**APPENDIX THREE:**

**THE INTERVIEWS**



## JOHN STEVENS

*John Stevens is a key figure in the development of free jazz and free group improvisation in Britain. Originally a jazz drummer carving out a successful career for himself in clubs such as Ronnie Scott's, he gave up jazz playing completely in the late 1960s order to commit himself entirely to free group improvisation. The group which he organised with Trevor Watts, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, has since 1966 been an institution in which many of the key figures in the movement have being involved. The composition and improvisational ideas that Stevens originated for this group have developed into workshop pieces which he has used extensively with both trained and amature or 'non'-musicians. These have now being published in a book entitled Search and Reflect which forms the basis of cooperative approach to music making and teaching. It is in these workshops that many young musicians get their first taste of collective improvisation, the present author included. His teaching and outgoing personality have been at least as important as his own playing. Throught the 1970s and 1980s he played in a wide variety of contexts, amongst other things forming bands using improvisation along with aspects of rock, funk, jazz and folk. He is also involved in drama and visual art. Today his main musical activities are teaching, playing different forms of jazz and occasionally performing with S.M.E. I met him at his house in Ealing. (see 1.1, 2.9)*

For me it was an instinctive thing, it was all tied in with drawing and painting really, I was doing that ever since I can remember. I was spending, like, hours doing drawings. It wasn't in any way self-conscious, almost like I didn't even realise I was doing it. When I got to secondary modern school this one teacher was very... he was almost flabbergasted at one point about what I'd been doing without

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any knowledge of anatomy or fuck-all, you know? It was all figurative. I'd use my own body. Also, I'd go into a local shop like WH Smith's or something and I was fanatical about books, but I never liked reading, it was all pictures, anything with pictures in it. So if I got some money for my birthday or christmas I go and sort through the book sales and pick out cheap art books like Bottocelli and Rubens. With Rubens I thought, 'Fuckin hell this is it' and I loved it.

Running parallel to that was music, my mum and dad loved music. My dad had been a tap dancer and they loved musical films and stuff so every week my mum would take me on a monday to the cinema and if there was a musical film on that's what we'd see every time... Ginger Rogers, Fred Astair, all that. Music was just a fantastic thing, it was all around, the radio would be blasting away on Sunday mornings. My mum and dad were quite loud people as well, partially because my dad from boxing had a damaged ear, so he was, like, deaf, or partially deaf anyway, so you'd have to really shout, I mean we were a really loud house and there was only three of us, 'cause I'm an only child. So there's this music which was going on and on, music was never not played during the day.

Anyway this teacher said I should take this exam to get into junior art school, which I did and passed. Ealing Technical College and School of art, I went there when I was about 12, and that's where the transition took place. When I went to junior art school I actually suffered quite a lot really, because I started getting really self-conscious about what I'd been doing for years. I couldn't say anything about it intellectually to you, but emotionally I was feeling uncomfortable with something that I'd felt very comfortable with. I couldn't take the guidance they were giving me and I didn't fit in, though I suppose I did as far as they were concerned in that they liked my work.

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I switched onto music out of Guy Mitchell, Frankie Laine, Johnny Ray all that stuff which was the popular music. But the more jazzy side of it was in the family, there'd be, like, Fats Waller, the Nat King Cole Trio, stuff like that. And there was one thing that I remember which was a Saturday evening and the radio was on in the kitchen and this music came on and I went, 'What is *this?*', and it was like all going on at the same time, it sounded like an action painting to me, and it was jazz. So when I was out in the street, and I can't remember exactly the details, but I must have mentioned that as a little kid because there were older kids in the street who went, 'Jazz, I've got jazz records,' and they started playing me stuff that they had, and I knew that it was something that I really liked. And one kid who was older than me, started playing me the bits and pieces he had and also took me to the Chiswick Empire to see the Variety. And there was all sorts of impressions: I saw Billy Eckstine singing and playing the trumpet, Rose Murphy - who you probably wouldn't know - a black woman piano player and singer, Billy Daniels, who was, like... well the line between jazz and what they were doing, well, you best not draw it. And obviously there was all sorts of other things as well, To me it's the Arts really, Max Miller, Tommy Cooper...

Funnily enough, running alongside of that, was my dad's involvement with boxing. To me, that isn't that different from jazz, the thing about duality and duckin and weavin. For me somebody like Muhammed Ali, the images and the whole idea of interaction and speed, was like a real artist. Okay he's a boxer but to me he could have been a tenor saxophone player. All those things, all those colourful things stemming out of the sort of environment I was living in, had an effect which was to do with *expression*. The whole aspect of performing was just *there* and I put a lot down to that atmosphere, particularly the level of enthusiasm that there was when the family got together, like, my mum and dad's

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sisters and brothers and all that stuff. It was a very typical, what you might call, working class bit; it'd be like whoosh! Bam bam! Dancing and singing and going absolutely potty.

I saw the Jack Parnell Band at the Chiswick Empire, which had Phil Seamen and Jack Parnell on drums, and I thought, 'God, this is unbelievable!' I used to read the *New Musical Express*, which had someone called Mike Butcher writing in there, as a guidance to what the new records would be. I suppose we're now talking about when it was getting clear, when I was about 13 Because *Jazz at Massey Hall* probably came out in 1954, which would make me 14, Lionel Hampton *At the Apollo* came out 1954ish, and the first Modern Jazz Quartet record with Kenny Clarke on drums. So I was now beginning to find my way. I'd go up to Squire's, a music shop in Ealing, from Brentford, where I come from. I'd go in and say, 'Have you got any jazz records?' and I'd go into the booth and start playing these records until I found one that I wanted. What I was looking for was that, sort of... *outburst* that I associated with jazz, where it's *all going at the same time*, that was the thing. Now as I go through the records obviously there's stuff that's a lot cooler and I wouldn't select that.

The first real step was listening to the music, pretending to play with it; being the saxophone player or whatever, you know, like, miming to it and getting carried away with the whole idea of it. I got my mum's Smiths Crisps tin which she used to have all the shoe stuff in and two dustpan-and-brush brushes and started playing on top of this tin. Eventually I got a pair of proper brushes to play on it with and that was it. I actually started doing gigs with this Smiths Crisp tin, it was like a skiffle group, there was an acoustic guitar player and a geezer with a tea chest bass and we used to do pubs and that, we called ourselves the Muleskinners. The bass player and I had a real affinity for a certain area of music. Now if you've got a mate and

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you've both got the same taste then that really pushes it on. So then the getting of records would be a 'guess what I've got!' sort of business, y'know. This affinity led to us actually going to gigs and luckily enough in Acton at the White Hart was a fantastic jazz venue. A lot of the really good British players in London would be gigging there every week. So I saw Phil Seamen down there, Stan Tracey, Tubby (Hayes) and all that. So that just spurred the whole thing on, regularly seeing this live jazz. So I thought, 'I wanna be a drummer,' and my mate said, 'Right, I wanna be a clarinet player,' and that was it.

The next big step was that in 1957, he goes into the forces, he gets called up right? And his first leave he contacts me and says, 'Guess what!', I said, 'What?', he says 'I'm going to a music school,' I went, 'fu-uck, fuckin hell, how come?'. It was for the airforce band, from training you go to Uxbridge school of music for a year and then out to a band and spend the rest of the time as a musician. When he came back and told me that I was doing a day job at the time. When I left school at 15 the first job I got was at Sandersons' Wallpaper factory and I'm a very clumsy person, like, they were printing this wallpaper up and I'm like tearing the fucking wallpaper and it was horrible. So I stayed there about three days and fucked off. My dad said, 'You should get an apprenticeship, that's what you need, a bit of security,' and all this. So I went to Evershed's and Vignall's engineering factory to be an apprentice engineer. Me and that didn't suit at all. In fact, when I eventually left, which was after about six months, the foreman said, 'Look, even if you wanted to come back to this place we wouldn't have you, so don't bother 'cause I'm glad to see the back of you!' I just didn't suit, it just didn't work, my temperament and that. Anyway, then I worked in a record shop which had a drum-kit upstairs and when the geezer used to go out I used to go up and play on his drum-kit. Which didn't go down too well because he'd

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come back and there's customers in the shop and I'm bashing away upstairs. So I eventually got the bullet from that. I ended up in a commercial art studio. I didn't like that either but that lasted a couple of years.

The real transition came when my mate came back and said what he said. By that time I'd left the studio and was working at Mercedes-Benz in the goods-inwards department and I thought 'Right, this is it, I'm off,' so on Saturday morning I went off to the recruitment office. I just missed National Service so I actually didn't have to go in, but I just thought, 'Right, that's it, I wanna be a musician *now!*' And that seemed to give the opportunity where immediately you were gonna be a musician. Now, I wasn't thinking about the nature of being in the forces and all the fucking uniform bit and square-bashing, I didn't even think about that.

When I got to the school of music there was the clarinet guy, who'd gone in first, there was (trombonist) Paul Rutherford there, there was (saxophonist) Trevor Watts there, (saxophonist Bob) Downes... So there were quite a few of us who were like-minded who were in there.

At that time I was moved by what Ornette was doing, what Coltrane was doing, what the Bill Evans Trio was doing, what Mingus was doing and what Eric Dolphy was doing. I was stationed in Germany and I actually depped for Kenny Clarke<sup>3</sup> at a rehearsal with J.J. Johnson, Jimmy Woods, Sat in with Tubby Hayes, Albert Nicholas the New Orleans clarinet player, If I'd been here I don't think that would have happened, and, the influence of Coltrane and Ornette was much more prevalent there than it seemed to be here. There was a tenor player called Hors Jeagar, I played with him, Manfred Schoof, the trumpet player, Alex Schlippenbach, the pianist and Bushie Niebergall on bass. I never thought, 'This is avant-garde,' this was 1962 and though we would be playing tunes in time Hors *floated* and flowed over the top of this in an amazing abstract fashion. Later a mate of

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Hors' came up to me and said, 'Oh, you're John Steven's, the avant-garde drummer,' and I went, 'Pardon?' I didn't even know the word, I didn't even know that expression, for me I was just playing time and conversing off the time....

You see, what you were saying about spontaneity, Dadaism and all that stuff, was that an influence or whatever, I didn't know anything about any of that stuff, my involvement with 'art', if you like, was an applied thing, I didn't have any knowledge about the development of it, didn't know much about abstract painting, not really, or any of that. It was a very personal creative thing that I was involved in, it was all the inspiration of *listening* and with a bit of luck playing. I didn't think so much about the tradition, what appealed to me was the modern music of that time, which would be when Sonny Rollins came in, and Elvin (Jones); all the bits that were the newest bits really appealed to me the most. It was a thing of just *playing*, even at the school of music. I'd go out into the corridor and I remember there was this very straight brass band cornet player and I said, 'Come in here!' y'know, 'Come an have a play!' and he said, 'Well, what shall I play?' I said, 'Play anything you like, I'll play along with you'. So the enthusiasm and, in a way, the confidence, was enormous. I had such a taste for playing and it didn't matter what it was, I just wanted to play. And this all tied in very much with the improvisational thing because that's what appealed to me, this instant *having to play* sort of business. One of the reasons I think I had such a passion for that, as opposed to the study of playing in a certain way, was because of the painting and drawing thing. Because your free aren't you? If I want to do a figure with 5 heads, I can do that, it doesn't matter, it's me and the piece of paper.

There was always people looking over my shoulder saying, 'This is what you should do, this is the way you should do it'. But I warded it off, I thought 'Right, nothing's gonna

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stop me now, doing this in the way that I want to do it'. That's the sort of feeling I had. But there were bits that you had to learn. So gradually I learnt to read in a certain way that was acceptable, so that I'd get by. And when we were on the march and we had to learn specific pieces I'd improvise. I could go on and on about that, how I got away with all that stuff I don't know, but the point is I maintained the lowest rank you could possibly have for five years! I was officially thick anyway so, well, what do you expect from somebody who's got such a low rank? So, I sort of coasted and just got on with my bit and I survived it like that.

When I came out of the forces it was a bit like coming out of school, you're again in that situation where you've got to work, but I wanted to play music. Well, as it happened almost as soon as I got out I was invited to start playing. It wasn't exactly jazz, it was with a vocal - instrumental group, but it had the influence and the material was derived from stuff like Count Basie and Frank Sinatra and the people in it were jazz players, the person who ran it was a piano player, Don Ridell. At first I was pleased to have a gig, I went round saying, 'I've got a gig! a gig, I'm a professional!' But I moved through that and thought, 'the thing I've got to do is start playing the Ronnie Scott Club'. And after I'd been out about a year I got invited and started playing there. So I'm playing in the place with players that I admired. But even that didn't suit me, and I didn't always go down that well. Pete King, who used to run it, actually said to a bass player, Bruce Cale, 'Why do you play with John Stevens? He should learn to play the drums properly before doing all that other stuff'. So it was a mismatch of what I wanted from music and what was actually going on in there.

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My burning ambition was to find a way to be free and to get the opportunity to see what potential there was in system-free interaction. That strong feeling got to the point, in 1965, where I had to do it, I had to... So I gave up all my conventional jazz gigs, having found the Little Theatre Club space. I just gave up, and I could go on and on about all the fucking ripples that caused, it still affects me now. There was a lot of animosity. You see you're not really supposed to go and do something on your own and turn your back on what is supposed to be the epitome of what you're doing. You're not supposed to make those choices. Anyway, I did that and took a dayjob in order just to have the freedom to just play whatever I felt like at the time.

One of the things that I've relied on about myself, having recognised that it's there, is that I might never do anything particularly brilliant as an individual but what I can trust in with myself is total application in terms of anything I might do, and that includes playing the drums, and hopefully that will project in a positive way to other people. I rely on that totally because I didn't have the ability to develop skills in the conventional fashion, So there's not a backlog of stuff I can rely on, it was all *in relationship to the playing experience*. But at least when I did it I would do it completely, *whatever* I was doing.

The clearest idea about it that I had was that I felt us (the Spontaneous Music Ensemble) playing freely together as a group, *collectively*, was one of the closest examples that human beings can get to nature, in the sense of the demands made by the situation that you're in. Being in tune, as close as possible, with all the people that are around you and at the same time contributing within that and never contributing to the extent that you couldn't hear what the other people were saying. So nothing you had to say was more important than an awareness of the whole. A group of people doing that together have a real feeling of, 'This is it!' And it doesn't matter what it sounds like. You're listening

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to the interaction and that's what you're giving over to other people. I remember sitting out in the back garden and saying, 'Look at that tree Trev!' and there's this tree, a willow tree, 'look at all that movement there, all that stuff, and listen to these birds singing while that trees doing that' - this was the vision, if you like - '*that's what we can be.*'

But there was such animosity and anger. People would come in and *attack*, and write things in the toilet about what a shit I was, and that Trevor Watts and I were gay. I was told by another drummer that playing that music and playing that kit, with the little gongs and this that and the other, 'If you play like that how can you fuck?' We were on our own down there yet people got really fucking annoyed. Of course, we also got a lot of attention for what we were doing, by people like Victor Schoenfield, who thought, 'This is it! A major step,' and he compared it with Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Sevens. I mean, I got a fucking lot of press really. But there are *other* people sat out there going, 'What a load of shit! This is just a load of crap, there's John Stevens *again* talking about fucking peace and love and fucking collectivism,' and all this blubber. And it was *insulted* and put down as 'egoless music', that was an *insult* at the time!

If anything, I was, like, the *stalwart* believer in this fucking collective bit. I had a real passion for this non-performance type approach... it was, like, everything but being impressive. So Evan (Parker) and Derek (Bailey) would go 'Urgh, it's all getting a bit too fucking cosmic'. Because in the end, when you think of it, a lot of the people who were involved in that sort of collectivism later established themselves as virtuoso soloists, or *original* players. And I used to go, 'It's not really important what I play or how I sound it's what I'm attempting, the way I'm attempting to integrate myself'. I used to feel that where I'd like someone to say, 'Oh, that was well played!' was the

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recognition of how I maybe managed to integrate myself so totally at a certain point in the playing that it became one, that I couldn't be identified as an individual because I was so involved in what it was. There would be an overall organic sound and you weren't saying, 'Oh, listen to the way that saxophone player played' or whatever. You can only get close to doing that if you're with people who are prepared to give wholly to do that. It's got nothing to do with how brilliantly someone plays the saxophone or the drums or whatever. But there's no mileage in it is there? It's not in keeping with 'being a musician' and hopefully being employed as a musician, or any of that. It's so far removed from that, the intimacy of that experience. People outside don't get the opportunity to say, 'Fuckin hell, what a great player that is!' so it doesn't appeal to people, it's not enough to be a good experience... So I gave up working with all the heavies. I thought, 'Fuck this,' their attitude would be 'Oh, how long do I have to do this for?' really just doing it because I asked them to. Not out of a real feeling for the possibilities of a collective. So a lot of the workshops I did came about because there were these people around who weren't skilled musicians to the degree of an Evan Parker or a Kenny Wheeler or whatever. So I thought, 'Mmm, well, I'll play with *them*' and find ways where we could have the experience together and for them to be able to work within the potential of their own skills or lack of them. Ha ha! I mean we actually did the Montreux-fucking-jazz festival! I took this team of people who were scared shitless...

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I saw a TV programme the other day with two American jazz musicians, a load of self-fucking-promotion shit which went on for an hour and a half under the banner of Albert Ayler. I was dis-gusted by it. That's when the idea of free music

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and free expression turns completely on its arse and goes in the opposite direction. People are interested in showing you how virtuoso they are, and telling you they're great and pretending that they're being free and pretending that they are interested in the idea of freedom. That aspect has now come through to free music, as well. To me the health of free music has lied in the collective possibilities within it, which are getting thinner and thinner on the ground. And the people who play freely on their instruments and show you their achievements are what's being associated with free music now. You see it was *valid* for John Coltrane to play for 40 minutes non-stop and to search in public, it was *valid* for Albert Ayler to be the dominant leading sound of the environment that he was in but it's not valid anymore I don't see that as being valid.

Like I mean Evan (Parker)'s solo playing isn't the most important aspect of free music; it's like an art object, a piece of sculpture which he shows off and which you can appreciate, and it shows you his amazing applied creativity towards the potential of an instrument, which is all very creditable, and it can help something he might do in a collective because people know he can 'officially' play the instrument in an amazing way. But, to me, it isn't that important as a statement politically. When Evan goes out to play his solo saxophone he *knows* what it's going to be like, he *knows* where he's going to go and adds more and more bits in it or leaves bits out.... I'm not attacking Evan, because I love him, but the thing he's getting attention for is not the most valuable bit.

Somebody I know is really choked about the fact that they haven't got recognition for certain innovations that they brought about on their instruments and they hear other people using those things, and all this stuff. And I'm thinking, 'Imagine going around thinking something like *that*'. Forget it! It's all gone. What it's about is how we get on now, What we are an example of, our love of the

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possibilities of communication, not worrying about whether someone on the outside thinks you've got the greatest shirt on or whether you've had your hair cut right, or how fast and clean you play the trumpet, or any of that load of shite.

I think that the women musicians are now the prime movers from point of view of doing something in a way that is a healthy way to do it; not hung up about being a super-duper 'gunslinger' but getting on with the true nature of the music.

That collective potential is a valid human experience. I believe in that... I believe in that *expression*, if you like. I believe in the collective expression. What I mean by that is us integrating as a collective, the expression of a free group of people. The expression is an example of us getting together and producing something which I see as being a valid statement. It's valid for us as an experience, and is very, very worthwhile, from the point of view of taking part in it. And I also think that it's a very valid thing for other people to experience externally.

My strong feelings for that experience have something to do with the *lack* of that within the society that we live. It wouldn't be such a big deal if that was more of a norm, but it becomes a big deal when it's quite a rarity. People *assume* this has a relationship with politics, so over the years it's been *assumed* that I'm a marxist, it's been *assumed* that I'm this and that I'm that, because of what I do. But there isn't a political philosophy that appeals to me, though there would be aspects, if I was reading it, that would ring true. But when that philosophy becomes a particular politics, and people join that politics, and they join it as a group expressing coordinated ideas, it loses something for me. It's like a religion. Whereas, the thing that I'm involved in, in terms of the experience of the collective, isn't an *idea* it's a way of being involved with each other; an activity which allows for it to go in

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whatever direction it goes in. And your own input is always fresh, it is not based on an idea, it's an experience that we re-experience and re-evaluate. Let me quote myself, from the sleeve of Karyobyn, from 1967;

"Music is a chance for self development, it is another little life in which it is easier to develop the art of giving, an art which makes you more joyous the more you practise it. The thing that matters most in group music is the relationship between those taking part. The closer the relationship the greater the spiritual warmth it generates, and if the musicians manage to give wholly to each other and to the situation they're in, then the sound of the music takes care of itself. Good and Bad become simply a question of how much the musicians are giving, that's the music's form."

It's free. It's beyond politics. I am, in a sense, you could say, 'political', because I look at everything and judge it, this, that, boom, boom, boom, all the time. But I like this thing of moving freely. I play music, I am not going to align myself to somebody else's ideas of politics. It's obvious where my heart lies... You see, spontaneity between human beings is a way of serving the community and in fact *realising* the ideals of a Marx, or a Jesus...

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So, Ann, that's my wife, my son Richard, me, and his girlfriend, go down to the pub, last Sunday I think it was. Now Ann is very happy for her son, 'See I told you, Richie's got his head screwed on, Richie's doing well, I always knew he'd do well'. Okay, so I have to put up with a lot of this, and she goes to me, 'Well? Why aren't you successful?' So I went, 'I *am* successful, aren't I Rich? Considering the nature of what I'm involved in'. She says, 'Yeah, but look

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at Rich'. You see the thing that Richard is involved with is something that he doesn't have to compromise with, which he loves doing, which is completely his creative bit, but it happens to fit in with somebody else's idea of what they like as well.

I mean, I am successful because I'm here and we're doing this and I can think, 'Fuck me, I got away with that all these years'. Shit, there's stuff which I did in the past that I think, god, I'd never be able to do that now. When I look back I think, 'Shit, I actually did that', I found a way of doing that, of making that statement, knowing, while I'm sitting here, that if I wanted to make that statement now in the way that I did then it would be virtually impossible. So I'm like duckin and weavin in corridors, trying to find a way to carry on with that sort of work; the way things are going I think it's going to become more and more constricted. You are in a situation where you are alien to the main motivation of society and you've got to prepare yourself for a lot of abrasiveness and a lot of fucking challenges to your own security. The experiences that I've had, the negative side of it, it seems to me, it was relatively easy compared with what it could well be in the future; meaning that it's gonna get fucking harder.

What's nice about looking back into your own past - especially when you didn't know fuck-all, where your just doing things - and trying to figure out who I am and why I'm doing this, having gone through this with you, which I've never quite done to that degree, is that you can actually arrive now and go, 'What am I worried about? I should just carry on with it because it's obviously alright'. Cause I really go, 'God, what am I doing? Should I be doing this? Have I been fooling myself for the last 30 years?'. You know, really, I go through it every day; my self doubt is enormous. But this, what we're doing now, puts into perspective a lot of reasons why I shouldn't have so much self-doubt. It's counterproductive. But at least it keeps me

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working at trying to find out what it is that I'm working at. It keeps me doing that, I can't let go of it. And I'm always hoping that I'm going to arrive at this wheel of continuity where I know I'm pretty close to what I am and I can function within an environment in a harmonious way.

*(27th August 1987.)*

EVAN PARKER

*Virtuoso saxophonist Evan Parker is one of the best known of the British improvisers, having an international reputation stretching beyond the normal confines of the improvisation and jazz worlds. Since playing with John Stevens' Spontaneous Music Ensemble in the mid 1960s and with guitarist Derek Bailey in the influential Music Improvisation Company (circa 1969). He has developed a highly individualistic style on tenor and soprano saxophones, employing techniques such as circular breathing and extremely fast tonguing, which have widely influenced contemporary instrumentalist in many different musical spheres. In addition to varied group work and a number of occasional duos and trios he also plays frequent solo performances. Until 1987 Parker had an important long running professional relationship to Derek Bailey which amongst other things spawned Incus Records in 1970. This musician-run label and their own duets have focussed specifically on the most radical and uncompromising aspects of British free improvisation. At the time of writing he is Chair of the London Musicians Collective trustees committee.*

*Our conversation concentrated particularly on relations between free music and politics. He was particularly keen to challenge what he perceived as narrowly utopian views of improvising, such as John Stevens', which had a heavy influence on my own perspectives at the time of the interview. (see 1.1, 1.3, 1.9, 2.2, also 2.4/2.5)*

When I first got involved in the music I was largely politically ignorant or apolitical, I'm not sure which. I mean I was 14 coming from - certainly not a moneyed background, not what you'd call a straightforward middle class background - but something like a lower middle class background; my father having worked hard and got promoted. And he swapped sides in the process, having been a union

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activist at one stage he abandoned that and got into the lower levels of management. So the only newspaper that came into the place was the Daily Express and the only sort of political discussion was the kind of thing you'd expect from somebody who'd left the Trades Union movement and joined management. So it took me a while to learn there were other perspectives and by that time I'd already been playing the saxophone for, let's say, at least 2 or 3 years. By the time I was 16 I started to have some political views and started to understand that there was more to life than the Daily Express.

From the age of 16 to 18 I met articulate children from middle class socialist families. There was a couple of characters, one at the grammar school, one at Chiswick Polytechnic, who were just very confident about their political ideas. You know, they came from families where things like that had been discussed. So I remember the Sharpville Massacre for example, and the early CND demonstrations... also my wife came from that kind of background, her father was an active Communist. So I was suddenly mixing with people at that age who... I don't know... could teach me a lot. Then I went to university and met people that were actually studying politics, and... as far as I could follow the arguments, I thought there were several points where Bakhunin was right and Marx was wrong. So that made it very easy for me to say that I thought Lenin was substantially wrong on several points, and there were probably points where Trotsky was right and Lenin was wrong, and there was no question that Stalin got quite a few things wrong!

By the time it got to '68 everybody thought the Americans shouldn't be in Vietnam so that was a rallying point. But once the Americans had left Vietnam the left began to fragment, there was no unifying cause. And then the factions fought with one another for a long time, and probably still are doing. And we've paid the price for that.

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I mean I couldn't get involved in nonsense like that, y'know, looking over your shoulder about who was right in Russia in 1912 or something. Although I can understand why those issues can become so important because they are precedents for how you go on... But, Marx doesn't take account, and probably Bakhunin doesn't take account, of the whole ecological input into the argument. You know, the stuff that came after - limits to growth and so on, from the early '60s you start to get these books which say, 'Hey, wait a minute, this limitless growth and development and the technological fixing of the environment is no good, is not going to work'. It started by being an intuitive view and then got more and more scientific credibility to the point where now even politicians have to take recognition of that fact. Anyway, that was the way I saw it and it made it difficult for me... A lot of friends of mine, grouped around Cornelius Cardew, became interested in Maoism. I'm not sure exactly when that began ...70s. Some people stayed with that and then after the changes in China they followed Enva Hoxa. Other people went with the Socialist Workers Party, the Labour Party, got involved in the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, I mean these are the kind of choices there were. But, I dunno, I just like to watch that from the sidelines, okay, when I vote I vote Labour and when I discuss issues I like to be as free to be as critical of the Labour line as of any other line. I like independence. To bring the thing right up to date I've even accepted the Hobsbawm line that tactical voting is important, so I've even voted for a Liberal because that seemed to be the best way to use the vote to get Thatcher out. Which is... well, beyond urgent! (*Laughs.*) So that brings the politics up to date in a very compressed way.

For me the two things, music and politics, of course interconnect in an interesting way and as an individual I would like to think that there is some coherence between, or at least not an outright contradiction between, the meaning

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of the music and my political beliefs. But whether they are a direct expression of one another or connected in any conscious and practical way is another matter. I think that for the most part I feel a bit uncomfortable if things do get connected in that explicit way. I mean I've done the odd benefit for anti-racist groups and things like that, but I wouldn't play for a political party. You know, I wouldn't turn up and support the local Labour MP, in fact I was asked to do that. I won't do that, even though I'd vote for him, because I don't want the music thought of in that way. I think that music's purer than politics for a start, and if anything politicians can learn more from the music than I can learn from politics at the moment. Things being in the state they're in.

It's more interesting to look at the lessons that politics can learn from music rather than looking at how the music can express a certain set of political ideals. I think the music already deals with and solves problems that the politicians haven't even formulated yet. Albeit on that tiny, small other-world scale, where it's much easier to do it.

In improvising you get groups where one... I mean I can play improvised music with (trombonist) Paul Rutherford quite easily. When we talk about politics we do get bogged down in the history of the Russian Revolution and who was right and who was wrong - you know, the First International and the Second International and tactical decisions that were wrong and so on. When we play improvised music together these kinds of disagreements don't seem to obstruct very much. The fact is that improvising is a way of incorporating disagreements, part of the health and life and vigour of the music comes from the possibility of expressing two different points of view at the same time, within the same piece of music, as long as each allows the other room and recognises their existence. It's like a... I don't know... like a non-verbal debate... Either/or always disenfranchises the

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minority. In a situation where a majority get their way a minority don't get their way and that's to do with either/or approaches to problems. In addition to either/or you always have the possibility of both, or sometimes one sometimes the other - alternation. Or an alternation that's so fast that it effectively amounts to the same thing. This kind of thing, these kind of thoughts, happen I think in music. Like sometimes when I've played with John Stevens it's like ping pong, non-competitive table tennis! (laughter)

Either/or is always very suspect. Very often 'this' only makes sense because you always have 'that' anyway. So if you only have 'this' what is the meaning of 'that'? Of course, it comes sounding a bit like Buddhism...

Power in a broader social sense is determined by the law and the mechanisms of its enforcement. But power inside an improvising group is not determined by the law in that sense because there are no laws. Authority inside a group is determined by the appropriateness of an action. So this is why I say that politicians can learn more from the music than we can learn from politics. I mean the music is a refined kind of... activity. There's a phrase of John Stevens' that describes it very well, he describes it as, 'another little world'. Which is to say that it's a small place but it is a whole place. It's a whole place with another way and err... it's big enough to live in, when you're playing it's the whole place.

-I know what you mean. You're saying that because you remove the prearranged material, you remove the composer from the picture, that means that everything comes about cooperatively. But there are still certain things that you can't remove; whose idea was it that a band with 1, 2, 3 people in it should play together? Was it musician 1, musician 2 or musician 3? If its musician 1's idea then musician 2 might very not choose musician 3 to be the third

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guy in the band if it was his idea, even inside a trio! Even inside a duo if musician 1 chooses musician 2 musician 2 might not necessarily choose musician 1. You can't idealise beyond a certain point. There are certain realities involved and even in idealised Company, which is supposed to give the participants a measure of control in how things are done, it only gives them that measure of control once they've accepted to be part of that particular constellation. And their reasons for accepting it might not be the same as the reasons for them being asked, and if they were to put together a constellation of musicians with the same aim in mind then they almost certainly wouldn't choose the same players as Derek Bailey chooses. This kind of hierarchical relationship is inescapable, is always going to be there because of the way things come about through individual initiatives, individual impulses, individual responses to the practical problems of how to set up performances.

In coming to me you're coming to someone that's tried to make a living out of this thing, ever since I got involved with it I've tried to make money from doing it. And I've watched a kind of business emerge where there was no business before. To begin with it was, and still is, kind of tacked on to the jazz business. It doesn't lay very easily in every jazz context - it doesn't work particularly well in the jazz festival context...

- I don't know why... because the music is often introspective. The music that works best in festival situations is music that doesn't question itself, music that has no questions, it just has answers and blats them straight forward at the audience. I mean I respond to that by having a version of the music ready which more or less has no questions too. A way of improvising freely which communicates in a very direct way. I can do it with certain people who I've worked with a long time because they know

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what the ideas are about. But it's not the ideal performance situation, even a jazz club may not be the ideal situation. In fact, for me the ideal situation turns out to be somewhere like the London Musicians Collective, which is a very rare species of place, which is dying out, not very popular with audiences. Or you can find other equivalent places; back rooms in pubs which are run by musicians are just as good places as the LMC, they amount to the same thing. What's important is that the musicians should be in control, at least some part of the scene should be directly under the control of musicians, and nothing to do with whether audiences come or whether audiences like what's happening. It's like having a... not exactly a laboratory situation... but a completely unpressured situation where the music can be whatever it wants to be. That sounds a bit mystical... where the music can be whatever the musicians want it to be.

*Do you see yourself as a jazz player?*

Yeah. Jazz has been many different things for a long time and was already many different things when I was influenced by certain parts of it. So I would see myself as continuing, or hoping to continue, certain aspects of a subsection of what gets called jazz. But many musicians are upset by the label and many American musicians are upset by the idea that any non-American could think that he had anything to offer what they see as an essentially American or Afro-American tradition. But I'm not going to call myself a Jazz musician if its going to upset somebody and I don't want to claim something which is not rightfully mine. I just do this, I know why I do it, I know what inspired me to do it and the labelling of it is actually someone else's problem. I don't care what it gets called or what it's related to. I can only say why I do it and where I see its sources of inspiration and they're not simply inside jazz, not completely inside

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jazz... but the core of its sources of inspiration are from particular jazz players.

But inside this current jazz revival, or modern jazz revival, there are different elements at work. There are some people who would really *like* it to be a museum piece, y'know the equivalent of the attitude that the famous discographer Brian Rust used to have, which was that the last jazz record ever made was on the 29th of September 19- whatever it was, 22 probably. I'm sure there are characters on the London modern jazz scene who really do believe that the last jazz record made was on the 1st of April 1968 or something and work within those stylistic limits. But there are other people that genuinely feel this to be the way they want to express themselves and are setting up an interesting problem for themselves. Because how are they going to go forward? If what we're doing had some historical inevitability, which I think it did - a historical necessity - then these... mmm ...these *determinations* will still be implicit. You know, if you go forward in the complexifying the harmonic language in certain ways then you come up with the problem that Coltrane reached in 1960. If you try and complexify the rhythmic element then you're also going to come up against points that were also dealt with later, 65 say, by various people, by Cecil Taylor, by Coltrane, by Eric Dolphy, different people. You know, this work has already been done.

Its a very... maybe overly... scientific kind of attitude, well that's my background. You know, the way you set out to do original work in science was to make a literature survey to see what had been done already and something that had been done already was not a place where you could make an original contribution, was not a place where you could make a name for yourself. And that's the way I approach music. I want to do something original.

If I could go straight to specifics: I loved Coltrane and Dolphy. I heard elements of what Pharoah Sanders was

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doing, especially when he played with Coltrane, and elements of what Albert Ayler was doing. In Pharoah's case it was to do not just with harmonics and the overtone series but with articulation, and in Albert's case it was to do with his control over the overtone series. And it just occurred to me that these were the two places where some kind of synthesis could be made, and it was a small entry point. It was like, I had a small paper to prepare on that subject, if you want to put it that way, it certainly wasn't a doctorate. It was just a little piece of original work that I could chip in somewhere, that was my entry point. But having made that discovery, if you like... The little truth that that synthesis represented then became my foothold that I could build from for myself, and that's how it worked out, and everything else really spins through from that. That sense of self has to start from somewhere. All the while that sense of self is determined by how closely you approximate to the tradition which is already existent and outside of you. In most people's cases that will be how close do they get to be able to sound like Mr X or Mr Y. Then they've sort of missed the point, because the tradition is that you're *you*, and the evolutionary quantity... *err quality*, in the tradition is determined by a succession of individuals strong enough to be themselves in a history made up of strong individuals.

I know now that you're starting to think, 'Oh yes, if try and make political sense of this then this sounds a bit fascist,' but it's not like that. I define a strong individual as somebody who makes that impact on *me*. So I define Coltrane as a strong individual, I define Monk as a strong individual, this is just the way I see it. It happens to be the way a lot of people who listen to jazz for a long time see it too. So it starts to take on more than subjective qualities. Also there are always people who have been pushed into obscurity just because they couldn't handle the professional side of it, they had the music

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fantastically together but survival sets such a tough set of demands. So they are real strong individuals in that same sense, it's just that nobody's heard of them. So it's not a worship of success when I talk about strong individuals, it's not like picking out the ones that really 'made it' and saying, 'Yeah, I wanna be like them,' or, 'I *am* like them'. It's not power worship in that sense. But there is a kind of power that comes from authority in performance - making right decisions, carrying something through, carrying a line, and some nights you've got it some nights you haven't. And hopefully on the nights you haven't someone else in the band has got it and you can lean on them a little, and on the nights you've got it and they haven't they can lean on you a little. There's no question that something like a version of power and authority exist just through *rightness of action*, rightness of decision. But this goes away from power and authority in a political sense to power and authority in a spiritual sense, more akin to somebody whose reached a certain stage of religious awareness having a kind of authority because of that state of awareness. Or take it away from that and put it in the realm of psychology if you like; you have a certain grasp of you're own strengths and weaknesses and operate well within that, power over yourself.

I suppose that what I'm encouraging you to do... I sense that there's a danger you might make too neat a set of correspondences between political thinking and musical thinking, and there are important differences. Even within a nominally collective situation there are mechanisms of authority which guide the music, determine it. John Stevens is a good example of that, he's a very dominant personality with a very clear set of ideas about what he wants to happen, what he doesn't want to happen, someone who is very forthright about communicating those desires through the sounds he makes at the drums. So ...the notion of an *egoless* way of playing, I think that that was discovered not to be

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an accurate way of thinking. it's a kind of late '60s model which maybe still gets talked about... The music has gone different ways since then. You see I think there was the feeling that if you, if we, could play totally for the group, could play in a way that was a response to what was there already, in a certain way in a deferential response to what was there then this was more truly collective. But there's a kind of naive quality to that thinking because if everybody adopts that line then there's no music, because there's no starting point, because nobody wants to assert themselves enough to say, 'the music could start here'. You had beginnings to suggest that the music grew from nothing, grew out of the background noise, so somebody scrapes a chair and somebody says, 'Okay we'll start from there,' so the first gesture was a response to a sound from the environment. This was a way of starting that seemed to be not about asserting yourself and was therefore preferable because it showed your humility. In a certain sense that was the closest that the kind of aesthetics underlying free music came to the kind of John Cage aesthetic of egolessness... But in the end - well, I'll speak for myself but I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one that that could say this - I discovered that asserting myself was part of the discipline and part of what was required. In the end it was more interesting for me to acknowledge that I was doing this because I wanted to do it and that there are certain things that I would *like* to happen. As long as I remain sensitive to the things that other players would like to happen there's actually nothing wrong with me guiding the music in a particular direction for a certain part of the time. The distinction between that and a kind of coarse domination of things either by straightforward playing or by using your power as an employer to make sure that other people do what they're told - the distinction between that and recognising yourself as an active *wanting* element in the situation is quite big enough. I mean I know the limits, I know the

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limits between positively wanting something and negatively not wanting something - denying somebody else a set of opportunities. So I think the *idea* of collective music has changed a little bit, away from being influenced by Cage and Eastern religions towards, I don't know, towards a set of values that are determined by its own history. Now that the music has a long history of its own it's generated a different set of values.

*Do you think that difference is partly between the actual conditions you're living in, i.e. between the '60s and the 1980s? You must look at what you're doing very differently now...*

Ha!... (as if to say, 'so that's what your getting at!'  
Followed by a long, long pause.)

...I don't. Sorry but I don't. And I don't see what I'm talking about as a response to the political climate or the socio-economic climate at all. It's to do with the experiences inside the music and getting to know people and deciding what the limits to a particular relationship are, based on some kind of sense of... possibilities left in the music - where to go next? What work remains to be done?

There are many things that are different between the 1960's and now, and therefore I have to see them as different. If I talk about the Little Theatre Club as the actual start of doing this kind of thing for me; nobody was doing it to make a living or to earn money. I mean we all wanted to do that and nothing else and we had to find ways of earning a living. So in this sense in the late 60s it was pre-decimalisation, pre-EEC, you had a cheap food, low rent economy. If you didn't want to buy things, apart from pay your rent and eat, you didn't need very much money, you could live on next to nothing in fact, and that's what most of us were doing - living on next to nothing and playing this music and hoping that we were professional musicians.

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Some people were professional musicians in conventional areas of music to earn a living and did this in their spare time. What's changed is that most of those people, to one extent or another, are doing this music professionally, and that's a big difference. That's something that we made happen as much as anyone else, because if we hadn't stood up, both collectively and individually, and asserted our cultural worth then we wouldn't have the professional performance possibilities that we have today. That's a big change and I'd be a fool not to recognise the differences in that. But it doesn't mean that *my* attitude to what I'm doing have changed. It means that the circumstances in which I do it have changed and the circumstances have changed because of a certain individual and collective determination that things *should* change. But that's not quite the same thing as saying that the attitude towards *playing* has changed. It hasn't, the attitude towards playing, and the ideal, remain the same

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I'm interested not just in improvisation, I'm interested in... err... music! I'm interested in improvisation because it leads me towards the realisation of a particular kind of music, not interested in music because it allows me to improvise. The interesting thing is that my idea of what that music is changes in response to a notion of where the improvisational process can lead it. So it's actually a very complicated set of priorities and relationships, but the final priority is a sense of music, fulfilled, complete music, that's what I'm looking for. I'm not interested in improvisation in that sense that it corresponds to some ideals of lifestyle or something, or some philosophical thing. In fact I think there are other areas of life where improvisation can also be inappropriate. It's not like the *Dice Man* or something, it's not my philosophy at that level.

Evan Parker

It's got to do with some idea like the specificity of a given situation, not to make the mistake of generalising from one specific set of circumstances to another specific set of circumstances.

The same problem I apply in every group is how to be me and how to make a contribution to this particular thing. How to do both. And sometimes you end up doing one better than the other, you end up being you better than making a contribution to the group, or you end up being a good part of the group better than you express yourself or be you. And ideally the institution become transparent and becomes only a natural consequence of everybody being what they want to be together, and all wanting the same thing. But that's totally idealised and I haven't spent 20 years in an ideal world I've spent 20 years in the real world. And I know that there are egos, there are fights, there are disagreements, there are powerplays, there are unpleasantnesses, there are ambitions, there are greeds. I mean, all these people who played together in the '60s are at one another's throats now! Well, not necessarily at one another's throats but there were rows inside the groups, people fell out, alliances, shifting alliances, X plays with Y, X falls out with Y, Y plays with Z, X doesn't speak to Z, you know. Y and Z fall out, X and Z form a group together, it just goes on and on - these are the negative things. There are also so many positive things about it that it's kept me in it for 20 years, because I can't think of anything else I'd rather do. I love the people. I love our weaknesses just as much as I love the strengths. I chose it. I helped *make* it, or a certain part of it and it's still what I want to do. When it isn't what I want to do then I won't do it anymore.

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*Your solo playing seems to be what you've become 'known' for, particularly in the last five or so years (...). Now, the collective aspect that you've spoken about is absent here. Playing solo and developing a style to the extent that you have seems to represent something very different...*

...To try and pull that into some kind of coherent relationship to the other things that I've said: If you do accept that egoless performance is not what you're about, and I think that most people have accepted that, for myself I acknowledge that while too rigid a sense of self can be detrimental to the freest kind of improvisation, no sense of self can be very detrimental to the possibilities of collective improvisation. So having acknowledged that a sense of self plays a role in what I'm doing then I would like to work on that and see what it means, work on it in a way that is as full as can be worked on. It feeds the other thing that I do with certain possibilities which wouldn't be there if I hadn't developed that solo music.

...If I start to think, 'how many lines have I got going at this point?' then I couldn't do it, it's like if a centipede asked itself how it could walk it couldn't do it. I'm thinking about it as *something that I've got happening* by hook or by crook... I have to take things to a certain point and get things happening and then they work best on their own. The psuedo-polyphonic aspect is almost a byproduct of trying to get other things happening. It works best if I just allow it to happen. In a solo situation it is very much easier to use equivalents of the theme and variation approach to improvising without actually having fixed themes. There are patterns that I refer to over and over again which are simply to do with the number of fingers on each hand and the number of holes on the instrument. These are the fixed points, these are the things I have to accept as being given every time I go back to the instrument. So very often I start by going through something

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which is just an affirmation of that then see where the logic of that takes me.

Something that may compensate for the rather austere nature of solo saxophone as *sound* is solo saxophone as *process*. As a process its actually quite inviting... and I think that's what people can hear when they listen to a solo performance of mine. They can hear a process being worked through, material being worked through, they can hear why things change, how things start and how one thing turns into another. So maybe that's where the interest is as much for me as the listener...

*What effect does playing have on you?*

It's a sense of fulfilment, a sense of gratifying work, work in the sense that work produces a sweet essence, the kind of work that everybody should be allowed, should find for themselves...

*This is a quote from you, 'It seems to me that behind the music must lie some indescribable condition to which the music alludes.' (from Impetus: 6, 1977: 256). What do you mean by that?*

(long pause) ...it would come close to something like a religious sentiment. Which is that... there is purpose in the universe... reality behind reality, and that many parts of it are unknown to us... And part of what life's about is either to come to terms with what you're never going to know or to learn more about what it is possible to know. So in that sense the saxophone music as an assault on the technical limitations of the saxophone alludes to a life which... makes questions... asks questions which may never be answered.

I don't think I can do much better than that, it's not very good but in that sense that might be what's alluded to.

Evan Parker

This small life and the bigger life - the life outside the music, they are the same thing, they *should* be the same thing. But the indulgence that performance space represents and the possibilities for ...self indulgence in a positive sense... that is equivalent to the kind of possibility of reflection, meditation or contemplation that certain quiet moments or moments of inspiration in life in general offer. So it's a more concentrated dose of those same kind of things, moments of ...what? ...insight! What does that mean? It means that you suddenly think that you understand something, and when somebody asks you, 'Well, *what* do you understand?' all you can do is kind of point to this sunset, or this tree, or this wave, or this painting, and say, 'Look, don't you see it?' 'Words can't express it,' and so on. So it's very hard to get words to express what words can't express, and when you talk about the music alluding to something *else*, that 'something else' may equally be the kind of thing that doesn't succumb to a verbal description any better than the music itself does. With this kind of discourse I think the best people are the ones who just drop into poetry and refuse to talk analytically... I think poetry is powerful... daily discourse is functional, analytical language is intellectual, art language is poetry, or inspired writing, creative writing. There's a certain point where it's just as hard to say what's behind the music as what's in the music. I think I've done my best - it's to do with unknowables and mysteries and senses of that, and moments of a sense of a purpose or a sense of a destiny, a sense of a relation to things, a personal relationship to all that out there. It's the language of poetry, or religion or high philosophy, but not the language of the interview...

(30th November 1987.)

PAUL RUTHERFORD

*Trombonist Rutherford was one of the early innovators of free improvisation and free jazz in 1960s London. He was a founder member of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Iskra 1909 (with bassist Barry Guy and guitarist Derek Bailey), his own Iskrastra orchestra, and has developed a rigorously abstract solo style. One critic described him as a, 'an eternally surreal expressionist; surely there is no further avant garde extreme for wind instrumentalists... Rutherford is the very soul of unreason' (Litweiller 1985: 255). This is perhaps a little misleading, describing only one pole of his activity, as he also plays in more conventional settings.*

*The interview took place in the Royal Festival Hall coffee bar, he wore a small gold hammer and sickle medallion around his neck, and spoke quietly in soft London accent, amidst many pauses and hesitations. (see 1.2, also 2.4/2.5)*

For me improvisation came primarily from two sources I think. The first was a natural gravitation towards improvising when I started playing. I was a natural musician, an instinctive musician in that I actually started discovering how to play by myself, fundamentally I was able to do it anyway... I mean I'm not saying it made a lot of sense, that formalising came later. The other thing that was very important was that I was fortunate enough to be with other creative musicians. You have to make a distinction between creative musicians and interpretive musicians, because the academic side of music is nearly totally comprised of teaching people to learn to read music, as opposed to what I think is the natural function of a person claiming to be a musician, which is to be able to play without having to refer to the dictats of other people. I believe that a musician should be able to improvise.

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I picked up a saxophone at sixteen but I didn't get on too well with that and then I acquired a trombone and that was more natural for me. I went to an evening class with some friends who were interested in jazz. We were taught in a sort of brass band situation which started the formal side of music-making; learning to read and play scales and things. Then I was very fortunate when I joined the air-force - I'm not saying the air-force was a good thing! I joined up in '58 to '60, this was after National Service. It was there that I met John Stevens and Trevor Watts, Bob Downs, and Chris Pyne was there as well. That was a very valuable experience, meeting those musicians. We had a kind of umm... mutual support society within the airforce. None of us was interested in the military side of things it was just the fact that we could play.

We were in the Music Services section. For myself it was a kind of misunderstanding, at 18 I decided that I wanted to go to music college because I wanted to play music. But I had a certain naivety that I couldn't get into music college because I didn't have enough money or didn't have enough qualifications, which in retrospect probably wasn't the case at all. In those days we weren't dealing with the ridiculous education policies of the regime over there (*Points over the river to the Houses of Parliament.*) so it was fairly accessible to people but I just didn't know... I think that was probably to do with my background, thinking, oh, music college is to do with classical music which generally relates to wealthy or middle class families, there's a definite hierarchical strata, working class people won't really understand or appreciate classical music unless it's the Warsaw concerto or something like that.

We were a working class family but I was fortunate that my father did develop a taste for music and art generally. It was a musical family, my father played piano, my grand mother played piano, so we always had music in the house... I think at that time, and probably still now, there was a

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lot of feeling that jazz particularly was something you wouldn't want your offspring to play. Well, I can see the logic of that, especially in these economic times, it's getting difficult... but my father was very supportive, my mother was a bit more worried, because she's far more practical than my father. But she's never been obstructive about me being a musician. And my brother and sister like jazz and music generally so I've never had any opposition at all from any of my family.

In the air-force we were playing just straight military band music, you know parade music. We used to do formal concerts as well where we played some fairly interesting music. We used to do rescored Tchiakovsky, Berlioz, Beethoven, Mozart, even Shostokovitch. I remember the first Shostokovitch I ever heard was a military band arrangement of the final movement of the 5th Symphony, which was great... Then I was playing with John and Trevor, and Chris Pyne. We used to rehearse after hours, we had access to the band room and there were a few small clubs and bars in Cologne where we could play at that time. We had some good opportunities to actually play music. That was bebop, well, clumsy bebop. It was a relief, though I actually did enjoy the orchestral pieces we had to play, the marches were shit... it was just the military side I couldn't stand; taking orders from fucking idiots, you know. The military side was just stupid. Amongst us, Trevor and John, none of us enjoyed the military side of it at all. We were separate even from the other people in the band. We were referred to as the 'scoobs'... scoobedo, that's jazz talk, at least they think it is! But we just sort of carried on doing what we wanted to do.

When I came out I worked for a bit in a government information service, filing documents, really boring. But I used to practise in the dinner hour in this old warehouse. Then I reexamined the chances of getting into music college and I was fortunate in that I got a scholarship and studied

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at the Guildhall school of music for 4 years. That was basically classical music, but I got involved in the Contemporary Music Society, as it was called, and we were playing more modern pieces, you know, Stockhausen, Edgar Varese, Stravinsky things like that... various other modern works, chamber music really.

The only thing about it that I didn't like about the school was the attitude of a lot of the classical musicians, and this is where it comes back to the fact that I think musicians should be able to improvise, should be able to play music without 'music'. I found that the majority of people who were studying music there, although they had qualifications, like grades on the piano which they'd been taught as children, couldn't operate musically without the written note, and I found that very strange. And they were pretty immature people as well, when I started studying at college I was 24 and I'd been in the airforce for 5 years, I'd been abroad and that and I'd also worked in a couple of offices, where's most of these kids were 18 year olds straight out of school and into music college; they'd not really experienced anything. And I think that showed in their attitudes. I developed a feeling that I didn't really want to go into a symphony orchestra, because if an orchestra going to be full of people like that then I'm not really going to enjoy playing music. And you've got to enjoy music, you've got to enjoy any kind of art form otherwise it's not going to work.

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I was in the Communist Party for about 15 years, I joined in '65 and was still in up until '82 or something. I mean I didn't leave, I just didn't rejoin and my decision not to rejoin wasn't actually to do with the fact I disagreed with the party. But with advent of Thatcher and everything I just became disillusioned, which is a stupid, ridiculous thing to

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think but erm... (*Long pause.*) ...things also were getting very much heavier on a personal level and getting more difficult workwise as well, which tends to sap your energies. But my political convictions are still exactly the same, in fact probably stronger now. My family's always been Communist, which didn't mean I was brainwashed into believing it, just that I had the opportunity to see the Communist point from the Communists themselves rather than being told what they're supposed to represent and all the bullshit you get on the media now, being told what it is by people who don't know and aren't interested in it, apart from the extent of stopping other people getting interested in it. I was at one time on the Cultural Committee of the Communist Party, I played at various political rallies and that... I think Evan, Derek, John Stevens and Trevor, Keith Tippett did that too, they were all generally anti-imperialist and left wing too. I've done things abroad as well... Germany, Italy, and got involved with things like demonstrations.

The '60s were fantastic, a great blossoming of everything. Politics were interesting, it was a fantastic feeling in Britain, that term, 'The Swinging Sixties,' I don't think it was exaggerated at all, it was. London was a great place; lots of positive things, it was a nice place to walk round, lots of artistic activities, there was just a good feel about the place and that has gone. Whether it will return to be either like it was or some kind of modified form I'm not too optimistic about, because of that team of gangsters over there (*Gestures towards Parliament.*).

I think basically, and I've said this before, that there are a lot of similarities between jazz and communism in that both of them are totally misunderstood. In this particular society, even worse in America, to talk about communism means Russia full stop. There is nothing other than that, that is the Reality of Communism, which of course is bullshit, it's got nothing to do with the ideals or

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political principle of communism. Similarly with jazz, most people who ask what you're doing, when I say, 'I'm a jazz musician,' they go, 'Oh, that's Acker Bilk,' or Dave Brubeck, you know, the lowest common denominator. I think that I've understood both things. To me communism is about the movement of ideas, it's not about a rigid adherence or application of a cast-iron formula, or doctrine, or dogma. That's totally not what it is, it's about the movement of ideas and I see the same thing in jazz. It's a moving music that's not static. Classical music *is* static and I think most pop or rock music is static, its reason d'etre is commercialism, to make money. Jazz has never been a great moneyspinner.

One of the reasons I started to get depressed about jazz was this strict formalising of soloists, solo fashions, like everyone tried to play like Charlie Parker, now the tenor players are all trying to sound like Coltrane, same with other instruments. Miles (Davis, trumpet), J.J. (Johnson, trombone), now their specific greatness was that they didn't copy anyone, they were obviously influenced by the musical environment but they actually created their own style, their own method of dealing with playing jazz. The formalising came later, for instance in *High Society* everybody plays that same bloody clarinet solo, or in *West End Blues* they try to play Louis (Armstrong)'s solos. But the beauty about them was that he played them, he didn't copy someone else's solos. That is what jazz is about, it's about originality, the application of the individual genius... It took me, along with John and Trevor, quite a while to say as much as we admire these people we're not them. We're Europeans for a start, which is vastly different. So there's no point in me trying to sound like a second rate J.J., it's ridiculous. I tried it, but it became clear in '62, '63. Trevor and me used to play in this big band, The New Jazz Orchestra, and I used to do solos, making a mess of trying to copy someone else. I was *hearing* other things but I was too timid to

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actually *do* what I felt instinctively. I then decided that that isn't what I should play because that isn't what I am. So for us European players to have got involved in the way we're playing now is actually a *logical progression of thinking and performing music*. It is a moving music, a dialectical music.

My only theory about improvisation is that it should keep music moving. In an age that is being standardised down to the lowest common denominator, improvisation, apart from being the most natural way of making music, is keeping musical dialectics going, a movement, its always a questioning activity. Improvisation by its very ...umm nature should always be in a no-man's land, should always be uncatagorised. It's one of the areas of music which, because of the fact it should always be in a constant state of flux or movement, is non-controllable by either economics or musical establishment ideas.

*So how is you're playing organised?*

Well it isn't. That's the whole point. I never know what I'm going to do before I go on, the only formalising is maybe I decide whether I use mutes or I don't use mutes, or if I use electronics... Once the process has started, for me anyway, it just goes, and it's like any other music-making, sometimes it's a good performance and sometimes it's not. There's no guarantee...

I can understand why people wouldn't like it. It's got no particular point of reference to what they consider to be music. But the most interesting reactions have been from people who've never heard the music before and come up and said, and a lots of them do, 'That was fantastic, what is it?'. They say, 'I didn't actually understand it but I liked it'. I always say, 'Well, you did understand it then'. I think that's a triumph of human perception, if you like. Because they haven't been brought up or educated to listen

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to it, it's got no catchy tunes or rhythms, it doesn't rest on references. That's all pop music is, cliché after cliché.

I have a feeling now more than ever that this horrible lowest common denominator, which has always been there but its never been as blatant, that any cultural activity, any leisure time activity, revolves around money. A good example is in sport, you see these programmes and it inevitably comes down to how much somebody's going to make. The last thing they seem to be interested in is the thing itself, the football match, the cricket, the *game*. That is so true in art as well. There was a very good article in the Guardian the other day about how orchestras are being financed by private companies and concerts are sponsored by so-and-so and so-and-so, it just seems to me that the whole idea of making music has become so corrupt. Thatcher is so dogmatic that private enterprise should come to the rescue of every artistic damsel and save it from the dragon of any kind of state funding. And it doesn't create better standards at all, you've only got to look at the general programmes of privately funded concerts; its the same boring old shit concert after concert, you get no experimental works. Because it's first and foremost a business venture, the concert element is secondary. They put safe music on so that they can get more people to pay money...

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People say to me, 'Oh you're lucky, you play music and I've got to do this job'. But you make your choice and although I'm happy to be a musician, and I can't see myself doing anything else, it is frustrating in purely financial terms. Like you get behind in your rent... Yes still, after all this time. Your actual financial viability is very volatile, shall we say. You don't *have* any financial security. I mean I'm 47 now and I'm starting to worry about what's going to happen in the next ten years or twenty years, the sort of

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thing you never think about when you're a kid and you've got all the energy, those anxieties become... because of that you get all this doubt stuff creeping in... this is all in the last 5 years. It hasn't got any easier, it's got harder in fact...

There's periods when I have to go on the dole because I literally haven't got any work, which isn't a situation I like but I have to do it. In the past I've worked with my brother who is a builder and decorator, but if you work full time you're not in a position to practice because it lowers your performance potential and if you can't play you're losing. Music is different from any of the other arts in that an actor can actually do another job, he doesn't actually have to *practice*, I know an actor has to learn their lines but they can sometimes even do that while they're doing another job, I can't take my trombone if I'm working behind a bar! A writer or painter can do another job and even derive benefit from it but a musician can't do that. A trumpet player or a saxophonist or a violinist need their fingers, they can't go lugging bricks around. There's also the noise problem if they've got neighbours. They come home and even if they've got the energy to practice they're going to be practising when other people have just come back from *their* job and they don't want to hear people practising an instrument.

*Do you regret being an improvising musician?*

No... But I do get angry if I feel my contribution to the language of the trombone has been under written. Other people have used my dialogue and been less than modest about the fact that it isn't their language, or that they weren't responsible for it in the first place. In articles I've read in the past I've been automatically lumped with Albert Mangelsdorf, Gunther Christmann, George Lewis... Jacoam Berendt wrote that Albert Mangelsdorf was the first jazz

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player to use vocal techniques on the trombone, but I was using them back in 1967, it's on record, Mike Westbrook's... I think its called *Release*. I never heard Albert do anything like that until the early '70s, certainly not on record anyway.

For myself I've chosen to do this. I mean I'd like to earn more money because I would be free of economic anxiety. But I've chosen to play this music and I don't regret playing it it and I want to carry on playing it...

*(8th February 1988.)*

DEREK BAILEY

*At 58 (at the time of the interview) Derek Bailey is one of the institutions of free improvisation in Britain and worldwide. In the early 1960s, with the Sheffield based group Josef Holbrooke, he began to develop radical guitar techniques which he is still exploring today. He is widely known for his solo and group work and for Company, a flexible organisation of improvising musicians through which many dozens of musicians from many musical backgrounds have passed. He also runs Incus records, until recently with Evan Parker, which has released over 50 albums of improvised music over the last 15 years. (see 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 1.10, 1.12/1.13) In addition he has written the only (published) book to date dedicated to musical improvisation - Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice In Music. Virtually before I had sat down in the practise room in his house in Hackney he began to speak.*

Well, the first thing I'd like to say is that I think the interview is useless as a source of reliable information, largely because of the people who usually get interviewed. Certainly where there's any career aspects involved at all. Now this might not apply at all to your stuff - but the interview's been going on so long and so widely accepted that it becomes more or less a regular part of people's thought, they think about their work in the interview form. So they have the answers lined up, and they have *good* answers. It's not enough to be meandering on and not making any sense, they finally see it in print and they realise what sounds good and what doesn't. So somebody whose a practiced interviewee - if that's the right word - can spin a right tale. And they do, you only have to listen to the old blues players, guys who've been interviewed over and over again, I mean they run rings around these jazz critics. But - to get to the main object - there are guys who've kind

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of shifted their aesthetic positions to fit in with their best description. They do something which is pretty well undefined - because I mean they don't know precisely what they're doing anyway - then they come to talk about it, and they present this edifice about it. Now, what they do is over *there* and what they say about it is over *here*, and what they say about it is much more attractive, possibly, than the thing they do and gradually what they do comes over *here* to match what they say! Now I actually know a couple of examples of that - which I'm not going to tell you about - of well known players who seem to me to have somehow shifted their attitude towards music to fit in with this aesthetic they've developed through *talking*.

So when the old guys - jazz players I mean - used to go, 'Well, I just play man,' maybe that was the best possible answer. Playing is very funny stuff and its never been analysed adequately. Being a player of a certain type who improvises is a very vague thing it seems to me. So you can chop a bit of that off and make it clear and that takes the place of the whole thing, that's what I suspect happens, because it's possible to develop a coherent partial view of what you're doing, and it takes over the whole thing.

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I played for I suppose twelve years as a professional musician, and looking at it now it's clear to me that the side of music which interested me was always improvisation. Now I knew nothing about free improvisation, I came across people doing it although it was not a recognised activity at that time. I think all kinds of musicians have tried it at different times, it's just an obvious thing to try. But it meant nothing to me, I was interested in other things. What attracted me to being a commercial musician was that I could do as many different kinds of work as possible. I mean I wanted to become a jazz musician from the age of about

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eleven to twenty one, it was only when I'd spent a couple of years trying to make a living as a jazz musician that I changed my mind. Because I didn't like delivering milk, which seemed to be an integral part of being a jazz musician in South Yorkshire. Most of the jazz musicians I knew spent most of their time selling second-hand cars and I knew I didn't want to do that. I just wanted to play and so I shifted, I mean I still wanted to play jazz but I didn't care what I played as long as I played something. And I spent years like that. I used to change jobs just in order to do a job that I hadn't done before, so I might go and work in a pit orchestra, which was horrible, I mean I hated the work but I'd just be interested to learn it. Anyway, the types of work I did like always involved more improvising. I suppose it was really the only thing that I was any good at. The jobs that attracted me were freer - if you like - there was more scope for pissing around. I liked to work in palais, in dance halls, I liked to work in trios and quartets. They'd have a big band which was the main band and then there'd be a kind of little relief band, the music was continuous you see. I used to like playing in the little band even though the big ones paid you more money and prestige. I also liked accompanying singers because there could be quite a lot of freedom in that. It seems to me now that I was always trying to encourage, develop and pursue this adaptability, finding yourself in an unusual situation and finding out how to do it.

There were always two kinds of musicians, band musicians and musicians who'd been to music schools and learnt to play in orchestras. So as a band musician you were automatically in a sense self-taught, if not on the instrument then as regards the work. Nobody taught you how to play in a trio in a restaurant. I mean there are certain things you do in that job and you can tell whether you're doing it right or whether you're doing it wrong, but nobody tells you that. And that's completely different from playing in a

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nightclub... lengths of tunes, volumes, the type of tunes... I really missed that kind of work when it fell apart. That came to an end more or less about the time rock'n'roll came generally accepted as something other than a purely youth thing. So that if you worked in a nightclub in 1964 you were expected to know all the Beatles' tunes, before that you were just expected to know all the tunes and the choice was kind of yours. The same thing would apply to last weeks' hit parade, I mean you had to know it from one to fifty because somebody in the club would want their current favourite which might be a real piece of garbage, but you had to *learn* it because you would never come across it otherwise. Before that it was a stock that you built up from other musicians and your own knowledge about popular music. This number 7 you would learn from the hit parade wasn't going to be any bloody use next week, you see, it would have fallen down to number 89 or something. The whole face of popular music changed. Another aspect of this is that after '62 or '63 it was unknown for somebody to play guitar and not sing: the public perception of a guitar player was of somebody who stood there singing, so the whole work situation changed and particularly for my instrument. There were subtleties in the work which disappeared, it all became standardised. When you get to, say, '64 or '65, there weren't any differences between restaurants, nightclubs and dancehalls because you just played Beatles tunes all the time, except sometimes you played them louder and sometimes you played them longer. Being a working musician became a much cruder business, you weren't expected to *do* anything, you were expected to replicate what was very popular. Anyway I went into the studios, and I found that the studios were very much more standardised than the lower levels, so I had very little interest in them and I got out as soon as possible. By that time Josef Holbrooke had started.

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I met these two guys (bassist and composer) Gavin Bryars and (drummer) Tony Oxley, they hadn't had all this other stuff, they were still young musicians, I was ten years older than them. So I was very lucky to meet them at that time because they were already interested in all this other shit - like John Cage and Messiaen, I'd never heard of John Cage when I was thirty one. I loved it when I heard it, I didn't know you could get away with that kind of rubbish! It was a revelation meeting those guys.

I didn't feel part of any movement. When we were in Sheffield there wasn't any movement. There was some free jazz, like Ornette Coleman, but I didn't personally like his stuff - I didn't like it then and I don't like it now. I thought we had some connection with jazz earlier on but when we were playing free I didn't. We discovered there were things in London happening, around John Stevens for instance, and we came down and played at the Little Theatre, which was about the last gig we did, but we were very much little fish in a little pond, we were very isolated really. I sort of believe in that sort of situation, I don't for instance believe in competition. Where we were, up in Sheffield, nobody knew about us and we didn't know about anyone else, we just got on with it, we just went where it took us and there was no peer group pressure to take it anywhere else. There was nobody to shoot us down, nobody said it was rubbish, nobody said it was good, we followed certain imperatives. I think a lot of things happen like that, outside of a competitive situation, and I don't think that sort of thing can really live in a real competitive situation.

We had three years of that and that's quite a long time, and it had finished, so I took a job in London in a nightclub. Then Incus Records was formed in 1970 and so was the Musicians Cooperative, just kind of self help because we were sick of the other stuff. I mean we were getting no help from anybody and at that time many of these guys were kind

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of rebellious characters, they're not now, people like Evan (Parker), (Tony) Oxley, Barry Guy, Paul Lytton... So there were these moves to take control. It was a bit of a thing in the air at that time; 'do your own thing,' it was to take control of the music. Because we were making records for people who were restricting us, we weren't making the kind of records we wanted to make. On the continent they'd done similar things already like FMP (*Free Music Productions* in Germany) and ICP (*The Dutch Instant Composer's Pool*) ) so we did it here. When I say we did it, I actually played the least part of all, because some of these guys were really militantly interested to do that, they didn't do it just as a last resort it was a first resort. In the late 60s we all got the chance to record (for the big established labels) but somebody like Evan or Tony wanted the means of production under our own control and we wanted to get our own concerts together in a regular place, and our own funding. You see we all played together, I'm only talking about 7 or 8 people but in that 7 or 8 people would be 5 bands and we were all in all of them - almost!

But I find that there's a lot of suspect attitudes within free improvisation nowadays, particularly I must say amongst the players who've been playing it a long time. I think a lot of them are running scared because of the aesthetic climate, they're like the present day Liberals, they can't move right fast enough to keep up with the fucking fascists. Because the conservative side's in the ascendancy and they've nothing to grab hold of. I don't think many players these days would want to be identified as *self-confessed free improvisers*. Improvisation has never done anybody any good and now the whole thing's been marginalised quite severely. Jazz is in now, but we're not...

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- No, I don't feel close to the jazz revival at all. It seems to be a kind of musical academicism, it's a received, completed thing. I mean it could be Beethoven, its got a start a middle and an end and that's the whole deal, you don't mess with it. The present day version of bop is essentially discipline, it may even be *about* discipline. It's authoritarian, maybe its appropriate for the cultural situation we're in, but that seems to me to be a very unmusical way of dealing with music.

In the '60s the move from jazz to free music was almost implicit, well, we thought so, but it turns out later that it wasn't, because there's still people playing like that - in Bill Evans' or John Coltrane's music there's no movement or development implied at all for most people who play it. We were playing it at a time when it was current but twenty or twenty five years later people are playing it without any thought that it might actually lead somewhere, they're not interested in that, they just want to play it. We found that actually what that music meant was to stop playing that music and do something else, it seems like that retrospectively.

You see jazz is about getting a certain atmosphere, a kind of fantasy element that's in almost all music, and I don't think free music deals with that at all. I don't think it's got anything to do with atmosphere, I think it's dumped that. But jazz, like Indian music, is a whole world, it's a kind of aura that people can slip into, it's a trip. I don't think free music offers that, it can't turn you into whatever you want to be, it's not going to dump you in 42nd street in 1945, it's not going to put you in some kind of Flamenco bar, it's not going to have you sitting with a woman in a nightclub or on the banks of the Sienne in 1890... all these kind of fantasies. You don't have that programmatic element to it, because nobody knows what the fuck it's going to be anyway. Most people who play it, I believe, don't set out to recreate something, they just set

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out to play. At its worst it sets out for some obvious kind of excitement, but even then it's not a *specific* excitement in the way rock and roll is...

I just can't see how you could not have improvisation in music, I think it's the most important aspect of making music. Without it jazz and popular music just turns into this thing that you have with so called 'classical' music, which has not survived, which is a strange kind of *ornament*. I mean the kind of huge body of European music from about 1750 to 1900 or 1920, something like that. I think New Music, the contemporary version of classical music has been trying to do something about it. But I don't think it's successful, I don't think it has done anything about it. I mean a guy like John Cage is probably more ignored now than he has been at any time during the last 20 or 30 years. People who've tried to deal with this peculiar thing that is 'serious music', classical music, who have tried to inject some sense into it, to turn it into something that isn't just idiotic, have just been dumped. They don't want that, the people or the spirit that guides that music doesn't want it to be any different from what it is. They don't mind somebody writing a piece of music in 1988 as long as its the same as it would have been if they'd written it in 1888! And they think that its an honourable practice to do that.

For me Beethoven was just some sort of unbelievably dreary aspect of school really, because I took music at school I was introduced to this shit, in fact I gave up music on the basis of this being music, because that's what I had to study, I couldn't study what I knew of as music, which my uncle played and which I loved to listen to. So I had no interest in that, if that was music I would do something else... I'd maybe deliver milk.

I do actually have more interest in it now. I listen to a lot of Bach and that's come out of playing because I've developed an interest in something on the guitar and I've been poking around and then I've heard some specific thing

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and I'd find out it would be Bach. So I've kind of looked at that because it seems to be dealing with problems that I'm dealing with, a similar type of problem to do with the manipulation of pitch. So that's led me currently to be quite interested in some of the things Bach did, but I ain't interested in the whole story that goes with it.

I think there's some value in certain kinds of musical ignorance. I'm quite happy to have been musically ignorant of this area for most of my playing life. It has a very strange effect on people to be introduced to all of that. I think it's very odd to study music academically. Orchestral players for instance are a very strange bunch of people. That sounds kind of racist in a way or some sort of equivalent of racism, but I'm prejudiced against orchestral musicians, I realise that. I think they're amazing, unbelievable twats. I mean when it comes to music they seem to lack all sensibilities. I've met a lot in, for instance, pit work and in the studios. They prize cynicism so highly that... there must be some sort of sadistic element in their training... I don't know, I've never made an articulate case out of this but I was very glad to have avoided all that and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone whose interested in pursuing a career in music.

The flexibility was always the big attraction of music, its an even bigger one now. It is so malleable, it really is like sand, you have to make it stick, naturally it doesn't stick, you can just form it and then its gone and I think that's a great attraction. I think to make it stick is actually a kind of heresy.

The nature of improvisation is to *infuse* music, it's almost the reason to play music. The point is just to exercise this thing that you can do in music. It's like a perfect match, and when it happens it's an expression of perfection, a perfect fit between what you're doing and the way that you're doing it. Anything at all can happen, not

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just in free playing, it can happen in anything at all where there's improvisation, but it can't happen if there is none, that's my belief anyway.

But I can't really deal with all the kind of sociological, religious connotations or attitudes attached to artistic practice. I have such an aversion to that kind of shit. This is back to what we started with in a way, I think you could work out a great story about improvisation visavis survival in a non-improvising world, in an increasingly regimented, overseen, directed, authoritarian world. I think you could make up a very good argument for improvisation being an essential lifeline for our species. All that might be right you know. But I'm not going to do that... the only ideology I hold is to do with the character of the music and I don't actually know anything about improvisation other than in relation to music. I think music's best played through improvisation and improvisation is best practiced through music. But it might have other applications, increasing consideration towards improvisation might have all kinds of rewards or might indicate very useful things socially, I could imagine that's so but it isn't an argument that I've got any time for, I have enough trouble just playing the guitar.

*(12th February 1988.)*

## EDDIE PREVOST

*Percussionist Eddie Prevost has been an important figure in British improvised music since the mid-1960s when he was a founder member of the group AMM. This group quickly jettisoned the legacy of Free jazz and concentrated on experimental techniques of sound production using both conventional and electronic instruments. In 1966 composer Cornelius Cardew joined the group and helped give the group a higher profile than many of the more 'ghettoised' Little Theatre Club musicians at that time grouped around John Stevens. Since the mid-seventies he has also led a quartet whose music is jazz-inspired free improvisation and plays in a number of other groups. In addition to his work as a drummer Prevost is interested in theorising the role improvised music as a social and political force. He has written several essays and articles presenting his views. In Improvisation: Music for an Occasion he characterises improvisation as being based on, 'problem solving,' during the performance and on, 'dialogical interaction between musicians'. In The Aesthetic Priority of Improvisation he stresses the specificity of free improvisation to industrial societies and characterises it as, 'the reflection of the legitimate aspirations of people who want to live free from the irrelevant and irrational dictates of the market society,' arguing, 'in choosing our art we choose a model for life'. He is Chairman of the Association of Improvising Musicians, an organisation set up to defend the interest of improvising musicians and to provide a forum for aesthetic, philosophical and political debate, and on the board of trustees of the London Musician's Collective. He runs a record label, Matchless, on which he releases recording by himself and his associates. (see 1.5, 1.6, 2.6)*

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Clearly the sources of free improvisation are, in a way, socio-economic. If you find you have even the time to think about these things it presupposes you've got the wealth, relative though that may be, to do it. I think in the late 1950s and early 1960s - in Britain anyway - people clearly did have more freedom. Maybe they didn't have 'Freedom' but they had more of it than they'd had before; more time to think, more education, more liberation than their parents had - on a working class level anyway. Because of that there was more exposure to diverse and exotic things... music, ideas in general. I mean, the '60s are bound in that whole myriad of exotica, things were being thrust at you day after day. It's bewildering really to think about it. That was a very exciting, albeit superficial, time to live through.

I would argue that the strength of the improvisation movement in the 1960s was precisely because it came from the non-established sector of music making; it was basically something which came from people with quite ordinary backgrounds. The traditional way for a musician who was serious about music, up until the late '50s was to play jazz of course. After all, what other serious music was there as an alternative to classical music? There wasn't any; there was the whole dreadful area of pop music, which didn't even have the vitality of the youth culture which came in the late '50s and early '60s with Buddy Holly and Richie Valence and all that stuff. I think people of my generation, though they were quite young when the youth popular music thing began, still couldn't take it that seriously and so they tended to get involved with jazz. Jazz was a way to make a serious non-established kind of music, you know, you studied your music and had quite serious thoughts about it. Even though you might feign some kind of street-wise persona people were certainly very serious about what they were doing. But up until this whole plethora of ideas which was floating around it didn't really occur to many of the British jazzers - and this is obviously hindsight speaking -

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that much of the music that they played, much of the music they emulated, was very kind of *provincial* in response, they were always aping. I don't mean that in a pejorative way, I should use 'emulation' as a more respectful description. They were emulating what they perceived to be happening in New York, for example, via the record primarily. And so we were always a bit behind, and always weren't as good as, and the response was always second hand.

I might be wrong about this but I would have thought that that was the situation until the mid '60s, until ensembles like SME, Josef Holbrooke, Music Improvisation Company and I suppose AMM. In Britain these were the first breakaways from the models that had gone before. Even the Mike Westbrook Orchestra were still very wedded to the Charlie Mingus/Duke Ellington tradition - alright, John Surman might have been quite influenced by Albert Ayler, but it was still emulative, using that as a model to go from. That emulative stream still went on, and that, and I *do* mean this pejoratively, provincial response still goes on. In the '60s people semi-felt that it was wrong to be speaking in a voice that was really an echo of another culture, another land and another time.

We used to live in Bermondsey as a kid and when I went to school I was interested in music. And their response to me, it was an old grammar school, when I asked to play music was, 'Have you got a piano or a violin?' That was like asking to go to the moon or something, it was impossible, financially there was just no chance. So they said, 'Well, I'm afraid you can't have music lessons'. So I was already alienated to music because they wouldn't let me in the door, they slammed it in my face. So what I had to do was to join the boy scouts to get in the band. I mean that's what you do when you're a 12 year old and there's no other way.

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I had a school mate whose parents were rather more affluent than the rest of us and he had a record collection which had some jazz in it. It was Sidney Bechet I heard first, and then when I got into my later teens I got more interested in the Hard Bop school, the early Blue Note stuff, and all that. It was all records, the only band that had an actual physical influence on me, who I used to go and hear amongst the British jazzers, the only group who I have to admit really had something, was the Jazz Couriers with Tubby Hayes and Ronnie Scott. A very strong band, very powerful. But as I got to about 18 I co-led a hard bop band and I had a review which described me as the Art Blakey of Brixton! And it was quite a salutary piece of criticism to have because it sort of made me stop... like I was uneasy... I saw it and thought, 'There's something not right about this'. I didn't know what it was, but it was the first inkling I had that it couldn't be quite right. Art Blakey was a black American and... I mean I've rationalised it since, obviously. I've recognised that he had certain kinds of experiences and it couldn't be transposed so easily to Brixton 20 or so years after, with my life experiences. I mean I didn't rationalise it, I didn't think about it like that then. In that band there was a tenor player called Lou Gare who also happened to be in the Westbrook Orchestra - this is all anecdotal not the kind of stuff you want but - in that band was also (guitarist) Keith Rowe. And almost inevitably, because of the way Keith was disturbing the inner rhythms of the Westbrook Orchestra, the three of us plus their bass player at the time started making our own music. There were some bitter elements to that really, which are rather sad... ostensibly Keith was poles apart, he did not fit into the Orchestra as the Orchestra saw itself, or as Mike saw the Orchestra. He had at one point being compatible but there was a growing feeling of unease between them all and in the end he had to leave.

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We did what most young musicians have to do which is try and find somewhere to play, which was as difficult then as it is now, I guess. Occasionally we played The Little Theatre club but it was a rarity for us really. We weren't part of that regular turnover that occurred there... I think there were and are definite stylistic and aesthetic differences. So although one felt a certain kind of rapport it wasn't the kind of rapport of people travelling on exactly the same line. We definitely were going in a slightly different direction and I think that meant, almost by definition, that the milieu in which we operated was also likely to be different too. Also, our performance area requirements were different. What we looked for, and found over a period of time was a regular venue that didn't have a kind of normal musician/audience relationship. We played for a long time at the Royal College of Art, we just happened to get a room there, and there and other places that we found, we generally had long tenures, and we'd be there every week of more than once a week for a long period of time. There'd be no pieces as such, there'd be a long performance and people might actually stop and go out and come back into it again. They were very often done in the dark as well, in complete darkness. There was one (man), who ended up being one of the producers of our first record, and he would come along and almost invariably bring his blanket and cocoon himself in this blanket and just lie on the floor. Do you see what I mean? It was a different kind of ambience.

In the '60s we were part of the intellectual main current I suspect. Though it didn't seem like it at the time. There were lots of poets and writers who were very active in a kind of sub-cultural way, maybe they didn't reach any great high profile in the public mind but they were very active. And there was a lot of openness. So maybe people would pick it up and put it down as quickly, but there was a sense that people were at least willing to examine this, for a while. That's sadly less true today...

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It's still subcultural. Improvisation has been something which has run concurrently with other more dominant stratas, in terms of artistic culture, the *official* culture. That sounds woolly... What I mean by that is if you think of the philosophies, or the musical ideologies, if you like, that prevailed in the '60s, you're thinking really of the modernist philosophy. The very monolithic, mathematical basis of serialism, for example, which claimed to be democratic because all the notes were equal! If you can believe that! If you think of that and then of post-modernism, which in many ways is very whimsical, very superficial and skin deep, it doesn't fit into any of those. It continued to exist despite the intellectual climate that was prevalent when it was formed and it still manages to survive subculturally despite the attacks on it as an idea. In effect it can survive because of its subcultural status.

And it is one of the very few things we have to hang on to really. The actual process of playing, is one of the few areas where you can actually feel freedom. You can feel your being, you are allowed to be yourself and allowed to cooperative with people in a way that is infinitely preferable to the way you're forced to cooperate and relate to other people in other forms of life. In that sense it's a very precious experience to have. Certainly that's why I would want to continue doing it. In this current climate it's one of the few realms of sanity we've got left. It is continuing, it is prevailing, it is expanding.

In essence the reason, I suppose, that it has survived is because it's got this inner-strength, a perpetual diversity. The thing which worries me about the way jazz has gone is that most jazz has become increasingly classicised. This has happened for all kinds of reasons, most of them to do with the way that the establishment, the market, has picked up certain identifiable models of jazz, examples of jazz, and said 'we will propagate these because we can make money out of these'. This encourages that provincial

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response, to use a cliché, there is this Coltrane cloning going on. That model is so dominant that it became classical, young players picking up the model of John Coltrane and treating it as reverently, as classically, as they would do if they'd gone to a conservatory and being taught classical music. The ramshackle virtue of improvisation is that *by definition* it creates and allows plurality, *by definition* each player is expected to bring his own personality, his own being, his own modes of expression to the music. If anybody is quite clearly copying anyone else eyebrows are raised, you're expected to try and become creative *in you're own way*.

The thing that I like about it is that its warts-and-all, its the whole person. And that, that *humanity*, is what I enjoy. I like to see someone's expression as much as possible. The richness of that, the diversity, the quirkiness of it. Most improvisers have many imperfections, in a sense its those imperfections which, I suppose perversely, those of us who like improvised music, actually quite like and admire.

-No, I wouldn't call myself a jazz-player. The older I get the less I understand what the word means. And I treat it with caution. I get angry when people claim for jazz things that I don't want to accept as jazz. If jazz hasn't got something related to your own time and place then it can't be real. I just find that very emulative response to jazz is, in effect, anti-jazz, because I do think that unless the music relates to our own place and time then there's something unreal about it. There are times where there have been paradigm shifts, the bebop thing is one. I think those things are important because they relate to the time and place and the politics of those people that made that kind of music. It is inevitably going to be an enfeebled version which continues to play the form of that music without having the guts, the impetus, the underlying features, which

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stimulated it in the first place. It's inevitably going to be a diluted form in some way or another. I heard Branford Marsalis's quartet recently and I think there's no doubt that they play that music *better* than their fathers did. But at the same time there's something missing, although they were very *playful* with it they weren't *experimental* with it. They knew where the perimeters were and they played within them. They seemed to be able to do anything with those forms. But for their forefathers those perimeters weren't set before, they were actually pushing out and feeling where they were, setting those perimeters, and that's the difference in a way. And I think that process is really jazz... That's what jazz *is*. Of course you can't expect musicians with long careers to go on doing that, but I think you have every right to expect a young musicians to actually do a bit of that. It may be that you can't make seminal leaps but at least you can expect to push, to refresh it. It is associated with one's life and politics and if you have a responsibility to your community it is to somehow refresh your music and thereby give your whole community some kind of way of seeking out more freedoms and more... to liberate your whole society in a way. It is a small way of doing that.

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Part of the problem we have is that we live in a psycholinguistic world. Ideas, words... like we're doing here, we're trying to discuss, to describe a process which, by definition, doesn't use any of these things. Much of the understanding - and this is where it gets embarrassing sometimes - is quite intuitive. Much of the understanding defies conceptualisation, indeed the reason you're doing it is because you need to work through it to come to an understanding which can later conceptualise. But at the same time I'm not very happy with the idea of somehow wanting to keep it kind of simplistic; the idea of being anti-

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explanation and wholly intuitive. Because I'm not a wholly intuitive being. Intuition is a very important part of my being, but my analytical processes are equally important. Sometimes in us all we get out of balance with one or the other, what we're looking for is a happy medium between the two where one can engage the other and feed the other. I'm very unhappy with this idea that music somehow shouldn't be explained, that's stupid.

So the theory comes out of practice. It isn't a manifesto. It doesn't say, 'this is what we want to achieve and this is perhaps a way of doing it,' it says, 'We've been doing this X amount of years and this is what it seems to me we're up to'.

From my own experience the three things which are most important in improvisation are, the idea of dialogue, the idea of problem-solving and the idea of transience. And transience is something that we can recognise perhaps as being something which reflects the informal way we approach both dialogue and problem-solving. You're not setting up some monolithic edifice because dialogue is something which is essentially mobile. When one has a conversation you don't have the same conversation every time. You have different conversations but the process is still dialogue. In the same way with problem-solving you don't tackle the same problems every time you come to a problematic situation. Those three things seem to me to be the most fundamental things in improvisation. I'm sure there are other things but without those I don't think you've got anything at all.

The moment you pick up your saxophone you have the problem of, 'What do I do?'; that, in itself, is a problem. Then somebody next to you starts playing and you know that what is expected of you is to play together. So what is it you do? How do you respond to what he does? You are quite right if you say, 'Well, the way I respond is intuitive,' but it's still a problem - it's not a problem insofar as having 'A Problem,' but one of engaging with the world. Each

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time you engage with the world you decide to do one thing or another; that choice is problem solving. You either solve it in a relatively successful way or you choose a way which is unsuccessful. The degree of success is how you ultimately decide whether a performance is good or bad isn't it? If it is meaningful in some way or other then presumably the problems have been assessed, approached and solved. You come away from a performance which is not successful, and this is as a player, and clearly you haven't solved the problems then that's what stimulates you to go on, I think. There are all kinds of problems, they're psychological, they're social, they're certainly musical in terms of manipulative ability to express ideas and sounds. I mean they are manifold, there are all kinds of things really, the whole world is there. That's what I find so intriguing about music, because its like a vehicle, like a ship, you can go to so many places. Music is about the last thing you're really interested in when you're involved in music!

Everybody must ultimately ask themselves, 'Am I being fulfilled by this exercise?'. And that could mean being fulfilled in various ways - intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, do I feel better afterwards? Or worse afterwards? What have I got out of it? Have I learnt something? Am I disturbed by it? Disturbed in a creative way? Does it change my life in any way?

The third thing is dialogue. The practice isn't fixed. In improvisation you are trying to discover the meaning of sound as if for the first time and you're refreshing your sound-making capacity. But, in conjunction with that, it is fundamental that dialogue comes into play, because part of the material you are working with is in fact your relationship with other people who are making music. They are part of your environment, your social environment, your musical environment. Your dialogue is a very important ingredient because you have a responsibility not only to take but to give as well. The conversation itself becomes

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progressive because the problem with monologue is that it doesn't have anything to bounce off. We have a conversation and my ideas shift because you throw up or push me into a direction I hadn't thought about going up. It's a progressive relationship.

The thing that characterises AMM is the stability of its personnel, because that has a pretty definite aesthetic course to follow, which does depend primarily on dialogue. Dialogue of a kind that demands deep understanding of the materials you're using and the people you're working with. Whereas there's a sense that much of improvisation, and the relationships inherent in it, are quite ephemeral. Some people will make a virtue of that, and I can see a case for it, I can see a case for a constant change of personnel. Derek Bailey has built a philosophy on it. He used to say that he was more interested in what happens with musicians before they develop a common language, than what they do afterwards. Where's AMM has been much more concerned with developing a common language and trying to make it as rich and expressive as possible. We've been concerned to build up a vocabulary and with refining it - much more so than merely... no, I don't mean 'merely'...much more so than finding constantly new things.

I'm saying that there is a set of rules. It's no good Derek saying he doesn't have any rules. Well, he can say that but it doesn't necessarily mean that it's true. The very fact that I can recognise his playing from one occasion to another indicates to me that there is a set of rules. If it's coherent there must be rules. There are rules, it's a different set of rules. And a different set of rules relates to a different world view. What we are proposing, whether we are doing it consciously or not, is a different world view - and there has to be rules in a worldview. I'm not proposing anarchy, I don't even believe that anarchy exists, there's nothing in nature which is anarchic, it always gravitates towards form eventually. The question is, 'What form?' and

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what we're proposing, consciously or otherwise is a form which in essence is completely different in its political and social implications from the form which classical music has perpetuated. And let's have no illusions about it classical music is not apolitical, it's very political indeed, and so is pop music. It's actually proposing a particular kind of a world, whether we like it or not, even whether it denies it or not...

What's communal about improvisation is the determination to work in this particular fashion *together*, and that's the important thing, you know. That's what people don't understand communism is about. They see it as a regimentation, everybody in line, all marching the same way. It doesn't mean that at all. It clearly means that you work in an environment which is supportive, which is engaging in the world in a supportive manner, which in fact liberates you individually much more than you could possibly have in the fragmented competitive society which we're currently being encouraged to adopt. Because there you're separated, you're apart, you don't know where you are in this world. These communal models are a way of finding out who you are. They're ways of seeing where you fit in the world and they give you much more freedom than they do restrictions.

I think the music has a message about our time and about our life. It isn't the message that says, 'Oh, when we reach utopia everything's gonna be lovely and cosy and comfortable'. It's *never* going to be like that and one shouldn't *want* it to be like that. There's always gonna be an edge, a kind of raw edge if you like, to experience. I mean, that's the condition of man isn't it? There's always going to be the unknown there, and that's the edge to creativity, that's the edge to movement through evolution, whatever that might be.

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-Yes, there's a certain idealism there, I can see that because we are talking about a world which currently clearly doesn't exist. Some people say that that AMM play the music that should be played all the time in the world they would like to exist. And I know what that means, although its a weird formulation. I know why it's said.

What we're posing... we're having to reinvent many of the ideas which have been lost - purposefully lost, pushed into the dustbin - in order to sort of regroup ourselves and find our way back to a kind of human existence we feel is, *must be*, preferable to what seems to be dominating now. So, it seems to me that it's a kind of reinvention. Or an attempt to reinvent a culture which has been destroyed, or to replace a culture that has been destroyed, not harking back to a folk ethic. Folk music reflected a kind of social formulation which existed for all kinds of reasons. We don't live in that world anymore. But what we do live in is an impoverished kind of society. There are certain people within it that feel alienated from it. Improvisation, to a large extent, is a means of finding a substitute, to reinvent, to build up again a new culture. It has that power, clearly it does have that power to do that. But it's having to deal with two very entrenched, powerful monoliths who are concerned, consciously or otherwise, to keep things as they are, to keep people from having a culture which is based on a sense of what Marx called *species being*; where human beings can express themselves fully, reveal themselves fully. If people do all those things clearly our society as we know it will crumble. Clearly music does have a power, and that can be a power to change, there are so many examples in history right from Plato... Music is so powerful it's capable of deadening, it has the power to be controlling, to put people to sleep, to discipline. But it also has the power to enervate.

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I think I've run out of steam! Oh, but I'll tell you what, You'll have to fit this in... It's to do with the contributions of relationships and your own perception of yourself and so on. One of the things that came out of the early period of our music was a common experience we had was that you would very often be playing and be... immersed in these kind of waves of sound. You'd be in the middle of it, consumed by it, and very often the common experience was that suddenly maybe you'd just identify one particular element and you'd wonder for a moment where it came from, 'I wonder how that's happening?' often you would actually stop playing and suddenly realise it was you that was playing this thing you hadn't recognised. And it was something we began quite consciously to encourage, that kind of... It sounds very trite in a way but the ultimate was a very selfless kind of playing. You actually transcend your own contribution. It wouldn't matter in a way if you were fulfilled or not, although in a sense that's what you're after, and you could actually get to the point where this happened. It was a very weird experience.

I don't think it's a loss of identity; it's actually a different kind of identity.

*(30th October 1987.)*

KEITH ROWE

*Keith Rowe has been the guitarist with AMM since 1966, when he developed a style of playing the electric guitar flat on a table, using various tools and household implements, employing it more as a 'sound source' than as a conventional instrument. This is not an interview but a transcript from a short spontaneous talk that Rowe gave before a solo performance at an LMC concert. (see 1.5, 1.6)*

Before I start I'd like to just spend five minutes explaining how it was that I arrived at this style of playing the guitar. For me it was actually going to art-school and studying painting, part of the formal Art and History course was about cubism and abstract expressionism and all that stuff. And there was a part of cubism which really interested me, which was that idea was that if you had two containers in front of and you were painting them and you knew that one of those containers was full of water or whatever, you couldn't see it but you knew that it was the case, how do you portray it? That was what interested me. And the other idea that came out of cubism was this idea of simultaneous vision, that if you knew there was something on the other side of an object how do you portray that? The way that they solved that was by having the painting more like an inventory. This was said to be influenced by the idea of the African mask: European portrait painters had painted the linear features of the person in front of them, whereas the African mask was much more a portrayal of a psychology rather than just seeing what was in front of you. So this was the problem, how do you portray the things that you know?

At that time I was a guitar player playing a bit like Barney Kessell, that's what guitar players in 1958 did - and sadly now still - unless you were really advanced and then you would play like Wes Montgomery; both in their different

Keith Rowe

ways reflected a single line, a linear approach. The other thing in cubism was the idea of getting away from a single point of interest, so the painting could have an overall view, it wasn't just one perspective. So, to relate these things from painting to music, I had this notion that when you playing a guitar line, (*Imitates bebop melody.*) then that was like a single vision, a single line going on, and I wanted to spread that out, move away from that linear approach to something much more organic... Then we came across Jackson Pollack who had in a sense taken the easel painting and laid it down on the floor and doing that he gave up all the easel painting technique, the OOO brush, but then he had gravity to play with. And I started to think about what would happen if you laid the guitar down and worked over the top of it in a similar way, giving up the guitar techniques, what effect would that have?

I suppose it's important for me to say that playing like this is not an accident, something I stumbled across, but something I fought for and defended. And I actually started playing like this in the Mike Westbrook band, and they were playing, like, *C Jam Blues* and Westbrook arrangements and I had made a New Year's Resolution not to tune the guitar anymore. So the guitar got more and more out of tune and I would turn up to gigs and it got more and more dreadful, we would have arguments. I would do things like place a Paul Klee drawing between the strings and the frets and the places where the dots fell I would actually use to play my solo, playing over say B flat, E flat, C flat using completely arbitrary notes on a guitar which was no longer in tune. So I got slung out after a while. So that's where I am now really...

And this is the same guitar, I've had it for thirty years, and it still works. And I haven't tuned it, I did change the strings though...

(18th March 1990.)

## MAGGIE NICOLS

*Vocalist Maggie Nicols is one of the relatively few women to have dedicated themselves to free improvisation. For a number of years she was heavily involved in the Workers Revolutionary Party and is now active in Anarchist groups, these involvements feed freely into her music and her understanding of improvisation. One workshop led by Maggie that I attended developed into a mixture of music workshop, Anarchist forum and encounter group in which any participant could contribute just about any idea about anything taking any form.*

*I spoke to her at her council flat in Holborn, her conversation changed direction frequently, interspersed with laughing, singing, movements and gesticulations. (see 1.14)*

I suppose I was attracted to jazz for emotional reasons, it was all very much to do with being young and female and very emotional. In the '60s I worked as a dancer at the Windmill Theatre in Soho and my flatmate was going out with a jazz drummer so I *pretended* to like jazz because I wanted to impress her... really! Then I saw The Glenn Miller Story and got a crush on James Stewart, it was all silly things like that, very romanticised, a young woman really searching for stuff. And then I started going down Ronnie Scott's, someone took me down there. At first I got into it just through how the people were, I'd get some sort of feeling about a person playing an instrument. Of course it was all men in those days, and through that person I would pick up on an emotional thing, as well as social things of course, like whether they had an alcohol problem or not! Funnily enough on a higher or deeper level and with much more political understanding I still think so much of what music is about what the person is expressing personally and socially today.

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I was very insecure about musicians, I mean I was very ignored and dismissed, I suppose they thought I was a typical young chick hanging about. Women were very invisible unless they were actually working or wives or whatever. But one night I was down Ronnie's watching the Mike Westbrook band and I heard this voice inside, wanting to sing out. I went up to the Little Theatre Club in '67 and saw John Stevens, and I think Norma Winstone, Derek Bailey and Trevor Watts and I remember just getting blown away by it all. I thought, 'This is amazing! How *do* they do it?' I just knew it sounded amazing but I didn't know what it was. In the end I was so filled with desire that I had to talk to John, even though I was scared shitless because I didn't know him. He was quite vague, he said, 'Oh, some other time,' but then I bumped into Trevor Watts and he said, 'Why don't you come up this weekend?' And up till then I'd been singing in a strip club, the Venus Room at Old Compton Street, so I thought, 'WooaaAHH!', because I'd never done free improvisation. But I got to the club and John just set a piece, which I still use in workshops to this day, the Sustain piece. John was playing a gong and Trevor was playing this lovely note on the sax and all I had to do was just sing one note, which was all shaky and cracked with nerves at first, but after a while I just began to hear all the things around me and it just took off into the most beautiful free improvisation. It was a complete revelation, I'd never experienced anything like it in my life. I was still singing in the strip club and I had to get back to it and it was pouring with rain outside but I was jumping up and down and singing...

I stayed with John and Trevor and we did the Spontaneous Music Ensemble album *Oliv* with Johnny Dyani and we also did the first Total Music Meeting in Berlin in '68. We were all put up in this youth hostel in camp beds, cold stone floors and no beds, but to me it was like a dream because I was so used to these musicians treating me like some sort of groupie, you know like *nothing* really. Then suddenly to be

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in the company of all these musicians and to be actually talking about *music* and I was actually singing, not just a hanger on, it was extraordinary and I took to it like a duck to water. To me improvising was as natural as breathing, it felt so organic and natural...

I became interested in improvising in drama and movement as well. I remember one gig I was doing, this must be about 1971, when the music really wasn't happening but at that time I lacked the discipline to just stop and be silent for a while. And it felt so dishonest that at one point I just felt myself compulsively doing a movement and all of a sudden, I couldn't believe it, but out of my mouth came this voice, 'I'm *lying*, I'm *LYING!*' and I started dancing because it was the only way I could escape, because of course I'd been a dancer, but I'd never thought of connecting it. So through a really frustrating block and unconsciously verbally owning up to that block something new and positive came out and that's something I've actually developed and worked with over the years - being that honest, talking, demystifying, baring it all. But I left it for a while because I found very few musicians that I could do that with, a lot of people found that a bit much, they didn't like it. A lot of people are doing that now but when I first started doing that I was very isolated.

The way I've kept in touch with all that is through workshops which I've been doing for twenty years now, and they've been where I've learnt. I've worked with people that go, 'I can't sing, I can't sing,' and you go, 'Oh, that's no problem, no problem,' and then after a couple of hours they're singing! And I've sometimes been in workshops and thought, 'Oh, I don't *believe* the creative power in this situation, oh this is as beautiful as anything I've ever heard on a stage, more so,' and that reinforced what John had always said about it, about the social dynamics and social interaction.

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Getting accepted by musicians was, for a woman singer, quite rare, and for a while I was special, it was like being one of the boys. But then to go into a workshop situation and coming face to face with the creativity of whole groups of people was quite an adjustment. But I'm glad I did that and have come down to earth and have a social base. Having that as a base I *can't help* but acknowledge everybody's creativity. I *have* to just because I experienced so many amazing, beautiful things in workshops, It's my laboratory, the workshops are primary for me I think.

I went through a period when I didn't actually do much improvisation, I was singing in rock bands and stuff, and it was actually the Women's Liberation movement that got me back into it, this was around 1976 or '77. I thought, 'I've had all these intimate musical experiences with men, and here I am discovering this shared political experience with other women, what would it be like to work with other women?' Now I'd worked with Julie Tippetts and we knew we had a very special rapport but I'd never actually worked with a whole group of women, so I approached Lindsay Cooper and there was a series called Music For Socialism so we played that as the Feminist Improvising Group. We were worried that it might all come over a bit like Socialist Realism, you know, 'What is a Feminist Note?' But in the end what happened was that the Feminist content was more in what we said, in the theatre. The actual interaction between the women was based on our Feminist understanding of our lives. We didn't rehearse or anything, and out of that came very personal things about problems we were all having, like I had a lot of problems with being a mother, and Georgie Born was worried about her weight and Lindsay had all this anger about going through classical instrumental training, so we just started from that. And it just blew people away, that gig was a turning point for a lot of improvisers who were there, even though they probably wouldn't give us the credit for it. I mean it wasn't a particularly *slick* gig, but we

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brought politics into it in a very raw way; at one point Lindsay was chopping up onions and I was rushing around spraying perfume around so the audience wouldn't have to smell the onions, it was completely mad. We started up by mopping up after Paul Burwell who'd been using water in his performance, it wasn't his fault and it wasn't fair really but we set him up. 'Don't worry Paul, we'll clear up after you,' it was just an extraordinary gig and for me it was like a release of all these things I'd discovered but had never felt I could express. But a lot of people didn't like it at all, because at that time it was all very precious and the LMC was divided up into these competitive 'schools of improvising'. But I don't think those differences mean we have to be competitive, I think it's fascinating that there's such a range of different groups and human beings involved in the music, that diversity is its strength.

I don't want to fetishise women, because there are many differences that divide women; race differences, class differences, all sorts of differences, but there was a physical intimacy between us in FIG which I found very liberating, which is very rare amongst male musicians. Also we felt as though we were liberating ourselves from the idea that we felt we had to be approved of by men. Though, gradually the women who were in (the rock band) Henry Cow started worrying about what the men in Henry Cow thought and I started worrying about what the jazz musicians thought and that was really a very undermining process. What was really exciting for me was that here was a group of women who had very different technical abilities and for whom technique was not the criteria, which it still is today for a number of improvisers. They tend to measure the success of an improvisation by instrumental ability, but with FIG we were improvising our *lives* in a way, not just our personal lives but a particular period of history.

Maggie Nicols

The big Women's festivals and socialist festivals in Italy also gave us the chance to play in front of a much wider audience, many of whom had never heard improvisation before and that gave me a real confidence in this music's accessibility, it speaks to people. It speaks to people's desire for some sort of autonomy or creativity or social connections that aren't preconceived. People loved the the fact that it was *becoming* as they were there, that they were part of something unfolding that hadn't actually been prepared in advance, and that they were affecting us. It's such a powerful music because when people are alone they make some of the sounds we make and we all improvise every day of our lives. Each improviser is dealing with the new, with each moment as it happens, but as we are not just born new every moment. I mean I carry with me my experiences, fears and prejudices, love, desire, background, family, musical influences, politics, you name it. For me it's an incredible dialectic of new and old. You are open to what is coming in, the environment, the audience, the other musicians and at the same time you are somehow carrying with you everything that has ever happened.

Improvisation for me is really the way of working that can do that and there is a political significance to practising it. If we were able to react when something new or unexpected happens, to sharpen our instincts and instinctively feel what is right in a given situation regardless of what we have planned, then we could avoid the panic and chaos. If you practice improvising you are potentially ready for almost anything, though obviously the amount of preparation you have to do for a gig is not comparable with what you would have to do for a street demonstration or revolution!

I mean I love music and I love composing but my passion is improvisation, I'm madly in love with it! I *am*! I see it as dialectical music.

Maggie Nicols

When I was in the WRP, before I got involved with the Anarchist movement, I learnt a lot about the philosophy of dialectics and contradiction. How did I join? Well, my ex-husband was an ex-member of the SWP and he used to rave on about it. But I wasn't interested, I didn't want to know about parties or anything like that. But when we split up I met some people from Equity who were trying to stop Equity registering under the Industrial Relations act. So I went on the lobby and to a couple of Socialist Labour League classes that Gerry Healey was giving on philosophy. At that time I still believed in God and I felt that it was an attack on me, because of course they were strongly atheist. So it was very painful, but at the same time they were coming out with all this stuff about interaction and nature that I just knew intuitively I had always felt, only they were putting it in a more scientific way I suppose. Then they asked me to sing at something, and somehow I ended up joining, that's how they hook you in, a nice big audience and everything, ha ha! I was in the Party for about five years and I learnt an enormous amount, I wrote some of my best songs and I was exposed to the practice of dialectical materialism, which demystified has just made such a difference to how I actually perceive and practice music, friendships and so on. And although they trained us to the view that dialectical materialism outside the democratic centralist revolutionary party is actually a waste of time, to me it's blossoming all over the place, even in the laws of opposites I find in my body, or dialectics in the history of jazz; how Charlie Parker's negation of Lester Young's style actually fully preserved that style, by negating you lose nothing, you preserve in a different form. That was so exciting and that connection between history and being open enough to take in what's happening *as it's happening* is also what I love about improvisation. It's what Engels calls the Science of Universal Connection, it's very simple really, but its been mystified, a lot of academic marxists make it into something

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very obscure.

Going into the Women's Liberation Movement at first seemed very incompatible carrying with the training the Party had given me. But by sharpening the differences certain connections became clearer, and that's another dialectical concept, Hegel's 'sharpening the blunt difference of variety to the point of opposition'. Like in improvisation you can get people from Salsa, classical, rock, jazz or folk music coming together and while they go beyond their traditions the result also reflects what they have learnt from those different backgrounds. It's not a matter of fudging or *fusing* the brilliant differences, but seeing the links between them. So what I learnt in the Party I've taken right into the music. And I've also learnt so much from the anarchist movement. I left the WRP because I'd felt attracted to women from the age of about sixteen and I remember at a branch meeting somebody saying that a lesbian or homosexual could only be a *sympathiser*, because they would somehow be open to blackmail from the state and they'd be a security risk! Somehow I couldn't really argue against that, I was scared of the leadership, I couldn't really confront things. Then I was instructed to stay in London when I had a gig in Holland, but I breached Revolutionary Discipline and I went. Then it was one of those situations where you take the phone off the hook and just don't answer the door. I basically ran away. I would get all these newspapers that I was supposed to deliver and one day I just got one and that was that.

I have to say that today when I meet someone who's too ideologically sussed out I get scared. I mean, I've been on the other other side of it so I know what its like; I used to go steaming in like a missionary, people used to go out of their way to avoid me!

Maggie Nicols

Now I want to actually find creative ways of being in a political group. I want to find people who are interested in combining workshops with discussion so meetings don't just decide what we're going to do but how are we going to do it and how are we with each other, even areas that the Women's Liberation movement call 'consciousness raising'.

*So you're interested in taking apart the separate dialogues surrounding music, political action, theory and therapy and somehow putting them together?*

Yes, desperately! Desperately, desperately, desperately... desperately! Ha ha! Really, really, really, really. I just feel that there is so much potential in that. We all have such a rich range of experiences to share. There has got to be a way of weaving it all in, I'm sure there is, I'm sure there is. Because we're all interconnected and we have to start exploring that. And it's limitless, and improvisation is limitless, as long as the world carries on there is no end to improvisation, because there's always something new... Every day... Every moment... Yeah...

*(23rd January 1990.)*

MARCIO MATTOS

*The Brazillian virtuoso bassist Marcio Mattos is a member of both free jazz and free-improvising groups based London, dividing his time between music and ceramics. (see 2.6) I did intend to speak with him specifically about the link between music and ceramics. As it turned out this meeting was not possible. I did however make the following notes after speaking to him briefly on the subject;*

I'd like to talk about the ceramics because I think that is an important part of my creativity...

My interest in ceramics is the same as my interest in music. Working with clay is very spontaneous and immediate. I don't like to use a wheel, that's too mechanical, it's very similar to doing session work as a musician. I like to work on the clay directly and what comes out is never too decided in advance. I might have some ideas about where various patterns and markings will go, but basically clay is something I can improvise with.

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In Brazil I started off playing the acoustic guitar, like most kids at that time, though I wasn't really ever interested in the electric guitar. It was the '60s and the bossa nova thing was on the up then, Stan Getz, Astra Gilberto and all that. I had previously had some cello lessons as a kid which I didn't enjoy very much because I wasn't really interested in classical music. I had guitar lessons with a guy who taught me a lot about harmony and stuff and he listened to jazz. I'd never paid much attention to it before, partly because you couldn't get the records, they were all imported and so very expensive. Apart from that the only jazz you could was the occasional big band on the radio and my father was interested in that, so he had

Marcio Mattos

one or two old LPs, not LPs, 78s, lying about; Basie, Ellington, Glen Miller, they were scratched but you could hear the orchestra. Then there was a record library which was run by the American equivalent of the British Council. They had an English-teaching school where I was a student and I had access to this quite incredible record collection and I discovered the world of music that was there and rapidly graduated from Dave Brubeck to Mingus, Monk, Bird, Rollins and then Coltrane - all the original Blue Notes were there.

Then I met a lot of other musicians who were into jazz and it was there that I started playing a bass that I had borrowed. Eventually I decided to have lessons and ended up at music School - The Villa Lobos in Rio - but that wasn't a conservatory type of school at all, it was very experimental, we all liked it very much because we all had a free hand at doing what we wanted. It was there that I came across improvisation and things like graphic scores, and they had a very rudimentary electronic music studio, where you could tamper with tapes and things. I was really a very advanced place for the time, this was 1968, '69.

The tragic thing about this school was that it was actually located in the old student union building. The student union of course had been banned since 1964 when the military coup happened, they banned most trade unions and certainly the students union which was one of the most active politically. So we were in their building, and because of the nature of the teaching there, and way that classes were conducted because of the progressive stance of the head of department at that time, I reckon that the military got a little bit suspicious about what was going on in there, especially considering that it had been the student union building. So they decreed that all colleges and universities - this was a general thing, not just because of us - should have a military instructor come in once a week and the name of the subject was Civil and Moral

PHIL MINTON

*Vocalist Phil Minton has extended the possibilities of the voice in improvised music to an extraordinary degree, exploring a wide range of vocal sounds normally not associated with music, through them suggests and mimics a variety of personas, emotions and expressions such as laughter, frustration and fear. He also plays trumpet. Surprisingly he speaks quite quietly and due to a combination of this and a fault in the recording it was not possible to transcribe the second part of this interview, made at his family flat in Highgate. (see 2.16-18)*

I started to play the trumpet after leaving school in Torquay at 15... I got obsessed with it actually. I started listening to music at the time, this sort of hard East Coast jazz, Coltrane, Miles and stuff and I identified pretty strongly with that sort of New York music, as opposed to what all the other kids were doing at the time, listening to Bill Haley and all this sort thing. You know there's a lot of social reasons for that, I thought this was sort of superior to everybody else's musical tastes, I would be asking for Coltrane and Miles Davis in about '56 at our local record shop and of course nobody had ever heard of anything like that in our area. I mean, I didn't have a clue of what was going on or how it all stuck together, I just liked these tunes and the amazing sort of power coming out of Coltrane's playing. So I was listening to this stuff and learning the trumpet as well so I just used to start blasting away. I was practising it completely wrong, I didn't know you were supposed to play on the chord changes. I had the trumpet for about three years until somebody decided to tell me that you don't do it like that.

Phil Minton

We used to have a little group, we'd sort of just go bananas. They were painters as well and there was this one guy who was interested in Jackson Pollack. And we used to do this stuff called Action Music, we invented that name. And there would be like dancing as well, we used to jump around and go bananas basically, rolling around on the floor and playing away, we had this massive energy. We just used to go and hire this room and go bananas in it. By the time I was about 19 I got a bit disillusioned with it all. Because it wasn't, 'how its done,' playing music. You know, we ought to have harmonies and stuff like that, and I packed it in. I packed it in for about a year. Then a bloke phoned me up and said, 'You play the trumpet don't you? Do you want to join my band', this was like a young, modern jazzy sort of group. So I said yeah and started practising again and I found that I could work around changes without thinking about it. I could work on quite simple tunes and I used to sing with the band as well, things like, (*Sings.*) 'I been breakin' rocks on a chain gang!', rhythm and blues, Cannonball Adderly.

- Oh yeah, of course I sang in an American accent! But it doesn't make sense doing that sort of music without the accent, because the accent of the music is in the playing, people *played* with American accents too, and it was all like that then.

And then I was at a jam session at Newton Abbot Art College and I met all the young lads from the Mike Westbrook band - John Surman and others. (*Puts on Devon accent*) 'Here man', he goes, 'do you want to join our band because we need a trumpet player.' So I immediately packed in my job and went up there. I'd learnt to read music a little bit but I wasn't very good. I had a shock when I came up I can tell you, all the lads were at music college and shit hot readers. I just had to get my parts early! And they were all about my age but they all seemed much older and more experienced, but I'd played a bit by then, I think I was 22.

Phil Minton

I was in this group, the Brian Waldron Quintet, and we used to do things like gigs at Torquay Town Hall as the main support group. We supported any shows that came around, Acker Bilk, Ted Heath, people like that, or ...oh, who else? ...Bee Bumble and the Stingers, Nero and the Gladiators and all those late fifties rock'n'roll singers. We used to do sort of blues and jazzy tunes. Then I got involved with this other band, like a show band, and we actually stowed away on a ship to get the Canary Islands, in a life boat for two nights. I was just messing around, having a good time, drinking and drugging. And we did a few summer seasons with them at Butlin's and then we got offered a record deal.

Then I got married and got off to Sweden for about four years. I started working in a Swedish showband just to make money. And this was when I had to work on my trumpet playing and my general musicianship and I started doing a lot of singing. I found that I was really good at doing covers and I got quite into it really, by this time the best stuff around was, like, American soul, Otis Reading. Also I had a lot of time at home and I started getting back into improvising. So I was away through all the Little Theatre Club stuff, I was completely on my own. It was rather nice because you didn't have anyone giving you ideas at all, it was completely my own. There were a few musicians there but no public... In fact a lot of people got interested in it, there was a whole little scene in Lapland in the 1960s, but unknown about. Then I left and came back to London and of course it was all going on...

That was the embryo of what I'm up to now really, only I didn't do it with so much confidence, that sort of collage of sounds. I suppose I sort of collect sounds, I suppose it's something like sampling only it's much quicker because I don't have to go through all that technology. Even right back in the '50s there was something in my head that I wanted to do, a sound, but there wasn't any role or model at

Phil Minton

that time.

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There was one amazing gig in a pub called Merlin's Cave. We were doing a trio with (percussionist) Roger (Turner) and Keith Rowe, and this guy, the landlord, comes up and says, 'Get out! I've never heard such a load of fucking rubbish in all my fucking life, get out now!' really horrible bloke. Then we had a funny one the other night with The Ferals, John Butcher said that a guy came up from downstairs and said, 'You're driving out all my regular customers, can you please stop?'. But that's pretty rare actually. I'm always quite surprised, because if people listen to Radio 2 or 1, or watch the television you never hear this music. My son is 21 in Sweden and he didn't think that this sort of music existed, I said 'Yeah, thousands of people come out to hear it in Germany and Austria and Switzerland'. He came to see me with John Russell, he was amazed by that stuff, he couldn't believe it...

*(4th April 1988.)*

JOHN RUSSELL

*Guitarist John Russell was influenced by Derek Bailey and has developed his own sparse acoustic guitar technique. He plays in a series of regular duets, for example with singer Phil Minton, and also in a highly acclaimed trio with saxophonist John Butcher and violinist Phil Durrant, who between them run the Acta record label. (see 1.15/1.16)*

*This is the second interview that I recorded with him. The first was made while I helped him with a house-cleaning job, and he asked me not to use it. It was a very 'difficult' interview with quite a confrontational undercurrent, I felt that he was suspicious about my motives for doing this research. To some extent this second interview started where the other one left off. I spoke to him in a pub near his home in Finsbury Park.*

*There were some points which came out of our first interview...*

*...which I hope you'll burn, tapes included! Semi-naked in a bathtub, wiping someone's ceiling down when we're both half cut is not the way to do it.*

*Two things which interested me about it though were that you said that you didn't feel any need to justify music in terms of it being, 'a career structure'. And at another point you said, in what I thought was a kind of aggressive way, that you didn't have a, 'middle class construct' to put on it.*

*Let's take the first point. I think generally people are brought up with music in terms of it being a kind of consumerist thing. And buying certain records and reading certain newspapers, all that sort of stuff, gives them a platform that enables them to have opinions. But there is*

John Russell

another side to music, an underbelly, or something like that. I suppose I started with the first position and moved towards the second position, which was that the financial reason for doing it is not necessarily the first thing, the extrinsic worth of the market place is not a way of assessing music. Advertising is not a conducive world for playing music in, and most of the music world is about advertising, I think, at the end of the day, they treat the punters as a bunch of cunts and take as much money as possible, lots of cocaine, champagne, blah, blah. That's not the kind of worth I want from playing music. I want something different from that.

I like the notion of free music, in a way, which means to allow the music to develop outside of those very obvious commercial pressures. That's not saying that there is not a way for for the music to have a commercial niche or something, but the danger is that the commercial niche can then be exploited and turned into something else, and that's where I start getting suspicious.

I mean we have a record company, we do gigs which we get paid for and all this stuff. But I don't think I would announce myself as a recording star or something like that.

*And the 'middle class construct'?*

I think quite often one is forced into the position of trying to be somebody who lives in an art gallery world, where one has to be very urbane, charming, witty and it's all behind a mask. I can envisage a picture of people with different masks on holding glasses of wine and I think that that side of things is difficult to deal with. I've worked in those art gallery situations, openings and so on, and the people have been... erm, a bunch of posers basically. I mean the artists are fine, but the work situation they have seems completely bizarre. I suppose I don't like the class system as well, that's part of it...

John Russell

I just think that it should be as simple as possible. I mean, when I play the guitar, it's someone playing the guitar. You might be playing something quite complex but you want to make it as clear as possible in terms of what it is you do. So you don't go giving people a load of stuff saying that it is any different from anybody else doing their normal day's work. It's just work I suppose, that's kind of simple. Its not religious or twee or... well, you know, it's between religion, twee, and politics innit? I'm a musician, that's what I do and it doesn't seem to fit into anything else. I mean I'm trying to give this a sociological slant because you're a sociologist, but... I think I just play and if the music's good that night, then it's good. It's important to get people there and to play well and to project it, and not make it a sort of therapy.

I don't think there's a need to justify it at all. I mean the justifications of the market place and the art world are ridiculous. Does music need a justification?

*...well, I would have thought so, yes. Okay, you say, 'It's work,' but there are different sorts of work and different activities have different qualities.*

Yeah, well I like it of course

*Okay, but why do you like it? What qualities does it have that distinguish it from cleaning out houses or working on a building site?*

I think the way in which you play with other people is fascinating. I don't know why but it is, and I like it, but I don't have the vocabulary to deal with it. Playing solo is very good. I just like going, getting a sniff of the room, a different acoustic, whether the plectrum's worn down or not, whether the strings are old or new, whether I feel on top of it or I don't. I love it, it's great, for me, even when it

John Russell

is very, very difficult - and some playing situations are very, very difficult - but if anybody wants to ask me to play then I'll play. It's that simple.

It's not got much to do with words, that's a good point. I mean the art world does have a lot to do with words, outside of the slapping paint around, or using a hammer and chisel, or plectrum and strings, I suppose. I think music works differently to words. How music affects people and how it works within itself in basic neurological terms, acoustic terms, psychological stuff seems to be different from words. With words you are always making a description of what music is. If you use words to describe a book then there's always the reference point of words in it but if you use them to describe music, it doesn't work like that. There's a referential aspect of music which is purely musical.

*And you are trying to distil that?*

Well, I just play music!

*Maybe it should be that simple, but I'm trying to suggest that it isn't quite that simple. For example in the first interview you spoke of trying to reach 'new ground', to play something which hadn't been played before, which is more than just saying, 'well, I just play music', it's social, it's philosophical, it's aesthetic, it's political and so on...*

Sure, I think that is very important, but it's still to do with music, because if you just end up repeating everything then you are not playing music, you just switch it through to the circuit and churn it out. That is not music. There's a human aspect which involves living and dying and change, for me that has got to be in it. If music is frozen, if you just churn it out, it loses an edge which I think is important. I mean you can hear people play Charlie Parker

John Russell

solos note for note and it doesn't sound like Charlie Parker because you don't hear the edge in it.

The most important thing for me is getting into a space and playing in it. And by space I don't mean a space, 'man,' I mean an opportunity to play where you can develop music.

*So it's a 'space'?*

What is?

*...the we're trying to talk about.*

You are going to start talking about canvasses being a space and the space being a canvass soon aren't you?!

In those terms I'm working in this cellar at the moment to earn the money to get some paint to do up an upstairs room in this flat that I live in, so that I've got a room to work in. Some space, my room, No Entry on the door sort of stuff. That's another sort of space

*(Long silence.)*

*The fact that you've chosen this music to play has meant that you've had to earn a living doing other things, does this affect the music, or are they completely separate areas?*

*...scrape, scrape a living...*

It's impossible to separate anything for me. Improvised music is not something that stands by itself, it's a kind of sponge for other things that you work in...

I've spent the last month working in this cellar and I'm very disappointed that it's going to be carpeted out tomorrow because I wanted to borrow your tape recorder and take the guitar down there and work on it with my new plectrum, a plasterer's trowel, which I have say sounds

John Russell

fucking great when I scrape it across the floor. But if I use that maybe it's a bit obvious. But it might work. At the end of the day I am a guitar player and maybe some of what I've learnt doing that will affect something that comes out of the guitar.... so of course it makes a difference.

Look, I'm planning to do a solo gig before christmas in which I will tie it all together as much as in an interview. That will be my statement and an interview can never get there. At the end of the day... I sound like a bloody politician, at this present moment in time, all these cliches... at the end of the day you have to come and listen to it and if you don't like it it's not my fault, the beers off!

Turn it off, you've got enough...

*(August 9th 1989.)*

## FRED FRITH

*Guitarist, multi-instrumentalist and composer Fred Frith was a member of the English avant-garde rock group Henry Cow who in the '70s experimented with many improvisational and collective forms. The group had an explicitly socialist outlook, amongst other things performing at the 1977 Music For Socialism conference. Since then Frith has achieved some prominence as a part of New York's community of free-improvisers and composers along with figures like such as John Zorn and Christian Marclay. (see 2.12/2.13)*

It would have been hard to avoid getting into music in my house. Both of my brothers were pretty avid music listeners. One of them is Simon Frith, who is now a pop music journalist, and when I was about five or six in the 50s he was always bringing home 78s of Paul Anka and Johnny Ray and people like that. Then my older brother was into jazz and my father was listening to Bartok and Debussy period classical music, that's what I mostly remember anyway, I'm sure he listened to a lot of other things too. So in our house music was seldom not a part of the scenery. And we had a piano that I fooled around on and I started violin when I was five years old at my father's insistence. And I was in the church choir and, you know, all that stuff. So it was very much a part of my life for as long as I can remember.

The first violin teacher I had was very progressive, because she had this theory that I guess was current then about learning to relax, so for the first few lessons I didn't even touch the violin. I don't know if you've ever been around kids but one thing five year old boys certainly don't ever want to do is relax, so I did a lot of exercises with my hands and fingers to get me to calm down. Looking back at it it was great training, at the time I was frustrated and I used to wonder why I couldn't play the

Fred Frith

bloody thing. Later when we moved from Richmond, Yorkshire to York the teachers were much less interesting and I lost interest in the instrument too. That was a result of picking up a guitar when I was about 13, so at that point the violin took a major back seat. And later, much later, I kind of retaught myself violin from a folk point of view, because I only had classical training. I had no less than ten years of serious classical lessons...

When I started the guitar, what was in the air then? I guess I was doing Shadows tunes... The very first reason that I took up the guitar was that there was a band at school who played almost entirely Shadows covers and I really wanted to be in this band, because it was obviously the way to influence people and be popular or whatever it was. I used to sit about at the door when they were rehearsing and wish I could be cool like them. And I went home one school holiday and learnt the entire book of 500 chords you could buy, just like it was a school exam or something. So that was the first thing I did on the guitar so that I could get the job of rhythm guitarist because nobody ever wanted to be rhythm guitarist, they always wanted to be lead guitarist...

After school I went to Cambridge, by then I met a girl who introduced me to the blues and taught me how to fingerpick, and this totally changed my life, finding out about the blues. Its only recently I've fully understood what what happening then but this was the first music I'd ever heard that was improvised, everything I'd ever been taught up to that point involved me looking at a piece of paper and reading it, even with the Beatles stuff everything was basically exactly like the records, copied faithfully, every note. Whereas with the blues it could be different every time, and it was quite a shock to understand also that instruments were part of you and part of a voice. There's a kind of vocal aspect to instrumental blues which is very important and which was not present in the other kinds of

Fred Frith

music that I'd heard up to that point.

I started reading a lot about blues and jazz, I remember reading a book called *Hear Me Talkin To Ya* by Nat Hentoff, and that really had a big influence on me because it was just like a chance to hear a lot of people talking about what they do in music, and it's striking if you read that book how much blues has to do with a voice coming straight out of you. For horn players that's maybe easier to grasp but for guitarists it's quite difficult to put that into your playing, the detachment of your hands and all the pedagogy involved in producing the notes. The blues loosened me up a whole lot and then I started playing all kinds of stuff.

When I went to Cambridge, 1967, it was a unique period in cultural history in as much as it was just about the birth of the LP as a serious musical form instead of just a series of hits. It was also the beginning of an interest in world music, it was very fashionable to know about Indian music especially but also Korean and Japanese music and all those things. It was possible to be exposed to a load of other culture's musics in a way that hadn't been possible before really, except to specialists. In that period, '67/'68, I was listening to a hell of a lot of different music very fast... I mean, I can distinctly remember hearing the First Soft Machine album, *Save Us Milk* by Captain Beefheart and *Absolutely Free*, the Zappa album, in the space of about a couple of days. I was also listening to Berioz and Cage for the first time and Indian sitar playing, so I was seeing and experiencing a lot, and I also got into Flamenco quite a bit.

I played acoustic guitar a lot in folk clubs, and one of the things that I started to do was that I would get an open tuning and improvise kind of ragas, to get the feeling of what Indian musicians were doing. From that, I can't even remember how it started to happen, I used to do things that involved sound more, not just the notes, I suppose because

Fred Frith

Indian music has a lot of quarter notes and bent notes you start to get interested not just in standard sounds. And I started to use the guitar as a drum also, because with a Spanish guitar you can get a lot of really good timbres by hitting it with the soft parts of your hand, you can hit the end and the top, so I was doing this kind of drumming and playing at the same time, but very much harmonically rooted in this Indian modal kind of feeling. So that's what started me, and in the process I began to hear a note that was generated when you you 'tap' a guitar; you get two notes, the one that you normally hear and the other one, which is coming from the left side of your left hand, which is not amplified because there's no body at the other end of the guitar. I read John Cage and this really made me think a lot about sound and about sound as music and about how the musical vocabulary that I'd been using was very limited in that sense and I was listening to a piece by Berio called *Visage* which was probably the first piece of really modern music I'd heard, which was basically a sound piece but had a very strong emotional feeling running through it as well, and this must had an impact on my hearing this note, because I wanted to hear more of this note. I started off by glueing a telephone mike to the wrong end of the acoustic guitar, but it actually makes more sense to do it on an electric guitar, so then I put a pickup at the wrong end of an electric guitar, I guess this was '69, '70. So I now started to work on a style of playing which where I would play independently with each hand with the added ingredient that I was getting two sets of notes at once.

I met Tim Hodgkinson at Cambridge and he introduced me to a load of jazz that I hadn't heard; Ornette Coleman, Coltrane, Miles and Mingus. We eventually formed Henry Cow together in 1968. It was more or less fun and remained so for a while. Around 1970 I graduated and we eventually moved to London and began to take ourselves more seriously, mostly as a result of Chris Cutler joining the group. He hadn't

Fred Frith

been a student and wasn't really interested in student attitudes which I guess we had at that time. We weren't taking it too seriously, or maybe we were taking it too seriously as a career but weren't taking it seriously enough on the basis of what we were doing. He tempered that and made us examine what we wanted from the music. We made our first LP in 1973 with Virgin who had just started. So we were in a position suddenly of having full page advertisements in the Melody Maker. We started touring France and Holland and coming across musicians who were much closer to us than anybody we'd really come across in England. We played little clubs in Holland, the government had sponsored youth clubs in most towns which were basically places where you could legally smoke pot, get exposed to culture of one kind or another and keep yourself off the street. The audience was usually so stoned they didn't even notice we'd been on the stage, that was sometimes difficult. France was a lot hotter. So we increasingly got further away from playing here and played in most European countries, continuously touring around and meeting people.

Henry Cow was unusual in incorporating completely improvised pieces into rock concerts in those days. Which put us in an awkward position which some of us still occupy - where on the one hand you're rejected by the improvising community because you're seen as dilittente rock musicians who don't know what they're doing, and on the other hand you're rejected by rock musicians because you're wierd improvisers who don't know anything about rock music. We suffered a lot from that kind of attitude and sometimes still do. It rankled that they could have that kind of attitude, especially amongst some of the LMC players.

So in a way Henry Cow was breaking a lot of ground that rock groups hadn't done before, for example we went in and improvised a whole bunch of different things and then we listened to the improvisations and took out a tape of the the parts that we liked and then began to write music or use

Fred Frith

the studio to treat the sounds to make another structure to go on top of it.

Lol Coxhill played with Henry Cow, in I guess 1972, and after he'd seen me play he said, 'You should go and see Derek Bailey'. So I went to see Derek play the next week and I was one of two people in the audience - his girlfriend was the other one, which is how it went for him in those days. And we've been friends ever since. What was important looking back at it about seeing Derek play for the first time was not even necessarily a technical thing of trying to see what he was doing but the realisation that somebody else was doing *something*, because you feel so isolated if you're experimenting or doing something different on an instrument. You really need feedback and to feel a part of something that's going on, you can feel so alone. Seeing Derek was like, 'Yes! Somebody's out there. Somebody's doing it, and not only that but they're doing it in a far more sophisticated way than I am and have developed their own whole language which they're totally inside of'. He was very impressive because he was so singleminded and clear about what he was doing, this was the most important thing for me. It gave me a lot of encouragement and it gave me the strength to really continue what I was doing and to find out what it was about what I was doing that was really important for me. That was crucial.

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Right from the beginning of Henry Cow up until now I've been interested in using whatever technology comes to hand. I mean, it's there for a reason you might as well find out what it does, although a lot of the times I've found its more interesting to make it do what it wasn't supposed to do. And because of this a lot of people who've seen me perform tend to think that I'm anti-technology in some way;

Fred Frith

especially when I was improvising with homemade instruments with kitchen utensils lying around, and beating the guitar with a hammer or a drilling it with a drill. It all seemed very crude, which it was, but the music that came out of it, if you listen to it separately from watching me do it, is not necessarily crude in the way that you might think. But as a result of that people assumed that I was trying to make a statement against whatever technology meant for them. But the contrary is true. I'm only ambivalent to the extent that I don't accept the design perimeters from people who aren't even thinking about the kind of music that I do. More and more musical instruments and musical technology are designed for a set of perimeters that cater to the lowest common denominator; it's based on things like how *clean* you can make a sound and how fast you can process. This is very useful in studios to people who are trying to make pop records or who are trying to get the ultimately reproducible snare drum sound or whatever kind of standardisation procedures that the studio is about. And pop music is to do with standardisation.

*Henry Cow was one of the first rock groups to take a political stance. Can you tell me about the context of that?*

Yes I suppose that's true, though our politics were often quite variable and often very confused, but we were quite radical. There was never really a political consensus within the group and that was one of the sources of tension. We were into releasing these rather pompous polemical statements about what we were doing, but actually not everybody in the group actually agreed with them so it was like anybody that talked the longest would get their way.

There was certainly a conflict between old fashioned leftism and Feminism in the group. We were three men and three women which was also quite unusual at that time and Lindsay Cooper had a lot of problems with the rather macho

## Fred Frith

manner in which we expressed ourselves, though that only really became clear through talking to everybody afterwards away from the heat of the moment. Because on the one hand we were becoming aware of, interested, and wanting to pursue, Feminist ideas and on the other hand we were still doing all the male posturing that we would have done if there hadn't been women in the group... But in terms of my own political education I can say I learnt more from the process of working with other people in that way than in any other form of education I can think of; travelling on the road with a group of people who are interested in changing all kinds of things and themselves and are finding all sorts of difficulties in so doing. And we were trying to realise all the contradictions we were involved in, and trying to promote ourselves as a band and trying to get away from the star system. There are always problems.

The politics which were interesting to me were the politics of collectivity. We made ourselves collective in a conscious and deliberate way, and set about making ourselves self-reliant in a way that was very unusual for a rock band with any kind of commercial success in those days. Of course it was fashionable for bands to travel around in buses but for a band to travel around on a bus, own their own PA system and have their own permanent road crew and administrator, and for everyone to get paid the same amount of money and discuss everything endlessly and be totally committed to this life from a political as well as a musical standpoint was quite unusual. We would have long and intense meetings all the time, even if it was just to discuss our itinerary, or which piece of equipment we could repair. Because we never had that much money and what we did have mostly had to go into keeping ourselves capable of playing, making sure everyone had strings or reeds and that the speakers weren't falling out of their cabinets, and we had two vehicles to keep in running order and so on. The way of working that I learnt from that is the way that I'm still

Fred Frith

doing now; the idea that you work through a community of like-minded people, the idea that you don't necessarily have to go through an agent to get a gig. You can set up a large network of musicians and people who are interested in music and help each other organise things, that's still the way I work now, in the states, or in Japan or in Europe, it's just the same.

People always dismiss it but I like marginality in a way. I embrace it completely. Often I hear music which is thought of as being totally insignificant and marginal which really has something that makes me interested in music again. Sometimes I look at the charts or the things that people write about music and I realise how totally insignificant what I do is to the vast majority of people. It has no effect, resonance or impact for anybody other than a fairly small group of people. I don't sell huge amounts of records, I don't get written about in the press but I do get real feedback, positive and negative which you don't get in the other position. So with improvised music I've actually turned down gigs unless they've been below a certain size, it doesn't make sense to me to improvise to more than five hundred people at a time. So after a gig people can come up to me and say, 'What the hell are you doing that shit for?' I like that sort of contact...

*(March 9th 1989.)*

STEVE BERESFORD

*Steve Beresford was one of the 'second generation' free improvisers who came to prominence in the 1970s around the London Musicians Collective and Musics magazine and pioneered some very different attitudes and approaches to free improvisation. He plays piano, trumpet and euphonium and homemade and toy instruments, often in a manner which disrupts, contradicts or subverts the musicians he is playing with. His playing incorporates aspects of humour, parody and pastiche, and is more directly addressed to an audience than that of the earlier players. These differences caused conflicts, for example between him and Evan Parker, some of which are recorded in Musics (see, for example, Beresford and Kieffer (eds) 1978). At the time of the interview much of his time was spent on commercial music, television soundtracks etc., improvisation taking up a relatively small part of his musical activities.*

I'll just give you a quick bio of my early development: My grandfather was originally a cornet player in an early jazz group. I didn't know that until shortly before he died, I was doing tours of America and I'd come back and he'd go, 'Oh yeah, I was in Chicago,' he was a cornet player in the Marines but I think he had a kind of dance band in the '20s. His brother was the piano player in the Dubrios Summers Orchestra, which was a society dance band in London which also backed up Louis Armstrong, he was also the house accordionist for Gormount British Films. My Father was a guitarist in the late '40s and early '50s, so there was always an interest in music.

When I was seven I took up the piano and by that time I was listening to my dad's 78s. I had private lessons initially with a woman called Mrs Edwards who completely blagged her way through my first year. So they put me in

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with Mrs Evans who was very good in fact, though ultimately I had a lot of trouble because I wanted to play Bartok and Debussy and she preferred the light classics, but she was much better... For years that meant that I couldn't improvise at all, I didn't know what to do when I sat down at the piano if there wasn't some sheet music there. Although right from the beginning I was listening to dance band music plus Doris Day, Frank Sinatra and very early on I started listening to Coltrane, Ornette Coleman and Charlie Parker and the usual things like that. I always preferred jazz to classical music, most of the classical music I heard before I did 'O' levels was Tchiakovsky and Grieg which I hated anyway. It was only after I started doing 'O' level music that I started listening to Bach and things like that, kind of more depressing music which I preferred, like Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme from Thomas Tallis*, which I think is a fantastic piece of music. They always keep trying to sell you things like Mussorsky's *Pictures At An Exhibition* and all this kind of programme music, which I always thought was crass and stupid. What I really liked was the more abstract types of music. Anyway by then I think I was playing in a soul band. I'd heard *Green Onions* by Booker T and the MGs and I started conceiving of how to improvise over a chord sequence. I was listening to Monk and Cecil Taylor, but I had no idea how they were constructing this music. Cecil Taylor sounded great but I didn't know how to do it, I thought he just banged the piano with his fists but it didn't sound the same when I did it. I mean I didn't know about chord sequences, I was living in Shropshire and nobody around there could tell me what a chord sequence was or how to form chords or all that sort of thing. But *Green Onions* was a sufficiently simple piece of music so I began to figure out how you can make one note improvisations over a chord sequence and joined a soul band by which time I was playing the trumpet as well; I took that up when I was 15. This would be about 1965, dead in the middle of the mod era,

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so we were playing Stax and Motown tunes, around Shropshire and Wolverhampton. That's how I started improvising initially, though I was a terrible jazz-snob at the time and would go, 'Oh, of course Coltrane is miles better than Junior Walker,' these days I don't actually listen to Coltrane much, I'm more likely to listen to Junior Walker. I did music 'A' level, and my parents kind of assumed that I was going to university which was unusual because I don't think anyone else in the family had ever been to university but I was obviously bright at school. I wanted a year off to play with the soul band but they said, 'No, no, you must go to university, in case you lose the place.' Which was not true but they didn't know the rules, even if the university had promised to keep the place they would have thought I ought to go. But I used to moonlight at weekends in the first year and played in the soul band anyway.

I actually hated university and didn't get on with any of the people. I studied music at York under Professor Wilfred Mellors, Robert Sherman Johnson, David Blake, Richard Aughton, I was just completely out of water. I mean I was a country boy, you know, and half the people in my year had double-barrelled names, I'd never met anybody with a double-barrel name before and I was completely lost for three years, hated it, and got a very bad degree. Basically music students are the most conservative people in the world, it was really frightening. I went up to York about two years ago and they were all wearing the same clothes and saying the same things and acting in the same way as they did when I was first there, and I immediately felt like this sprog from the country again! People in tie-dyed gypsy skirts going, (puts on public school accent) 'Oh Fiona, are you playing first violin in the Beethoven?' It's just terrible, frightening.

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- Yes, of course it's a class thing. Most of those people are going... well most of the women are going to marry bank managers and/or become music teachers. It's hopeless. Music colleges are just producing millions of piano players, I mean how many piano players can get a gig? How often do you get the chance to do a piano concerto? Its ridiculous, the whole thing is really stupid. And, although this was supposed to be the most avant-garde course, it was actually very conservative in most ways.

The only useful thing was that I could just muck about on my own. At that time I was listening to the Spontaneous Music Ensemble. Because in those days you could buy the Melody Maker and it would have a review of the new Albert Ayler LP or you could tune in to Jazz Club and it would have SME playing live, which is inconceivable now. This was the most advanced music and it was just on the radio and it did my head in, I was very impressed. I was listening Ornette and stuff, I just wanted to know what the most avant-garde shit was and then I would listen to it, John Cage and people like that. I was very attracted to the SME, Evan's playing was particularly good, it was like all his saxophone phrases would come out from underneath the music, almost like backwards playing. Then I picked up things like Manfred Schoof's *European Echoes*...

In 1971 I met these people called Neil Lamb and Dave Hertzvelt. Neil was a guitarist from Maine and he was immediately very interested in Derek (Bailey), and also in Luciano Berio and also things like The Band - what was going on in America in terms of rock music. He brought over this drummer from New York called Dave Hertvelt who was like Elvin (Jones) and we had this trio called Bread and Cheese, which was obviously very influenced by English improvised music. We really liked the jigsaw aspect; the way things lock together, how things would mask each other. I was very horrified when I heard things like Peter Brötzmann albums because there didn't seem to be any interlocking at all, it

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was just three people playing their arses off, that seemed very retrogressive to me at the time, it was like, 'Well, they're playing *jazz*, and we're playing *Improvised Music* which is a different thing.' And I think it was a valid attitude as well. Improvised music becoming very identified with jazz is really a bad thing... Anyway, we started working at York University, I think the first gig we ever did was the best. We were very interested in using voices as well as instruments and I started using lots of little instruments, and played bit of trumpet and piano. Derek heard us and liked my playing particularly. Initially he got us a gig in London at Ronnie Scott's which was obviously incredibly thrilling, I'd hardly even been to London before. Then he put me in a group with Frank Perry, Phil Wachsmann, and then later I think Christine Jefferies. There were three years after college when I was basically on the dole, trying to be a music teacher and failing very badly and playing with various types of groups.

I finally moved to London in 1974 and I played bass guitar with a group called Roogelator for a bit which was just pre-punk, a guy called Danny Adler, and Dave Soloman, he was listening to James Brown on the one hand and Han Bennik on the other. It was a great idea but never really came off. We always reacted very strongly against all that experimental rock music. Especially Henry Cow, that stuff where they change time signature every bar and play cheap pastiches of Messiaen and the words would be sort of apocalyptic. We always liked dance music and thought it was more intelligent musically than any amount of sort of sixth form intellectual... that's one of the things I've always tried to do, steer away from that sixth form intellectual music, I never liked that, not that I've got anything against intellectuals or sixth formers per se...

By the time I came to London I had a whole circle of friends. We had this group called the Three Pullovers, sometimes it was called the Four Pullovers. If I listen to

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that tape now it just sounds like white noise! It was a really radical group, Nigel Coombs was playing kind of feedback with piles of tobacco tins and a violin, Roger Smith was playing this kind of crab serial Spanish guitar which would suddenly sort of generate into epileptic strumming, Terry Day was playing Coca-Cola cans and me, I didn't play any piano with that group at all, just little toy instruments and squeakers and things. It was just like scratching about, but really intense, I can't imagine how anybody sat through it -except that it was so single minded. At that point I was absolutely *determined* that I wasn't going to play anything to do with jazz at all because that was somebody else's music. This was our music.

I was one of the founder members of *Musics* magazine, and we started the Musicians' Collective, which was after the Musicians' Co-op folded. But we had much more kind of liberationist ideas and we let anyone in, we didn't really realise that a lot of people that get attracted to those types of organisations are in there because of the organisation not because of the music, know what I mean? They like having meetings basically, and endless ideological discussions which never got anywhere. It never really did what I wanted it to do which was bring people together and sell the music, to reach out and convince people that this music was fun. The problem was that most of the *musicians* didn't think it was fun. How are you going to convince the public that it's fun if the musicians don't even have a good time playing it? You wonder, well, 'Why are they playing? They're not getting *paid*'. I always thought it was fun.

*What was the shift in emphasis in the seventies? What was different that annoyed some of the older players?*

Well we certainly never thought about technique. I think what caused some of the conflicts... Apart from that, well, it's similar to the reaction we got to an album I recorded

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about 18 months ago, called *Deadly Weapons*, with John Zorn, David Toop and an actress called Tony Marshall. It had very good reviews in all the big cinema magazines and popular culture magazines, but all the jazz magazines *hated* it, I mean they just *loathed* it. It was quite incredible, one of them said it was, 'chic elevator music for psuedo-leftist intellectuals,' which I take as a complement obviously! But what they hated about it was that they took jazz and juxtaposed it, like we would just drop into a jazz piece and drop out. And I think that was one of the things that caused the hatred in the '70s, it was like we were devaluing Derek's flattened ninths by saying, 'Ah well, let's have two minutes of flattened ninths and then do a Marlena Dietrich tune, or something'. Not that you plan it, you just do it, and you can use jazz as an element, part of 'the soup,' to quote Steve Lacy. And I think that the fact that Derek had obviously spent years of his life working on this language and then to see it picked up and thrown away like a straw dog was... I have to say that Derek has always been incredibly nice to me and deeply supportive, I don't think Derek could give a shit what people do with his ideas, I think he just plays. But maybe some of the people *did* give a shit, and certainly Evan and I had quite a big falling out at certain points. I mean I get on fine with him now, I think he's brilliant, and I never suggested for one moment that he was anything less than a brilliant saxophone player, but I think maybe he felt my music did.

If you're going to try and look at the Three Pullovers in terms of instrumental virtuosity, you're going to get nowhere. We *had* virtuosity, at least Roger did, Roger's a virtuoso guitarist, and Terry can just touch a cymbal and it speaks volumes, but what was important was just playing together. I think we were very very committed to the idea of group improvisation as one of the most important things. Most of the people I was working with came out of John Stevens's workshops. You may have seen John Stevens

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completely obliterate groups from time to time but in the workshops, he's different, I think they're very very good. People like Paul Burwell and David Toop went through them, and Roger Smith. A lot of my generation went quite religiously and what it fostered was that real deep belief in the whole group working as one unit.

I think what I was very interested in was, like, setting up a mood very quickly and then destroying the mood, which is why I like advertising music and TV music. You set a mood like *that* (*Clicks fingers.*) in a few notes and then completely go against it, almost like a tape edit, which is why I've always felt a great affinity with John Zorn's music. And I think Alterations, a band I had with David Toop, Terry Day and Pete Cusak was a very important band in terms of that juxtaposition. I really liked the idea of just becoming like a machine, although in some ways it was obviously very neurotic, but then I suppose I'm a very neurotic person anyway. The way I put it then made it sound very responsible and intelligent whereas in fact it was pure self-indulgence, which I think is fine as long as it works. Of course that's what we were always accused of, just being self-indulgent, but I would always say, 'What's wrong with being self-indulgent?' And I still believe that. And anyway I think everybody's a performer, everybody will deny that it's show business until they are blue in the face but in fact of course it's show business.

John Stevens, for example, is one of the biggest poseurs in the world, isn't he! He knows what he looks like when he's playing the drums, he'll think very carefully about what suit to wear, or what haircut. I think John is very self-conscious, not in a *bad* way, I don't see that as a pejorative term. And Derek, I know he just comes over as a mild mannered English guitarist, but this has clearly become Derek's persona, which to some extent he has internalised. And the fact that you become a mild mannered English guitarist does not mean that it is not show business. Evan

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was talking about the '60s when he started wearing T shirts and jeans on stage, saying that was a conscious thing, saying, 'Look, it doesn't matter what we look like, you've got to concentrate on the music'. I was surprised about Evan actually admitting that he made a *decision* about what he wore on stage. This is a great jump forward from the time when nobody would even dream of talking about clothes, this would have seemed like a bourgeois deviation of the highest order; purism was something that was in the air a lot at that time.

-Were we political? I think we were very political at one point, I mean very vociferous. I did a few benefits for the National Abortion Campaign. And I got involved with Music For Socialism, but I gave it up because it was the hegemony of the sixth form intellectual. Chris Cutler stood up and said, 'I don't have any interest in any music that isn't supported by the proletariat,' which is ridiculous, I don't know any proletarians who liked Henry Cow and it seemed such a stupid thing to say. Because he is somebody who despises popular music, he hates it. I was also involved in this anti-sexist music movement for a very short while until I discovered that they hated soul music. It was just around punk time and everybody was making moral judgements on the basis of genre, so somehow punk was supposed to be politically responsible, even though I thought it was completely *irresponsible*.

I always thought that most punk sounded like the Rolling Stones, who I've always hated, but I thought it was fun, I liked the kind of mindless violence aspect of it. And I really liked the Slits, who I worked with for a while. I thought they were absolutely the funniest thing I had ever seen, because they were so angry and so completely useless at the same time. I really liked that about it, it was completely incoherent rubbish and everybody was trying to be

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so macho when they were obviously a total weed, I really liked that too.

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I still improvise now, but I don't play in London, nobody will give me a gig in London, and I spend much less of my time improvising. I mean I used to playing down the Collective three times a week at one point. There were some ridiculous things like me and David would do Top Of The Pops on Thursday and play down the Collective on Friday in front of three people and a dog, which was great. I really loved that, but a lot of people *hated* it, it was like real flak for playing *pop* music. I do less improvising now, but everything I've done is absolutely *infused* with improvisation. Because that's how I found out what I wanted to do and that's how I gained confidence. At the moment I'm doing TV music and things like that...

I hate working on my own, the big problem of having worked in groups all my life is that confronted with a blank manuscript I'm completely at a loss and have no ideas whatsoever, completely useless. I mean I could do it, but it would take me days to write the simplest thing, whereas working with other people who make demands on me then I'm quite happy to try and meet those demands. I can do solo improvisations for an audience, but I would never sit down and improvise for my own amusement, or maybe for two minutes. I never practice, I never have practiced since I was about twenty.

*Looking at your musical involvements, from free music, to Doris Day songs and Television theme tunes, it strikes me that a lot of them seem to have nothing in common. Is there any point around which they interlock? Some central theme?*

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It's not for me to find that central theme, I don't think. I don't know, I think artists can be divided into two groups, if I *am* an artist which I seriously doubt, okay you can divide *people* into two types. People like John, or like Webern; who are always on about the core of the thing, the seed, the grail, the thing that defines everything else, and people like me; who wouldn't even dream of looking for what this thing is, who don't give a damn really (laughs)...

(16th February 1988.)

## PAUL SHEARSMITH

*Trumpeter Paul Shearsmith is amongst the musicians inspired to improvise through John Steven's teaching methods and performances at the Little Theatre club. He organises his own group and is also a member of Echo City, (see 1.18, 2.11) who build many of their own instruments from industrial materials, and stress the importance of workshops and making improvisation accessible, especially to politically and socially marginalised groups. For him improvisation is a practice which necessarily has directly political overtones. He is also an architect. I spoke to him in his local pub.*

I started listening to music through my brother, who was six years older than me, so I was kind of impressionable. He listened to rock 'n' roll, like Bill Haley, who was the vogue then. But for some reason he was also into George Lewis, the clarinet player, Louis Armstrong, Bunk Johnson, mainly trad. Then I remember Acker Bilk's records, the first ones, before he did *Stranger on the Shore*, and even before Acker Bilk there was Chris Barber doing things. And I remember my brother had a ten inch, or was it nine inch, LP, and it's got John Henry on one side and Lonnie Donegan on the other, and I really liked Lonnie Donegan. And he bought *Battle of New Orleans* and an EP of *Bring a Little Water, Dead or Alive*, I've still got all these at home... That's how I got into it. Then I took it a bit further. I went to boarding school and everybody had their rock heroes and photographs of them, and magazines, and in this magazine was a picture of Cannonball Adderly, I didn't know who he was only that he played a saxophone and therefore it must be jazz so I ought to listen to it. I then went and bought *Cannonball Takes Charge*, which is a really good record, and I was also listening to Ellington. The most avant-garde thing I bought was *Mulligan meets Monk*. I thought it was

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beautiful.

I played a trumpet given to me and my brother by somebody who used to look after me when I was a kid. Her husband had died, he'd played in the John Smith's silver band and it was his cornet, and old Besson. And I couldn't play it, I just couldn't play it. Then my brother joined the school band and came home with a bugle, which I used to blow on, and a friend at school took up the trumpet, so I used to blow on that a bit. I did ask my dad for trombone when I was about fourteen, but he was in hospital with a thrombosis when I asked him, and I didn't realise how serious a thrombosis was, and he said 'no'.

At school I only enjoyed sport, art and lunchhour. On leaving I went to Leeds School of Architecture and was there for about six years. I did a sandwich course, half a year there and half a year in an office, I failed one year, so I must have been there seven years. (*Laughs.*) I'd have been quite happy to stay there longer! I enjoyed it all.

I came down to London in 1972. I used to live in Brixton and go and see Stan Tracey play at The Plough with John Stevens on drums, with guest bass players and guest soloists. There was this girl who I came to London with called Ann, and we used to get pretty boozed up and shout and enjoy ourselves and really get into the music. John obviously recognised a malleable soul and invited us to the Little Theatre club. He asked me if I played an instrument and I said 'no.' But I still had this little silver cornet, so I took that down and I gave it John to blow and he couldn't play it either, because it was full of holes. So that was a great moment in my life to realise that it wasn't me who couldn't play the instrument it was the instrument that couldn't be played. I'd seen a cornet for sale in a junk shop on Upper Street for about 4 or 5 pounds, it was a Corton. So I went in and tried it and they'd got the valves in the wrong holes, I presume that's why it was only five pounds, so I bought that and started. I used to go to John

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Stevens's workshop and school in Bethnal Green and also play at the Little Theatre club, that's how I started playing. This was '73, '74, until the demise of the Little Theatre club in '75. If you turned up there at night time you could always have a jam after the main band had been on. John Stevens always seemed to be the inspiration for all of that, along with Trevor Watts. Some really brilliant players played there; Vervan Western used to play solo, and Larry Stabbins, and there was Marcio Mattos, Dave Defries, a lot of players came out of that place.

That finished about the time I was building the flat I live in and music became second place, or third place because sport was my other interest. So the trumpet was put in it's case and not brought out again. Then I went travelling in the States and found a pocket trumpet. And this inspired me to carry on playing because I really liked it as an instrument. And then when I came back I met a couple of people at a Trevor Watts' gig who I'd seen about and they were forming a group and asked if I wanted to play and told me to turn up at the London Musicians Collective and play, so I did, and then there were a whole series of bands after that, leading up to the Smith, Smith, Shearsmith, Bird and Musgrove group - everyone in that band learnt to play in the Little Theatre club - and Echo City.

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It seems quite important to me does Echo City because it's getting people to play; it's about getting people who have no musical history to play an instrument which itself has no history. They're not frightened of that instrument and therefore they don't have any preconceptions, we just take them around into all sorts of different situations and let people play them, which seems to me part of the whole ethos, that's how I got into into music in the first place, people playing instruments and improvising on them.

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For most people life is quite hard, there's a lot of boring parts to life and music is definitely a way of uplifting the spirit and the soul. Which in itself is a quite a political thing, teaching people that you have some control over your aspirations, your life. Like your aspirations might not be the end of the week's wages, they might be creative, you might be able to create something that's worthwhile for you and lots of other people. And up to now that creativity has been kept a part of the artist whose had to go to music college, art school, spend many years practice. My history of playing is totally built on not being a skill that's been learnt over many years, learning scales or mystifying... Improvised music, although it is a minority music, because it is difficult to listen to, anybody can play it, therefore you can become part of it.

So in the Echo City workshops we are getting other people to play with no hangups. We use the instruments with the mentally and physically handicapped. Downs Syndrome people are often brilliant, they often seem to have this really amazing rhythm within themselves and they enjoy playing the instruments. We start off with body-music, where people have to make a sound with their bodies, that's the simplest instrument there is. You start off with clapping, nobody's embarrassed by that, and stamping your feet, then you see what other noises they can make, like you might go (*Pops finger from mouth.*) and say, 'Who can do that then?' Then they'll start tittering at the farting noises and it's really a good way of breaking any barriers. Then we show them how the instruments work and then let them have a go, which might be 20, 25 minutes of cacophonous noise. Then we get them to sit down and organise groups to play on different instruments then we encourage them to work out a piece to play on that instrument to the rest. So they get some idea of playing to an audience, and the audience is enjoying everything so they clap and they all enjoy being

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clapped at. And then we'd use those same groups and do orchestrated pieces which would have a leader which tells them when to play louder or softer... It's quite simple and requires no particular level of musical competence. loads of fun and lots of noise, interesting noise.

And what happens is that hopefully the audience all becomes players! There isn't an audience that you feed music to, they all come and participate. So what I'm saying saying that everybody should improvise and that everybody can. But I think that one of the problems is that society is very wary of improvised music, because it does lead people to improvise, to ask questions. The whole basis of it is to ask questions. That's another one of the things about Echo City. It's about getting people who haven't had a chance before to realise that they should have better expectations out of their lives, which then becomes a political question, and I don't think the powers that be want those questions to be asked. That is not a just a link with politics, that is *the* thing, that is what it is all about, freedom, do you have freedom of expression? Freedom of expression is being cut back drastically.

I joined a left group during the Miners' strike, the Workers Revolutionary Party, because I thought it was time to get of my arse and do something about all these things I'd been talking about. I used to go down to the picket lines in Kent selling *Newsline*. Hard work, getting up early, or not getting to bed at all, and driving down, but terribly rewarding. The miners were fine people. It was an experience that's been very important to me. I'm not involved now in the WRP because of all the splits and things and I haven't really got the time to understand everything that's going on. It has been important though, there are a lot of things that I understand and that I learnt from that period... You can't stop people struggling. There might be turmoil and trouble for a long time but you can't stop people wanting

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something better...

If you are trying to build a new culture you can't forget the best parts of life, which are music and art, in all revolutions there have been places for the artist, surely there must be room for the musician too. The visual artist is far more readable for the masses but surely music, and the operation of how it's done... surely if someone has experienced *that* then they are not going to want to lose it, and they are going to end up a better person for that as well.

Though improvised music is offering a freedom to people to better their lives a lot of the people doing it aren't interested in politics except on a superficial level. They think because they're doing music they don't have to be part of the political act. They think it is a political act which I'd be very wary of, it might even be a copout. After spending some time in the WRP I was surprised talking to musicians who I'd respected because of their socialist views and everything and then finding out how little they knew about why things happened politically. Trevor Watts, who is somebody I completely admire, although he could see why he was being political through his music couldn't see why things were happening around him, why the National Health Service is being dismantled, why this and why that, when there are reasons for it. They don't understand the reasons and if they had involved themselves more in politics they would know the reasons. I think musicians shouldn't see themselves as apart from politics. That's a grave mistake, because you are affected by it. Even if you believe that music can change people you've got to understand what you're trying to change them from and to. It's no good saying you're enlightening everybody, why do they need enlightening and what are the problems?

(2nd March 1988.)

ROBERTO BELLATALLA

*The Italian bassist is a well known face on the free jazz and improvising scenes, playing in a number of groups, including The London Bass Trio and Dreamtime. I interviewed him in a house in Walthamstow where he was renting a room. Roberto knew what he wanted to say, and started speaking, quickly and clearly, as soon as I turned the machine on and ended long after the tape had finished. I hardly asked a single question. (see 2.3)*

People are bombarded with commercial music, which nowadays in not even played anymore, it is made by machines, that's what you hear all the time, on the television, radio. It's big business. And that is one reason why so few people are interested in our music.

For me it was different in the '70s in Milan - I'll just cut all the why I started playing and how. The situation at that time was that the Communist Party and similar organisations were putting lots of money into jazz and particularly into improvised music. Milan was one of the centres there, Rome stayed more traditional, but Milan held the Italian jazz avant-garde. It was a bit like belonging to a secret society before then but suddenly there were huge audiences, thousands of people, programmes on TV and radio, articles in magazines, everybody was interested. And it had a cultural, political and social background which was very important too. Jazz and improvised music became the music of a cultural revolution, in that moment in Italy it was happening. Culminating in 1976 there was a political shift to the left and in those years we would have gigs every week or every few days, particularly in the Summer. All over Italy at these Community Party festivals you would play for people who were not a jazz audience or an improvised music audience but families, for people, just people, and it was

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fantastic to see how they would react. Improvised music is not really an intellectual thing. It's a bit like acupuncture, you are hitting certain points and we all have them and if the music is honest and comes from the depth of your heart people respond automatically.

But now it seems to me that for the first time the young musicians are going backwards - I'm talking about jazz. Now people are going back to the '40s and '50s, rediscovering things and bringing them up in a pedantic way that for me doesn't express anything. The '80s have been conservative, people like Courtney Pine and Loose Tubes and all these things, there's absolutely nothing new there. These kids seem to imitate rather than developing a personal approach, a language. They have got heroes like Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Joe Henderson and they try to *imitate* them; there are books available to learn the solos, and records and tapes. Try, try, try, try for two, three years and they are able to play that solo, so they are hipsters, they put on some fancy clothes and that's it! That's how it works. But think of John Coltrane - *their hero* - John Coltrane; he pushed forward relentlessly, all the time...

And now there is an organisation around that too, which has been taken from the pop music world and adapted to jazz. And they had to refuse improvised music because they can't sell it: it is unpredictable, it is uncontrollable. It is much easier for them to deal with nice, softly spoken young chaps who don't drink and smoke, than with the usual jazz motherfucker that drinks and smokes and swears and goes and plays his ass off, it's not so dangerous. So, the pop business came into jazz and now improvised music is having a tough time because of that.

And there is a new moral to all this: you are right if you show that you are successful and success is money and exposure, no matter that you've got nothing to say! These new jazz musicians have seen the older players still playing in pubs and they accuse them all of being old and getting

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big belly's from all the beer. So they look around and think, 'Well I'm not going to do that, I'm going to be *successful*,' because you are something if you are successful and otherwise you are *shit*. So that is one explanation why the music has taken this turn.

I don't want to name names, but I already have done, so I'll carry on; like Andy Sheppard, Courtney Pine, they've got big managers behind them. I would like to see improvising musicians with big managers behind them. I would like to see what the people would think if they turned on the TV and instead of seeing Courtney Pine with his big eyes they would see some of the other motherfuckers hanging around in London. Because in London there is an incredible amount of fantastic, very creative musicians - I mean people like Evan Parker, Derek Bailey, John Stevens, Louis Moholo, Dudu Pukwana - they've *created* a certain style. Like, why am I here in London? I'm here because the music coming from England had already influenced me when I was in Italy. That music was closer to me than American jazz, for sure.

I left Italy because I was called to play in Holland by Tristan Honsinger. It was just the chance I was looking for to check out how things were. In Italy there was, and still is, a limited number of people you could play with, but I'd played with people like Evan Parker and Elton Dean there so I had some addresses in London, and I got gigs here too. And I liked it, I still do - in spite of everything. I mean, every gig brings so much musical emotion and I am very happy when I am playing. Improvised music gives you so many ways and opportunities to develop within yourself, and in a group, they are infinite; so you can really progress every time you play. But then it comes to the end and you count the money and think 'Oh shit, we have played for five, six people'. Maybe we have played a great gig but not enough people. But things will change in the '90s, improvised music is still strong - it's becoming stronger and stronger. And it is not a fashion, it's your way of life, it's your

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commitment, it's your *weapon*...

Yeah, that's right, it's a weapon. Are we living in times of peace, or of war? Music is a weapon. It's a weapon culturally; in practical terms it's what you can do in your own world to try to give an impulse for things to change in a certain way rather than another. It would be much easier for all of us to put on nice suits and ties and fashionable hairstyles and play what is fashionable now, which is not what was fashionable yesterday or what is going to be fashionable tomorrow. 'Okay you want me to do this, I'll do this.' It's like going to see Margaret Thatcher and saying, 'Yeah right, I agree, I give up'. So it is a weapon because instead you say, 'No, *I believe in something*.' It's not only musical you see; it goes much further than that. Music is what you live, every day, every moment and when you go to play is just the moment that you open these doors and project it.

So music can contribute, because everybody listens to music, it's just a matter of what kind of music. Every time you turn on the television or the radio it's like buy, buy, buy, buy, buy, buy, buy this, buy that. Why don't they want any other music? Because music might be dangerous, music might make you think; and their 'system' - which is a word I hate - doesn't want people to think, to have a choice, to have their own ideas about things. You must buy, in the end *you must buy*. But our voice when we play music could be one of those voices saying, 'No, fuck it, why?'

Nothing in history has ever lasted forever, so even this system has got to change, and when it does one of the things that is going to be left could be the music we play. Because it is an extremely open music. It has to be, life is an infinite immense thing, so you can't just isolate one part of it. Life and music are mysteries: you never stop learning, there is always a point from which you can go forward, all the time. I'm glad I've still got so much to learn...

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I guess in the end you have a choice, you are on this side or on that. Everybody has this choice. And if you are on our side you know you are going to take lots of shit, it's going to be much more difficult. But at the same time it's going to be much more rewarding, probably not in terms of wealth, but you are going to produce the best. It is a choice of knowing or not knowing. I mean a lot of people feel quite happy reading *The Sun*, without wanting to know, and lots of other people go on and read this, this and that books just to know. When it comes to creativity, what gives you the fuel and the information to continue? It is knowing. And whatever can stimulate that, from reading to listening to other music, looking for manuscripts, trying this and that; because the more you play, the more you know.

And music is just one aspect of this; it's about how you look at so-called 'reality', you know? We are so much indoctrinated - and this is obvious - from the moment you are born, wherever you are born there is someone to tell you this is this and that is that. If you have this thought, 'is it true that this is reality? What is this "reality"?' Then you have to start again right from the beginning and this is very difficult. If you play improvised music you have done it; you break with something; you destroy something that is a preconceived idea and start again. Playing double-bass has inspired me in this respect, because it is an instrument that doesn't have frets and the first thought for me when I was a kid was how come there are frets on a guitar but not here? And I worked out that there were more notes, because there are all the quarter tones and, well... anything! I realised that music is not just twelve notes and that the thought that music is twelve notes is a western thought. It is something that has been created artificially and put into a dogma. But in other places of the world it is different so who is right and who is wrong? The fact is that my instrument has got more than twelve notes. So the instrument taught me a lot and I think that every instrument has got

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this possibility and we as human beings also.

Music-making stimulated me to move in a certain way, because everything in music is so relative. Like, starting from a middle 'C', well, it could be slightly sharp or slightly flat. But the big mistake in western music has been to fix things into certain stereotyped ideas, that is always a mistake; science, in the first place, has always proved the contrary. But the Christian influence on our way of living has stopped this natural process of creativity. For centuries and centuries the only music allowed was based on a certain pentatonic scale, everything else was forbidden. So it has done a lot of damage, our culture has for two thousand years being blind and deaf. This society has burned people for centuries, just for saying 'I think there is another way,' not even saying, 'You are wrong'. They have said, 'no, you must live *this way*,' But with every possible thing, what we say today is tomorrow no longer true. And this is what we are. Everything is like that; no wave is like the other ones. By refusing to acknowledge this we have built this system, we feel safe within these walls, with what we know, and with the language that we have constructed. Everything is built just to make you feel sure. But in reality you are *more fragmented*, because in the back of your mind there is this knowledge that you are going to die, you are going to lose everything, every object. This cup is like all my life, it can break at any time, my bass too!

So, I can see that everything is a vibration, we are a vibration, everything that is matter is a vibration which assumes certain aspects, colour and things. And, say, the Egyptians knew that very well, but something got lost because now we don't know it, we don't consider that at all. Everything is a vibration and we have to respect this, because the possibilities from this are infinite, and when you are playing an instrument you vibrate along with it - quite literally, you vibrate. Now that goes much further

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than these notes or these scales. Just one note, just one, can help you to understand lots of things if you are ready to enter this world of vibrations.

What you are trying to reach is a climax on an emotional and spiritual level and if that doesn't happen then the gig is not happening. But even if there is just one person there who can feel it, you can feel it; I assure you, you can feel it. If they are vibrating on the same wavelength with you, you know it exactly. And maybe this is important, maybe you are holding the world together! Who knows? You know, when the Tibetans are blowing their trumpets and chanting they are holding the world together, they are doing their bit, it is acupuncture. You must touch that spot, because the world needs that. Maybe us as human beings we are just *meant* to do that, maybe that is our job, not just in playing music but whatever you do should be done with certain kinds of natural laws and we are like those doctors... So you know just maybe going to play a gig in a pub might be useful.

You know, I do believe that, because it is our little contribution. There are different levels and this is on the vibrational level, which maybe not everybody understands, and also on an emotional level. I believe in playing acoustic music, to make wood vibrate and skins vibrate, and just that can bring people closer to the rainforests instead of getting them closer to the Manhattan skyscrapers. I believe in that; and as far as I am concerned New York can sink into hell right now, I don't care. But don't touch the forest, you know? Because we belong to there, the forest is keeping us alive as long as it is there and so is the sun and the sea, the animals whatever. So the '90s is going to be interesting, I am full of... not expectations, but hopes. We have as human beings reached a certain point and it is a crucial point. If we go any further there is no way back, it is our children's future and it is in our hands - and you know music does contribute, yes.

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Now, I'm not saying that these things are what we think about when we're playing, because when we play that is all there is and the music must speak for itself, it doesn't need these arguments, but this is the sort of thing that I think many musicians think about, this is why we do it.

Of course sometimes I bang my head against the wall! I hate to say it, but sometimes we sit down and go, 'Oh fuck! No gigs, no money, no satisfaction, oh *shit!*' And you can get really depressed. And you are bound to get a bit depressed now and then, it's normal. I mean we are human beings too; though I wish I could be a Tibetan monk and be above all this. But I'm not. So you are bound to fall, and shit, I have to take it.

But we are lucky in England, if we didn't have Social Security improvised music might not have gone on at all! In Germany and Holland there is state subsidy but here there is nothing, the musicians have had to do everything for themselves. And on their part the musicians here have really failed to do something together; there is not such a unity between them. Everybody here acts like an individual and that can be dangerous. We need managers, records, we need to be organised and push ourselves forward so that they can't ignore us.

Look, I'm 35 years old, this house isn't mine, I have to pay rent for it. I never earnt any money out of music and the chances are that the future isn't going to be much different. But I've made this choice, I didn't have to do this, I could have gone, 'Yessir,' dressed nice and played nice music, but this is what I have done. And I'm not bitter, because I'm still learning, I am still alive...

(16th October 1989.)

## ANNIE WHITEHEAD

*Trombonist Annie Whitehead plays in a variety of situations most of which are jazz, or dance, oriented and occasionally in free jazz, for example in John Stevens' Fast Colour, and free improvisation. The interview is particularly useful in offering some insight into the attitude towards improvisation from the point of view of conventional music education, and in some of the areas of the music business from which improvisers are usually excluded. I spoke to her in her council flat in Bethnal Green. (see 2.10)*

I started playing music really in a structured way, just reading, I never thought of myself as an improviser, I'd never heard of it really. I started to play the tenor horn, aged about 12 and I moved on to the trombone a few years later. And all I knew was that I liked music, I liked the sound of it and it was a big part of my life. But not jazz, I never heard any jazz, I just heard the radio and classical stuff at school, Beethoven, Bach... I took music up to 'O' and 'A' level, so there was a certain amount of... I've forgotten what you call it, working out what the composer was doing. It was all geared to writing and playing, and writing was this kind of mystical thing that you didn't do unless you were very, very clever or very talented. It was like something that was basically bestowed upon you. You were taught that you probably wouldn't become a great composer but you could play the works that the great composers had written, if you worked hard enough. So I just took it all for granted really and went along with it. And then it got to the point where I really didn't know where it was going to lead me. I didn't think I wanted to be a music teacher, which seemed to be the only thing you could do and there was no way I would have thought of being a composer or conductor. By that time I was playing in a big band, The

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Manchester Youth Stage Band, but I was like... I knew people took solos but it didn't seem to have anything to do with me, I was on third trombone or whatever. I went on lead trombone as well and that's not a soloing part, it was the second trombone that took the solos and that was really taken up by this woman, everyone was completely in awe of her. The trombones didn't get many solos anyway, the saxophones did the most and we just thought that this was completely beyond us, a complete gobbledegook that we didn't understand.

I didn't know what I was going to do and there was a lot of pressure on me to stop playing, I was about 15 at that point, and everybody was going, 'Well, what are you going to do?'. And I was saying that I didn't really want to teach music and I did like playing the trombone and that's all I know. And they just said, 'Well, forget it.' This was the school, my parents were fine. They were kind of a bit bemused by all this. I would enter competitions and win prizes and things like that, but as soon as it got to point where I was saying, 'Well, I want to take this further,' there was a really big block against it from the school. They said, 'You should concentrate more on your academic subjects because you're not going to get far playing the trombone'. So I wrote to Ivy Benson (*Of the legendary Ivy Benson Big Band.*) and she gave me an audition and I joined the band as soon as I was able to. We didn't improvise but I had heard bits of improvisation by now and found it interesting. I think people don't really get taught how to think, to improvise, at school. At school you get books which don't really encourage your ear, they encourage your technique and that's quite good but your not really encouraged to think for yourself in music at all. I remember it must have been three or four years before I thought of just playing a tune to myself, that I'd heard on the radio, say. I just sat and worked through all these excercises, scales and things, which puts you in very good stead because

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you develop a good technique, but you don't know what to do with it. And when I joined Ivy that was even worse, absolutely no improvisation whatsoever, and if you did improvise you were punished! She would show you up on stage or be very nasty to you, or make you play a load of trombone features that you'd never seen before in front of the audience, like *Getting Sentimental Over You*, which I'd never even heard before. It was just terrifying when she did that, she could be very nasty when she wanted to. You actually felt that you ought to conform because if you didn't the rest of the band would go, 'Oh god, she's in a bad mood,' and everybody had a hard time. We played in Germany quite a bit and I started going to clubs afterwards and meeting people, one night we went to this nightclub and they had this band who played mainly for dancing but they did do a bit of improvisation. One night they asked me to sit in to play *When The Saints Go Marching In (Laughs.)*, and Ivy caught me at it so I was really unpopular for a while.

So then I left Ivy and stopped playing for a while because I didn't really want to carry on doing that. I went to Jersey, I was living with a musician, and he could play jazz - he was a piano player - but it just seemed to be a different thing, something a piano player could do but I couldn't. Then I fell in with a group of friends and they knew I played trombone and they said, 'Why don't you just come and play?'. So that's how it all started, I just used to go round a play with them, at that point I was really only hearing pop music but I went round to their place and started hearing jazz. I was about 18, 19...

I started learning to play jazz, completely by ear. I started off by trying to learn other people's solos to get my ear working and to find out what they were doing. And then you start being able to do it by yourself. There was a guy in that band who really helped me out a lot transcribing people's solos for me, there's a lot of people who've been really encouraging. Because I've always been very shy about



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improvising, I still do feel like that even though people say, 'Oh, you're an improviser now, you are actually a grown up improviser,' I still feel really insecure at times, not in front of audiences but in front of other musicians. I still get terrible nerves if I play with someone who I haven't played with before, because with some people there's barriers to be broken down; sexual barriers, things like that, some guys are a bit... I'm not talking about free improvising people now even though there is one or two... I'm talking about the older school who did it differently. I can find my way around a chord sequence but I wouldn't do it the same way as them and I wouldn't kind of show off my prowess at it, finding eight different voicings on a minor chord, you know. Because I don't think that's important, I think what's important is the communication with the audience. A lot of improvisers are quite insular, they have to be as well, to kind of give them the commitment they need to carry on in their own particular art or craft. But I'm not really like that, I'm very kind of instant towards the audience. And taking what's happening from the musicians around me and giving back, that's when I like it best. But it's hard, a lot of musicians are very opinionated about certain ways of playing and things like that and a lot of people aren't open to doing it a different way.

I didn't know about playing free music until four or five years ago. I used to hear it on record but I didn't play it. But ever since I've known John (Stevens) I've thought more about improvising, no... Paul Rogers, that was the first time, it was when his band had just started. I went to the first rehearsal and we played a couple of tunes and a couple of solos and he said, 'Okay, you start this next one,' and I said, 'Uhm, pardon?' and he said, 'Well you just play, it's easy,' and I said, 'I can't do that' and he said, 'You can. It's easy, it's the easiest part of the whole set, all you have to do is just play and then we'll come in after a while'. And it was awful. I went home and

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came back next day, really worried about this and thought to myself, 'Well okay this is it then, the band's waiting so I'll play something,' and I played about three or four notes and just stopped. Come the gig I just played something, and I felt happier about it because I'd done it. Nobody commented on it, nobody said, 'That was terrible,' or 'That was wonderful,' or anything, but nobody commented on anything else either. So I just thought, 'Oh well, I got through that one okay'. And that was how I started. But most of the solo work I've done has been over quite structured things like chord sequences or structured rhythms.

I moved from Jersey, I learnt to play a bit of jazz and moved to London, not to play but to listen because I knew that all these people, Louis Moholo, Chris McGregor, were playing just across the water and I was missing it all. I went out to gigs every night really and because of that met musicians and started making contacts and started getting sessions. I fell into the session scene quite easily, I was just lucky, I was in the right place at the right time. I didn't realise this but there's very much a kind of loyalty thing involved. If somebody books you for a session and then you get booked for a session and you get to do the booking for it then you're supposed to ring the people who got you the session from last week, even if you think that they're not really right right for it. And I never did this, I always tried to book who I thought were right for the session. Anyway I did sessions for a long time, I still do some now actually but not as many as I used to, which I'm quite glad about.

My main source of income is from the record that I made. I don't know how many I sold because I can't get any information out of Virgin (Records) about it at all. But it must have sold a lot in Germany, because as soon as I go to Germany all the journalists turn out and want interviews and

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that sort of thing. It got unprecedented fantastic reviews in every daily paper and glossy magazine. So that's my main source of income, I'm still doing a lot of work in Germany on the strength of that. I'd like to make another record but I don't think I'm going to be able to do it in London, nobody here seems interested. I've sent people tapes but it seems to be more than that in record companies, you have to socialise, and be all nice and I'm not really up to that at the moment, not in London.

I thought of moving to Barcelona but it's dead there. But *all* my work's done in Europe. The only thing I do here and that I'm committed to is John (Stevens)'s group Fast Colour. But its always been like this in England, playing jazz, people think you're some strange animal that doesn't need to eat or pay the rent, like all you want to do is play music and live in a dive. And this has been the whole image that's been associated with jazz, so people don't want to pay you for it, they actually think they're doing you a favour by letting you come and play in their clubs.

*Is it difficult being a woman in what is traditionally such male preserve?*

Jazz started off by being quite competitive. When I started of listening to jazz, Charlie Parker say, I knew that they had cutting contests and things like that. And that was still happening to me, people were going 'Oh, well I'm better than you' and there was this quite strong competitive edge to it and I think a lot of women aren't interested in that, I know I certainly wasn't. I mean I had too many problems just playing you know? That's happened to me since then as well. I was doing a gig once when this other trombone player got on stage, I was playing a solo and he made sure he played a louder, higher one, and I know it was just for that reason because you could see it. I was actually embarrassed because the audience could see it as

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well. The guy stayed onstage for the rest of the gig, it really was a very competitive thing. I kind of felt sorry for him. But I think that's why a lot of women haven't been involved in jazz.

I mean I feel a lot better about it now because I think that if people have got problems then that's their problem really. I do resent it sometimes when it's communicated to me, people calling me 'Dear', things like that. It's very subtle but you can often see it when you first meet people, they really don't think you can play. I did a gig with a German pick-up band and this guy called Micheal O'Daniel, who I'd never met before. He didn't want to rehearse so I did a rehearsal with the band and that was okay. I knew that he just didn't take it seriously and before the gig he was very, kind of, cool. He was also kind of sexist, you know, he rang me up at night saying did I want to come to his room for a drink with him, and this was our only kind of level of communication up until the gig. And then the gig was fantastic and he kind of turned round and looked at me, like, really surprised. It's still kind of happening, you know.

I mean I kind of say that I'm not really all that bothered, but I am, you know, it makes me angry. Then, yesterday, well... I had a really bad day because all kinds of things went badly, like I stayed in bed late which I really don't like doing because you get up and think, 'Oh shit! It's going to be dark soon and I haven't done anything,' and I was sitting practicing and thinking about how I could get a record deal and thinking about all the kind of things that record companies want from women, which is that they be young and good looking and charismatic... And I was just feeling angry about the whole thing...

It's also very hard because it depends on how much women are prepared to do to become integrated or to match up to the expectations of men around them, which is why there's been a lot of women's groups. Because as well as the

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communication and understanding of each other that comes about through playing there's also on the edges of it a lot of discussions. Also I think a woman would admit to another woman that she's learning a lot rather than to a man because then you get the paternal thing. I learn all the time from playing with men and with women. I suppose I went through that thing of just wanting to play with women but I came out the other end.

I don't really believe in being separatist, it creates a ghetto. I've been part of women's bands before and enjoyed but I feel a bit funny about women-only gigs, which I can understand politically because maybe be women do want to go and have a good time free from being hassle from men. If you do do a women's gig it's great because you get a fantastic response but sometimes I think, what does that response hinge on? And it's a very big show of solidarity. It's not that much of a critical audience, which sometimes you need, sometimes you need some kind of criticism of your music. The only time I've disappointed women members of the audience is by having men in the band, I've seen it happen. But I think that's a bit narrow minded isn't it? Because it's still music. I've actually dodged the feminist question quite a lot by saying to myself, well, it's still music, that seems to be the bottom line for me.

*(19th March 1988.)*

STEVE NOBLE

*Percussionist Steve Noble is amongst the younger, sometimes called 'third generation' improvising musicians who came to prominence in the mid '80s. (1.19) He grew up listening to records by the first generation of British, Dutch and German improvisers and his playing is a logical continuation of theirs. Interviewing him at his housing association house near Kings Cross, he was unwilling to link free-improvisation up with anything outside of music. He was also very concerned to separate free music from jazz, and had a lot to say about both the younger and older generations of British jazz players. I gave an introduction which included my interest in persuing links with Surrealism, politics and so on...*

Do you think you can include ideas that come from the Arts when you're talking about improvising? I mean most of those people come from a middle class background... Also I wouldn't want to connect it up with politics or anything like that. You know, when the Miner's strike was on all these people were suddenly saying, 'Oh, well we should be doing something to support them'. I just think that's bollocks. I mean, most Miner's would probably tell you to 'fuck off' if you started playing. I think that because its completely open when we're playing some people think that there is some political statement being made. But I wouldn't choose to point that out, it seems naive to say, 'Oh I'm making a statement'.

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For me music was always there, pop music, on TV, then going up to Scotland and seeing marching bands, and then just wanting to get a drum, why a drum I don't know. I got my

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first drum when I was about eleven. Then starting a pop group and actually getting bored with it quite quickly. Then buying Melody Maker in '71, '72 and there were articles about jazz musicians. I bought my first drum kit when I was about 12 and I was given a book put together by the Paiste cymbal company which had all the drummers that they gave cymbals to. So there was the drummer from Roxy Music, Pink Floyd, Ian Paice from Deep Purple and John Bonham from Led Zeppelin, then Ed Blackwell, Paul Lovens, Paul Lytton, Han Bennik, John Stevens, Tony Oxley... and all these wierd kits. Then I remember seeing the Modern Jazz Quartet drummer Connie Kay on TV, and he had a nice kit. Then being able to read about all these people in Melody Maker and Jazz Journal. I don't know why but then I started buying improvised music records, I was about 13 or 14. We used to live out near Oxford and my stepfather used to come down to London for business and he used to have to go and get records like *SME For CND*, all dressed up in his suit and briefcase and bowler hat or whatever.

When I was sixteen I had a year of drum lessons with this guy called Nigel Morris who used to play with Isotope who were quite a successful English jazz-rock band. I used to go to gigs with him and see him play, but there was always something about it that didn't feel right. And that was to do with him making me take on the techniques that he was taking on. But I didn't really have a direction, because I wasn't playing with anyone. Then, when I was seventeen I moved up to London and got a job in an auction room. I was going to all these concerts and that was great, but I still hadn't met people... so I thought, 'fuck this!,' because it was going nowhere, quit the job, signed on and spent the next year practising. Then I made contact with this Nigerian hand drummer called Elkan Ogundi and started playing with him, and I went to the Barry Summer school a couple of times, the second one was good because I met (pianist) Alex McGuire, but I still think it's shit. I was on the jazz side

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rather than the improvising side and they're such miserable shits that teach you, they're hopeless! There's no joy...

Through going to gigs I met the people who went on to form Rip, Rig And Panic who were quite open considering they were working in the rock area. So I did that off and on for about three years. Then, in about 1984/85, I got together with Alex McGuire and Alex Kolokowski and did the first Ubiquity Orchestra thing. Then me and Alex (McGuire) started putting our own concerts on at the LMC as the Ping Pong Club and did a radio broadcast, and people got to know we were playing and that we existed. We played with Derek and he asked me to play with him at the Bethnal Green Library, and then to Greece to do two concerts and some things round London.

I'm just about making a living out of it now, it's been a while since I've had to go and do other things, though I used to have to work in the Post Office, and there's always Unemployment Benefit; almost all artists and musicians have to use that, then there's the Enterprise Allowance scheme, and I occasionally do sessions with jazz or rock groups. I don't want to be a jazz drummer though. I mean if someone offered me a gig doing Monk tunes then I'd do it, but I'm not going to go, "Yeah great, now I'm fucking Jimmy Jazz Drummer!" I've got a great interest in it, but I don't want to be a Clark Tracey or a Mark Taylor. They he might have six gigs this week which pay them £50 a gig, but it must be so depressing. Night after night playing a music that's already happened and has been quite vital, just rehashing it, and very badly. I mean if you've seen Philly Jo Jones, or Kenny Clarke or Max Roach play, you know how brilliant they were... but what's the point in listening to, say, '50s Hard Bop and saying "Yeah wow I like that period, I'm going to put together a group like that." What's the point? There doesn't seem to be any future in it. But then who am I? You know, I might not have a gig for a month and they might play every night.

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You hear these jazz guys going, 'Oh we get such a rough deal in this country,' well I couldn't give a fucking shit. I mean jazz has got nothing to do with this country! These "great British jazz musicians," I mean, compared with a lot of the American musicians, they're not great, they're not great! Like Pete King, I'm sure he's an amazing alto player, but it doesn't seem to *mean* anything. You can still buy a Charlie Parker record from 1945 and it's absolutely amazing music - and when you hear poor imitations, well for me it's not very interesting music. It could be a great night out, but it's just entertainment really...

Myself I just enjoy making music the way I am at the moment. Which is using improvisation, with people who are prepared to get onstage and just play. Without any predetermined elements apart from the group I've chosen to play with and the gear I've taken with me; like if I haven't taken my bugle then I can't play the bugle. With a lot of people I improvise with it's completely open. If you do a session or some jazz then you know what it's going to be like beforehand, you're going to be asked to fit into a certain role, but I've got the chance to say 'no' to that.

In the free improvising world there's a lot of real *individuals* and not many people want to be like that, a lot of drummers just want to sit behind a drum kit and go 'boom chick, boom chick...' and if you go out to the pub and listen to people's conversation then a lot of people talk like that too, and I'm not saying I'm better but I'm just looking for something else... But the times are so against being creative in any way and maybe people look at at me and think "Wow, what a dickhead!" and think what I do is a lot of shit, but I just want to play, and I have done since I was a kid. I don't know where it all leads but I just want to play. I don't want to try and justify improvising, I just enjoy it. And it just seems such a logical way of making music and it's a very genuine way of making music.

Steve Noble

I'd be interested to know whether other people have got a sort of theory about why they do it. I certainly haven't, it just seems very logical...

I mean, I'm trying to think about why I'm trying to play this music. Maybe I don't even have to think about it. It just seems that's what I want to do. I find that I'm just very interested in percussion and finding new ways of playing things...

*(3rd August 1989.)*

MICK BECK

*Mick Beck is a saxophonist and leader of the Sheffield-based big band Feetpackets who combine free improvisation with many different varieties and levels of composition. He also plays in a number of other contexts including solo and in Derek Bailey's Company. He also has a very successful career in a management consultancy partnership.*

I'd like to start with where I am now and then track it back, if that's okay with you, if only because I'm not really sure how much connection there is between where I am now and the historical background.

There's a difference between what I'm trying to do as a solo performer and what I'm trying to do in a group context. What I think I'm trying to do as a solo performer is fairly clear, in terms of the words, I'm interested in exploring the possible noises you can get out of the saxophone, with particular reference to how they relate to multi-phonics; getting more than one note at a time out of what is ostensibly a single-line instrument. And that leads into diversions from the tempered keyboard, quarter tones etc, so that takes me into what for want of a better word, I'll call microtonology. What interests me about that is how they are perceived in the human ear, or the European human ear, starting with my own.

Looking at it another way I suppose I would describe myself as a definite romantic, in that what I'm really interested in, behind the words, is the sort of music that sends shivers down the spine. I want the high emotional content and that journey of seeing what the saxophone can do is simply a means of generating new tingles. Whatever you do, whatever anybody does, needs to have change and development in it to sound fresh. No matter what it is, no

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matter how good it is, if you keep repeating it it begins to sound hackneyed. So the expression of newness keeps it fresh - this is beginning to sound like a detergent advert - and actually anything could give that tingle, it's the context, from which it comes, what comes before it and after it, rather than the actual notes, that have an effect. So I came to believe some time ago that what sounded discordant and what sounded concordant was merely a matter of habit, the convention of the time; that opened the way for exploration into the ways one might be able to influence the way people hear. So that's what I'm trying to do when I personally have got an instrument in my hands.

At the other extreme, as far as group stuff is concerned, I think I'm still caught up with on of the age old dilemmas of free music, which is that if if you just put a bunch of musicians in a group and say, 'Right, now we're going to play free music,' not infrequently that can be quite boring. So the question for me is, 'How do I make this particular group have a greater chance of being interesting?' Hence a group like Feetpackets where we are working with really quite well articulated and tightly defined structures. Now, one of the tensions that always comes up in the band is that people often say, 'Well we really want to do less structured stuff and do more free stuff,' but then actually when it comes round to performing a very substantial degree of conservatism comes into play, a fear of actually letting go of the structure. It's a standing example of how a bureaucracy is likely to perpetuate itself, it's very difficult for a group which has got into the habit of working under certain structures to actually drop those structures. Two very strong mechanisms in human behaviour, and all animal behaviour - I would assert - are that if something's successful then you repeat it, and that the known is on the whole preferable to the unknown. If you've got some charted territory then you'll

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tend to go over that before you're prepared to step into the unknown. So in Feetpackets, and I would suggest any other group as well, there is a dichotomy; yes, we do want to something new but we also want it to relate to things we know, I think that's only people being realistic, it's not a criticism. I mean to move too far from that is probably going to remove you to degrees of anarchy which are probably going to promote self-destruction fairly early on.

Structuring is very much a means and not an end. I mean if you pressed me very hard on what the end is I'd probably collapse into incoherence - apart from that belief I mentioned earlier, that music can offer a form of direct experience.

I started playing in the mid sixties: really just, yes, out of an interest in music but more because I was looking for some medium - and it didn't really matter what it was - to express my own individuality. It was an emerging sense that you need a sense of identity in order to set yourself apart from all those other buggers, all that kind of thing. So I fell in with a group of people who happened to be interested in jazz and I got pressed into taking up the saxophone. I started to explore up to what were then the boundaries of jazz, which very explicitly was called the avant-garde at that time - Coltrane, Dolphy, some of Rollins, Andrew Hill, Joe Henderson, Sun Ra, Mingus those sorts of people. And I played saxophone throughout my university days, I suppose emulating Rollins, but I didn't really dissect the music that carefully, never really got into the nitty gritty of it. Then in the early seventies I moved to London and played less and less, I really virtually stopped around '75, and then I realised that there was something missing and I needed to have another go at it, so in 1979 I took a year out of my career and spent most of it learning music, really trying to go back to basics. I started from where I left off, at the free jazz end, and

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hung in with that motivation until about 1983 or 4, when the interest in free music, and also contemporary classical music, gradually developed...

At the moment I'm trying to be a professional musician but I'm not trying to do it 24 hours a day and my other job is what I rely on for income.

*Do the two things feed into each other in any way? Do you see any link between the two?*

Well, I've thought about that and 'not much' is the answer. I tried to look for some carry over from the management point of view, like how do you manage a particular group or situation; there's a lot of stuff in management theory about teamwork. But I wouldn't say there's much connection because in a free music context the extent to which you want people to generate their own personal momentum and to express their own identities is much stronger than would be the case in any more conventional management situation.

The reason I feel an emotional need to do things other than music is because I do have quite a strong and fairly conventional need to exercise intellect; you know follow-through logic, problem-solving, all that kind of rubbish. And I can't apply that to music; it's just a waste of time as far as I'm concerned, a different ball-park.

*So you wouldn't have any particular political or philosophical ideas to put on improvising?*

I don't think I would, no. I'm not aligned to any political party and I don't see my music as being politically aligned, although having said that, by it's very nature it is exploratory and tending towards the innovative so it tends to veer away from conservative approaches and forces.

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The nearest I get to a philosophical stance is that in some way of self-fulfilment (the questions about music that I'm pursuing) are important to me and I must leave it to other people to judge whether they are for them too. I mean I veer quite a lot towards the do it rather than talk about it, so I think I've said most of the things I've got to say that might be vaguely useful...

*(21st January 1990.)*

## STEVE DONE

*Guitarist Steve Done performs in a number of improvising groups. For several years he has helped organise some of the most important weekly free jazz and improvised music clubs including The Seven Dials Club (with drummer Joe Gallivan), at Earlham Street, then later at the Black Horse, The Opporto (with drummer Dave Alexander), the Jazz Emporium at the Union Tavern on Kings Cross Road, and the Duke of Wellington on Ball's Bond Road (with trumpeter Jon Corbett). Along with Corbett he also helped set up London Jazz Action, an attempt by a number of clubs to pool resources and raise the music's profile.*

Around the late '60s - '68, '69 - I was studying music off my own back, because I'd always loved it. I was taking lessons on the guitar then, getting all the classical stuff together. I would take it around a mate's place, we'd both be 16, 17, 18, and we'd just sit down together and begin improvising, in tonal ways, not that we started in any particular key. There was also this guy called Tony Lark who I've been trying to trace ever since, he was at Nottingham University, he played alto saxophone and I'd never heard anything like it in my life man. You know, he just started squarking and squeaking down this thing, and I thought, 'Excuse me? Can we do this? Is this okay?' Because I liked making strange music but I thought, 'Is it really music?'. And there was always that fear that it couldn't really be music, because music's got this whole history and it develops, all that stuff that I'm teaching to students now...

I remember hearing Coltrane's *Live At The Village Vanguard Again* with Pharaoh Sanders doing that solo, I just went, '*Jesus Christ!*'. And I remember there was a gig at the Cockpit Theatre in St. Johns Wood, I can't remember why I

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went, but it was the Musicians Cooperative, there was Evan (Parker), Kenny Wheeler, Paul Rutherford, Barry Guy, Tony Oxley and Derek Bailey, that would be '71, '72, maybe a bit earlier... uhm, and I thought, 'Yes, that's quite interesting, I think we'll have some of that'. At that stage I was only playing for myself, I had thought of turning professional but I was stuck out in the backwoods of Hertfordshire at that time... I look back now and think, 'Jesus Christ, I wish I'd moved down to London earlier or something'.

I was a professional musician in '74, '75, '76, something like that, trying to write pop songs. I was working in insurance before that and I more or less lived from what I'd saved from that. At that stage I didn't have the commitment I've got now, it was the dilettante approach, the gifted amateur... well, not gifted, but certainly amateur. I did a variety of jobs and studied philosophy, still am doing. I was a member of various debating societies, elitist groups, all that sort of introverted crap. Thinking is definitely important to me, those questions like, 'What is the universe?' 'What's it all for?' coupled with spiritual belief, that search for something that I believe in, I think music helps that.

Anyway, I was transport manager for Bowaters, a cardboard box manufacturers, that was really thrilling, it's amazing the diversity of cardboard, people don't understand... that was for a couple of years before the firm went bust. I was Father of the chapel for staff in Sogat and I was junior management as well, so I was seeing it from both sides. The general manager was an accountant so it's no wonder the fucking place folded - he should have been a *cardboard* man you see. Then round about 1978 I stopped playing. I don't know why, I just stopped, and I went back into insurance again, selling insurance. I made a little bit of money but I couldn't handle the pace of that, I wasn't built to bullshit people, the salesman bit, traipsing the

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streets, ringing round people and all that. I believe in insurance but I couldn't handle that. Around 1980 I moved down to Croydon, met this guy who had a few bob and then we did this landscape gardening bit. He'd been doing it for a company for 10 or 12 years and I'd had some experience at labouring so we set something up. I did that for about six years, up to 1986, but in the middle of that I got interested in the music again.

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I think personally if I do rationalise myself my interest is in modernism, in taking things further. The Dadaist approach, or the nihilist approach, is okay in its historical perspective, but I don't really approve of iconoclasm for the sake of it. I don't want to be seen as something out-on-a-limb avant-garde, what I'm doing is an extension of all the music that's gone before, that sort of idea. As part of a tradition and an extension of that tradition, the evolution of the language and all that. Maybe it started out in that early period as a matter of rebellion and finding things that nobody else is listening to, to be different and all that kind of stuff, but certainly for me it became this idea of extending the language. So you get interested in modern art... erm, in the spiritual quest generally, if you like, you know; 'what's it all about mate?'. (*Laughs.*) The position now is that art is the aesthetic experience, it's communication that can't be done in other ways.

The spiritual growth of man is an important aspect, to find out what's going on in this universe, not just to find out what's going on on the stockmarket. The trend, or a trend, today seems to be this superficial thing, almost a hedonistic thing, spur of the moment gratification, the image that is generated by that kind of thing is instantaneous, cosmetic, entertainment. It's the difference

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between entertainment and art really. Entertainment is about taking your mind off work, it's about relaxation, where's art, for me, is a part of work, it *is* the work and it needs to be explored.

I think that man is inherently conservative, change is a painful experience, as you go through life what you try to do is establish a little bit of order around the things you deal with. But change is an essential factor so there's always that tension between trying to maintain the status quo and trying to develop and progress. Something like art is moving into new areas. If you're just an entertainer and you're just reworking what's happened before then that's part of the comfortable scene. The Royal Opera gets £13 *Million* every year from the Arts Council just so that rich people can entertain their mistresses, or masters or whatever the female equivalent is. It's a social event, it's an anthropological study to go to the Royal Opera house, it's nothing to do with art. Pavarotti charging 30 grand to stand on a stage to sing a 200 year old song, very interesting, but it's not art is it? The social context of things like that, and the conservative status quo, is much more overbearing than any artistic interpretation that Pavarotti might be applying to Puccini or Rossini. The Royal Philharmonic orchestra is going to play some more two or three hundred year old music, which is all very good, but the attention sort of thins out as one begins to get closer to one's own time. One doesn't like to see that one's own time is continually changing.

'Life is a perpetual state of flux,' as Heraclitus said, and Bergson echoed him in the early part of this century. Life is an everchanging process and... I think improvised music is obviously a part of that change, obviously a part of the forefront pushing things musically forward. And I think that free improvisation is more related to that dynamic process than playing yet another chorus of *All The*

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*Things You Are* or *Scrapple From The Apple*. You know what *Scrapple From The Apple* does, you know the way it moves, so you can play that and nothing changes, even the solos are going to be based on the same harmonic and melodic material, there's no sort of *movement*, no *dynamism* in that movement. It's that dynamism I find enjoyable about life. Life is good. The dogshit in the street, tin cans, just the physical experience of life being there and continually affecting your senses. And new bits happening and seeing other things in different relations to each other. As an improvising musician I'm up on the platform doing that, entering into dialogues with other musicians that will hopefully at the end of it result in a piece.

(3rd February 1988.)

ROHAN DE SARAM

*Rohan de Saram is a member of the Arditti string quartet, who have an international reputation performing contemporary-composed music, having worked, for example, with composers such as Geörgy Ligeti, John Cage, Iannis Xenakis and Witold Lutosławski. Since 1985 he has also been a member of the improvising group AMM (see 1.6) and has maintained close contact with Sri Lankan music. He is thus in the rather unusual position of being able to interpret the practice, historical condition and spiritual significance of these different music's from the point of view of practical involvement. I spoke to him in his family flat in Islington.*

From my childhood in Sri Lanka I was taught the piano, maybe the quintessence of western music. There were good teachers of piano but very few teachers of other instruments. My parents, who were keen amateur musicians, heard that there was a very good cellist nearby, a refugee from Warsaw. I was eight at the time and it was he who insisted I should take up western music. I had never heard of the cello before that. It could have been a drum for all I knew!

So that is how I started the western music and the eastern music I have done more or less parallel with it. I play Sri Lankan music, mainly drum music - whose rhythms are absolutely extraordinary - I have been interested in those since being a child. Ceylon has been ruled by Western powers for three, four hundred years, with the Portugese, Dutch and British invasions. So it has been a part of our life to have both east and west. It may not be the best of east and west but it has been both!

The fact of improvisation is something that has been fundamental to eastern music, and to western music right up

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to the early 20th century when writing became such an important thing and improvisation just fell out, it was dropped. And now the written symbol has become all important in so-called classical music. So the player has become merely an observer of extremely difficult and often very minutely notated scores. But I think the improvisational tradition that was prevalent in old Europe is something that is a vital part of music. It is an intrinsic part of music, a basic form of composition really. A way of knowing how to build a piece, but you do it on the spur of the moment.

When I am doing improvisation with AMM it really is a form of composition because to be successful the parts have got to have a meaningful relation, the whole has got to have a certain sense of direction, even in so-called free improvisation. In AMM I think we have discovered that free does not mean free in the sense that we can do anything at all, but free in the sense that we do not have preconceived rules to guide us. We don't have any preconceived 16-bar harmonic material like jazz, or a mode like the Raga system, or even a harmonic system like Bach, that is all that the freedom consists of. But nevertheless, even though we don't have these preconceived things in the free improvisation, the fact remains that to create an intelligible and meaningful piece we have got to take motivic structures, whether they be melodic, whether they be harmonic, whether they be rhythmic, and be able to build something from them like a composer does. That is how we work I think.

Of course there are differences too. Doubtless there must in a free improvisation be more of what I would call the Dionysian aspect of art, as opposed to the Apollonian. In free improvisation there must be more of the element of the unpremeditated and of course the range of colour is infinitely wider than one would get in the classical media. That makes it in a way all the harder. When one has such an immense material to draw on I think there is the danger that it becomes a sprawling mess of uncoordinated sound. The

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difficult thing is to restrict oneself so that one is able to build something that is intelligible. Stravinsky said that real freedom comes from discipline and restriction, you can't be free with just any old thing, it has got to be within given laws.

*But you just said that there were no rules for free improvising, and now you are saying there are laws. What is the difference?*

Each improvisation will make its own laws. To create an intelligible improvisation one has got to make one's own laws as one goes along. One player might give a small motif of three notes; that might become a focus for attention to development in various forms so that it becomes meaningful to have it as a centre, a pivot from which to develop, that's what I mean by a law. In that particular improvisation, for that small period of time, maybe it would be those three notes.

Then quite often maybe the single player develops his own lines. But at least for the listener there is something that would be meaningful because one player at least has developed this particular thing. The others might be separate at that time. That is one of the differences in a lot of 20th century art from classical art. For instance in chamber music one of the ideas that has obsessed a lot of composers is the idea of the *separateness* of the players in a string quartet: We have recently recorded Cage's *Thirty Pieces* and in this the four written parts are played quite independently of each other, and we are seated very far apart. I was at the rear of the stage facing the wall, while the others were positioned on a balcony, in the audience and seated on a window ledge! And in Elliot Carter's *Fourth Quartet* the separate identities of the instruments are explored to the degree that each instrument plays in its own rhythmic orbit throughout the piece, so there is hardly a

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note that is ever together - I think there is one synchronised place, though they are held together by the same pulse, so that is a sort of unification. Carter's Second Quartet uses the same sort of idea in a much simpler form and I think it is a very successful piece - if one likes that sort of music, and of course not everybody does! (*Laughs.*)

In an improvisation you also have to be aware to be prepared for all sorts of directions that are unseen and also for taking away your own sense of direction. Maybe you personally would like a certain direction but somebody else does something and the direction alters. So that in itself is very close to life, I think, more so than a written composition. Life is a continual interaction between what one person would like and what is imposed on them from the outside. So one can feel that one is being used to do something, your life is being lived rather than you are living it. That aspect comes across very forcibly in improvisation because one's sense of direction is often being turned towards other channels and one is forced to think along different lines. You may, to a certain extent, guide it - but only to a certain extent. In a written composition, of course, that is all set out so one knows beforehand exactly who is guiding what.

Yet in many respects I think that the extremely complicated notation that is used in some of the compositions we play in the string quartet, like (Brian) Ferneyhough, like Carter, even Ligeti for that matter, tend towards the effect of an improvisation anyway. If one looks at the score for Ligeti's Second Quartet, which is now almost a classic in the repertoire, strictly speaking every note he has written is not playable in the given context, and it is not necessarily expected.

I'll give you a story of how we worked with Ligeti on his first two quartets in the early part of our career. The

First Quartet is quite a traditional work extending some of the techniques of Bartok, but the Second has hundreds of little notes and unusual techniques and so on. We had about five days to work with him before the concert and we naturally thought that the major part he would spend on the Second Quartet, as we were still struggling to learn it technically, and that the First Quartet would take us a day or something. But strangely enough it was the Second Quartet which was finished in a day and the First that he spent the rest of the four days on.

That in itself was sufficient to open our eyes to the fact that in the Second Quartet he was as - or more - interested in the dynamics and timbres as in the pitches. He was really interested that we grasped the overall idea of the piece, the way it was constructed, the different juxtapositions of sound masses and so on. The instruments are used conglomerately, they are not individually composed lines like the First Quartet or every other classical quartet. It is the general effect of the different sections and movements that Ligeti is really interested in. So, the overall effect is that of an improvisation. Sometimes, before performances, he comes to us and says, 'Play like crazy! It does not matter if there are a few wrong notes here and there!'

And similar things happen even with Boulez, whose quartet is very hard to play because of the difficulties with his extremely complex notation! And Ferneyhough continues to write in an extremely difficult style, but from a practical point of view possibly it is overnotated in many aspects and, again, in actual practice a lot of things he writes become simplified.

*But Ligeti's more recent compositions, such as the Horn Trio are very traditionally formed and notated, and he is not the only composer to have backed away from improvisation, or the use of a more open score. One thinks of Cage, Stockhausen...*

Absolutely! Almost everyone has! Certainly all the post-Webern Darmstadt composers of the '50s and '60s: Stockhausen, Boulez, Berio. They all seem to have reached a certain boundary, as far as the improvising element is concerned. And in returning to more traditional forms the performer is called upon to play in more conventional ways.

Also it is relevant that in our personal experience we find that there are very, very few string players interested in playing avant-garde music, very few. In fact we are the only quartet perhaps in the world doing it on the scale that we do, all the others have withdrawn into a classical or light repertoire now. For example, we have done several masterclasses in different parts of Europe, and no string players are particularly interested in coming to play avant-garde works. It does not seem to attract players.

Audiences also are limited. Undoubtedly. There are small pockets of interest all over Europe, but undoubtedly small. Though we must not forget there are places like the Paris Autumn and Strasburg festivals which attract large audiences, and recently we have given three concerts of contemporary music in Vienna which completely sold out. But I believe the reason for the dwindling audience is connected with certain definite aspects of the very language of this music, that probably have narrowed it down into an end-of-an-era type of development...

*That's a strong phrase to use. Are you talking about end of the whole...*

...yes! I think so, the whole development of the mainstream of western music, an arc starting from, say, Haydn or CPE Bach, through Strauss and Mahler, right up until Schoenberg's 12 tones, and Webern and post-Webern.

The 12 tones were crucial to this. This equalisation of tones is an interesting phenomenon, because almost all music in all parts of the world has had a tonal centre of one sort

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or another, modal, pentatonic, certainly all ragas have a central tone. I can't think of any music that does not have some tonal pull, that has complete equality in the way that Schoenberg or Webern proposed. And with the coming of the complete equality of the notes, this departure from tonality, came this problem into western music.  
Comprehensibility.

I think the sense of tonality is *inborn* in the nature of the sounding tone. The tone has an *immutable* series of overtones, the fifth and the fourth come from the overtone series which is rooted in nature. Nature doesn't have anything like a complete communism of music, where every note is equally important. Tonality is something that the human organism responds to. It is a given law.

*It strikes me as extraordinary that you should say such a thing. The dozens of new pieces the quartet commissions every year, surely virtually none of these employs a traditional sense of tonality?*

Yes, absolutely true.

*But how would you respond to those improvisers, such as Derek Bailey who seem completely opposed to composition per se, seeing it as a dead form producing ossified objects? Would you go that far?*

Yes, I suppose there is something in that. You know, Indian music has different ragas for different times of the day and there is something very profound in that I think. These ragas are one of the aspects in which the human being is sensitive to the changing characteristics of a single day, let alone a month or a year - a single day, which is a kind of microcosm of a life; birth, growth and decay. In that same sense, in an improvisation one is more naturally a part of the exact time in which one is working or playing. And

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Indian music has *never* been written down, it is still in that liquid state, a vast material from which to draw for improvisation.

That might possibly be a very important aspect of the future development of western music, precisely that of freeing oneself of the shackles of the written word. Because the written word is a very dominant force in western music, and in western *life*, in the ways people become labelled, have certain attributes attached to them and so on. It is all fixed on the word, ignoring the inner spirit of the person. And the whole point of Indian music is that you get close to the inner spirit and that the actual music one hears is a thing that is then and there.

*So are you telling me that perhaps European concert music is just not relevant any more?*

Well, perhaps it isn't. But it is wonderful to be involved in the decline of an age! (*Laughs.*) It is a historic process we are involved in, and it is a pity that more players are not involved in the same thing; but it is a natural thing in the growth of any art that one has an infancy and a maturity and I death. I personally see that the decline of a certain direction of development is only one facet of this age. There are so many other things going on at the same time. We are now living a global life and there are so many other factors coming in.

But how the future is going to develop it is very difficult to know. I think it is also a fundamental social question as to what people get out of music; after all, music like Bach's, even Beethoven's, were forms, ways of life really. They were essential, they were like food for the people. Now often music has become a very peripheral thing.

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So it is a decline in a certain set direction, according to certain set values. But that does not mean it is not ascending in terms of other values. I think it is a mistake to say that something is declining *overall*; there are lots of other standards. And I think this is an age, a transitional stage, where very fundamental standards have to be re-evaluated and changed.

*And do you see music as having some role to play in these social changes?*

It could be a reflection of certain patterns. For example, an extraordinary characteristic of so many contemporary concerto works is that the solo is immersed, or engulfed, in the surrounding orchestra. For instance in Berio's cello concerto it is remarkable that the soloist is heard at all! And the first time I heard Ligeti's cello concerto on the radio, well, it could have been an oboe concerto, or a trumpet or trombone concerto, because you can't really hear it as a solo instrument, practically never!

Very many works now have that characteristic, and I think that is understandable. After all, the concert as we think of it, emerging from Beethoven, is the concerto of the *hero*; the single person is the virtuoso and the orchestra is the mass, so you are conscious of one person being above another. Now in our social way of thinking, that notion is no longer applicable, as it probably wasn't in Bach's time. We are again in an age in which the mass formations are of particular interest. There are big mass movements where each individual is just a small bubble that comes up for a while and then disappears. For generation after generation the individual is submerged in the overall sweep of the ages.

And I think this is linked to improvisation. I think that the result of the sort of improvising that we do in AMM is rather similar, in that very often there are overall effects and types of lines that one is a part of, but there

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is not a single line that attracts attention. There is an overall sweep of direction in the improvisation, and it has often crossed my mind that there is something similar to the age we live in. Also composers such as Ligeti and Xenakis very often think in masses; even when writing for solo instruments or small groups, it is thought of in a mass conglomerate way, not in details or sections. The detail is less important than the overall direction of the particular mass.

AMM took part in one of our Sri Lankan concerts in which we used the concept of Sam Sara. Sam Sara is a concept peculiar to Buddhism and Hinduism, of being tied to the wheel of existence; that the ideal of human existence is to cease to exist, to cut yourself off from the wheel to which one is tied through attraction or desire for living. So this was a music and dance representation of Sam Sara and we did an improvisation, just entitled *Sam Sara*. I don't know if we got as far as Nirvana, I don't think we did!

I thought that AMM improvisation lent itself ideally to the characteristics of Sam Sara. There is something in some of our improvisations that does seem to characterise it. It is music which does not delineate individuals but is to do with conglomerate mass movements. Sam Sara is the wheel of existence and when one thinks of the existence one is not thinking of individuals but of mass movements, the overall movement in which individuals are absorbed into an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. So one is thinking along those cosmic principles which are central to Buddhism and Hinduism.

I think Bach is somebody who I've always been very attracted to because in many respects he seems to be the closest of western composers to that aspect. I'm referring to the cosmic outlook, where the musician himself, I mean his personal life, is absorbed into a bigger thing. That is how our musicians live in Ceylon. We have the most wonderful drummers and dancers, but they are not interested in personal

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glory as such, they are there for the service of their religion basically. They live for their music. It is a way of life similar to Bach's. There is a fundamental difference between that way of life and the form of life that comes after the French revolution, where the individual is a hero.

*But improvisation surely has no tradition to rely in this way, and it is atheistic, having no religious, ritual or social basis.*

Yes. But we might also talk about a revolution in religion. Until now religion has meant a body of people, a church or temple, but maybe we are coming to a point in human civilization where it is the essence of a man, or human being, or any being, that is seen to be identical. As the Hindus have preached, we are all one, inwardly the same. So maybe the realisation of that particular aspect might mean that the human species have come to a point where it is no longer necessary to think in terms of a set religion with so many rituals and so on. Maybe there are times when that falls away and one gets onto another sphere of spiritual experience. So religion might become a personal thing for each individual, but through that personal thing it becomes universal, because through it one realises in a way the similarity in the essence of each. That is the biggest bind that there could be!

And these ideas are implied in improvising. There is a very deep thing when one is improvising... one does go to the very fundamental things which can hardly be put into words. They are extraordinary, what Jung calls the collective unconscious. There may be certain layers of consciousness so that when we use certain musical figures they may have universal meaning for all nations at all times. Bartok in his collections came across many things that pointed in those directions. He collected things in

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North Africa that tallied with things in Turkey very closely and one couldn't explain it necessarily by migration.

I think... I'm sure the future of music must lie along those lines and that is why I think a group like AMM is for me very important in many respects. It may lie in the very distant future but I'm sure it has something to do with that part in music which addresses itself to the basic similarities underlying all human beings. There are deep seated things that will always come out. Like tonality I think is one of those things that is fundamental to the human organism. It is part of a given law...

*(8th October 1989.)*

ROGER SUTHERLAND

*Roger Sutherland is percussionist with the live-electronic improvising group Morphogenesis, a secondary-school teacher, and lecturer and author of many articles and a forthcoming book on contemporary composed and improvised music. He was also a member of the Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Orchestra. (see Sutherland 1989, no date 1 and 2, see also 1.17)*

My interest in improvisation is partly connected with my interest in music as a social process, ideas of collaboration, equality, and absence of hierarchy. But it's also a purely aesthetic thing in that I became interested in Edgard Varèse's remark; he likens musical formation, or the construction of musical forms, to the phenomena of crystallisation, where the exterior forms of the crystal can be manifested in a limitless variety of formal structures and formal systems. But what I found to be historically the case in music was that, although theoretically there was a limitlessness of musical forms, in practice the number of musical forms seemed to be actually very limited, and certain structures seemed to be replicating themselves. Up to a certain point there seemed to be a kind of proliferation of formal conceptions, in the early '60s, and then a kind of rigidification set in, where composers were just parodying themselves, you get this in Ligeti for example.

It seemed to me that although in practice mathematical and theoretical speculation of the sort practiced by people like Boulez and Stockhausen ought to result in a proliferation of new musical structures, in reality this isn't what was occurring. So my interest began to turn to various forms of improvised music, which I first became interested in through attending sessions by AMM. What impressed me about their early performances was that they

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used to engage in a tremendous variety of sound-experimentation. They had old piano frames, they used all kinds of amplification, they used all kinds of junk that used to lie around the place. The thing was completely exploratory and open ended, you had the feeling that you were sitting in a laboratory, which is something I had never felt at any kind of concert. You just had no idea what was going to happen, and it gave a sense of excitement which I'd not experienced at any kind of performance situation. The players and the music seemed to be open to virtually any kind of phenomenon that it might absorb, social, acoustic, or otherwise; aircraft noise, noise from the street could legitimately become part of the performance. And the absence of visual imagery, the darkness itself was a kind of inherent theatrical part of the music. But what impressed more than anything else about the music was that I was hearing structures that I'd never heard before, and also I was hearing a kind of density of polyphonic occurrence which was completely new to me, there was just so many things going on in the music at the same time. It was enough to blow your head out. It's like... I think the best way of describing it is to use a visual analogy, that of certain 19th century landscape paintings which use vast, spacious, multiple perspectives, and which also enhance the sense of vast space through the technique of obscuring things. One of the interesting things about Fredrick Church, for example, was that he had a technique of using multiple vanishing points. So you don't know where to look first in the picture. Your eye is torn in several different directions, quite aside from the fact that the picture is huge anyway. But also as well as your eye hurtling down all these tunnels of vision, the tunnel seems to be endless because the termination point is usually clouded in obscurity. Mountain tops are surrounded by clouds or darkness, you can't actually measure the space. And that is the impression that AMM's music gave me. It was like a vast acoustic terrain

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whose dimensions were limitless, and whose perspectives were constantly changing. Also, one of the things that struck me was that ostensibly it was extremely monotonous, it was like watching the ocean, constantly the same but constantly changing as well. And you could focus on very fine details or just move back and just listen to the whole vast changing perspective. There was a sense of space and density... this constant sense of ambiguity and transition, created by free, collective, intuitive improvisation... unstructured by notation... equal without any kind of leader...

I mean AMM's music was fresh every time, not like it is now. Now it sounds slightly jazzy, a little bit cliché-ridden, and certainly very predictable.

Shortly after I heard the AMM Electra album, which I thought was absolutely one of the most amazing things I'd ever heard, I read something in the *Musical Times* called *The Scratch Orchestra: A Draft Constitution* which was written by Cornelius Cardew. And his idea was recruit a large number of people, he didn't specify qualifications or age or prerequisites for membership or anything of that nature. But the flexibility of how he defined the Scratch Orchestra implicitly suggested that the people who should join it would have to be people who were very open, intuitive, creative people, and not necessarily people who were working in traditional categories. In fact he says, 'the word music and its derivatives are not understood here to refer primarily to sound and related phenomena, hearing etc. What they do refer to is flexible and depends entirely on Scratch Orchestra members.' So maybe half the Scratch Orchestra's members were actually musicians and the rest were theatre people or art students or engineering students or whatever, and they were engaging in all kinds of experimentation which could be presented as part of a concert and might be related under a certain conceptual category, but they wouldn't primarily relate to hearing or music as such.

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I wrote a long letter to Cornelius Cardew telling him about my credentials hoping that he'd accept me for membership, but I realised afterwards that it was quite unnecessary because he'd accept anybody. He wasn't sitting in judgement, saying, 'this person is a musician,' or, 'this person isn't a musician'. He was actually quite a dictatorial sort of person, but in a way that was much more subtle than that, which didn't hit me until much later.

But what the Scratch Orchestra did wasn't strictly improvisation in the sense of interactive improvisation. At the practical level that wouldn't have been possible, because you were talking about maybe a hundred people filling Hampstead town hall and engaging in an enormous variety of acoustic, visual, theatrical, and other activities which had no planned relationship to each other. It was more like a collage of theatrical and musical events that would happen simultaneously, following I suppose Cage's idea that everybody is in the best seat, that everybody could choose their own point of focus and you could just wander around and listen to and maybe join in different things. It was a very '60s kind of phenomenon really... more like a huge cocktail party perhaps than a concert.

Scratch Orchestra activities fell into a variety of activities, first of all there was what was called Scratch Music which basically was intended to be an accompaniment which you could play continuously for indefinite periods, but it could be anything, it could be a drum rhythm or you could be painting, it would all count as Scratch Music. And these were just ad hoc layers to be put together ad libitum as the occasion demanded it. Popular Classics, which related a bit to the Portsmouth Symphonia syndrome, where each player plays a part which can be either a page of the score, a page of the arrangement, a page of the part for one instrument or voice, a page of thematic analysis or even a gramophone record! And then the rest of the players would join in as best they could, contributing bits from memory,

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doing as best they can to play the *William Tell Overture* or whatever it happened to be. Obviously, it sounded diabolical. It would be out of tune, the rhythm would be discoordinated, that would be its inherent appeal, the fact that it wouldn't sound like the real classical masterpiece, it might have bits that would be vaguely recognisable. That relates a little bit to improvisation, improvisation upon a theme.

Improvisation Rites were another activity. The Rites were little ritualistic activities that people would engage in, and they would provide a kind of stimulus to musical improvisation but without giving people any idea as to what exactly they had to play. An example is, 'Do something while smiling because what you are doing makes you smile. Stop smiling because what you are doing no longer makes you smile...' and so on. Or people might lie on the floor in this kind of fan arrangement, and play in this supine position without actually being able to see each other. Or I did one which involved blowing candles out and reading books, you sit in a circle and each person would have a book and a lighted candle, and you keep reading until you reach a word which suggests something like darkness and you blow out the candle, when all the candles have been blown out then you start playing. So it sets the *mood* for an improvisation...

Everybody got the chance to organise a concert going in alphabetical rotation, which was very democratic. You would devise the framework and people would fit in within that framework in whichever way that suited them. The concert I organised was actually very tight, it didn't leave anybody much room for manoeuvre. I programmed a series of avant-garde classics that I wanted to see performed. They demanded a lot of inventiveness from people, but the idea was that people would have to communicate a great deal to enact them. And the best example was Ichiyanagi's *Distance*, where the score simply says the instruments are to be placed on the

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floor and the players are to be ten metres above the floor, that's all the score says. I left it to the players how they would enact it, and what they did was to build a huge scaffold and they sat at the top of this scaffold, about twenty of them, and they'd all worked out ways of playing their instruments at such a distance. The ways that they devised of doing this defy description... The nice thing about it for me was its communality and unpredictability, the fact that people had to coordinate a great deal in order to enact this thing. It was quite unlike all the previous concerts. Whereas the earlier concerts had been like a modern metropolis, full of all sorts of noisy, unrelated activities, and creating the sense of alienation you get in a big city, this was more like a little village, a little tribal circumstance in which people were intensively involved with each other, and I thought that that was the direction that the Scratch Orchestra should in fact go in. But it didn't.

I found the situation alienating. Because the first concerts that I took part in had so many different things going on at the same time, it was like a free-for-all, and there was very little communication taking place. I think that's what led in the end to the interest in a Maoist ideology. My experience in coming away from Scratch concerts was that all these people doing their own thing was all very nice, but that it was a self-indulgent anarchy of the worst kind. I didn't feel having gone there that I knew these people any better than I had beforehand, and I thought that improvisation ought to be some kind of interactive discourse and that we should be consciously trying to formulate something a bit more meaningful.

Unfortunately that desire for meaningfulness was translated into an interest in some kind of political ideology or political coherence, which didn't interest me. a, because at that time I wasn't interested in politics, and b, because it seemed to me to limit the possibilities of

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aesthetic innovation. And that is in practice the way it worked, because the desire to communicate with the mass of the people and not be anarchistically self-indulgent led to recognisable, conventional musical forms, and an insistence that people should start playing conventional styles and instruments, should do voice training and conventional rhythmic drumming and all the rest of it, people were actually taking *lessons* at that stage. I'm obviously simplifying it, but this transition took about two years.

It's not quite like a contrast between the total anarchy and a total marxist regulation that took place later on, it wasn't quite like that, but it was almost like that. Going along to Scratch Orchestra meetings suddenly people would pull out books on Marxist and Maoist theory and spouting long tracts at people, about how art and music ought to be formulated for the edification of the masses, it came as a tremendous shock to most people, it was completely out of the blue, it was completely unprepared. It had a slightly traumatising effect on a lot of people, because previously they'd been regarded as centres of creativity that weren't being dictated to in any way, and suddenly we given a kind of party line which we had to follow. There was a hard core of devotees of this ideology, people like Cardew, Keith Rowe, John Tilbury who previously had kept a back seat. They'd obviously been asserting a great deal of influence, but it was unseen influence, now it was there on the surface; it was naked oppression we were confronted with. To me it was like the old guard socialists clamping down on the young left-anarchist socialists, it was a political conflict. It wasn't like there were just one group who were trying to bring politics into the music, the politics in a sense was already there, because the music was already obeying a certain political principle - that of extreme left-anarchism ala the mid-'60s. This was more like the retrenchment of the old left, ala the early '70s asserting itself, and it was parallel I suppose to the sort of demise

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of anarchist politics around that late '60s period. It was almost contemporaneous with that shift. Just as the excitement of the Sorbonne was coming to a close, so the anarchism of the Scratch Orchestra was being snuffed out, it was exactly parallel to that. After that I became disillusioned with the idea of collective music-making for a long time, and had very little practical involvement in it, maybe for ten years.

I don't think you can separate music and politics, because music has to do with the hegemony groups who determine what counts as music and who control that which can be disseminated musically, and which determine musical statuses and musical hierarchies and systems of finance through which certain projects can be realised and certain projects can't. There's a whole host of institutions in the musical sphere whose primary purpose, although ostensibly they're there to serve artistic progress, their real purpose it seems to me is to achieve a kind of retrenchment and to limit what counts musically.

I'm interested in music which is social, but social in a particular way. Because most social discourse has to do with habit, what sociologists call reality-maintenance, and most musical discourse it seems to me is of that type. It seems to me that most social discourse is to do with people propping up each other's egos: if you get a group of housewives they all complain about their husbands, if you get a group of teachers in the staffroom they all complain about the headmaster or the education authority. It's like a collective defence system against any threat to their survival or their integrity or whatever. Whereas the kind of communicative discourse that I'm interested in in music is an exploratory discourse. Frederic Rzewski formulated this idea, he argued that the purpose of his playing was to move from what he called an 'occupied space' - which is governed by cliché, convention, habit, like a jazz ensemble playing

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in received ways - moving to what I think he called a 'created space', which is a space for mutual discovery and self-exploration and you would try and break up all the habits of tonality and rhythm and conventional musical response by using as many unorthodox sound systems as possible. It could potentially be traumatic, it's more like an encounter group, it's a process of discovery or exploration...

*(23rd May 1990.)*

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Duties, right? And it was a fully fledged subject, you would have to write papers and pass exams. Of course no-one wanted anything to do with that, but it became quite obvious that there was someone from the armed forces there at the school all the time, he didn't just come in to teach the lessons, he had an office and was there all the time. Eventually things got a bit out of hand and they closed down the school in 1970. They claimed that they found political and subversive pamphlets in the school library, which there may have been, but it was entirely a non-militant thing, you know if people wanted to read them then they could, but the thing was blown out of proportion and they closed down the school and arrested the head of department, who was quite a well known composer at the time. It was then that I thought that would be the time to leave the country, things were very very bad. I was playing bossa nova and jazz standards and things in the evening to earn money so I could afford to buy the ticket and get a passport and so on, so, like many other young people at the time, I decided to leave the country, we didn't see much future there. Most of my friends had left, some had been locked up, we were stifled, creativity was stifled...

At the time I was already very interested in free improvisation, because of the people I met at the school, we had improvising groups that performed in a non-jazz way, there were people who came from a classical background and there was this very fertile exchange of ideas. We had one visiting professor, Lukas Foss, who came down and gave a series of lectures and he talked about new music and improvisation, then we had Morton Feldman and Earle Brown as well.

So I came to Europe, I came to Paris first because I knew lots of people there and had a place to stay, I was there for a bit and it was interesting and everything but I really didn't see a lot of music that I was interested in. Steve Lacy was there of course, it was nice to hear him, but

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it became obvious that it wasn't really the place for music and I was thinking very seriously about going to Amsterdam, which at the time seemed a really good place to go, especially as it was good for funding. I could speak English very fluently and I couldn't speak French very well so that was another factor.

I went to the Montreux festival in 1971 or '72 and Derek (Bailey) was there and (Peter) Brötzmann was there as well as Bill Evans and Mingus, it was a great festival, and I met quite a lot of British musicians - Trevor Watts, John Stevens. I thought the music that these guys were playing was interesting. So I came to London and started work with the Spontaneous Music Ensemble and did a big tour, met lots of musicians. That was when the Little Theatre Club was happening, that was the centre for free music at the time and there was really a lot happening, so I used to play there quite often and then there was the Musicians' Coop at the Old Unity Theatre in Islington. I became involved with the beginning of the LMC and I was doing quite a lot of gigs. I was also interested in Live Electronic Music at the time as well, I was doing things at the West Square with Phil Wachsmann and so on...

*Has improvised music changed very much since the early seventies?*

Yeah, very much so, one's playing tends to evolve, naturally. You work on different things, different things catch your attention so as time goes on you tend to look at your music from different points of view. But the underlying feeling is there, because your underlying musical personality is your self, and that doesn't change very much. But in the music in general there has been some changes I would have thought, different people bring in their own point of view, different groups and combinations appear. This is one of the exciting things about improvised music,

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different combinations drawn from the same group of musicians will most probably produce quite different music. I find that very exciting and interesting working with different musicians in different combinations.

*You seem to have made quite a definite decision quite early to play a certain kind of music.*

Yes

*Were you aware then...*

*(Interrupts.)* No! *(Laughs.)* to be honest with you Richard I never thought about it in those (career) terms at all. I just... y'know... I could have probably had a more comfortable career if I'd gone into any other profession in Brazil, or even if I'd perhaps become a session musician backing singers, or playing on recordings of Brazillian music. Some of my friends in Brazil are session musicians and they're connected with studios and they have quite a comfortable living. But I never wanted to do that. From the very early days I just thought that I wanted to be a musician in the open sense of being a musician, I mean of making music your way of communicating with the world. And I started off doing that with jazz and the free improvisation grew out of that, it was the improvisation which really attracted me to jazz. I also discovered Indian music at that time which has a great deal of improvisation, that was quite mind-blowing, and very interesting. I went to India to study actually, after I came to London. I stayed here for few years and then in '73 or '75 - I can't remember - we travelled with some friends. We went to Germany and bought one of these Volkswagon travellers and travelled overland through Turkey, Iran, Afganistan, Pakistan - In those times it was quite easy to do that, and cheap as well. I was staying in North India, in Dara Dhun near the foothills of

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the Himalayas and there was a very famous sitar player, Vilayat Khan, who lives there and I went to see him. We talked a great deal about music, east and west, he was a very interesting man, very knowledgeable. I studied sitar with another musician who he recommended - Satragit Singh - but before I could learn the sitar he said I had to learn the tabla, for the rhythm, and before that I had to learn to sing, we were in India for about a year and I had nothing else to do so I would practice for about eight hours a day.

Talking to Vilayat Khan, he said you can't just go to India and practice like shit, you've got to be born in India to play Indian Music, and not only once but many times! I mean to understand the nuances of the raga system you really have to get right into the culture. But just having the lessons and learning the system was quite interesting, I certainly got a lot out of it; about the different ways you can approach a determined, fixed pitch, and cyclical rhythm and the way that interacts with melody.

Then in 1987 my wife and I got the chance to go to Japan to take part in this international ceramics symposium, where they invited artists from different countries to go and work there for a month, and they provided board and lodging free of charge, all we had to pay for was the ticket. So I took my piccolo-bass with me and set up a couple of gigs in Tokyo and a music workshop, which I thought would help pay for the ticket. We went there for about two and a half months. But the organisers apologised that they really didn't have a family in the town where we could stay because there were two of us and Japanese houses are small, and I had the bass as well which freaked them out, I arrived with this huge instrument that they never saw. So they said would I mind if we stayed in a village in the country not far from the town in this two hundred year-old Buddhist temple. So then I was invited to meet the monk who lived there and looked after the temple - he was in fact performing in the opening ceremony of this symposium - he turned out to be a master

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shakuhachi player! So we stayed in this temple and this monk Shiku turned out to be very much interested in improvised music, in fact he had one of Evan Parker's records and he could hardly believe it when I said that I played with him quite a lot. So immediately we made a musical partnership and started playing together and from that he arranged quite a few gigs in Nagoya and then more in Tokyo and then later he came over to London and played at the LMC. The shakuhachi music which mostly comes from Buddhism is not exactly improvised - but it's not written, there is a system of notation but they learn it by heart - but it *sounds* incredibly improvised. And Shiku applied that concept to improvisation, right in the middle of the improvisation he would put snippets of very old tenth century shakuhachi tunes and everything kind of clicked into place, it's quite interesting... But despite all this the roots for me are definitely in jazz and before that in Brazillian music.

Improvisation surfaces in most kinds of music but people who want to do that exclusively, without relying on a composed piece to improvise on are in a way taking much bigger chances and risks, that's why I think it's not so popular amongst musicians. I mean in a workshop situation it's often easier to get art students improvising than trained musicians, though when they are interested trained musicians tend to be very interested and in the long run are more likely to be able to make a meaningful improvisation. By meaningful I mean creating a lifelike experience, not just going through motions or playing a game. It is something that is in fact being created in the time, a sense of life in the music.

Is there anything else you want to talk about? Because I'll have to leave in a few minutes...

(3rd May 1990.)

PETER MCPHAIL

*Peter McPhail plays saxophone, flute and electronics in a number of improvising groups based in Oxford and London, including The Extemporary Saxophone Quartet and the London Jazz Composer's Orchestra (see 2.4).*

I studied classical flute at school and did all my grade exams and all that, but I was under a lot of pressure from home not to get involved with music as a career; from my parents particular version of the protestant-ethic this was seen to be a somewhat self-indulgent thing to be involved with. My father and grandfather were both philosophy graduates, my father was a teacher and until recently ran various education research projects, though his career was bugged up partly because he was disabled through getting polio during the war. I probably had rather less self-confidence than I might have done in asserting what I wanted to do, because of his wishes and all the rest of it: it took me quite a long while to just say, 'Fuck it!' and get on with doing what I wanted to do.

Someone gave me a ticket in 1967 to see Roland Kirk and Charles Lloyd at the Hammersmith Odeon. I'd just done - or was about to do - grade 8 on the flute and I was intrigued by C.20th flute music, particularly French stuff, and to my brain at the time it was like hearing somebody spontaneously doing Debussy or Poulenc or whatever *without a safety net*. And I remember making what was really quite a clear decision - which I never had the guts to follow up at that time - that I was going to give up written music, get a saxophone and this was what I was going to do with my life.

But in fact what I did with my life at that point was I went and did a degree course in Human Sciences at Oxford. But I did get a saxophone and bugged about and eventually, in 1973, when I was in my last year, I found some people who

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were also interested in playing improvised stuff. I was listening to American free jazz - Shepp, Coltrane, Ayler - But you know I didn't know anything about the background that these musicians had, I thought it was just this gift and you got up there and started playing and sooner or later it would happen, I didn't know about chord sequences and things. So if someone started playing a guitar or something I would just try and join in but I didn't really know what I was doing, so it took me a long time to learn things that I might have learnt a bit quicker, but that did help me develop my ear - because I didn't know what I was doing I had to listen. Then in about 1972 I got involved with a hippy group called the Global Village Trucking Company who used to do interminable jams 'man' on fairly crass chord sequences, it had a nice spirit to it though. I was going through a fair amount of angst at that point as to whether to drop out of university or not, and they were actually putting pressure me and talking about record deals and this that and the other, but I wasn't that convinced that that was the future of music for me anyway. Mind you, I was no more convinced that I really wanted to finish doing my degree, but I did. I didn't do much work and got a fairly mediocre degree. I don't know, I think I was in a bit of a fucked up state in various ways. I could do the academic thing very easily because that was my home background - I'd listen to my father and grandfather having rabid philosophical debates from the time I was so-high, so tutorials and seminars and that kind of thing were no sweat, I was very good at that kind of thing, but it didn't really mean much to me. So it was a very schizophrenic situation, a lot of which was down to my own lack of courage I think, which is easy to blandly talk about now. Courage to say, 'I really want to do this, I'm going to do it,' and then knowing how to go and do it.

Pete McPhail

I did postgraduate and worked in the academic field in Belfast and Oxford until 1978, researching and teaching. And they were saying, 'Well, why don't you do a doctorate?' and I could think of ten doctoral projects off the top of my head but there wasn't one of them that I felt vaguely inspired to do, so that's when I jacked it in. I'd started playing again a couple of years before that - I did very little playing between 1973 and '76 - but I didn't know anyone who was doing anything very interesting so I was playing with pub-bands playing rock soul, funk and R'n'B, then a new-wave band called Tiger Lilly. In 1980 I met up with Pat Thomas and Matt Lewis and we formed Ghosts and that was the first chance I'd had to play with people who were into similar music. And for few years we used to play at least two or three times a week, and we did some gigs in various parts of the country and some radio broadcasts on Charles Fox's programme and I became fairly committed to it. But there was still a lot of conflicts; I was trying to get a realistic fix on earning any money, I was on the dole for quite a while....

*What aspects of improvising in particular do you find interesting?*

It's partly to do with wanting to make music, and inter-relating with other people, in a particular way. Ideally it's like a social intercourse, a conversation, an exploration of certain *feelings* - people tend to be wary of that one, but I think it's important. I'm sure part of it is to do with how you're feeling, and some days there is just no way you're going to deliver a great performance because there are just some things in your life inhibiting what you might say - there is a sense in which your life limits what you can play as much as your technique does.

Pete McPhail

The reason I keep practising the instruments is that I keep coming up against real boundaries when I'm playing, as if there's something I want to say and I haven't got the vocabulary to say it yet, so I work on that. Maybe you're playing with someone and they're doing something and you want to communicate with them at that point but you can't find a way into doing it. I mean there are times in a gig when someone's playing something and you can't find anything to play with it and that doesn't matter a damn, you just think, 'This is great, he's playing, I'm listening!' But there are other times when you go 'Oh yes, somebody's said *this*, but also *that*' and you listen and think, 'Yes! Fuck! but also *that* and what have I got to say about that?' So that problem might be a need to work on some technical things, say to enable me to enter a certain harmonic area.

I'm making it sound more conscious and more rational here than in fact it is; this is a kind of post-hoc rationalisation of what happens. I don't find the need for a notebook when I'm playing. It's just sometimes when you're playing you get a sense of something working well, or feeling very complete or open or whatever, and sometimes you get a sense that your not really saying what you want to say. It's the same as words; I mean even if you feel very strongly emotionally about something or someone you might still find it very difficult to find the words to express what you want to say, I mean I've got plenty of verbal facility, derived from the background I've had, in terms of spraying words around the place but I often wonder if I've really said what I wanted to say! I mean I don't want to draw the parallel too much between conversation, speech and music because obviously they are different and operate in different ways.

It's very difficult to get a fix on what a being a quote - artist - is all about. there are times when I wonder if it isn't the most self-indulgent business in the world,

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expecting people to pay you for something you want to do. In a fact in a fundamental sense I don't think it is but it *is* difficult to justify, because you know that reality for most people is that they have to do a certain thing and put up with the boredom and coercion of a formal work situation in the interests of earning a living, and you can see this most clearly in the third-world; in a situation like that you can't talk blandly in terms of 'choice'. So if I turn round and start moaning about apathy and lack of cultural adventure in this country it may be in rather bad taste; it's a pretty trivial problem compared with where the next grain of rice is coming from. It is important, but it's not *that* important.

*Is there a goal?*

(*Long pause.*) ...dunno ...I think about goals more when I'm going through the periodic worry about wanting to earn more money, so therefore I'm suspicious of goals because it emerges out of my thinking in that area. I thought at one time that maybe the aim was transcendence. because there are those moments that occur, unfortunately not that often, when suddenly everything else disappears and for however long it is you're in a space where you're not aware of operating the instrument and the things just flowing out. I used to think that maybe that's the state one should be in all the time. Maybe some people are, maybe all the other guys are experiencing this all the time and I'm beavering away having these problems and all these conversations with phantoms...  
(*Laughs.*)

(*2nd May 1990.*)

FRANCINE LUCE

*Singer Francine Luce is French-born, of parents from Martinique. She is organiser of the Black Cat Club and other pub venues in North London. She sings in a number of both free improvising and free jazz groups, and also plays trumpet. She has a critical perspective both of the conditions in which improvised music exists in London and of the response of some of the musicians to those conditions.*

I discovered this music in 1983 when I came to London. I had always sung jazz and blues, but in France I was doing more what could give me some money - backing vocals, African and West Indian bands in a lot of recording studios, so I could finish my work and get two hundred, four hundred pounds, this sort of thing. But I knew it was just a moment when I just made a bit of money, I wasn't happy in my heart. When I came to London at this moment I discovered Dreamtime; Nick Evans, Jim Dvorjak, Roberto Bellatalla and it was with them I discovered improvised music, and it was just okay, and that's when I discovered the trumpet as well, and it is only three years since I've been using my voice as well.

It's such a *musique magical* you know, it's so creative, the creativity of everyone puts this magical thing together. You know when you really feel people together, and the *sound*, and the emotion going together. My first experience of this was on a recording in Italy with Jim Dvorjak, Roberto and two Italian guys and I had this French poetry to sing, all written out, I thought, 'Oh my god, how can I read that?' it was really serialist stuff. So I just said, 'Okay let's go,' and we just did it - just improvised. And I just thought, 'Shit! What am I *doing*?' it was great but all of a sudden I thought 'Hey! What is going on here?' I thought I was going crazy, I just wanted to stop and say, 'What am I *doing*?' but I looked at Jim and he just looked back as if to

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say, 'It's great, *carry on!*' and that was it. It was the revelation, just sing, without thinking, just feel, and at this moment we were really together. I was just this voice, I was singing with everyone, I could hear the trumpet, I could hear the bass, I could hear the drum, and my voice was going with everyone at the same time, and that is a beautiful emotion that. And you can't find that in any other kind of music. I imagined the wind going through a tree, the wind can go everywhere, and my voice was doing that amongst the musicians. That is a magical moment, it's not happening all the time, the more and more you do this music the more you accept that sometimes it's a good gig and sometimes a bad gig, we're all human beings and we are all what we are, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

For me it is really the music that represents life. When you play this music sometimes you are *in communication* in a way that is just like the real things that happen in life. So when I'm singing I'm the same as I am in life, talking with people or whatever. There is a difference in a way because there is an audience, but there is no difference in the way we interact, that is the same, I feel. That's what I like and that is what I feel is the beauty of this music.

And in improvised music nothing is wrong, no mistakes! You are just free and you can just do what you want. Though sometimes there are musicians who just go too much for themselves, that can happen a lot in improvised music, you have to be aware of that. So that is a mistake, not regarding the notes, but a mistake to just do your own thing and not care about the others, you cannot just go in just one person's direction, you have to use all the directions. But also sometimes to not listen is good. It's good to listen but not all the time. To listen is just one possibility. Sometimes I don't want to listen, I don't care about what you're doing because *I'm* doing *my* stuff, it's one possibility and it's in our selves, sometimes we just think of ourselves, and we have to accept that part of ourself and

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make it part of the music. I just love that sometimes, but then I come back, I'm not going to stay by myself, otherwise I'd just go in my room and sing on my own. So you are allowed to do it, but be careful! Don't go in just one direction, this is wrong.

Another image is I'm singing alone but aware of what's going on. I'm still alone but aware. Then I come back and I'm in communication with just one but I don't really know what's going on. Then I'm in communication with just one, but I'm aware about it, then I can be in communication with two musicians, say saxophone and trumpet, and then I can be with all of them, even in a big-band I have had this feeling.

There are *all* these images, it's open, it's free, nothing is *wrong* and you can go with that and that is yourself. It's *the human being*, it's all the images of the human being himself, and in communication with others. It's for that I find improvised music beautiful. *It represents our life*. You've got someone who is in communication and someone who is not and then you've got all the emotional things, violence, strong and weak, love and suffering, that is the music, it's all this supported with spontaneity, creativity and expression. So for me it's that, to express yourself, what you are, who we are - what we are when we are angry, when we are soft, when there is love, when there is sadness, when there is suffering, when there is happiness, when there is violence, you go and see a gig in improvised music you can feel all those things. It's a music who *says* something. If I do jazz standards it's still me, it's still my voice, and I express myself because I'm singing, but I don't feel like I'm doing an improvised music gig, I feel a structure, I feel it closed, shut, I feel enclosed, restricted, if you do a solo within that then you move but around you nothing gonna move. In improvised music it is different, the structure in improvised music is the musician himself, is ourselves, there is no limit except the

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musician's potential for creativity, that is the structure of improvised music.

In this music we don't what is going to happen, that's why people are scared of it, they don't know where it's going to go, nobody does. So it's not for nothing that I like this music, because I don't like security. I could be all my life a singer to do proper songs, then what? Where is the surprise, the emotion, the expression? Even if I sing them differently each time it's still the same song. Maybe it's the words; if you sing 'cloud', it's 'cloud' but if I do a sound that sound will change more easily, I'm not restricted, it's a sound and there's no word.

But because this music is creative all the time, it is more important to sometimes be quiet and take back some energy and inspiration in order to go back to it. Many of the musicians I know in London do not know how to take care of themselves. They just play, play, play, play. Okay, that's what they want to do, express themselves. But you need to balance that, you need sometimes to stop and to know how to take... shit, I forgot the word... you need to take some energy back sometimes, and many of the musicians here don't know how to do that. How to stop and think, have a walk in the park, do some breathing exercises. They don't go inside themselves enough, and that is reflected in improvised music, you know the sets get longer, three quarters of an hour or more, with no break in between, no silences, Go For It! Boom, Bang! And this also scares the audience. At this moment what the musicians should do is to be aware, 'Look, okay, I'm in front of some people, I'm not just on my own so I should respect that.'

Women, maybe we've got more of this thing, to stop and to listen and to be aware of what is really going on. So I think it changes something to have a woman in the band, but I never feel myself that I would like to have more women in a band, or just women, or to have concerts just for women or

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anything like that. I mean in Paris there is nothing like this... music is music, man, woman or child, the sound is the sound. If you feel you want to be involved in this music you just do it

As the woman got more sense of communication and respect for the space, and the sensibility of the silence, the music will reflect that. And if the man tries to work on himself, on his selfish parts, then the music will change. This is work that the man should do, you work yourself you work the music at the same time, you work the music you work yourself. And it's that you find in this music, where else can you find that? In no other music.

Also, I think this music contains much suffering. When you need to express yourself all the time it means that something is hurt inside. Maybe that is also something to do with the condition of the music, because it's not easy. The condition of the musician who lives here doing improvised music, it's just hard. Going to gigs and getting just £5 or £3, if you get £10 in an improvised music gig it's just great, everybody is happy! But it's just *nothing*.

But people still carry on doing it here, in London, and London is still really the place that improvised music exists. You can find it a bit in Germany but it doesn't exist like it does here. So I don't understand why nothing more has happened for those musicians, why there's not enough structure for them, even just one proper club! I think now we really need to do something because maybe in two years the musicians are going to get too tired and they're going to move. We must find a way to let this music get known to people and for I think the musician also has to do something. Maybe in the sense of behaviour on stage, being aware of what's going on in the room that you play in, that might give a contact to the audience, because people are not completely ready to listen to this music. And more musicians should try to do more things collectively -

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outside of the gigs, it's here where something could happen more, to be more aware of how to *fight*, to let this music be recognised. But they're either too lazy or too selfish... How many musicians try to run a club? Not a lot... So now I'm a bit worried what will happen in London, because when I arrived here two years ago there were nearly seven clubs and now there are none...

This situation, these pubs and clubs we play in, which are just horrible. The landlords only want to put this music on because they think about how many beers the audience will drink, so they will make money, but when they realise that people are not coming because it's not a reputable music they just kick you off.

I mean I am a musician, but I can see what's wrong with the musician also. The musicians must take their share of the responsibility also. Some of the musicians give up and go, 'Oh shit, nobody cares about us, nobody will ever listen to this music, I give up'. Me, I feel happy to be here even though it's so difficult, It's like I still hope. For me it's not possible that in London this music still exists, that so many musicians do it for years and years and still want to it, and that they are not recognised for that, it's just not possible.

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I think it's a shame, when you are at school until six all that the children are doing is expressing themselves, socialising with the other, painting singing, body movement. Then even in the classroom it's a small class and it's all to develop creativity. Then when you get to seven it's like nothing, no creativity, all sitting in rows, and everything is going in the opposite direction. The only thing we have is to go to the gymnasium once a week. But we have all got this creativity in us and we all need to put it out, because it's what we are here for, to *create*. I feel like there is a

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break somewhere and this creativity is lost and there's a few people, who go in this direction of art or whatever, who get it a lot and carry on and just want to do it more and more. It starts at school, it's such a pity, such a shame.

For me it's my... Like if you don't create, you are not active. You just receive everything, you don't do anything, and we've got so many incredible things. It doesn't need to be in art actually; Everything could be art, people who build a house. You see, the power we've got to do things, it's just amazing, it's incredible. And this is the first thing we've got, otherwise what's the point? What's the point of being here? I can't imagine myself without creating something, how can people feel that that doesn't mean anything?

*(4th September 1990.)*

PHIL WACHSMANN

*Violinist and composer Phil Wachsmann trained in classical composition and violin. In the 1970s he played compositions which called for improvisation, for example Karlhienz Stockhausen's 'intuitive music', and was a member of the innovative improvising group Chamberpot. Today he plays in a number of contexts including solo, the contemporary Iskra trio with trombonist Paul Rutherford and bassist Barry Guy, and The London Jazz Composers' Orchestra. He also uses electronics and runs a regular workshops at Morley College. (see 1.11, 2.5)*

I have to say for a start that I feel quite committed to a very pluralistic view of music, many different types not just improvising. I don't like polarities and things, like in the commercial area people tend to think of you as a certain type of player, producing a certain type of thing and they're surprised if you do anything different. So my view of improvisation isn't that it's making a commodity but that it's making something new each time in whatever situation that might be. One doesn't have to nurture one's personality in that way, it's going to come through anyway.

Anyway that's just something I wanted to say to begin with, otherwise it might sound like I've got a set path. Because there is a tendency when one looks back at things to think that there's a set path, whereas actually it looks more and more like a set path the more you describe it afterwards, which I think is a problem with history, and also with the views one gets about how free music came about. A thing which I always remember as being rather a shock was in a group which I worked with for a long time called Chamberpot. My own perspective of what happened in that group, even the chronology of it, who did what when, and what it was that the group was about, when I talk to my



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colleagues in that group I find that they have really totally different views. We could actually get into a fight about it, but it's really just a matter of understanding it. I think that's just the way it is, people naturally have very different viewpoints of what happened in the past. That might be even be more pronounced with improvised music in the sense that you haven't got ground rules, you're actually making it all the time, while you have got a perspective you aren't actually making something that's fixed or measurable at the time. So if you've got four creative people working together and they're all working on their own angles and when they're working together something happens, it's even more likely that that will happen... That's 'paths' anyway. So would you like to know how I got into it historically?

I studied conventional music in Durham and I got an exchange scholarship to go to Indiana for a year. That was really nice because I had a year where I could more or less do the subjects of my choice and I was allowed to attend some post-graduate courses too, because some of the American undergraduate courses are very simple. I did composition, violin, and C.20th music. That was 1965, and I got to hear things I would never have got to hear in Durham, people like Harry Partch, I met him actually, Feldman, Ives, Cage. So that was very exciting. This American music has different concepts, so I had to become more aware about questions like, How are people listening? How is the music performed? What is the context of it?

The other thing is that my father is an ethnomusicologist, quite an interesting one, quite an important one in his way, and I heard African music for the first ten years of my life. I think that influenced me a lot, though I never tried to be imitative. It helped me not to get so trapped within a scale, and to be aware of different values, different scales, and to be aware of the different ways in which people listen to music. The other thing that I found very exciting in Indiana was that I had

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composition lessons from a Chillien composer called Orego Salaz. And although his music was generally speaking neo-classical he was prepared to look at my compositions without reference to any other works and that was stunning, and for me, very influential. In England at that time you could only go and do a piece, 'In The Style Of...', like a Bartok piece. It was very exciting for me to write a piece and find out that another person had a lot to say about it without reference to any other model. I suppose I've been very committed to this idea of making a piece without reference to things outside it. I know that this is intellectually and academically suspect and so on - it's impossible not to have associations and outside references, you know it's even impossible for me to do an improvisation without reference to what I had for breakfast or whether the sun's shining or not. But on the other hand I enjoy focussing on something without reference to anything outside the piece. I then became interested quite a few years later in structuralism, Levi Strauss; looking at structures and making comparisons within a model, without reference to outside the model, and also linguistics. Anyway, those kind of ideas were things that influenced me a lot.

When I went back to Durham to do my degree I began to get very annoyed with performances of contemporary and classical music, they seemed to be without excitement and they seemed to be about going through the notes correctly. There were so many performances that weren't real happenings and for me I found this was very lacking - like a desert. It lacked the performance element, the real feeling of live performance. I mean a piece of music must be a happening, if you perform Mozart and it's not a happening then it's not really worth doing, it has to be a real communication at that moment, otherwise you might as well just read the score. But these of values of course that are much more important in improvisation... It has to take risks and there is a tendency for music not to take risks, because

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technology, the media, and education tend to heighten the levels of technical perfection required and then people actually value that more than the event of a happening in a musical performance.

Something my father did a lecture on was changeability of musical experience, that one can have radically different musical experiences throughout ones lifetime with the same single piece of music. In his case it was Beethoven's *C Sharp Minor Quartet*. To begin with he enjoyed it as a player, just the sheer sound makes it a very exciting piece to play, to actually be making these vibrations is a strong physical feeling. Then he studied music and got to do the Adorno act on it, took it apart and it got to be a big intellectual experience, like algebra. Then the third experience was when some lecturer said it was based on Hamlet and there is some evidence that Beethoven was reading it at the time and so on. My father was horrified to think that all this wonderful music could just be a piece of *film music* or something. Then came the War and the smash up of a certain way of listening. All the European values which had developed up until that point, artistic values and so on, seemed to get shattered by the war experience, then being in Africa for twenty three years and hearing no live playing, then he *came back* to it and that was a different experience... Then he brought back what he'd learnt from African music at applied that to European music, as a new way of looking at it... So these are the kind of ideas I suppose I grew up with.

So that was one element. Another was that I studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. She taught something very obvious but which is not often talked about, that when you write a piece you have to have a real sense of imagination of how the player is going to play the piece, and what it's going to mean to the player. And Henri Poussour, I went to some lectures of his on contemporary music that were very exciting...

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Then what did I do? Yes, in 1969, 1970 I formed a group with some friends - Igdrasil - and we used to do our own compositions and some prose pieces, Ashley, Riley *In C*, and then Cardew, Feldman, Cage, Ichiyanagi, Stockhausen's *Aus Den Sieben Tagen*. We did some performances and I began to enjoy the free-playing bits more than the bits that were held down by the composer, or notation. I got to think, 'Well, why slave away at someone else's idea when one's own creative idea can actually be much better or more exciting?' I mean I think those composers contributed a great deal but actually the real formation of the notes was what I was doing with my colleagues, rather than what the composer had proscribed - he was just setting up a situation or an area of sensitivity or focus. Well there was a division; some people in the group only valued the bits that were determined and others like myself began to enjoy the freer bits more. It fitted in perhaps with certain adolescent views about anarchy as well. So gradually I got to do more improvisation. Then out of that came Chamberpot, in 1973? which I think was quite an important group. As with a lot of groups in those days the music was ardently non-tonal, post-Webern, in order to avoid cliches or the regurgitation of other music, that was the sort of area in which we wanted to work, Iskra 1903 was also dedicated to that area; no octaves, avoiding tonality. The thing was that in those days as soon as you hit a concord or long-pedal the music would automatically start sounding like something else, because of the way people's ears were in those days. And it wasn't until I think quite a lot later that it became possible to bring tonality into improvised music without setting up associations. The reason for that in the internal dynamics of a group is that if someone used a tonal tune or something like that, it has such a strong polarization that it polarizes everything that everyone else does towards it. It's like talking to someone with a one-track mind; the concord can be so strong that it wipes out what other people

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are playing.

For a long time in Chamberpot we were only about music, and not about theatre or personality things. We worked together for 8 or 9 years and did two records. Towards the end we did start introducing some tonal things, like a melody, but still within an atonal context. It became much freer and less hung-up on being atonal, which is what's happened in Iskra also, at least since I joined it. If you look around there are a lot of improvisers who are less atonal than they used to be. A lot of free players don't even have that atonal skill anymore, they're not interested, it's not relevant to them. Anyway Chamberpot was very important to me, we worked very extensively, rehearsed at least every week. A beautiful thing about it was that sometimes if we couldn't get on with each other, couldn't talk even, the music would still work. Another thing was that we never liked to repeat ourselves, so if something worked well one day there was always a tendency to prevent it happening again. I think that's something a lot of improvisers feel, if they try to re-do their best day, it never works. Because what makes it work is being really present and honest, is what you really want to say at that moment...

I think at first I regarded improvising as a compositional process, though not in the sense that a composer is someone who has to tie up all the loose ends, or in the way that a sonata is a musical argument which must resolve itself. For me a composition could be more like a train journey, a slice out of time. But I came - quite late actually - into contact with Derek (Bailey), and I think it took me one or two years to understand what he meant when he said that improvisation is really very radically different from a compositional process. I guess I'd already got part of the way there, so that was a kind of progression.

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I did a piece dedicated to Eric Satie for a record on Nato based on a book of his called *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*. All I did was that every time I thought I was something memorable I would forget everything and just go on playing, so it was five minutes of violin playing without ever allowing my brain to dominate, every note I would try to forget how it was done. And it's surprising how well it flows. That's one way of disturbing one's normal thought processes to see what else is there, but I mean that was a piece I wouldn't play like that normally. It's done with the belief that actually there are all sorts of things that are going to flow despite oneself.

Another thing I've been exploring recently, this is the last four or six years, is that I'm getting more interested in human inter-reactions which have nothing to do with music necessarily. You know if people just be themselves, and don't try to be anything then it's amazing what marvellous things come out. I mean, I used to have trouble, personally, relating to my own feelings, and you know when you do get in touch with your feelings you are a whole person, and amazing things happen which can't possibly happen when one's trying hard and all those mental things are going on. So with my solo record in 1985 a lot of the stuff in that is to do with Acupuncture, Tai Chi, getting in touch with my feelings, that sort of thing. For example, one goes and plays, performs, if you don't really know where you are, don't notice where you are, how can you perform very well?

I'm not prepared to even talk about it really, except I'll just say that is in my past I would have always thought that a colour having a certain very strong meaning, or feeling or atmosphere, even a strong effect in the medical sense, I would have thought that was absolute rubbish. But the person who did acupuncture also did some healing, not actually touching just moving her hands across one's body and projecting a colour, and on one occasion I thought I could see the colours she was projecting, so I checked with

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her afterwards, and they were the same colours, so something must be working there. And then just getting in touch with incredibly strong feelings, and realising how much can happen if you break down barriers, so actually it's more interesting just to drop barriers than to create barriers, as a human being.

And all of this is for me very tied up with improvising. The sort of issues that happen in my life, in terms of human relationships and everything to do with how one lives, are the same things that happen in the music. I mean I know from Tai Chi that if I got that sense of awareness of myself and the space around me that that has a very strong effect on my playing, and I think my performing has improved a lot since I started, because I'm just so much more aware of so many things. I know if I have to play, and I'm feeling unlike playing, if I want to push the world away, I don't want to see anybody, I know now what's going on, whereas in the past it would just be not a very good performance. Now at least if I can't put it right then at least I can work with the shit that's going on and use that. So that can generate a hell of a lot and I think it makes for more contact...

I now also have a conviction that people don't really listen properly, people don't actually hear one-hundredth of what's going on, they hear something else and I think I'm getting better at that something else and improvisation is a marvellous area to work on that. Music is not the notes, I think you'll find Keith Tippett saying something like this now and again, it's something *behind* the notes. Most audiences react to that something else, they get human messages, people really relate to honesty.

I played a festival in Switzerland recently. They put together a group of ten or eleven musicians and everyone was trying very hard to do their bit and everybody felt they had to make an impression. Someone suggested I do a solo, which I didn't really think was a good idea but anyway I did it. I didn't want to get up there and just *compete*, so I just

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attached a bit of wire to the violin with the delay and various bits of electronics, which is not a new idea, and I brought the level of what I was doing to a minimum where it was almost not a performance, I was concentrating on the process of just doing nothing at all, just making noises and so on. And although I say it myself it was probably the best thing of the evening, for the audience. And I think what they really clued into was that something really honest was happening and it was very refreshing, instead of being fed all these commodities that people had been making at home. And the other musicians raved about it as well, because after that they could shed all their fears about their self-image and just be themselves, and it would actually be much more interesting and that made it easier for most of them to play.

And that's the sort of thing I like, it fits in very much with what I've learnt about living, which doesn't mean to say I'm successful at it, but it just what I'm focussing on, and it's more interesting to focus on it than not, for me anyway. It all fits in with the concern to break down barriers...

And I do think that improvisation generally has moved towards being more communicative. Audiences seem to enjoy the very abstract sounds in a way that they didn't in the past, and that's because then we were focussing on the the squeaks, and now there is more maturity and emphasis on the things that generate them. It ties in with an awareness that you can see around you, people are more interested in feelings now than they were ten or fifteen years ago, they talk about them more. I mean jazz musicians used to talk about 'good vibes' but it was never very specific, I mean they were never very detailed...

If I hear some music I usually expect there to be some feeling of enlightenment about it... you can almost identify a moment when suddenly the air clears and it's really exciting and uplifting and it makes you feel good in the

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same way that acupuncture or massage or therapy or whatever does... those are the things I think that people pick up on, much more than whether you're repeating a melody or whatever, do you know what I mean? So that's the sort of thing that's interested me for six years or more... I used to be very intellectual, in my life as well as music, now I find it's much easier to get in touch with my feelings...

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What you've got, what I'm talking about, is going to make me sound rather kinky I suppose! I mean I've always felt that music's about music and I never liked to hear it said that music's about healing or therapy or something else, and I still stick to that, I still think that music should be about what happens musically. It's just that what goes to make music seems to expand enormously to cover just so much... would you like some more coffee?

*(9th May 1990.)*

ALEX WARD

*Alex Ward plays clarinet, saxophone and piano. He has played with Derek Bailey and Company regularly since 1987, when he was 14, and also has a duo with drummer Steve Noble. (see 1.19)*

I came into it very much through jazz. When I was very young I heard a large range of music through my parents. At this time my dad didn't have a very large jazz collection but what there was was very varied, if I look back and try to think what were the first three jazz records I ever heard, one was the King Oliver recordings with Louis Armstrong, one was I think a Ellington thing, and the other was Ornette Coleman's *This is our Music...* And I liked the Coleman a lot, so I started buying other Coleman records, read in books about Coleman, then heard Coltrane and Ayler, I got the LP *Vibrations* and I really liked that a lot. Then I got into Cecil Taylor and from that into people like (Anthony) Braxton and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. This was sort of 1985ish, I was about eleven, and hadn't heard much stuff after the '60s and I was a bit a bit puzzled, I thought, 'well, where did it actually go?' And then later that year I saw an advertisement that the Anthony Braxton quartet was coming to Leicester that December, and I went to that and I think that's what most opened me up to free improvisation and the forms connected with it. I liked his playing very, very much, I also like the pianist Marilyn Crispell, the compositions; the great melodic lines that are leaping all over the place, I found that very appealing. I think what I liked about it most was that it was really a very different music from anything I'd ever heard before, I couldn't sort of pin it down. So I looked for Braxton records and that led me into free improvisation. The only thing I'd heard before that of free improvisation was about a month before that

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concert I'd been to Nottingham library and I found a record there by Derek Bailey, *Lot 74*, and I knew he'd played with Braxton so I got it out. I *hated* it actually, I couldn't make anything of it, it was just a noise, and it it wasn't even a *loud* noise, I couldn't get anything out of it at all. Then a few months later there was a Derek Bailey solo broadcast on the radio on *Jazz Today* and I really liked that, it was very rhythmic actually, he gave it quite an ironic title, *The Only Good Jazz Composer is a Dead One*, and after that I went back to the library and got the record out again and it made a lot more sense.

Then in summer of 1986 I went to the first Improvisers Forum, and I met Howard Riley and Derek there and got a chance to see him play and to play with him. By then I was very much into free improvisation, though I hadn't actually ever played with anyone, so the whole concept of actually improvising with someone and reacting to them was something I'd never done before. Then I developed an interest in contemporary classical music, at one time I got lots of Ligeti, Messiaen, Stockhausen, Webern, Harrison Birtwhistle, Boulez, Elliot Carter, but I don't listen to it any more...

I'd always wanted to play the saxophone, because it was the instrument that interested me most on jazz LPs, and specifically the alto, which has that sharp cutting quality. But the clarinet was bought because it wasn't quite as expensive as a saxophone but was roughly in the same area. The first clarinet I get was quite cheap, about £60, it was the sort that when people ask you the make of your clarinet, you tell them and they go, 'Oh god, not one of those.' Having the clarinet actually forced me into be more original because I was listening to Albert Ayler records and trying to imitate him, and the clarinet isn't actually the most obvious instrument to do that on... If I'd had the saxophone from the beginning it would have been more of a straight imitation, whereas just the fact of having a clarinet forces you into doing something different, though I was taking

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classical lessons for technique as well.

After that I got the chance to play at various Company concerts with Derek Bailey, which was a great opportunity to meet people who were interested in the same area, although obviously they were all a lot older than I was. And the chance to play with these people has opened me up to all the different ideas about free improvisation.

The impression that I get about the original generation like Derek Bailey and Evan Parker and to an extent Anthony Braxton and Leo Smith was that they had a conception of free improvising very much in terms of people playing together but maintaining the coherence of their own line. So although they would relate to each other it wouldn't be just a case of them trying together to build up a sound. Now because they were very much the people I'd listened to that was also very much the what I thought of it. But when I started playing with other people I discovered that a lot of people working now, like Steve Noble, conceive of it slightly differently. Certainly the people in Sheffield think of it much more in terms of building up *group* patterns which you would add to. Now that's a very new way of looking at it to me, firstly because here in Grantham I've got no-one else to build up patterns with! And secondly because I hadn't actually listened to much more recent free improvisation, I'd just listened to the 'classics'.

Something I do regret to some extent is to do with the way that Derek works. How it often works with these Company things is that you get there, say an hour and half before the thing, you perhaps meet these people briefly and then work out what you're going to do, and then you do the concert and you don't actually see them again unless you do another concert with them. And you don't know anything about them. I think Derek Bailey likes this as a method for making the music, you just get thrown into these situations and you just have to play, you may have to start an improvisation in

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front of an audience with someone you may not even have met before or heard of. Now I've nothing against that as a way of making music, it's just that I would actually like to be able to talk to the people, perhaps have a chance to discuss ideas about music, and I could learn from them or whatever. I don't find I get a chance to do that. The other thing is that because of the nature of how Company works, everyone in it is treated fairly much as an equal, now to a certain extent I find this very flattering, and it's nice for my ego and whatever, I'm up there on equal terms with all these great musicians, but in another way I think I would, to a certain extent, actually like, because I *am* only sixteen, to be actually taught a bit about it! I mean there's a lot of gaps in my musical knowledge...

That collective approach, say of John Stevens, wouldn't be so natural to the way I think or be immediately appealing to me. I don't find that those ideas are the sort of one's I would at all share, everyone sort of sitting in circles and things, really I've never liked that sort of thing. I've not felt attached to the idea of improvisation or other avant-garde forms as having some sort of social relevance, or philosophical import. I've never been able to come to terms with Cage's ideas at all. I've never really been into the idea of free improvisation or other sorts of music as, you know, vehicles for mediation or losing oneself or whatever, it's just not the way I think. I like to approach it just by picking up an instrument and by just working out musical ideas, I like to think of in a much more down to earth way, if you see what I mean.

I'm never totally absorbed in music to the extent that everything else is blocked out, I never get sort of lost or anything. It's not just improvising, when I play classical music other people talk about getting totally lost in it and switching everything off, this is always something I've heard other people talk about, never something I've actually known for myself.

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- No, it doesn't worry me really, because I have a feeling that if I did completely lose myself in the music, I'd end up playing a lot of absolute rubbish, I mean it's like free association or whatever, just saying the first thing that comes into your head. Although you might link that with free improvisation I would like to think that free improvisation was a bit more than that, if it's just a stream of consciousness... I mean I've always thought like that, I don't think I can think otherwise.

I just think I basically like music really, I mean, I suppose I like it more than other things. But I would never want to say anything like, I find music spiritually uplifting or it makes me a better person, or anything like that, because I don't think it does. I don't actually believe that music does anything - except give pleasure to people who listen to it and create it, and I've always really thought that's enough. I mean I'm not very interested in politics, so it could be said that that might be why I don't see any political aspects to it, but I am interested in philosophy, and the more I learn about music and the more I learn about philosophy the more I'm convinced that they have nothing to do with each other whatsoever.

The strongest effect any piece of music has ever had on me is to make me want to hear more music, it's never had any impact outside of itself or related music. It never leads me onto related topics...

I know this is sort of the opposite of the way that a lot of people in this area think, but I have just always really liked listening to music and playing it.

*(29th May 1990.)*

## LOUIS MOHOLO

*Louis Moholo is a South African drummer who in 1965 came to London with Blue Notes, with pianist Chris McGregor, saxophonist Dudu Pukwana, trumpeter Mongezi Feza and bassist Johnny Dyani. Moholo has played in dozens of international free improvising and jazz groups including Company, Peter Brötzmann's trio, duos with pianists Cecil Taylor, Keith Tippett and Irene Schweitzer and his own group Viva La Black. (see 2.1, 2.2)*

*Johnny Dyani, Dudu Pukwana and Chris McGregor all died during the course of this research, Pukwana and McGregor within a few months of its completion, leaving Moholo the sole surviving member of this expatriate group (Feza died in 1975). I talked to Moholo very shortly after the death of his two lifelong friends and comrades. I asked him to begin by telling me about his background in South Africa...*

Ah no! My name is this, I was born by the river, you want me to start like that? You want me to do all *that* stuff?

Okay. I was born in South Africa in 1940, the tenth of March, under the heat I was born. And I come from a no-good country in terms of laws, a very fucked-up country indeed - you must hear me well, it's the most beautiful country in the world, I'm saying 'fucked-up' because of the laws there and what those white cats are projecting. That's why I split in the first place. But before I tell you about that, let me tell you about how I started playing drums.

It was just from being a kid, touching this and that, I got two sticks and started banging on the sink, and maybe some notes would come out, then scratching a ruler against the fence on the way back from school, maybe that would sound nice. I didn't know that this would be the beginning of my appreciating the notes that come out of a drum. And of course in South Africa you know the drum is *the* thing, it

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was just banged all over the place, everywhere that you went to some cats would be sitting there banging on the drums and I would come there too and dance, like a kid. There would be boy scouts marching bands coming down the street, and it used to fascinate me the way the cat on the big bass drum used to swing that thing and play; boom boom boom! It used to drive me crazy you know? We used to follow these boy scouts bands and our mothers would come and gather us back because we were going too far and we would come back crying. So we used to get some sticks and tin cans and things and imitate the boy scouts. I would find myself playing on the tin cans and other cats would be picking up papers and rolling them up - that would be a bugle. And we would go round and round the house, just imitating the scouts, banging and making a lot of noise, like kids do, until our mothers would tell us to stop, not realising of course that this was to be my future profession. That's how I started, though I didn't realise that I had started.

Then aged six or seven I got into the cubs and then graduated to boy-scouts and then I was near to those kettle drums, the real thing! Ha ha! And then I was there man, playing those kettle drums. But then they got taken away, because the scout-master said I was playing too much, I was *unruly*... But I had tasted the real thing now, and I couldn't leave it - right up to now, I'm still on the case, still on it. This morning before you came I was banging away for two hours before you came, every day. It keeps the doctor away!

That is my beginning, that's how I started and from then on I just went on to do play normal dancing stuff for ballrooms, Glen Miller stuff, and Ellington. Then I left that for traditional jazz, combos and trios, and that just grew and grew. I played in many places in South Africa, I won a prize for my drumming, they were issuing little gold stars you know, ha ha! 'Oh man, you're a good drummer, have a little gold star, right on!' So I gave it to my father, I

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don't know what happened to that. Dudu (Pukwana) got one too, Mongs (Mongezi Feza), and Chris (McGregor) too got one. I was tied for my prize with a drummer called Mr Eddie Moboza, who died in South Africa, a very very good drummer. He played with the first Chris McGregor big band in South Africa, one day he didn't make the gig, this guy, and I depped for him and I never parted with Chris from then, this is about '61.

We were invited to play in a festival in Switzerland. Dollar Brand invited us to come to a club where he was playing and we worked there and stayed in Zurich for one and a half years. We came to England after that with Dollar Brand and he stayed here for about six months, he didn't like it at that time. We got out of South Africa to better ourselves, you know? And see the world. With *all* the *shit* that was happening there there was no space for *nobody* to do *anything* in South Africa. We had to come over, I mean we were tired of it. I was working with Chris McGregor and Chris McGregor's a white cat. We were not supposed to play together, we were not supposed to be on the same bandstand with Chris, we were not supposed to play for white people. I mean I was supposed to play places where *my mother* wouldn't be allowed to come in and hear me play. And they wouldn't only refuse her to come to my concerts, they would also beat her up maybe - so fucked up were those guys in South Africa at that time. And even now they are still like this. So sometimes Chris McGregor would have to play behind a curtain, and vica versa, I would have to play behind a curtain if we got hired by some white cats. And Chris McGregor used to come to this place where we would drink some beer, in the Zulu quarters, but white people were not *allowed* in here, but Chris dug this beer so he would paint his face with black polish to come in there. The authorities would put someone there to make sure that there was no white people coming into this area, they were not allowed to come in there. You know Chris was not even allowed to come into

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my village! For a long time white people were not allowed to come into black-townships at all. And vica versa, we had to get papers to come into white areas. I was arrested a lot of times coming from a gig carrying my sticks home, I mean I wasn't doing anything, but it was an offence just to be there, just to be walking in the street. I had to walk seven miles home, because there are no buses or taxis going to my town and all the gigs were in white areas. And the police would pick me up and I'd be picking potatoes. Straight from a gig to picking potatoes for three months!

And I was sold once you know, I was *sold*. *Sold!* There was something happening in my township and this guy sent me to get a bottle of brandy in town, which was the only place you could get it. So I got this money, I walked into town and went into the bar and this guy asked me what I wanted and asked whether I was a coloured person or a black person - because if I was black there was no way black people could get liquor. So he said 'Come here,' and ran a pen through my hair, like that, you see? And it stuck, you see, so I had failed to be a coloured because they have hair that is closer to white people's hair. So I failed and was slammed out, and as I was being chucked away from the bar some policemen came and arrested me, saying, 'What were you doing being in *there*,' being a black you see. So I was arrested and sentenced to four months for being in that house. Instead of just lying about in jail and cleaning up all the faeces they sold us to the farmers to go and pick potatoes. They were making money out of us, we got a shilling a day. I did that for about two months, and the third month I was inside this farm working for this Boer, I was called over the loudspeaker, '*Louis Moholo!!*' and I was taken to Cape Town. I didn't realise it but I was being released, a guy had paid £25 for my release in order that I could play at a festival.

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Anyway we came over to Europe and I started hearing some other vibes. You know I was away from South Africa and away from the chains. I just wanted to be free, totally free, even in music. Free to shake away all the slavery, anything to do with slavery, being boxed into places - one, two, three, four - and being told you must come in after four. I was just a rebel, completely a rebel. And then of course there were people like Evan Parker whom I saw was also a rebel. From then on I just played free, I met John Tchicai, Steve Lacy, Peter Brötzmann. Me and John Stevens were actually the first drummers to play free music in Britain, if the truth be told, and then after that a lot of other cats came in, but we were the first...

Free music is *it* man, it's so beautiful. The word 'free' makes sense to me. I know that's what I want, freedom, let my people go. *Let my people go!* And that's interlinked with politics, they embrace each other. It's a cry from the inside, no inhibitions... And the colours are so beautiful; there's a cry, there's joy, a joyful noise, there's sadness, there's rain, there's winter, there's love... that's why it's beautiful.

You know someone said this music is the healing force of the universe, Albert Ayleeeeerr! God bless him! I would have liked to have played with him, I missed the opportunity. Me and Johnny Dyani were going to do that, we were going to go to his house. We were supposed to go with Steve Lacy from Argentina, he'd picked us up in London to go and tour with him, but the stupid American ambassador refused to give us a visa! I had sticks in my hands and a Downbeat with my name in, and I showed him this but he didn't believe I was a musician. He was like, 'No, don't pull that one on me,' and in the end I got so angry with him I told him to fuck off himself, you know? I told him that four hundred years ago they used to hunt me in the bushes in Africa, and put me in some ship and took me to the states, made me work in the

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cottonfields. Then I didn't want to go to the states, but they took me by force. And now that I want to go to the America he says I mustn't go, so I told him to fuck off, to stick America! So we failed, a lost opportunity, because Albert Ayler, Pharoah Sanders, Ornette Coleman, they knew we were coming.

We felt very welcomed in Britain, we were not holding back, we didn't have airs and graces about nothing, we were just innocent guys coming from South Africa. And the people liked us, I mean Dudu was liked all over the place, and Johnny Dyani, I mean the charisma of these guys, and people who met Mongs would just fall apart you know? We were just a likeable band, ask Mr Keith Tippett about it, ask Evan Parker...

But we were not welcome everywhere. We played at Ronnie Scott's Club but we never liked it. We had a misunderstanding with the manager. He started calling us 'boys', and we are not boys. In South Africa we are called boys, you know my father would be called a 'boy' by a boy of about twelve years old just because he's white. Then at Ronnie Scott's they would start going, [affects public school accent] 'Well you see boys... one should do this, one shouldn't do that... okay boys?' and I would go, 'No no no, don't call us boys!' In any case I am a man myself, I have been to the circumcision school, and I'd been through too hard a time to be called a boy in England. Then one night we were there with Wes Montgomery and I thought, 'Is this guy going to say "boy" to Wes Montgomery?' He *didn't* say it to him, because he was from the 'states. I wish we'd never played there, they gave us such a tough time. And the standard of music that was played there was so disgraceful, as it is today, it is awful that music. They were afraid of us and afraid of the music we were doing, because we were playing free and at Ronnie Scott's it was unheard of. They wanted us to play some *boomba-boomba* stuff, you know, because they think we

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come from the jungle.

We had to fight very hard, there was a lot of prejudice. I mean I don't even want to say anything about it, but someone said I should use Brylcream for my hair! - Ben Webster said that - I didn't want to say that. My hair was just natural black hair, I didn't put no Brylcream in it, but he would, like, make a joke, 'Hey maaan, you should put some Brycreeaam in your hair maaan!' When me and Mongs asked him if we could sit in with him man and he asked us where we were from and we said South Africa and he couldn't believe we could play *anything*, because maybe we were from the jungle. He goes, 'You come from South Africa my man? No, come tomorrow'. And we *did* come tomorrow because we were that serious, *desperate*. Then after two weeks he gave us a break and we played with him, Mongs played so beautiful... and Ben Webster *adopted* Mongs after that, right there on the bandstand, he goes, 'Man, you're my son!' And he wanted to go through it all, legally and everything, *really*, ask... I was just going to say, 'Ask Johnny,' I was just going to say 'Ask Johnny' man... In the end it was just a verbal contract, 'Okay, I'm your son'. When Stuff Smith died we were consoling Ben Webster, he came to us, me, Mongs, Johnny and Dudu, he was crying and we looked after him for one day. We gave him respect, the respect that we came with from South Africa, he was our father, and he liked us for that, he liked us. He used to look after us very well, Ben...

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It's impossible for you to play free music if you don't know the finer points and its very difficult to know the finer points, and to play something simple, if you don't know the whole spectrum. It is very difficult to be simple. Like the things Paul Motion does are so simple, he lifts up his sticks and goes wallop! It seems so simple, but it's not. Its simple to play one note, just go to the piano and play

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it, but, fuck, how to put it? Miles Davis is a master of this, he would just play one note and it was so effective, it could knock you out, just one note, Monk too... and Steve Lacy, he can play like that, like a lazy snake, that texture, simple but so rich, you can't have this richness unless you know the whole spectrum. It's not simple actually, I shouldn't say this is simple.

I've gone through periods in my life of heavy playing, I used to break my sticks and you have to go through it in order to break it down mathematically so you can just play one line, boom, and that's it. So when that happens I just welcome it, I can't say that I set out to do it, to plan it doesn't work. It's where the music carries you.

*When you start to play is there any intention of playing something in particular, or in a particular way?*

No, you're completely free in there. The approach is from a higher level, you've played already. The first note you hit; this is the note that controls you. You just follow, and you can get a vibe from the next person you're playing with, and, especially if you're playing with someone like Derek Bailey, there are so many forces that you don't even have to play. The music just plays itself, the drums just play themselves sometimes.

*Is that specific to free-playing?*

It is specific to free-playing actually.

There's no one word for it, as well. I've asked people for explanations of what happens, I thought that maybe I'm just stupid and can't speak, you know? It's difficult to put it in words. Cats like Derek they just tell you to play, 'Play!'. Other people I ask them to play and they say, 'Play what?' I say what are you carrying in you're hands? You're

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carrying a saxophone? So play it!' It's very difficult.  
'Play what?'

*You mean they want a 'thing'?*

Mmm, but there is no thing! And nobody must make any thing out of it as well. There's no thing, there's nothing! Just play! I don't know how to explain it man, I don't have the gift of really explaining this music. Sometimes it's hidden to us as well.

I sometimes think that if the music had been explained to me, what it would do to me, what it would do to me in my life, this heavy duty *demand* it makes, I don't think I would ever be interested, now that I know what music can do to a person. I like music, but the life... if I could be born again and know that I'm going to come to be in exile, then no way, because exile is a fucker, self-exile, any exile is something else. Sometimes, a *lot* of times, I heard Dudu say that he would have preferred the difficulties of South Africa than to deal with the music over here. Because in South Africa, although there was the oppression and all that, we still played *innocently*, we didn't know who the bank manager was! Over here you have to deal with him, and VAT, and all that shit. In South Africa at least the music was yours. And the people of South Africa, they recognise that if you are gifted in something, in anything, then you are that, and you are *named* that. You are respected, and just innocently too, no big deal, not because you have a million pounds in the bank, you are just the village drummer who makes his people happy. So I would be called 'Louis Who Plays The Drums', my surname would be 'Drums'...

But here? It's just another crazy drummer isn't it? Whereas in South Africa I'm a person, a person who plays the drums. Here there are so many other things, forces which have *nothing* to do with life. But I thank God that I came here anyway, you know, because at least there's one South

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African drummer who knows how to play free music, to play avant-garde. Because in my early days I thought I didn't want to have anything to do with avant-garde, free music or jazz; I wanted to pay my rent, and it didn't pay my rent so well! Whereas there were forces in the pop world that terribly wanted me, John Lennon, Frank Zappa, but I refused, because I just wanted to play with *Dudu!* And Mongs, Johnny, I couldn't see myself leaving them, I couldn't see myself leaving this fantastic music. Though I knew that if I did I would have some money, and then I was scared of this money. I was scared. You see, when I started playing free music I just cut off from everything, from money - there was no money anyway - and I *hated* it for not having it and then when I had it I'd just fuck it up, you know, just have a big ball and get *rid* of it, ha ha! So when these guys said, 'I'm going to give you *millions!*' I just said, 'No thank you very much man, I'm going on the motorway now to play with Dudu in Cardiff for about £16!' Ha ha! 'Leave me alone, leave me alone!' And Mongs too, he would say, 'Leave him alone! Why don't you leave him alone! Ah Mongs...

You see, we didn't understand it. Like Mongs joined this guy Manfred Mann, they would go into this studio and do pop records. It would be £12 per hour, and these guys were fucking around in the studio, stretching the hours because they wanted more money, and Mongs was just wanted to take care of business and split, he was *bored*, just freaking out. These guys were fucking around for a whole day, and we really didn't feel like this, so one time when the drummer was fucking around he invited me and we came in and played one track. The producer was very happy because we did this record in two hours, so of course these guys didn't want us any more, we were fucking up the scene, you know?

The Blue Notes were such an underrated band. It's a pity. At the time in the '60s I wasn't really aware of it, I was just

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in it, doing it, but it had so much impact on people. But we were never rated, we were not recognised, never, we were just left in the cold you know, we didn't understand. Hence some of us maybe died before our time as well, because of the hardships in England, we went through some really strenuous shit in England, fighting against sheer odds. But we came to understand that blood is thicker than water. Even when we were not playing together as the Blue Notes we were together in soul, and Chris was helping me out in many ways that I'm not really prepared to talk about, those are secret things you know? We helped each other every way, just by being damned *alive*, you know, it was just enough. Now that they are gone... it's like I got the sack you know, sacked out of the band...

I thank God for having met up with these guys. Like Dudu, this guy was a *ton* of music, you know? Mr Dudu Pukwana, he used to compose about four songs a day, even in the hardship of South Africa, and practice every day. Dudu was just the pillar of the Blue Notes. Dudu the blessed light, he was a blessing, you know? He was special, I have an interview that he did actually, not knowing that he was going, that it was to be his last one. This guy just gave it to me the other day. I'm afraid to listen to it, it's in my drawer over there, but I can't put myself to listen to it.

And Mongs was the *darling* really, the sweetheart of the band, everyone loved him, Mongs would knock us out, everybody! Then we had this other guy called Nick Moyake, Nick was the older guy to us, and we respected him, he had more knowledge of music - indigenous music, music of the heart. He was just music and he pulled us together in terms of strength.

Then of course Johnny, every song that we played Johnny would just cream it and make it so beautiful, Johnny was so musical, anything he did was... he was kind of like a godsend for us, he had some magic about him. And we knew that from the start, when he was a young boy with a singing

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band I was playing drums backing them, it was ridiculous, he was such a fantastic singer - singing the high notes with such ease. Then he switched from alto singing to bass playing, and he played it so well. And he just fitted like a glove, he was in the same vibe as us, and he put the music of the Blue Notes where it was at, he was a gift from heaven.

Then Chris. We would just naturally get into songs, we would just take them lightly, like kindergarten songs, and Chris, maybe typically of a westerner, would leave no stone unturned and he saw the gold, which we didn't because we were *in* the gold. He just saw this beautiful music, and did something about it. He organised it, put it into perspective from his musical knowledge. So we had everything in there, and everybody had a part to play. Chris was very broadminded, a very, very clever cat. In the end he was very proud of us, and we were very proud of him, secretly.

Now this is a secret, but we were very proud of each other and really kicked each other's asses. We did not play games with each other, we did not play buddy-buddy, even though we were buddies. If I fucked up Dudu would just go, '*You fuck off man!*' No buddy-buddy. If I'm out of line or wrong, there was no bullshit. We were strict in our own ways and really very concentrated on this music. And we were so together too, we never failed to be at anybody's beck and call, if anybody said, 'practice' under no circumstances were we to refuse, we were so keen. It was like an emergency, something very urgent we had to do, and our first record was called *Very Urgent*. It was just like a flower that *burst* open!

The Blue Notes did not split actually, we just stopped playing with each other for some time and went off to form our own bands, each of which was successful. And the Blue Notes was *the* fountain, and we never went back to ask for help. There was a link. And now and then we would meet and play with each other, and that was unbelievable man,

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unbelievable. Me and Dudu were going to do this gig for Chris, that would have been the gig of the century, *really*. But it wasn't supposed to be...

I thought Chris was the one who was going to live longer than anyone else. Because Chris was the one that was, like, health conscious. So much so that sometimes we would be pissed off with him. Like we would be making this interview in a hotel foyer with some big Italian guys, like the BBC or the equivalent, and Chris would steam in there with a bag, just a see-through bag of onions, which are good for the heart, and some carrots and honey. We're sitting in this foyer drinking some Champagne and me and Dudu are just wanting to finish so we can have a beer, and Chris would be just the opposite, he'd want the meeting closed so he can go and meditate upstairs. And we want to go and fuck ourselves up with beer!

So I just really thought that Chris would live longest. Up to the point when Johnny died it was just like roulette, like Russian roulette, like, who's going to go first? It was terrible! And Dudu sometimes was very outspoken, he used to talk about it a lot, like, 'Whose next?' And me and Johnny would just tell him to leave it out. It was horrible, just like Russian roulette...

But I thank the Lord for having put it together, for having shared a life with these guys, a very very good foundation, a very good musical background. The Blue Notes was a school. And from the start it was like we knew that this wasn't going to last very long this band. But we were given some time, we had a long run, about thirty years, no no, thirty two years...

And now there's nobody... Sometimes, often when I'm in a nice place or nice company, I think that I shouldn't be here, and I start thinking, 'Oh *shit*, Johnny's not here to enjoy this'. Every time. I wish it to go away from me, you know? Because I'm really pregnant with these guys. *Pregnant*

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with them, they're *in* me. It's a shame. And I knew them from like boys too, when we were still young...

I dream about them a lot. The day before yesterday I was with Dudu, literally, really I was with Dudu in my dream. We were just relaxed. All of them, I've dreamt of all of them. It's nice, to feel like they're visiting me now and then, you know?

*(6th September 1990.)*

#### APPENDIX FOUR: THE AUDIO-MATERIAL

Tape 1: British Improvised Music, 1966-1990, recorded examples.

##### Side One

1. SPONTANEOUS MUSIC ENSEMBLE: Ten Minutes, (10.00) 1974  
John Stevens; percussion, Derek Bailey; guitar, Kent Carter; double bass, Evan Parker; soprano saxophone, Trevor Watts; soprano saxophone. (from Eighty Eight Minutes (1974) Part 2 Emanem Records 3402.)
2. ISKRA 1903: Improvisation 5, (5.57) 1972  
Derek Bailey; guitar, Paul Rutherford; trombone, Barry Guy; double bass.  
(from ISKRA 1903 Incus Records 4).
3. EVAN PARKER (tenor sax) BARRY GUY (double bass): Incision 1, (5.02) 1981  
(from Incision FMP Records SAJ 35).
4. DEREK BAILEY (guitar, voice): In Joke (Take 2), (4.00) 1974  
(from Lot 74 - Solo Improvisations Incus Records 12).
5. AMM: The Crypt (excerpt), (.....) 1968  
Cornelius Cardew; piano, Lou Gare; saxophone, violin, Christopher Hobbs; percussion, Eddie Prevost; percussion, Keith Rowe; guitar, electronics.  
(from The Crypt Matchless Records MR 6).
6. AMM: The Inexhaustible Document (excerpt), (.....) 1987  
Eddie Prevost; percussion, Rohan de Saram; cello, Keith Rowe; guitar, electronics, John Tilbury; piano.  
(from The Inexhaustible Document Matchless Records MR 13).

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7 a,b and c. ALTERATIONS: a. Not So Dumb, Deaf and Blind, b, Herione, c, Part Political, (....) Steve Beresford; piano, euphonium etc., David Toop; guitar, keyboards, flute etc., Peter Cusack; guitars, Terry Day; percussion, reeds, strings.

(from Up Your Sleeve !QUARTZ Records 006).

8. HUGH METCALF (gas mask, voice, live electronics, bass drum, high hat, guitar): My Guitar is a Virgin, (1.52) 1988 (from My Guitar is a Virgin Klinker Zoundz KZ 8803).

Side Two

9. EVAN PARKER (soprano saxophone): Six of One, (6.00) 1980 from Six of One Incus Records 39, and also in the Collected Solos boxed set, no label name or number.

10. DEREK BAILEY (guitar): Noting, (5.38) 1985 (from Notes Incus Records 48

11. PHIL WACHSMANN (violin, electronics): one short movement from Water Writing, (....) 1985 (from Water Writing Bead Records 23)

12 and 13. DEREK BAILEY (guitar) TONY COE (clarinet): Kuru, (2.23) and, Sugu (1.25), 1979 (from Time Incus Records 34).

14. MAGGIE NICOLS, JULIE TIPPETTS (voices, percussion, concertina): What's This? (excerpt), (....) 1978 (from Sweet and S'ours FMP Records, SAJ 38).

15 and 16. JOHN RUSSELL (acoustic guitar), PHIL DURRANT (violin, trombone), John Butcher (saxophones): F.T.T.,

#### Appendix Four: The Audio-Material

(2.25), Pen or Pencil, (2.30), 1897  
(from Conceits ACTA Records 1).

17. MORPHOGENISIS: Improvisation 26/8/87, (...) 1987  
Adam Bohman; Prepared violin, balalaika, objects, Ron Briefel; sound projection and Atari ST computer, Clive Hall; percussion, live electronics and sound projection, Micheal Prime; shortwave radio, bio-activity translator, water machine and live electronics, Fred Sansom; prepared guitars, live electronics, Roger Sutherland; piano, percussion and Atari ST computer.  
(from Prochronisms Pogus Productions 201-2).

18. SMITH, SHEARSMITH, SMITH, MUSGROVE AND BIRD: T.P.,  
(....) 1987  
Allan Dallas Smith; soprano saxophone, Paul Shearmith; Cornet, pocket trumpet, trombone, Roger Smith; guitars, Jerry Bird; electric bass, Robin Musgrove; drums.  
(from Together Again Face Value Records 001).

19. ALEX WARD (clarinet, alto saxophone), STEVE NOBLE  
(drums, percussion, bugle): untitled performance excerpt,  
(....) 1989  
(from an unpublished private recording made at the OASIS wine bar, London E5 by the author).

20 and 21. STOCK, HAUSEN AND WALKMAN: two pieces (...)  
(From What's Up? With Stock, Hausen and Walkman).

## Appendix Four: The Audio-Material

Cassette Two: Associated musical examples, links with jazz, composed and popular music etc.

### Side 1

1. DUDU PUCKWANA'S SPEAR: Sekula Khuluma, (4.14) 1973  
Dudu Puckwana; alto saxophone, piano, percussion, vocals, Mongosi Feza; trumpet, percussion, vocals, Bizo Mngqikana; tenor saxophone, percussion vocals, Harry Miller; bass, Louis Moholo; drums.  
(from In The Townships Caroline C 1504/Virgin Earthworks EWV 5).
2. LOUIS MOHOLO: Amaxesha. Times of Sorrow, (9.50) 1978  
Louis Moholo; drums, Evan Parker; tenor saxophone, Kenny Wheeler; trumpet, Nick Evans; trombone, Radu Malfatti; trombone, Keith Tippett; piano, Johnny Dyani; bass, Harry Miller; bass.  
(from Spirits Rejoice Ogun Records 520).
3. DREAMTIME: Careful Driver, (....) 1983  
Jim Dvorak; trumpet, Nick Evans; trombone, Gary Curzon; alto saxophone, Roberto Bellatalla; bass, Jim Le Baigue; drums.  
(from Bunny Up Affinity Records AF109).
4. and 5. LONDON JAZZ COMPOSER'S ORCHESTRA: Polyhymnia, two excerpts (....) 1987  
featuring Barry Guy; composer and bass, Pete McPhail; soprano saxophone soloist, Phil Wachsmann; violin and electronics soloist.  
(from Zurich Concerts Intakt Records 004).
6. AKEMI KUNYOSHI-KUHN (piano), MARCIO MATTOS (bass), EDDIE PREVOST (drums): Handscapes, (7.06) 1986  
(from Handscapes Leo Records LR 143).

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7.,8. BRITISH SUMMERTIME ENDS: Nine Unknown Uranian Moons,  
(2.43) Nam Pring, (2.55) 1986  
Clive Bell; flutes etc, Sylvia Hallett; violin, voice etc,  
Stuart Jones; cello etc.  
(from Pop Out Eyes Nato Records 707).

Side 2.

9. JOHN STEVEN'S AWAY: Now, (....) 1976  
John Stevens; drums, Nick Stevens; electric bass, Ron  
Herman; double bass, Robert Calvert; saxophone, David Cole;  
electric guitar, Breno T'fordo; percussion.  
(from Somewhere in Between Vertigo Records 6360 135).

10. ANNIE WHITHEAD BAND: Mambo 3, (....) 1985  
(from Alien Style Virgin Paladin Pal 6)

11. ECHO CITY: A Shirtfull of Ice, (3.29) 1987  
Suzi Honeyman; violin, Paul Shearsmith; trumpet, Rob Mills;  
saxophones, Giles Perring; drums, percussion; Guy Evans;  
percussion.  
(from Gramophone Date Records DALP 400336J).

12. and 13. FRED FRITH: The Technology of Tears (excerpt)  
(....), Jigsaw Coda (3.04) 1987  
(from The Technology of Tears RecRec Music ReCDes 20).

14. and 15. THE MELODY FOUR: Ma Belle Marguerite, (2.26),  
The Melody Four? Si, Senor! Please Stop, (3.16) 1989  
Steve Beresford; vocals, keyboards etc, Lol Coxhill; soprano  
saxophone, vocals etc, Tony Coe; tenor saxophone, clarinet,  
vocals.  
(from Shopping for Melodies Nato/Chabada CD OH 19/21).

Appendix Four: The Audio-Material

16., 17. and 18. PHIL MINTON (vocals), VERYAN WESTON  
(piano): Klang Nocturne, (2.00), Another Way Out,  
(1.06)/Wayfarers Prelude to The Lost Chord, (1.35), The Lost  
Chord, (3.14) 1987  
(from Ways ITM records 971420).

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Corregenda

Page 10, line 24, should read, 'free music and words'.

Page 324, line 8, should read, 'the music we're trying to discuss'.

Page 406 is mistakenly inserted between pages 315 and 316.

Page 435, line 15, should read, 'that was very much the way I thought of it'.