

Improvisation: People Making Music (1986)

People Making Music. To begin with, people: people doing something, interacting and through their play, music becoming. Improvisation as a social fabric, of people focused within a context; not a piece of music but the whole of our living tissue. A dynamic process; each individual unfolding, the breath expanding in gestures of becoming sound.

A shifting of focus, from the performance of sound-object (composition) to sound-play / enactment (improvisation), and other radical implications become apparent. The intention of performance changes; not an aiming at a preformed journey well done (image-goals of perfection, investments in the mastery of institutionalized techniques, fingerings marked with dynamics and phrasing prearranged and refined in rehearsals, echoes of recordings and other performances tangled within the image . . .), but rather the realization of form, ourselves finding / revealing on paths (perhaps) untravelled. ("Unpremeditated music is the true gauge which measures the currents of our thoughts—the very undertow of life's stream," reflected Thoreau in his journals.) . . . like a brook after rain pours through dirt, rock, trees and grass, finding new and subtle twists and turns as things move / are moved in the flow. Doors opening.

Improvisation as a process of focus, in touch with the needs of the present music ourselves within and with others (not a repetition of one's habits—learned behaviour from the outside or even one's own habits): aware of needs of the moment / sounding.

And as the intention of the music-maker is refocused (more upon one's own hand instant), so also is the attention (now as active participant / listening) of the audience revitalized. Nothing is prescribed for either; both confronted / dwelling within the immediacy of unfolding. (How different the hierarchies of through-composed pieces; all risks worked through, resolved by the prescriptions of the composer, to be realized by the mastery of the performer and appreciated by the sophistications of the audience—and with this all, an intricate network of evaluations before and after the fact.) Encountering each other in an open field, no paths as yet defined, we follow where the sounds lead, attention given to each nuance of sound activities and interactions each moment revealing. There is no correct way to listen, except to be present, hearing. (If improvisation were looked upon as a process of discovery by someone, shared within the moment with people, can an improvisation be unsuccessful?)

There is something radical, and perhaps truly subversive, in all of this (and especially within our contemporary object / goal oriented society); relationships of people and value systems to be reconsidered. (What would happen if, in an orchestra, a violinist—one of thirty or more—would get so carried away with a musical passage, so as to begin to express their own individual sense of that passage? What would happen to the violinist? . . . to the orchestra? . . . to the conductor? . . . to the audience? . . . to the music?) Improvisation as a meeting of people upon the common ground of unknown: the space fulfilling the resonance of gesture, sounding of person(s) moving the air. And the music, what is it, if not vibrations disturbing the air, moving us as we receive . . . touching upon the ears of our body, changing.

7/22/83

If we begin improvisation from a different edge of listening, concerned with learning more of larger possibilities of sounding

(the European concert hall only one of many; the full spectrum of world music offering

a rich and ever more varied palate of textures), we discover the fullness of music/ourselves expanding deeper into the sound, expressive of what needs to be heard.

We are the sounding string, wind, object being one.

SOUNDINGS: plumbing the depths of sound and in / of me. All sounds. Touch releasing things into motion; gesture realized / resonances of texture becoming song. (Music: the process of living, sounding.) Improvisations, my violin playing . . . an overflowing of myself in space. Sound as a physical reality, touching upon the ears of the body; (“upon the string, within the bow . . . breathing”) . . . reverberations within the skull becoming a changing landscape—a new music.

I follow the line,
am molded by it, yielding, as I mold it
like a brook after rain pours through
dirt, rocks, trees and grass, finding
new subtle twists and turns as things move,
are moved in the flow.

improvisation: a process of discovering (though usually it implies inventing and demonstrating of one’s imagination within a more or less given framework); here as a process of focus (the deeper the focus, so also the process of sounding the river, plumbing the depths) on a sound-texture / gesture and learning more and more of the nuances, details as well as the expanses and horizons to sound out.

melodies of timbre / texture / articulation: a new sense of melody of sound, rather than only pitch at root of the structure. Here the tree expands in various seasons of human growth: our awareness(es), feelings yielding upon the string and drawn across as the breath gathers in the roots of living.

gesture: (the bow upon the string, the wood, the metal, the tightness, heaviness, caressing, drawing out, pounding, digging in) hair of the bow.

I start from where I am (which is not the same as starting from nothing); there is alot in all / around us all the time. (Nothing prearranged or anticipated.) It is just a matter of letting whatever is necessary come forth, to be heard (which is not the same as repetition of habits).

as one sound unfolds, I follow it with my bow
bent thick or thin upon the line;
gut and metal enfolding, stretched taut
full length the black wood
a pathway of no stepping stones
while fingertips find footholds and swaying,
sing a resonance of lush green.

Improvisation allows for the logic of our total selves to participate; what comes forth is the coherence of the sounding gesture.

. . . possessed of the sound / in the depths of its resonance; being at one with the performer through gesture; through practice (performance, meditation, listening) becoming more and more clearly a richness / multiplicity of one; not possessing the sound, i.e. thinking of the “best” technique to develop the “musical idea.”

What happens to Art and technique in all this? The learned systems of Art music are but a manifestation of control to establish a seeming coherence that is already implicit in the material; but the illusion of order that satisfies is the same as the illusion of freedom that is in improvisation.

To be naked in the depths of sound and free to reveal our nakedness before people; to be as we are and offer our findings: Sometimes the line is more straight and sometimes more elusive, twisting and changing direction; very rich with the details of all of it / our richness. Sometimes I come to a dead end, suddenly stop and wait until something else transports me to a different place of song (singing way). Or sometimes my energy scatters, reaching out, contracting, swirls and I, going with it, like a meteor of free associations. And sometimes there are utterly black voids of such deep hued resonance. . .

Improvisations are transient; they come and go. Perhaps they should not be recorded (so I thought for a long time); or perhaps a record (a diary in sound) is the most fitting. Notation is no longer important here. Compositions, on the other hand, have become the “literature” of music (objects notated, analyzed, pillars of culture), whereas essentially they too are displaced in time, perceptible in that moment of passage beyond words.

Improvisation: so easy / so difficult depending on which angle you’re looking from. Actually, it is neither, for those who engage *in* it. All angles converge on the present moment, touching and then, radiating from center and out into time, becoming song:

“Songs are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces & ordinary speech no longer suffices. Man is moved just like the ice floe sailing here & there in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing force when he feels joy, when he feels fear, when he feels sorrow. Thoughts can wash over him like a flood, making his breath come in gasps & his heart throb. Something like an abatement in the weather will keep him thawed up. And then it will happen that we, who always think we are small, will feel still smaller. And we will fear to use words. But it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves—we get a new song.” (Orpingalik) M.G. 11/1/79

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Listening to the sound of a brook, a blur
of wind upon my face
my ears hearing it as I sit
still listening, the nuances becoming
apparent as my ears
open to details expanding a new
way. The bow upon string within
sounding, so also, like brook
each living moment the hairs catch
the string responds, snaps back
a shaking, vibrations of air as pebble
dropped into a pond.

here,

now the music of both
in focus, the clarity perceived
within movement ever evolving
necessities of physical gesture:
the brook, each weight and turn
of pressure producing rhythms and pitch
variants singing subtle twists and turns
ever fresh; the bow humming
the string, a wind through
maple, spruce and popple leaves
shaking a soft or brittle
tune, as heat of season dictates
thickness or thinness of sound, so wind/the bow
moves air. A hawk
circles the sky waiting
the right moment to plummet
earthbound the quarry in talons.
The bow, so also, finding (allowed to find)
its place upon string, poised
within node flying the balance

of pure tone releasing. Within sky
blue hawk ascends
the current, wings tipped in circles arched
playing the line its path
follows; power revealed
in nuances of flight as it plays upon the wind
all edges
of sound the bow finding
partials of hues/qualities of tone bright
or dark within the beaked eye.

The archer could never hunt
such quarry. But to be there,
to see it and hear
its breath is
to receive a hugely, more vast
vision
of singing.

October, 1983

The discussion [Rencontre] performance at
the American Center in Paris: interesting to clarify
activities "par chance" and as necessity ~ that is,
to say again (and always, over and over), to understand
the organic nature of improvisation: a very intense,
focused event of listening/looking (that is, when with
dance) and putting it into form ("per-forming"):
to en-act! (At deepest of meanings, this too, truly,
is always chance; but such is also chance that has
created all that is in the world around us ~ "like
a tree"; all that is strong, beautiful, moving ~
that is to say, that which moves, changes and
moves us in nature.)

So, also, is the response of necessity ~ the

sounding, the gesture at one with "what needs to be done". (Seemingly a paradox, but in a world of appearances, so these two-in-one make perfect sense.) It is difficult to discuss this because of our "civilized" (here use the word: "arbitrary-imposed-control") demands/images ~ fear of chance and the natural world that leads people to all kinds of extremes of systems and order; anti-septic, plastic formations. (This, too, is of necessity, but of no interest to me.)

July, 1985

The garden is that space of continuity, lines over-reaching years ~ the past, future and present all embedded here.

Weeds ascending as I decline my years. Here, once a family succored and, before that, cows and later, then again, the grass will succeed.

A weed is an image by man defined as that which isn't wanted. But it forever asserts itself ~ and cows, unconcerned with labels, eat of it delightfully. The garden, in the eye of man, becomes civilization so defined by language, to be forever challenged by less sophisticated growth that needs no tending. So then, the precarious nature of this civilization that we tend/hold onto. Turn our back for a moment and all changes. So civilization is this pretense of continuity ~ in a much larger rhythm of pervading flow.

This year I have not yet planted the garden ~ it will be a month late.