

The Politics of Improvisation (1982)

these words
written, black upon white
heavily indelible within the mind's eye
should be heard,
sounded out as wind articulating
utterances, leaves fluttering in Autumn
to sign the presence of something passing, unseen but felt
within the spiral of the ear.

“The Politics of Improvisation” was first presented as a talk at the “Alte Schmiede” in Vienna, in May, 1982. Alte Schmiede: the “Old Blacksmith Shop.” A place to forge, out of red hot metal, new ideas with which to tread upon paths as yet untravelled. A place of renewal: fire, of endless becoming and transcendence, and metal, of being and prescribed form, coming together in the passage of redefining. Now a place of meetings and exchanges/ changing.

The original presentation consisted of walking to various individuals and places in the room, posing a question and pauses for discussion. (The questions were written on separate cards and could be read in any sequence.) At the end, the audience was asked to submit their own questions which were read aloud and stimulated more discussion. I welcome such a continuing dialogue from the readers of this article.

Once upon a time, I imagined a piece of music in which I invited several musicians to my house to play some music. When they sit down to begin, and finding no music, they ask, “Where is the music? . . . to which I respond, “*You* are the music!”

At the time I smiled at the idea, but later, as it lingered in my mind, I came to recognize the radical implications even within its simplicity.

(and so the story begins.)

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?
What would happen to the orchestra?
What would happen to the conductor?
What would happen to the audience?
What would happen to the music?

Can you possess a sound?
Can you possess an improvisation?
Does the improvisation become more valuable if it is recorded
and copyrighted and sold?
Would you listen to a live performance differently if you knew
it was being recorded and was to be released as a phonograph
record?

How do you judge a concert of improvised music?
How do you judge a concert of classical, European music?
Is there a difference?

How does a music conservatory student judge a concert of
classical, European music?
How do you judge a concert of new (never heard before by you)
contemporary music?
How do you judge a concert of music from cultures outside of
the European tradition?

Why do we judge concerts / pieces of music?

Tell me please, do you judge each tree so critically?

Does the training of a musician, of a professional
musician, reflect the value attributed to the music?

Does the value differ from the “unschooled”
training of a folk musician?
... of a jazz musician?

Is it more valuable, less valuable or just different?

Can you copyright an improvisation?
Can you copyright a music composition?
Can you copyright an edition of a music composition?
Can you copyright a book discussing or analyzing the music composition?

Which is more valuable? . . . Why?

(Wind upon my face
coming and going.)

Is a composition by Bach or Beethoven
(or name your favorite composer) "perfect?"

Can an improvisation be "perfect?"

How is it that many composers who performed in the European classical repertory
were known in their time also for their talents as improvisors, and today
it is rarely part of a composer's activities?

Consider the training of a composer and performer:

What was the difference between composer and performer in the past?

What is the difference between composer and performer now?

Have we become so specialized as to narrow each spirit into the appropriate
slot for the final accounting?

How is it that as the price of printed music
goes up so also it seems that the value of living
people becomes more and more worth-less?

(music as rooted in the living experience)

Could the decline of improvisation have anything to do
with the development of the orchestra as a major institution
in classical European music?

Could the decline of improvisation have anything to do
with the establishment of large businesses printing music
available at a reasonable price?

What happens to the individual (performers and composers)
in the context of these larger institutions?

Have you ever, in the act of doing something,
realized it would be more meaningful
to be doing something else?

What would happen to a classical musician
at that moment performing a sonata?
What would happen to an improvising musician
at that moment playing music?

What would happen to your life?

When listening to some favorite piece of music,
performed by a different person or ensemble, do you recall
previous realizations?
Do you compare them? . . . at the moment of listening?
. . . afterwards? ever?

How is this different (if it is different)
from listening to an improvised music?

Why, in classes of musical
analysis, is the object
of study dissected in terms
of harmonic structure but
the *sound* of the living
music omitted?

In an improvisation, can you anticipate
anything that will happen?
. . . How does that make you feel?

In an often-heard piece of music, do you
anticipate anything that will happen?
. . . How does that make you feel?

What does this have to do with the musical experience?
. . . with the social/ historical experience?
. . . with the personal experience?

Why are limited editions more valuable than unlimited editions?

What does "valuable" mean in this context?

Would the print be less an aesthetic experience if there were more of them?

Does that make each human being, uniquely one, the most valuable edition of all?

Singing a tone on each out breath,
over and over, the same tone for a very long time
what do you hear?
What is constant? What changes?

Do you attempt to make the tones (dynamics, articulation, duration,
quality, intensity, etc.) all uniform?

Do you allow for differences to occur? Do you enjoy them?

If this were part of your profession, would your attitudes, of above, change?

How do you feel about a person who is illiterate?

Could you respect such a person?

Could you imagine working under such a person if he or she were
your director?

Do you think them capable of conceptualizing as subtly as you?

What do you think about a musician who cannot read music?

How is it that every school in the United States has a music appreciation course with major attention given to the European tradition of classical music?

How is it that very, very few schools in the United States have a similar class in the history and appreciation of jazz?

(Or is the issue here not only of class/ culture attitudes, but also of racism?)

Why is the musical "expression" separated from the piece of music? Why do students practice the notes and rhythm first and then add "expression"? - add it like spice on top of a cooked meal, rather than worked into the process of cooking.

How would you respond if a soloist, performing an 18th or 19th century concerto, would really improvise the cadenza in the midst of the concert?

How would you respond if a musician embellished and improvised around the melodic-harmonic structure of an 18th century music repeated section (as was done then) rather than simply to play it through again, but softly (as is done now)?

Could that moment ever be captured?

Would you want to capture it?

Have you ever observed the facial expressions
of a musician performing in an orchestra?
of a musician performing in a string quartet?
of a musician performing in a jazz ensemble?
of a musician performing in a rock concert?
of a musician performing in the street?
of a musician performing on a hillside?

What are some of the differences?

Do these have to do with the music being performed?
... with what you experience?

Who is the architect
that laid the foundation
for concert halls: seats all lined up,
nailed to the floor, rigidly
facing one way?

Do you ever feel the strait-jacket
or urge to stand up stiffly
at attention while the orchestra
performs as if
on military parade?

When an improvisation is said to be free
what does that mean?

Free from what?
Free to do what?

Can you listen this way also?
Free from the images and expectations?
Free to receive and participate?

When confronted with music that incorporates improvisation,
why do most professional musicians feel threatened and often
say, "anyone can do that."
Because anyone can do it, does that make it less valuable?
And if anyone can do it, would each person do it the same way?
And, if the professional has lived with and played their instrument
for many years, would their realization be different and, if so,
in what way(s)?

And besides, do you really believe anyone could do it?

Why do students of music study editions in which the figured
bass (the standard 18th century improvisation shorthand) is
totally worked out, note for note, and often poorly realized
by the editor? . . . (What's his name?)

Who gains by this?
Who loses by this?

Is a musical improvisation a piece of music
or the whole of music?

(Why are selections of music called "pieces?")

If an individual were to realize the raga Bhairava every morning,
would it be the same "piece?"

If two individuals were to perform Bach's E Major Partita in
different eras, would it be the same "piece?"

If an individual were to improvise upon the chord changes of "Body
and Soul" in different countries, would it be the same "piece?"

How would you hear them? . . . listen to them? Would you be the same
person afterwards?

What does improvisation ask of the performer that is so different from printed, through-composed pieces of music?

... perhaps: "Who are *you*?"; "How do *you* think or feel about this moment / sounding?"

If an improvisation be looked upon as a process of *discovery* by someone shared within the moment with other people, can an improvisation be unsuccessful?

Is it possible to teach music composition?
Is it any less possible to teach improvisation?

If composition is included in the curriculum of most colleges and every music school, how is it that practically no school includes improvisation in its course of study?

If improvisation were taught in every music school, would that make it more valuable? or less valuable? to whom?

Can you name the 2nd flute player in the . . . orchestra;
or the 4th horn player, or even the lead viola player?

How is it that devoted listeners to jazz can name all of the instrumentalists
in an ensemble?

Why is the capacity to name the people so different in these two situations?

When you go to a concert, do you hear the piece of music as an object
(Symphony No. 5) or as the sounding of people, for people of the moment?

How much do we think of a label,
which identifies an object,
which conjures up a sound image
of a recorded rendition

. . . while we sit and listen to a live performance?

Can improvisation ever be heard this way?

Why is "improvisation" a special word? . . .
when, in fact, we improvise all day long and
in everything we do.

Do other cultures in the world include
such a word in their language?

Consider what I am doing here/now; what you are doing-
the way we are relating: You, listening to what I have to
say and I, talking and wondering who you are and what you
think about all this.

Consider:
the difference between a lecture and a conversation;
the difference between an orchestra with a conductor and
a chamber ensemble without one.

How many words do you read each day?

How many sounds do you hear each day?

How many new thoughts do you think each day?

What do you do with all this information received each day?

6/12/83

I find myself writing about improvisation again ~ reading Rothenberg's comments on translation (see "Technicians of the Sacred", preface and commentaries) and reflecting on my own interview touching on oral tradition. How strange!: music, a phenomenon of sound, now predicated upon the written page, and all of its studies having to do with techniques, etc. from the printed page (with a little ear training thrown in). It's all moved to the frozen page tradition, at odds with the lively ("once upon a time") tradition.

Not to be forgotten, though, is the music culture of most of the world (by contrast to the Western European classical tradition). Oral/aural tradition: music of the educated ear, eye and fingers (the whole body perceiving) of the musician and released through/from fingers to ears, within the social setting of enactment (performance), and so completing the continuity/flow of culture.

7/21/86

... spirituality and politics, as reflected in the work of an artist. For myself, within my work I understand that clearly ~ as tied together within the relationship of the natural sounding of the world (including people) and expressive within the context of improvisation (people being the valued center ~ improvisation being thought of as the process/in-the-act of discovery ~ to other people, sharing). The mutual touching of it all is a discovering and focusing in the moment of the sound coming forth, rather than an imposing or demonstrating (either by compositional structure or relationships of

people). How then can improvisation not be discussed?
It is integral with the sounding of the environment
and at the root of my spirituality/politics coming together.

10/7/85

I sit alot in La Place des Vosges, quiet rest place
in this too-much-rushing city. Reading about Varèse
— slowly, the French words improving with the
reading — and thinking about the meaning of
percussion music for him and Cage: to free them of
the tempered scale and eventually to lead to an interest
in sounds of the environment — the "timbre of sound,
itself the object" (or, as Jim would say, "Klang").
But we (some very few!) have gone beyond this (and
Cage, too) and can return to instruments —
possibilities with new ears (but can conservatory
trained musicians follow with us?!?) to create a
new music of sound/texture with pitch-noise of any
and all complex overtone structures (not just the
piano black and white twelve tones — Schoenberg
creating a system to hold it all together, when the
air was circulating in the palm of hand opening to
fresh possibilities). It's possible to use these set
pitches (nothing need be discarded), but all the rest
is more interesting to me. And so, for me, there
are no microtones; this word implies a hierarchy of
set tones, which are the points of reference for the
microtones. (And so we can push Schoenberg further: all
tones and tonal complexes are equal, not just the black
and white 12 tones. We can have the full spectrum:
yellow, orange, red, blue, green, purple, etc..)

In my violin playing of "Soundings" all is possible,

the violin leading me to learn new possibilities, as I keep my ears open. (Oh, I think so much in Europe! where systems, logics, ideas and structures pre-meditated are so at the source of art work, culture, etc. ~ and what I see is it all as logics, to hold together each own culture's way, to allow/reflect in art "language" ~ clarification by focus and intensification, release of energy through form, ritualization of experience, etc.. And even in this, each culture and country has its own needs and ways.) And then it gets pushed further and becomes "high culture" (art) separate from "people" (for them, commercial pop forms to entertain in cities ~ but then, as Blacking says truly: isn't all of this folk music; it just depends on who the folk is!), and away from the dirt of daily experience (that which interests me the most: our fragility on this earth, all the nuances of things passing as heard in the breath of bow upon string; every detail and never exactly so again.) Not objects to be sold and museum pieces pinned upon the wall, but our naked selves.

This morning, 11 a.m., light like halo upon the heads, hair and bodies of people; edges of contours brilliant and slowly, imperceptibly changing as the sun moves through the sky, we moving/becoming forms perceived/perceiving the joy of living moment. I smile. This morning, earlier, I had thought of "high culture" in this city of "high culture" (haute cuisine), filled with tourists and my hotel room (even as at Notre Dame last night) enveloped in the smell of latrines, etc. (perfumes and body deodorants make sense in such places of "high culture"). But morning light and trees, with children and I think of/feeling "joy of living moment!": the space of a park versus the concrete

of cars and people rushing. Ah! so I have preferences for a specific kind of "dirt", as of trees and brooks and earthen dirt; I make choices ~ at least for living. City dirt, gas fumes, latrines and garbage ~ yes, we must deal with these too (they are here); but always the wilderness (the wild places Thoreau talks about) is important ~ I need that most of all.

“to carry through in the form”

[reflections on a performance of John Cage’s “Theater Piece”: twenty nouns and/or verbs; actions to be realized in time—a new theater inviting participation.]

We all had questions. Some had answers, even before the questions occurred—but what had to happen was that answers had to be worked out; that something be *done*, when and even sometimes how and where. Again I learned (again & again, the teaching comes and when will it be *learned?*): no answers, except as resolved in the doing.

Twenty cards, each with a noun or verb; each separate on its own card. (Unrelated as yet, to meet in a field of time/ defining the unfolding of actions.) What shall the words be? “Anything goes—only when nothing is taken as the basis. In utter emptiness anything can take place.” . . . So I tried a chance procedure of having the dictionary give me a list of words. Amazing results! . . . Words I’ve never heard of, whole new possibilities of ways/ of kinds of actions. And in working out the time score—whole new relationships of things became. Continually, new doors opened.

[Later I would try other ways: lists of objects that might be sounded and ways of articulation; definitions of space and movement; focuses on people—various explorations that illuminated always new aspects of doing.]

The group of performers met: musicians, dancers, actors, sculptors, video & film makers—all overflowing with ideas, possibilities, imagings, desirings—but none with a score worked out! Mind had leaped out beyond body, frozen in anxiety. Longing and fear confronted. . . . The questions became more passionate. An impassive score, allowing so much; could it hold all these dreamings together?

per/form: “to carry through in the form”

or “to accomplish entirely, achieve, complete.”
“to carry through to completion; to complete
finish, perfect (an action, process, work, etc.);
to bring about, bring to pass, cause, effect, produce (a result),
to carry out in action (a command, request, promise,
undertaking, etc.); to carry into effect,
execute, fulfill, discharge;
to carry out, achieve, accomplish, execute (that which
is commanded, promised, undertaken, etc.
or, in extended sense, any action, operation,
or process undertaken or entered upon);
to go through and finish, to work out, do, make;
to do, go through or execute formally or solemnly
(a duty, public function, ceremony or rite;
a piece of music, a play, etc.);
to act, play (a part or character); to act in a play;
to perform music, play or sing;
go through a performance.”

“prepare a 30 minute program of action”
(Theater Piece, 1960)

We act, but the results are always in our head: Confusion of presence (present *and* future, and, also, the past clinging to us) . . . “anything goes—starting from nothing” . . . no premises, or patterns of behaviour clinging to present acts, fears of execution (success and even perfection) and always judging/being judged . . . is it effective? (a result)—and so the act is not so simply doing, within itself being done.

. . . which is what “Theater Piece” asks to be enacted.

And what if I choose as one of my words, ‘Kill’? an actor asks. (Why need to choose the word?) I think of similar situations in the past: given the freedom of choice, people ask if they can smash my violin—of course not! Why does freedom from restraints unleash inclinations to destroy, rather than freedom to create? . . . The answer is all around us.

Our dictionaries reflect us; dictate us our society mirrored in its confusion, attempting to clarification. We are a capitalist society, laying away nuts like a squirrel—but also with the dream that what we have stored, will multiply. Always there is the question of effectiveness; the question of the right investment with the most returns (the act of investing, itself not so much a thing in itself but something that has roots tangled in the future): the rehearsal to “improve” things; the schooling for a “better” life. John Cage’s Theater Piece places us where we are: an illumination of the *present*.

So also the performance: concern with the *act*, not with oneself. More questions; (the encounter with this piece has reached to the depths of ourselves, stirred up). The thought (the fear): how am I expressed in all this? (and appreciated for my efforts).— Clearly, in the doing, how cannot we be but expressed, being at one with the action?! A dancer sounding the space. What is important is the *clarity* of participation; (neither self assertion nor denial of self, but rather a commitment to performance): the focus (might I say, even, love?) within the event, present.

And in the process, of choosing words/material to create situations as yet unknown, we found ourselves in unseen circumstances, forced to be inventive. Multiple activities, simultaneously realized, becoming a new gesture—uniquely expressive. Or a succession of events evolving a new sense of phrase, as yet unbreathed. (It became clear that though each person identified themselves as a musician, dancer, or whatever, we were in a situation in which all aspects of our total presentation participated in the experience. All gestures were dance/movement, music/soundings, visual images in space.) . . . And in performance, the audience moving around and through us, the imagined line between “actors” and “spectators” blurred, creating an even more rich fabric of living relationships (without intention, but *there*).

Upon roads intersecting, occasionally, participants meeting in a space of time. (Theater) And departures, too; though no timetable dictating which way, where or how . . . and things were transformed of themselves and people, too, in the doing, so were changed.

August 20, 1977—Sheffield, Vermont

Two Program Notes:

“a breaking of vessels, becoming song” by Malcolm Goldstein (1981)

The music has to do with reflections on the breaking of the vessels/shells (“kelipot”)—with the release of sparks of creative energy—as referred to in the Book of Zohar, and on the “Perennial Question” of existence as posed in Charles Ives’ “Unanswered Question.” It is the process of sound events becoming articulate as phrase gestures, of a “larger” melody implied.

It is an improvisation structure in which all of the participants (orchestral instrumentalists, conductor and flute soloist) play an active role in creating the dynamic flow of the music. The orchestra, working from a specially devised notation, progresses from a gamut of specified events to more tonally designated timbre modulation phrases. The flute part has no prewritten material at all, but rather uses the living sounds of the orchestra as the basis for the solo improvisation. It is a concerto, a “working together,” in which the soloist, responding, extending, combining and molding the orchestral performance, creates, within the ever-fleeting moment, the vision of communal song.

“Cascades of The Brook: Bachwasserfall” by Malcolm Goldstein (1984)

“Cascades of The Brook: Bachwasserfall” is an improvisation structure for chamber orchestra with solo violin. The music is conceived of as an extension of the first movement of Bach’s Sonata in G minor for Violin Solo, itself an elaborate, through-composed improvisation. The notation of the original manuscript serves as the basis for the notation of the chamber orchestra realization. It is transformed through collage and other graphic devices, overflowing with nuances and implications, as it elaborates upon the melodic and harmonic structure of the original prelude. While the orchestra performs from notations of performance possibilities, the violin soloist improvises freely, expressing the lines as tonal/sound-texture qualities with a new vision of violin sounding.

At the core of Baroque music was the integration of composition and improvisation: the composer/performer, the realization of improvisation structures notated as figured bass lines and the practice of rich embellishments to give life to melodic skeletons. It has been said that Bach was not just a brook, but an ocean. This music attempts to sound some of the depths of this vast ocean and places the performer/artists in a continual process of creative discovery. “Cascades of The Brook” was composed in 1984 for this premier occasion, to celebrate Bach’s 300th birthday.