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**Spontaneous Music:  
The First Generation British Free Improvisers**

Andrew Edward Callingham

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

The University of Huddersfield

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## Abstract

The British free improvisation scene originated in London and Sheffield during the mid 1960s. In groups such as AMM, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble and Joseph Holbrooke, a distinctive and ambitious musicality developed that still occupies most of its protagonists forty years later.

Marked stylistic contrasts developed within the genre, notably the ‘atomistic’ and ‘laminar’ methods of interaction. Nonetheless, a consistency of principle and practice was also apparent that defined British free improvisation as unique. In some respects the genre resembled its German, Dutch and American counterparts, and also the jazz and classical avant-gardes that had inspired them. Both conceptually and practically, however, clear differences remained.

The British free improvisers refined a method and an aesthetic of musical creativity, which suggested an intimate perspective and a detailed analysis of that which we accept as ‘music’. Its techniques and results were unconventional, but remained consistent with music’s defining concepts and experiences. As such, British free improvisation suggested a more inclusive model of musicality than is common, and implied a broad critique of the cultural values that define ‘music’ at all. Though the free improvisers themselves did not explicitly state the connection, their work may be viewed in the context of Deconstruction: the post-structuralist analytical strategy associated with philosopher Jacques Derrida.

British free improvisation culminated from innovations within the twentieth century avant-garde. Referencing styles such as atonality and free jazz, it challenged the aesthetic, technical and hierarchical standards of Western tradition in a form that was striking and extreme, but also of logical development and focus. Free improvisation owed explicit debt to a variety of other musics; its most singular achievement however, was the redefinition of ‘rhythm’ by which it disguised this fact.

The music of the first generation British free improvisers is reliant upon precise conceptual and practical execution. But though this has enabled the genre to be musically innovative, in the long term it has also become a logical problem. With British free improvisation as its subject, the scrutiny of Deconstruction reveals significant discrepancies between what ‘free improvisation’ implies and what it actually represents.

## Acknowledgements

Many people around me have given their support and encouragement to this project. Thank you, one and all (and especially to Nick Court, for reminding me to just ‘get it finished. No one wants to hear about it any more’).

Chris Hampton is long lost, but out there somewhere. It’s hard to imagine this having happened – or *what* might have happened – without his influence.

Mum and Dad, of course, can’t go without a mention.

Ta.

Improvisers of various styles and generations have given their time. Thanks then to Leslie (Lou) Gare, John Butcher, Rhodri Davies and Bill Bruford, for sparing a few moments and the offer of assistance.

The late John Stevens was responsible for an enjoyable, eye-opening and (at length) very influential Saturday, long ago.

Particularly, my gratitude goes to Eddie Prévost, for an unexpected and generous welcome at The Vortex and on a number of occasions since.

And Special Thanks are due to the academic staff who got me through it in the end:

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*In 2002, Evan Parker’s Electro-Acoustic Ensemble performed at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. Chris Meredith told me afterwards that his wife, Sue, had thought it ‘the worst thing she’d ever seen’. This thesis is dedicated to the Merediths.*



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## Introduction: *End To A Beginning*

This thesis is my response to unexpected gestures by musicians of my own choosing. I had encountered Chris Cutler and Fred Frith, John Stevens and John Coltrane all before, but *Live in Moscow, Prague & Washington*,<sup>1</sup> “*So, what do you think?*”<sup>2</sup> and *Interstellar Space*<sup>3</sup> were neither what I had anticipated nor wanted. During my formative years as a musician and listener I had a friend who would find what seemed then obscure albums – by Yes, King Crimson, Frank Zappa – in jumble sales or his father’s record collection. We would marvel at and be perplexed by the “really cool” or “really weird” drumming. Often it was technically very accomplished: agile and frenetic and syncopated in unpredictable ways. Sometimes metrically irregular, too, it nonetheless remained expressively rhythmic, keeping time for music that seemed likewise eccentric. Rightly or wrongly, we often considered it ‘jazzy’, and hunted fervently for more like it. Following up on a variety of leads, the albums listed above were purchased very much in this spirit. I had seen John Stevens – one of the most vital figures to the coming analysis – perform in Oxford in 1994, just a few months before his death. In a duo with saxophonist Dick Heckstall-Smith, his playing fulfilled all of the criteria that had drawn me to those earlier Crimson and Zappa albums, and was most assuredly ‘jazzy’ too. The festival programme gave a brief history of Stevens’ work, which I filed away mentally for future reference.

The second-hand copy of “*So, what do you think?*” – by Stevens’ group, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble – that I picked up later that year proved confusing and disappointing. In a quasi-jazz quintet line-up (of soprano sax, trumpet, guitar, drums and double bass), it was not only Stevens’ drumming that had apparently come apart,

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Cutler & Fred Frith. *Live in Moscow, Prague and Washington*. [1980 (?)]. CD. CCFCD1

<sup>2</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. “*So, what do you think?*”. 1973. LP. TGS 118

<sup>3</sup> John Coltrane. *Interstellar Space*. 1991. CD. GRP 11102

sounding random, inept, wilfully senseless and obscure (and not, this time, in an appealing way). To a man, the players were neglecting anything discernibly like a tune, a rhythm, a riff, a solo, mutual accompaniment or 'music'. This was what one imagined the 'experimental' to be like, and explained in an instant the absence of such goings-on from familiar culture. Even the sax and drums duets of *Interstellar Space*, although superficially similar, had seemed more musically coherent (if almost equally unappealing). *Live in Moscow, Prague and Washington* did not teach me any great jazzy drumming either. Dynamically more spacious and featuring electric 'rock' instrumentation, it did occasionally feature recognisable rhythm or melody. Again though, these interludes did not come often enough to make me want to listen to the whole. It was not clear what, if any, kind of 'music' was going on, what Cutler and Frith were thinking of, or what exactly the live audience were finding to applaud. ('How could anyone tell when they had finished?' one might ask.) A chance recollection of this long ignored and unloved CD provided the initial impetus and sense of direction towards my eventual thesis.

The first generation of British free improvisers distinguished themselves musically during the mid-to-late 1960s. They showed a unifying aesthetic in their work, which defined their approach to musical improvisation and, consequently, also the music that they improvised. Individual and group styles varied, but, broadly speaking, those characteristics apparent in the sound of "*So, what do you think?*" are representative of the genre as a whole. Their musicality is unconventional, and it has sometimes been suggested that the sound of free improvisation does not equate to 'music' at all. But regardless of the subsequent minority status that their activities hold, many of the original British free players persist in a similar vein into the twenty first century (alongside successive generations whose work they have informed and



inspired). There is a breadth of extant commentary about British free improvisation, but, except for a few isolated examples, rather less of any depth. Though not necessarily irrelevant or inaccurate, a widespread tendency towards generalisation and allusion is apparent in the discussion. One such broad conceptual area is ‘covered’ by Derek Bailey’s model of ‘non-idiomatic’ improvisation. Both his partisan perspective and analytical assessment are certainly insightful, provocative and suggestive. But under scrutiny, *suggestive* – rather than rigorously developed or defended – they remain. Discussion of this genre is also laden with repeated, knowing references. ‘Anton Webern is present, as is Ornette Coleman’ writes David Toop of the SME’s *Karyobin* album, to give a typical example.<sup>4</sup> Once more, these are not incorrect or unverifiable, yet neither are they often qualified, either methodically or conceptually. And what is also noticeable, at length, is that the currency of such unsubstantiated comment has only served to perpetuate the same trend.

My study will comprise a consolidation of sorts. Its academic scope, requirements and format have enabled me to bring together lines of historical and musicological inquiry that are unique and significant to British free improvisation’s model of musicality. The first chapter (in conjunction with Appendix One) describes, analyses and compares stylistic variety within the first generation’s music to a depth that the constraints of journalistic review have not permitted and full-length accounts have not attempted. What I establish, that previous writers have merely intimated, is a unified, coherent and definitive set of criteria by which to understand these players’ work. In turn, this will illustrate the differences between first generation British free improvisation and certain other musics with which it has been compared and/or confused. Chapter Three, too, does not just nominally revisit the genre’s often-cited

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<sup>4</sup> David Toop, *Haunted Weather. Music, Silence and Memory* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2004), p. 207.

family tree. From the musicological basis of Chapter (and Appendix) One I have identified and interrogated the most pertinent forebears of this music: the names and generic associations, but also the specific practical and conceptual refinements by which these individuals expanded music's parameters during the twentieth century. I will discuss patterns of influence and relation that have recurred throughout the avant-garde of the recent past and have shaped free improvisation. And at the end of the chapter I will examine the ultimate and specific culmination of these processes that defined the first generation British free improvisers' music as unique.

Based in these findings I will then adopt a critical approach based in the post-structuralist theory of Deconstruction to further consider the concepts that underlie free improvisation (and the discussion that surrounds it). Even more so, these chapters – Two and Four – will expand upon arguments that have long been associated with this subject, but have more often been cited inaccurately or inadequately. Chapter Two is a broad-ranging, but essential and elemental, examination of the phenomenon of music. With regard to free improvisation's apparently problematic nature in this context, the questions of how music is defined, how it *has* been defined, and how it *might* be defined cannot reasonably be overlooked. Suggested by the evidence in Chapter One, the re-defined parameters of music that I will develop here are intrinsically necessary to human musicality, and ones on which free improvisation has thrived. Once again though, the arguments that I present are fundamental and complex to a degree that previous studies have not explicitly pursued. The conceptual implications of this chapter also further illustrate, and justify, the practical uses of supposedly 'avant-garde' technique, detailed in Chapter Three. Chapter Four considers a question that has increasingly been forced by the passage of time: to what extent free improvisation can actually be 'freely improvised'. As well as providing a

vital modern perspective on the first generation's work, it also examines the concept underpinning the genre. Significantly, this chapter challenges the ideals and terminology of several of free improvisation's key theorists, upon which so much subsequent discussion and assumption has relied.

## The Literature

Many free improvisation CDs include descriptive and/or analytical sleeve notes. Those on Martin Davidson's Emanem label, especially, are often a vital source of contextual data about a specific line-up of musicians or recording project. They have contributed immensely to my overview of the subject area, though by their necessary brevity they have tended to suggest starting points for investigation, not solutions in their own right. One ongoing source that has been indispensable to my research is the UK monthly magazine *The Wire: Adventures in Modern Music*. As well as up-to-date commentary about the British free improvisation scene (and critical coverage of a number of aesthetically related musics), it has provided my primary point of reference for newly released recordings and recent or upcoming live performances. The magazine has also included a number of useful longer articles: both new interviews and retrospective features. Of the former, for example, there has been a thoughtful and provocative encounter with AMM's Eddie Prévoist; of the latter, recollections and discussion of John Stevens's career, and a piece on the scarcely documented People Band. An issue of *The Wire*, it must be said, rarely passes without some mention of Derek Bailey. A number of regular and occasional correspondents contribute to the magazine, making it a helpful gauge of current critical trends and terminology pertaining to this music. As I will discuss further in Chapter One, there is a self-sufficient and self-perpetuating circularity to the concepts and comment on such an



insular scene. The development of a critical language to deal with free improvisation has naturally had a profound impact on a study such as my own, and has clarified many avenues of exploration and debate between musicians, audience and professional commentators. In certain respects though, the self-containment and encroaching traditions of this body of writing are also becoming problematic. Presently I will discuss one particular example, which I pursue at greater length in Chapters Two and Four. If one were to have a general stylistic criticism of *The Wire*, it is one that, at length, applies also to the first generation free improvisers: that the innovative and provocative effects of the new music they present are inevitably compromised and dulled – at least, conceptually – by concentration and restatement. And *concept* is intrinsic to free improvisation.

Derek Bailey's *Improvisation. Its Nature and Practice in Music*<sup>5</sup> – published in 1980 and revised a decade later – is a renowned text, and has been influential on many subsequent writers and thinkers of free improvisation lore. Combining both Bailey's own concise, informed and informative writing and extensive interviews with practitioners of varying shades of improvisation, it is an essential, and largely unavoidable, point of reference in this area of music-making. The first half of the book deals with improvisational practice, method and aesthetic across a range of genres, as one of musicality's core acts. The latter half contrasts a study of specifically 'free' improvisation in various group and solo contexts. Most significantly, (prior to Ben Watson's Bailey biography in 2004) *Improvisation* contained perhaps the only detailed account of seminal 'free' group Joseph Holbrooke, of which Bailey was a member. The passage has frequently since been quoted and referenced, and my own study makes no exception. The central concern of

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<sup>5</sup> Derek Bailey, *Improvisation. Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992).

Bailey's text is his term 'non-idiomatic', by which he denotes 'free' improvisation. The idea is established against the distinctly idiomatic examples of the book's first half, and, up to a point, it is a useful and evocative description of British free improvisation's unique conceptual and practical basis. As such, I too employ – but also expand – Bailey's model in Chapter Three, to structure my own account of improvisation's cultural and technical evolution during the twentieth century. Even by 1980 though, Bailey's 'non-idiomatic' paradigm was perhaps problematic. The controversy was implicit in the music of certain players of the emergent second generation, and it is central to my analysis in this thesis' final chapter.

Fundamentally a very personal treatise, Eddie Prévest's *No Sound is Innocent*<sup>6</sup> is a different proposition altogether to Bailey's text. Both men are formative and ongoing influences on the British scene, though Prévest uses his experience to refine a perspective, where Bailey casts an overview. His writing style is clear, evocative, readable and compelling. Although including some brief biographical and bibliographical information, Prévest's is primarily an intellectual, aesthetic and political consideration of the impetuses towards free improvisation. Rather more abstract than Bailey's discussion, Prévest too posits a convincing and attractive move towards conscientious, personal, egalitarian and culturally independent music-making. He also has his own take on the genre's nomenclature: to Bailey's 'non-idiomatic improvisation', Prévest adds his 'meta-music'. But once more, the concept represents too idealised a vision, which, again, I deal with it in Chapter Four. Whilst neither a strictly factual nor an 'everyman' account of free improvisation, Prévest displays an insight and a gift for evocative aphorisms in his writing, which has either triggered or

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<sup>6</sup> Edwin Prévest, *No Sound is Innocent* (Harlow: Copula, 1995).



focussed several key avenues of my inquiry. His follow-up, *Minute Particulars*,<sup>7</sup> continues the trend. Published in 2004, it has ultimately exerted a lesser influence on my own consideration of this genre, having appeared at a much later stage of my research. Pursuing similar themes to his earlier work, *Minute Particulars*' chief departure is a move away from the abstract into an engagement with documented culture and history. Usefully indexed, *Minute Particulars* is the more accessible reference work, and better suited to the non-partisan reader.

Richard Scott's *Noises: Free Music, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde [...]*<sup>8</sup> is an unpublished PhD thesis dating from the early 1990s. It is a sociological study of the reassessed social hierarchies that British free improvisation suggests, and as such is of somewhat different focus to my own study. (It is perhaps more thematically akin to Prévost's later book, where my thesis is closer to Bailey's.) I discuss the contrasts between Scott's account and my own later in this text, but essentially ours is a difference of focal point, between motivation and method. Scott provides one particularly valuable resource: approximately two-dozen first-hand interviews with members of the free improvising community. Again, I came to Scott's thesis relatively late into my own research, but – mostly amongst his interview material – he provided me with several examples of consolidating or exemplifying quotations.

The final of the major texts relating to free improvisation is Ben Watson's *Derek Bailey and The Story of Free Improvisation*.<sup>9</sup> An expansive but accessible read, it benefits from the author's apparent personal familiarity with the subject, and is an extensively detailed account with much previously unseen and/or (publicly) unknown data. It, too, contains exclusive interviews with other significant players – such as

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<sup>7</sup> Edwin Prévost, *Minute Particulars. Meanings in music-making in the wake of hierarchical realignments and other essays* (Harlow: Copula, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Scott, *Noises: Free Music, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde; London 1965 to 1990* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and The Story of Free Improvisation* (London: Verso, 2004).

Joseph Holbrooke's Tony Oxley and Gavin Bryars – and generally displays the broad, close and prolonged association between Watson and Bailey's music. In analytical terms, Watson is often informed by a political agenda ahead of a musicological one. On a personal level, however, the marked absence of criticism of Bailey or his work – which is not spared to others – is noticeable, and slightly unsatisfactory. That said, Watson's text is a comprehensive personal study, and provides a relatively up-to-date summary of many figures, events and artefacts not covered elsewhere. In terms of the genre as a whole, it might better have been titled 'The Story of Derek Bailey *in* Free Improvisation'; the book cannot claim to present an entirely equal billing on this count.

Several other texts, with a less specific focus on free improvisation, have been invaluable to my research. Whilst providing vital details of free improvisation and the free improvisers themselves, the following works have also proved especially relevant in establishing the musical background to the genre. Himself a member of the second generation of British improvisers, David Toop demonstrates considerable musical erudition and personal experience in *Ocean of Sound*<sup>10</sup> and *Haunted Weather*<sup>11</sup>. His particular talent is a far-reaching appreciation and association of diverse musical contexts and practices. As well as his own intimate encounters with John Stevens' working methods, Toop summarises with equal elegance the ramifications of Futurist 'noise' or Cage's 'Silence'. Eclectic in scope, his writing is nevertheless succinct and evocative enough to generate and further suggest extensive research materials. Another latter-day improviser, Roger Sutherland, was responsible for the accessible, focussed and informative *New Perspectives In Music*.<sup>12</sup> A study of the twentieth

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<sup>10</sup> David Toop, *Ocean of Sound. Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Toop, *Haunted Weather*.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Sutherland, *New Perspectives in Music* (London: Sun Tavern Fields, 1994).



century's classical avant-garde and experimental traditions, Sutherland's text suggested vital areas of consolidation and development for my ideas. Though only AMM are mentioned by name in his book, there are many pertinent analyses of the British free improvisers' key influences on show; Sutherland makes sense of many and varied allusions to Webern, to give just one example. He also illuminates further Toop's discussions of Varese and Russolo (as, in the latter case, does the research of pioneering electronics improviser, Hugh Davies). John Wickes' *Innovations in British Jazz [...] 1960-1980*<sup>13</sup> offers quite a different focus. Primarily a chronological and biographical – rather than analytical – text, Wickes' has been an inspirational reference source, comprehensively covering a relatively unrecorded era and sphere of musical activity (in comparison, for example, to that in the USA during the same period). As well as chronicling the formative years and maturation of the first generation free improvisers, he also documents their more mainstream parallel activities, side projects and ad hoc collaborations, and the coming of the second generation players. Particularly in the early stages of my research, Wickes' book was useful in defining the parameters of my own subject area. He not only discusses just about all of the musicians on whom I eventually focussed, but also proved crucial in *eliminating* several avenues of ultimately superfluous investigation (in the context and space restrictions of the current study, at least). In short, Wickes helped to clarify certain differences between what the emergent 'free improvisation' represented, in contrast to an already burgeoning British 'free jazz'. He also helped establish that such a distinction was not always clear, and has not always been accurately made since. Final mention must be made of Richard Cook and Brian Morton's *Penguin*

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<sup>13</sup> John Wickes, *Innovations in British Jazz. Volume One 1960-1980* (Chelmsford: Soundworld, 1999).

*Guide To Jazz On CD*:<sup>14</sup> arguably as indispensable a research tool as any. A staggering and wide-ranging work of scholarly knowledge, analysis and insight in its own right, the *Guide* should also be a first point of call for any survey of available British CD recordings. Each entry contains details of musical style, historical context and personnel movement, etc, whilst Cook and Morton's personal commentary often also suggests links to deleted recordings, forgotten groupings and careers, and close musical relatives. Though inevitably subjective in nature, this text also includes some aesthetic criticism of free improvisation, which may or may not be of further individual interest or use. Comprehensively indexed, updated every couple of years, and a compulsive, leading and rewarding browse, Cook and Morton condense the most useful aspects of most of the above texts, giving favourably disproportionate coverage to an otherwise commercially peripheral body of music.

Of final note: Cook and Morton's guidance extensively, though by no means exclusively, informed the choice of recorded listening that formed the basis of my empirical research. I make reference to a number of recorded performances throughout this analysis, all of which are detailed in my bibliography. And *The Wire*, too, is an ongoing and varied source of information and comment on new and re-issued recordings.

## **Critical Context: 'Deconstruction' & 'deconstruction'**

The scheme of analytical approach known as 'deconstruction' poses several points of entry to the discussion of free improvisation. As a critique of cultural identity by assessment of its values and origins, deconstruction primarily informs two chapters

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Cook & Brian Morton, *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD* 6<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Penguin, 2003).



(Two and Four) of this thesis. In the first – and though the interpretation is *mine* – I present the free improvisers as perpetrators of a deconstruction; in the second, their work is its subject. Deconstruction is chiefly derived from the works of Jacques Derrida. But – as it was pointed out in the early days of my research, when I started to flounder over my newly acquired copy of *Dissemination* – Derrida, or Derrida's writings, are not the subject of investigation here. Rather, it is the methods of deconstruction that are to be used as an analytical tool. I make occasional reference to Derrida's texts. *Of Grammatology*,<sup>15</sup> for example, includes a rare engagement with music on his part. My research materials in this regard, however, have tended towards surveys of deconstruction as a whole, rather than diversion through the 'classic' works individually. Derrida's *Aporias*<sup>16</sup> did provide one useful point of reference early on. It highlighted clearly the particular inquisitive mindset and intimate scrutiny to which terms and concepts were subject in Derrida's writings. In contrast, the misappropriation and oversimplification of articles such as 'How To Deconstruct Almost Anything' are alarmingly common and, it appears, influential.<sup>17</sup> *Positions*<sup>18</sup> is another helpful overview. As well as an extensive introduction by deconstruction/Derrida scholar Christopher Norris, it comprises three interviews with Derrida himself, in a format that coaxed greater clarity and concision than his formal texts tend to present. I have consulted a number of studies of deconstruction during

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected edn. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Morningstar, Chip, *How To Deconstruct Almost Anything. My Postmodern Adventure*. <<http://www.mrbauld.com/howtodecon.html>> [accessed 10 July 2005]. Broadly, the author's prejudices seem to derive from his personal experiences at an academic seminar, i.e. he makes criticism of certain people who were discussing deconstruction, rather than deconstruction itself, and in a sense this article is a response to the decrease in Derridean rigour that has progressively afflicted its use. Whilst showing *some* grip of its techniques, Morningstar nevertheless also makes the classic misdiagnosis that deconstruction 'can interpret any piece of writing as a statement about anything at all', rather than suggesting that any piece of writing cannot be guaranteed to say only what it means, or mean only what it says. Overall though (and to use the author's words), the article is 'a delightful piece of slander'.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass, rev. edn (London: Continuum, 2002).



my research, which are catalogued in my bibliography. Special mention, however, should be made of Norris' *Deconstruction. Theory and Practice*.<sup>19</sup> It makes an accessible, succinct and thorough account of its subject area, as well as of the expanding traditions, interpretations and divergences that deconstruction continues to inspire. Finally, I owe the greatest practical debt – in terms of structuring my own analyses – to Martin McQuillan's essay 'Five strategies for deconstruction'.<sup>20</sup> Inevitably, by its subject matter, a challenging read; nevertheless, critically, conceptually and pragmatically it was an essential resource in my studies.

The 'How To Deconstruct...' article, to which I refer above, is representative of a pronounced trend in post-Derridean analysis. There is widespread misappropriation of the term 'deconstruction' in critical writing, a fact that became apparent during even my earliest research. Andrew Shone, for example, reminisces of Joseph Holbrooke's activities in the 1960s: 'what was happening [...] and was apparent to the interested observer, was a reappraisal of the musical elements as applied to improvised music: deconstruction of the known jazz syntax'.<sup>21</sup> And Eddie Prévost makes a similar diagnosis of AMM's contemporaneous work: 'New techniques were needed' he suggests 'to [...] extend the potentiality of music-making. AMM was "deconstructing", in practice, just as the term began to emerge in philosophy'.<sup>22</sup> Commentary such as this is not difficult to find, and it provided a powerful impetus for me to investigate more thoroughly the ramifications of Derrida's *actual* theories upon free improvisation. Prévost himself admits that 'there is a genuine difficulty with "using everyone's everyday *meaning* of things"'.<sup>23</sup> In essence,

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction. Theory and Practice* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> In Martin McQuillan (ed.), *Deconstruction. A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 1-43.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Holbrooke. *Joseph Holbrooke '65*. 1999. CD-ROM. Incus CD Single 01

<sup>22</sup> Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, p. 4.

this precisely *is* the central tenet of Derrida's work, and (as I will discuss) Prévost's claim for AMM's 'deconstruction' of music-making is not incorrect. What is more questionable, however, is the sense in which Prévost (or Shone) made the allusion to 'deconstruction' in the first place. An inconsistency is present, somewhere between 'the everyday meaning of things' and 'the term [...] in philosophy', and there seems a distinct possibility that Prévost, for one, does not display an accurate or complete understanding of that to which he alludes.

AMM et al. performed ostensibly 'free form' music, or to be more precise, music based upon unconventional and unfamiliar structures and materials. As such, Prévost's observation does not appear unjust, in the everyday sense. The English word 'deconstruct' comprises a common enough root verb, 'to construct', and equally regular inverting prefix, 'de-'. Its implied meaning – to dismantle or rearrange – may be readily understood. The avant-garde techniques of AMM or Joseph Holbrooke, then, initially seem sufficient to justify Prévost or Shone's suggestion of a deconstructed [rearranged, disarranged or dismantled] music. Prévost's assertion, though, poses additional problems. His reference to 'deconstruction' aspires to both the everyday and the philosophical sense of the word, but also simultaneously discredits either meaning by its own indecision. The statement *could* be read in two halves, to accommodate the uncertainty: i.e. AMM was deconstructing (in the everyday sense) [when coincidentally] the term began to emerge in philosophy (which had its own specific meaning). This, however, seems an unlikely reading. It is stated that AMM were deconstructing 'in practice', which implicitly compares and contrasts their work with a related *theoretical* process, in philosophy. Both clauses here relate to the one subject. That subject, too, is presumably the philosophical 'deconstruction', rather than the everyday. This is strongly implied – Prévost's sudden lack of



grammatical prowess seems a doubtful alternative – by the use of quotation marks to frame the word *deconstructing*. The punctuation indicates a specific connotation to the term's use: a conscious acknowledgement of a specialised vocabulary or frame of reference. This is not everyday speech. Ironically though, it is here that Prévost subsequently retreats from making a conclusive assertion of philosophical 'deconstruction', and veers back to non-committal everyday usage. Having alluded to the term in the first place, identifying it as a defined philosophical concept and then extrapolating a comparative practical/theoretical relationship within a wholly separate area of endeavour, further appropriate exposition on Prévost's part is distinctly lacking. That 'deconstruction' is a 'term in philosophy' is too vague a statement to be of any instructive relevance. Though *No Sound is Innocent* is an accomplished and insightful example of the philosophy and politics of making music, Prévost has or makes no obvious justification for presuming an extant body of knowledge in his readership: that that such a reference implies. He may be well versed in Derrida's theories, but it seems an unnecessary, inconclusive and unhelpful intimation if he is. In fact, the text suggests Prévost's essential unfamiliarity with Derrida's notion of 'deconstruction'. The absence of any further qualification of deconstruction's place 'in philosophy' is only compounded later, by his nominal thematic coupling of 'deconstruction' with 'reconstruction'.<sup>24</sup> This relies too heavily on immediate phonetic similarity for convenient effect, without corresponding to the technical language that the philosophical 'deconstruction' *has* evolved. In this context, the tendency is merely to reiterate the everyday, generalised understanding of the term, whilst aspiring by allusion to the analytical insights of its philosophical namesake.

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<sup>24</sup> Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, p. 19 & 26.

Prévost is merely one high profile example – just in this subject area – of this particular trend. Christopher Norris has noted that:

‘Deconstruction’ has [...] become something of a buzzword among commentators on the postmodern cultural scene. It is a term that now comes readily to [...] media pundits, pop journalists [...] newspaper columnists (up or down- market) and others with an eye to intellectual fashion [...]. But these usages all have one thing in common, namely their suggestion that a term like this, however arcane its origins, must be available for purposes – or adaptable to contexts – which require little or nothing in the way of ‘specialised’ critical grasp.<sup>25</sup>

Little more than the most cursory Internet search for “‘free improvisation’ + ‘deconstruction’” will produce results comparable to those of Prévost’s writing. Primarily, however, I was alerted to this phenomenon in *The Wire*. The magazine itself is the product of many individual contributors, and is therefore perhaps symptomatic of this problem, rather than the cause.<sup>26</sup> Its influence – like Prévost’s – though, on a relatively insular sphere of criticism can only help to perpetuate the loose application of ‘deconstruction’ to seemingly any example of merely *unconventional construction*. A trawl through *The Wire*’s pages reveals almost as many ill-defined uses of the term as there are references to Derek Bailey. To give one favourite example: in a review of a 2002 concert by Keith Rowe and sometime collaborator Gunter Muller<sup>27</sup>, Brian Marley felt compelled to qualify ‘a cymbal and a floor tom’ in Muller’s instrumental set-up as ‘the deconstructed remnants of a drum kit’.<sup>28</sup> The allusion is perhaps poetic, but ultimately gratuitous in a critical context. The

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<sup>25</sup> Norris, pp. 134-135.

<sup>26</sup> Even Cook & Morton insist on calling AMM’s Keith Rowe a guitarist ‘only in the most deconstructionist sense’, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Keith Rowe/Gunter Muller/Taku Sugimoto. *The World Turned Upside Down*. 2000. CD. Erstwhile 005

<sup>28</sup> Marley, Brian, ‘The Departure Lounge’, *The Wire*, December 2002.



statement, once more, is not false, if not exactly the stuff of most people's everyday conversation either. But the increasingly clichéd and repetitive use of 'deconstruction' in certain spheres of analytical writing makes it conspicuous as an allusion to some commonly accepted, albeit undefined, critical tool. An evocative term in its own right, a perceived understanding is being implied, inferred and reinforced by the contexts of its use. This critical currency, though, is without recourse to the rigorous philosophical analysis that established deconstruction's conceptual weight to begin with. My intention is to address free improvisation on the terms that Derrida's writings do suggest.

There is one final book that deserves credit for its influence on my research: a popular science text, James Gleick's *Chaos*.<sup>29</sup> I was referred to it by Julian Palacios' analysis of rock group Pink Floyd's early 'free form' improvisatory experiments.<sup>30</sup> The emergent science of 'Chaos Theory' deals with the complex and seemingly unpredictable behaviour of matter, in its systematic transmutations, movements and energy exchanges, etc. Moreover, it suggests that the notion of 'chaos' itself is a phenomenological illusion, and that despite their apparent complexity these transactions are nonetheless both finite and ordered in permutation. In these terms, Chaos Theory has offered useful analogies – models and modes of thinking – by which to consider and evoke the 'freely improvised' encounter. *Chaos* has a recurrent motif of 'sensitive dependence on initial conditions', and a 'free' improvisation may only result from the finite assembly of players, instruments, location, stylistic and time restrictions that coalesce at each performance. Furthermore (according to the so-called 'Butterfly Effect'), even the briefest musical event can have repercussions on the course and conclusion of an improvisation. If that improvisation is conducted and

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<sup>29</sup> James Gleick, *Chaos* (London: Vintage, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Julian Palacios, *Lost in the Woods. Syd Barrett and The Pink Floyd* (London: Boxtree, 1998), p. 206.



negotiated collectively, then sympathetic responses must presumably be influenced, and therefore limited, by the very specificity of the original event. The most significant musical insight that I derived from this book, however, concerned the designs of ‘fractal geometry’: infinitely repeating patterns of ordered construction, visible from both increasing and decreasing perspectives of scale.<sup>31</sup> Chiefly this line of thinking influenced my work on Chapter Two, with regards to the physical and dynamic constancies between ambient sounds and music, and between different organisational layers, patterns and units in and of music. As such, it contributed quite substantially to my rationalisation and depiction of free improvisation’s mechanics.

The first generation of players who defined British free improvisation present a fundamental, but essentially straightforward, problem. By the implication of the contexts in which it is performed, free improvisation *appears* to be a genre of music. The point has been disputed, however, and from contrasting perspectives. Some commentators have found it difficult to reconcile free improvisation with ‘music’ at all; others – myself included, upon my rediscovery of *Live in Moscow, Prague and Washington* – have been unsure *how* to understand the phenomenon as ‘music’, or what its values, functions and techniques are. To some of the free improvisers themselves, it is merely the music that they choose to make; others still have elevated free improvisation’s status above that of ‘ordinary’ music, precisely *because* it avoids the forms, methods and traditions by which the latter is usually defined.

Those initial mistaken purchases – *Live in Moscow, Prague and Washington*, “*So, what do you think?*” and *Interstellar Space* – each guided me towards these questions and, in some way, have assisted in the processes of contriving and refining an answer. Cutler & Frith’s music is ultimately of a later period and slightly different

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<sup>31</sup> Such as in the angular, molecular matrices that comprise a grain of sand, for example.

origins than that of my eventual subject matter. Coltrane's, despite superficial similarities and its pronounced influence, is of a different genre altogether. But the Spontaneous Music Ensemble (and their contemporaries in the endeavour of British free improvisation) seem to have posed a fundamental, far-reaching and conceivably influential critique of our conventional understanding of 'music', albeit one that has been broadly overlooked. In the following study, I will examine the nature both of the British free improvisers' critique, and the contexts that have caused its neglect.

To recap, briefly: in Chapter One, I will present a critical and musicological overview of the factors which defined first generation British free improvisation as a distinct entity. Chapter Two will deal at greater length with deconstruction, and go on to investigate the criteria and terminology by which music is commonly defined (and free improvisation has sometimes been excluded from its orbit). This will establish a conceptual basis for my analysis in Chapter Three, where I will discuss the musicians and musical innovations that formatively influenced the free improvisers. In parallel to this discussion, I will also describe the characteristic shifts of emphasis and aspiration between composed and improvised musics. Chapter Four, again, will use the analytical ideas of deconstruction. This time, the subject of scrutiny will be the concept of 'free improvisation' itself, and the extent to which it remains a justifiable description of these musicians' activities.



## Chapter One: *FACE TO FACE*

### An overview of British free improvisation

The initial task of this study must be to identify and define its subject matter. It is safe to assume the reader's unfamiliarity; by no criteria of mass recognition, consumption or apparent influence could free improvisation be described as a 'popular music'. '[A]udiences are typically [comprised of] between two and fifty' noted Richard Scott in an earlier study of the genre.<sup>1</sup> And from my experience, I would concur. Even at the festivals or 'big name' performances that I have attended, free improvisation attracts spectators only in their dozens.<sup>2</sup> In a more mainstream musical context, any amateur or local pub gig may rival such statistics. As such, Scott continues, 'free music is more than simply marginal, it exists at a level of permanent economic crisis'.<sup>3</sup> An unsuspecting encounter with this music might suggest reasons for its meagre status in the public domain. 'The din, if you're unprepared, can verge on the traumatic'<sup>4</sup> wrote critic John Fordham in 1972, whilst percussionist Eddie Prévost has been told 'that what [he] did was not music... [not] even jazz'.<sup>5</sup> Such assumptions as these imply questions that are vital to the consideration of freely improvised music. For the moment however, as Fordham continues, let us assume merely that '[free improvisation's] strangeness is not an accident'.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter I will discuss 'the first generation British free improvisers' from both practical and conceptual standpoints. First, the generic name will be

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Scott, *Noises: Free Music, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde; London 1965 to 1990* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1991), p.69.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Freedom of the City 2003 (which featured, amongst others, Eddie Prévost, Keith Rowe, John Tilbury, Paul Rutherford, Howard Riley and Steve Beresford), Conway Hall, London, 3<sup>rd</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> May 2003; Derek Bailey at The Electric Cinema, Birmingham, 12<sup>th</sup> April 2002; AMM at The Warehouse, London, 31<sup>st</sup> October 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Scott, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> John Fordham, *Shooting from the Hip. Changing Tunes in Jazz* (London: Kyle Cathie Limited, 1996), p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent* (Harlow: Copula, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Fordham, p. 46.

accepted simply as an umbrella term by which to describe a particular circle of musicians, one that remains effective and appropriate today. This section will offer an historical account of the groups and individuals under discussion, and highlight the distinctive forms and styles that characterised their music. Second, the composite terminology by which the genre is described – ‘first generation’, ‘British’, ‘free improvisers’ – will be assessed incrementally, in order to clarify the definition it proposes. As such, I will establish a working model of free improvisation’s modes of operation, referring both to those qualities that exemplify its practice and those it can be seen to exclude. The demarcation is important, especially with regard to the analysis of free improvisation’s musical antecedents in Chapter Three. More generally, the exposition and conclusions offered in this chapter will stand as essential points of reference to my subsequent arguments, as well as a comprehensive and necessary introduction to a music that is conceptually vital and far-reaching, yet esoteric and largely overlooked.

## The Players

In protagonist Derek Bailey’s words, free improvisation first ‘claimed an identity for itself’<sup>7</sup> around 1965-67. Here, he refers to the genre-specific sense of the term: the eponymous ‘first generation’ of this thesis. ‘Free improvisation’ may also denote a somewhat malleable process or rationale of music-making with extensive historical and cultural precedent. Bailey, for example, alludes to his own ‘confused and alienated’<sup>8</sup> first encounter with the latter practice in 1957,<sup>9</sup> and also references a ‘free

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Bailey, *Improvisation. Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 85.



improvisation' of human prehistory<sup>10</sup> by way of distinction. But whilst not unrelated, neither is the generalised musical activity synonymous with the specific innovations that Bailey, et al, instigated in the 1960s. What this watershed period represents is one of extrapolation and transition: of the techniques and concepts by which certain models of music were enacted. It may be recognised in three distinct ways.

First, a number of individuals – distributed among a few small, isolated groups – appear to have articulated and opted to pursue their own idea of freely improvised music during this time. Several writers and/or participants, including Bailey, Eddie Prévost, John Wickes and Ben Watson have usefully documented this formative period. Both Bailey<sup>11</sup> and Watson,<sup>12</sup> for example, provide vital accounts of Joseph Holbrooke's development from modal jazz, via free jazz and the classical avant-garde, to free improvisation, in the relative seclusion of Sheffield's The Grapes pub. Wickes' study, meanwhile, documents a broader spectrum of musicians, albeit in less individual depth, but including almost all of the first generation improvisers and their subsequent regular groupings. Concentrated mainly in London, Wickes portrays the majority sharing a background common to those of the members of Joseph Holbrooke: a conservative or mainstream musical education – in the Armed Forces, for example – tempered by exposure to various strands of American and European modernism.<sup>13</sup>

Second, and subsequently, a mutual awareness developed amongst these musicians, offering the potential for greater musical, organisational, theoretical and social exchange. Effectively, this established the free improvisation 'scene'. One

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<sup>9</sup> In almost identical wording though, he also refers to an 'occasion in Glasgow in 1952': Jaworzyn, Stefan, *Old Sights, New Sounds. Derek Bailey in Japan* <<http://www.l-m-c.org.uk/texts/bailey.html>> [accessed 27 August 2003].

<sup>10</sup> Bailey, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 86-93.

<sup>12</sup> Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and The Story of Free Improvisation* (London: Verso, 2004) pp. 51-111.

<sup>13</sup> John Wickes, *Innovations in British Jazz. Volume One 1960-1980* (Chelmsford: Soundworld, 1999).

important early venue for the scene was The Little Theatre Club, in Garrick Yard, off Trafalgar Square. After the evening's theatre had ended, the nascent free improvisers were 'allowed [...] to use the club six nights a week [...] regardless of profit or attendance' as writer Bill Smith describes.<sup>14</sup> The latter factor would have been a crucial resource for what was (as has been suggested), at best a marginalized musical activity. Indeed, Bailey has characterised the era and circumstances as the 'possibility to do anything with anybody at any time in front of nobody'.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, it was at The Little Theatre Club (especially) that free improvisation began to establish itself. It was here, as Smith continues, that 'a few months later Evan Parker came down from Birmingham, heard the band and immediately became involved, as also did Derek Bailey'.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Eddie Prévost, percussionist with the group AMM, recalls that '[the improvisers at The Little Theatre Club] generously invited [us] to perform from time to time'.<sup>17</sup>

Thirdly, in order to affirm free improvisation's emergent identity, came the move into the domain of public performance – however limited – that invited recognition and scrutiny from others. These second and third stages are more closely related than they initially appear, and offer some clue as to the insular nature of the free improvisation scene. Though open to the public, it is pertinent to remember that The Little Theatre Club was made available 'regardless of profit or attendance'. Typically, free improvisation flourished in 'behind closed doors' research and development. AMM, for example, held weekly sessions of this nature at the Royal College of Art and the London School of Economics, between June 1965 and

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<sup>14</sup> Sleeve notes to Derek Bailey/John Stevens/Trevor Watts. *Dynamics of the Improptu*. [1973/74 (?)]. CD. ESR 004

<sup>15</sup> Interviewed in Watson, p. 197.

<sup>16</sup> Sleeve notes to Derek Bailey/John Stevens/Trevor Watts' *Dynamics of the Improptu*.

<sup>17</sup> Prévost, Eddie, *The Whispering Gallery. Upcoming\AMM*

<<http://www.whisperinggallery.com/wg/upcoming/amm.shtml>> [accessed 23 September 2001].



September 1966. In a group fact sheet of the era, differentiation is made between ‘AMM concerts’ and the private weekly ‘plays’, ‘attended only by a handful of interested people’.<sup>18</sup> Arguably though, in terms of musical content or numbers of attendees, ‘public’ and ‘private’ would seem to have relative and ambiguous practical connotations. ‘Most nights the people on stage out-numbered the audience’ remembers Robin Ramsay, one transient participant.<sup>19</sup> Although by a certain point free improvisation can be said to have reached the public domain, the scene was still essentially self-determining, and of restricted wider appeal or influence. There is a small dedicated following for these musicians, and at live events (in my experience), familiar faces in the audience notably recur, often those of fellow improvisers. It is significant that – forty years after its formal inception – the key texts and terminology pertaining to free improvisation remain those written by its practitioners: Eddie Prévost’s *No Sound is Innocent* and, particularly, Derek Bailey’s *Improvisation*. Free improvisation did not merely ‘claim an identity for itself’ during the 1965-67 period. But, at the few venues such as The Little Theatre Club, it also established a musician/audience relationship of insular self-sufficiency that persists in comparable form at the turn of the twenty first century.

Chris Cutler – variously a drummer, composer and improviser in a number of leftfield contexts – has observed that ‘music does not consist of hard atomic categories, but is a continuum with, at any given time, specific and “local” configurations’. ‘Like any seemingly hard edge,’ he continues ‘these configurations will dissolve under high magnification’.<sup>20</sup> Cutler’s model is particularly apposite to a consideration of the free improvisation scene, in terms that Bailey has suggested:

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<sup>18</sup> Sleeve notes to AMM. *The Crypt – 12<sup>th</sup> June 1968. The Complete Session*. 1992. 2xCD. MRCD05

<sup>19</sup> Robin Ramsay, *Albert Ayler n a kilt. The Assassination Weapon. Edinburgh, 1966/7*: <http://www.variant.randomstate.org/11texts/Ramsay.html> [accessed 20 August 2003].

<sup>20</sup> Chris Cutler, *File Under Popular. Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music* (London: ReR Megacorp, 1991), p. 17.



‘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!’<sup>21</sup> Though seemingly flippant, Bailey is also fundamentally accurate here. I will, in fact, discuss *six* permanent or semi-permanent groupings in which free improvisation’s distinctive and definitive traits may be observed. Bailey, perhaps, is speaking specifically of the Little Theatre Club improvisers; as the quote from Prévost (above) suggests, this tended not to include his group, AMM. (Though excursions further afield by its individual members were by no means unknown, AMM has maintained until today an insularity, permanency and constancy of membership largely uncharacteristic of the free improvisation scene.) Of the remaining five groups, Bailey has actually played with four: Joseph Holbrooke, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Iskra 1903 and the Music Improvisation Company. The Evan Parker/Paul Lytton duo makes up the numbers. It should be remarked, however, that while these groups provide useful indicators of the trends that defined free improvisation, they do not represent the sum total of the scene’s activity. They were working bands, but the very nature of the collaboration that free improvisation implies also facilitated any number of ad-hoc musical meetings. Documentary evidence of some of these have endured, the majority has not: as Rob Young asks, ‘Who now knows how groups such as Naked Software, Gentle Fire and Intermodulation sounded?’<sup>22</sup> A glance at Bailey’s currently available back catalogue, for example, reveals several recorded duets with others of the first generation, outside of the context of a regular working group: Evan Parker, John Stevens, Tony Oxley and Eddie Prévost.<sup>23</sup> Parker, likewise, may be heard alongside

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<sup>21</sup> Interviewed in Scott, p. 286.

<sup>22</sup> Rob Young, ‘Soundcheck’ [review of AMM at The Roundhouse] in *The Wire*, May 2004, p. 57

<sup>23</sup> See Bailey’s entry in Richard Cook, Brian Morton, *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD. 6<sup>th</sup> edition* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 67-71.

Stevens, Barry Guy, Prévost and Keith Rowe,<sup>24</sup> and so on. But each of these examples is nevertheless still only one recorded meeting, from playing careers shared over decades.

To return to Chris Cutler, his analogy of music as ‘a continuum’ albeit consisting of ‘specific and “local” configurations’ is a useful paradigm by which to illustrate the divergences in the first generation British free improvisers’ work. The musicians grouped and regrouped in a series of line-ups that displayed a related, but shifting, series of musical emphases. These highlighted, for example, the possibilities of a particular instrumental line-up, a specific area of musical sound the group wished to explore, or the manner by which individuals contributed and interrelated within the group. I will assess the six groups in two tiers, in terms of what might be called the ‘stylistic severity’ of their own musical aesthetic. First, this will comprise an analysis of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble and AMM, as representatives of the most starkly contrasting forms that British free improvisation has taken. Second, the Parker/Lytton duo, Iskra 1903, the Music Improvisation Company and Joseph Holbrooke will be discussed as points of musical consolidation, refinement and departure within the genre.

Broadly speaking, there are features common to the music of each of these groups. By the familiar standards and conventions that define most music today, those of the free improvisers are deeply incongruous. Their improvisations – which tend to vary in length between 5-10 minutes and 60-75 minutes – are almost uniformly, to some degree, discordant: ‘out of tune’ to most ears. Melodies, harmonies and rhythms all apparently fail to take shape in any familiar sense. Cumulatively, and superficially, the effect may be compared to a number of musicians simultaneously tuning up.

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<sup>24</sup> Cook & Morton, pp. 1155-1159.



Amongst these sounds, however, there are usually still traces and influences of recognisable cultural and instrumental traditions, most often those of European classical music and American modern jazz. Whilst free improvisation invites potentially any number of impromptu combinations of players, it is also unsurprising that – especially in its early stages – such an obscure and potentially alienating form might encourage a ‘safety in numbers’ mentality. And it is within the make-up of these pioneering groups that we can begin to identify the characteristic forms and methods of free improvisation.

In any consideration, two groups emerge with immediate and inevitable prominence: The Spontaneous Music Ensemble (‘SME’) and AMM.<sup>25</sup> The legacy of both groups within the canon is manifold. They represent two of the three groups (along with Joseph Holbrooke) that first explored ‘free improvisation’ as defined in this thesis. Each group has existed over an extended period, far in excess of their contemporaries: AMM continuing today, while the SME dissolved in the early 1990s. And during the course of their careers, the two groups have also numbered within their ranks the large majority of those at the forefront of the free improvisation scene (although in noticeably differing ratios). In varying combinations, AMM has comprised a handful of significant long-term members and an approximately equal number of shorter-term participants. Until the departure of founder member Keith Rowe in 2004, for example, AMM had long centred around the trio that made its debut in 1982 (which is documented on the *Laminal* box set).<sup>26</sup> Although recorded prior to Rowe’s departure, the CD *Discrete Moments* (in Eddie Prévost and John Tilbury’s name) effectively now seems to define and modify AMM’s group sound, as

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<sup>25</sup> The meaning of ‘AMM’ (very occasionally ‘*the* AMM’), also apparently an acronym, remains a band secret up until the present day. See Prévost, p. 12, for example.

<sup>26</sup> AMM. *Laminal*. 1996. 3xCD. MRCD 31



of this writing.<sup>27</sup> [Addendum: In August 2005, the Prévost/Tilbury AMM released the CD *Norwich*. AMM's trademark sound is surprisingly intact here, with Rowe's static drones often superseded simply by the empty spaces that Prévost and Tilbury leave. This duo is a very different proposition to AMMs II and III (see below).] Conversely, the SME functioned as an encounter group of constantly flexible membership,<sup>28</sup> ultimately revolving around drummer John Stevens. His single-minded vision of the SME's musical direction both brought musicians into the fold and precipitated the departure of others. Some indication of the fluidity of the group's personnel may be gleaned from *Territories of the Mind*, an excellent and comprehensive discography of Stevens' recorded work, compiled by Paul Wilson of the National Sound Archive.<sup>29</sup> It is safe to assume that by no means all versions of the SME – some of which perhaps convened only once – were recorded. Nonetheless, Wilson names approximately 65 individuals who have performed under the banner of the SME, as well as numerous unlisted workshop participants (in Stevens' Spontaneous Music *Orchestra*) and several guest collaborators, including Yoko Ono, trumpeter Bobby Bradford and guitarist Sonny Sharrock. Deriving both from their respective longevity and the variety and influence of their participating players, the SME and AMM are especially useful in the study of free improvisation because of the documentary evidence they have left behind.

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<sup>27</sup> John Tilbury & Eddie Prévost. *Discrete Moments*. 2004. CD. MRCD58. The duo performed as AMM, with guest Sachiko M – a Japanese electronics improviser – taking Rowe's traditional place, in London, December 2004. Review by Tom Perchard, 'AMM + Sachiko M. London Museum of Garden History', *The Wire*, February 2005.

<sup>28</sup> The SME at times worked as a duo, most often between three and five players, and sometimes more.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson, Paul, *Territories of the Mind. A John Stevens Discography*.

<<http://www.shef.ac.uk/misc/rec/ps/efi/mstdisc1.html>> [accessed 21 August 2003]. 'Part 2: 1970 to 1974', 'Part 3: 1975 to 1984', 'Part 4: 1985 to 1994' and 'Part 5: Appendices' are linked to the same address.

As the exceptional *Territories of the Mind* demonstrates, individual recording careers may prove extensive in scope. And this effect is markedly pronounced in certain areas of musicianship, specifically those that are based around a high number of short-term projects. Jazz, for example, is based largely around the interaction of its musicians, and so tracks are recorded in real-time with the full ensemble present to facilitate this. Freelance session musicians, too, are employed for their professional versatility and efficiency: to fulfil the role dictated by their employer quickly and effectively, before moving on to another assignment. These approaches are contrary to the elaborate recording processes that prevail, for example, in mainstream rock music. In such circumstances, bands may record and layer separate instrumental tracks over the course of days, weeks and months, in order to assemble the illusion of a ‘perfect take’ of a particular piece. ‘Although [jazz musicians] are seldom as financially rewarded as their counterparts in rock and classical music, they often get to make many more records’, Cook and Morton summarise.<sup>30</sup> Intrinsically, an unadulterated free improvisation will take only as long to record as it does to perform. As such, and although high street music shops belie the fact, there are hundreds of recordings of free improvisation currently available in Britain, showcasing myriad combinations of players.<sup>31</sup> This variety allows a broad appreciation of the forms and techniques that have come to characterise free improvisation. But it is also useful to be able to identify and compare landmarks within the genre, to examine the

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<sup>30</sup> Cook & Morton, Introduction.

<sup>31</sup> Of particular relevance to the first generation of improvisers are the independent record labels Incus, Matchless Recordings and Emanem. Each of these labels release both newly recorded and archive performances.

Established originally by Derek Bailey, Evan Parker and Tony Oxley, but now the province of Bailey alone, Incus focuses primarily – though not exclusively – on Bailey’s many solo and collaborative ventures: [www.incusrecords.force9.co.uk](http://www.incusrecords.force9.co.uk)

Eddie Prévoist’s Matchless Recordings chronicles AMM and various associated musicians: [www.matchlessrecordings.com](http://www.matchlessrecordings.com)

Martin Davidson’s Emanem deals widely with the careers of the Little Theatre Club improvisers, Stevens, Parker, Rutherford, Watts, etc: [www.emanemdisc.com](http://www.emanemdisc.com)



consistencies and discrepancies that provide a deeper insight into its controlling ideas. Such distinctive reference points are exemplified by long-term performing/recording groups precisely like the SME and AMM, with their established, persistent and constant methods of self-devised activity, maintained by certain core personnel.

The documentation of their lengthy careers is of twofold value. By their longevity, they have each amassed an extensive body of recordings (from across the entire span of their existence) that far surpasses in volume any of the other working free improvisation groups. Their obscure status in the music world means that there are now inevitably many deleted and unavailable items in the canon, but each group is represented currently by more than a dozen officially available CD recordings in the UK.<sup>32</sup> Second, and in the light of the previous consideration, AMM and the SME's recordings are a helpful source of comparative analysis by virtue of their essential stylistic dissimilarity.

One example of the insular self-sufficiency by which the free improvisation scene functions is the way in which the music is conceptualised, rationalised and described within the circle of performers and audience. The terms 'atomistic' and 'laminar' have common currency on the scene, describing two strongly evident and contrasting styles of playing. Respectively, they allude to the 'horizontal' and 'vertical' planes of musical organisation: spatial metaphors derived from the appearance of standard musical notation on the page. (Horizontal) atomistic improvisation concerns itself primarily with the successive linear developments of a motif, while (vertical) laminar playing focuses on patterns of sounds that occur simultaneously. They represent archetypal musical structures and concepts, essentially those of 'melody' and 'harmony'. And – if not in common use – both 'atomistic' and

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<sup>32</sup> Cook & Morton, pp. 36-38, 1374-1376.



‘laminar’ are nevertheless extant English words in their own right. Their literal derivations are not unduly obscured or distorted when applied to musical matters. In specific reference to British free improvisation, Prévost cites ‘Evan Parker, in a lecture he gave [...] in London during August 1980’ as having originated these terms.<sup>33</sup> Despite other consistencies in their respective styles, the SME’s playing is typically described as ‘atomistic’ and AMM’s ‘laminar’. To return, once more, to Chris Cutler’s ‘continuum of music’, it is these characteristic styles that establish the continuity for each group. While ‘specific and local configurations’ of musicians and instrumentation have come and gone, certain core members and their working methods have remained familiar. And that free improvisation may provisionally be systemised as either ‘atomistic’ or ‘laminar’ suggests already that there is a higher degree of organisation within the form than John Fordham’s ‘traumatic din’ might allow. The SME and AMM have each persevered with a singular musical vision over the course of decades. This perhaps indicates some means to musical expression that – while seemingly incompatible and unacknowledged by our common ideas of music – may nonetheless exhibit comparable qualities of technical versatility, expressive potential and aesthetic reward.

## 1. The Spontaneous Music Ensemble

‘Many (perhaps most) of the practitioners [of free improvisation] came from a jazz background’ writes Emanem’s Martin Davidson.<sup>34</sup> Amongst the groups under discussion, this is most conspicuous in the SME’s recorded output. They formed in 1965, around a nucleus of players in residence at The Little Theatre Club: trombonist

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<sup>33</sup> Sleeve notes to AMM’s *Laminal*

<sup>34</sup> Sleeve notes to AMM. *To Hear and Back Again*. 1994. CD. MRCD03

Paul Rutherford, drummer John Stevens and saxophonist Trevor Watts.<sup>35</sup> Stevens ultimately became *de facto* leader and sole constant of the group, which continued up until his death in 1994. Initially, the Afro-American ‘free jazz’ movement – most obviously the music of Ornette Coleman’s group – was an inspiration to the SME, and their early performances were in a recognisably similar vein. I will discuss free jazz in greater detail elsewhere, but mention should be made of the recent CD re-issue of the SME’s debut recording sessions, from March 1966. *Challenge* portrays the group still distinctly under the auspices of albeit a leftfield strand of jazz.<sup>36</sup> (See Appendix One, Example 1.1) The CD *Withdrawal*, containing recordings from autumn 1966 and spring 1967, depicts a transitional phase in the group’s activities.<sup>37</sup> In the sleeve notes, Martin Davidson categorises the material as ‘compositions for improvisers’. Though most of the content was improvised, in other words, it was done so around a skeletal basis of various structuring musical motifs and conceptual designs,<sup>38</sup> which guided the improvisation’s overall development and character. In these terms, too, the SME can be said to have operated in a manner still akin to a jazz group. However, the interplay, phraseology and timbres that the group now employed were markedly removed from the Ornette Coleman tributes of a few months before. *Withdrawal* also includes a suite ‘composed and directed by John Stevens’, entitled ‘Seeing Sounds and Hearing Colours’. Davidson attributes to this to the influence of Viennese composer Anton Webern, and particularly his *Five Pieces for Orchestra*.<sup>39</sup> What is most significant about *Withdrawal* is the introduction and assimilation of distinctly European characteristics into a music conceptually indebted to the improvisation of American

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<sup>35</sup> These three met originally during National Service, ‘in an RAF band in the late fifties’. Wickes, pp. 42-43.

<sup>36</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Challenge*. 2001. CD. Emanem 4053

<sup>37</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Withdrawal*. 1997. CD. Emanem 4020

<sup>38</sup> The *Withdrawal* material was, at least partially, intended to effect a soundtrack, in accompaniment to a film of the same name.

<sup>39</sup> Sleeve notes to The Spontaneous Music Ensemble’s *Withdrawal*



jazz. In terms of the nascent free improvisation – and to use a linguistic analogy – on *Withdrawal* the vocabulary is provisionally in place, if not the syntax. (See Appendix One, Example 1.2) Of course, individual and arbitrarily captured archive recordings cannot fully document every transitory aspect of an emergent musical form. What becomes apparent from the CD *Summer 1967*, however, is the point by which the SME *had* definitively formulated and adopted their mature style. It is here, in the atomistic duets of then-current line-up Stevens and sax player Evan Parker, that the group's distinctive sound and mode of working can first conclusively be heard, in a form that endured for the next twenty-seven years.<sup>40</sup>

The SME's interaction typically appears 'busy', the contribution of each musician skittering and densely clustered amongst those of the others. Individuals converse in a series of short, spasmodic motifs, often barely a second in length, with a staccato, quasi-percussive attack. Momentarily, the improviser pauses to gauge their own and others' responses, then the process repeats. This is the essence of the 'atomistic' approach to playing: the stream of tiny, moment-to-moment actions and reactions. Although everyone is, in some respects, playing relatively sparsely, the constant overlap of 'phrases [that are] short and asymmetrical in themselves, as well as by comparison with the phrases before and after' (as critic Victor Schonfield describes)<sup>41</sup> often leaves few opportunities for musical 'rests' – silence – to occur. The effect becomes more noticeable, too, as the number of participants increases; at times it can obscure the clarity and individuality of the atomistic method, giving the impression simply of a torrent of musical activity. For this reason, the *Face To Face* CD (featuring the 1973 duo of Stevens and Watts)<sup>42</sup> arguably contains some of the definitive recorded examples of the atomistic SME. (See Appendix One, Example

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<sup>40</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Summer 1967*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4005

<sup>41</sup> Sleeve notes to The Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Summer 1967*.

<sup>42</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Face To Face*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4003



1.5) The ‘call and response’ is noticeably measured and spacious in a number of instances here. Intimate and familiar with the method, either man implicitly acknowledges the lesser challenge and/or encouragement to *make* himself heard. In a quintet, however, such as on the SME’s “*So, what do you think?*” LP,<sup>43</sup> each improviser has potentially four other sources of musical stimulus to which they might react. As a consequence, some passages blur into an approximation of relentless momentum, as everybody’s reciprocal reactions become ever more frenetic. Nonetheless, it is in this area that free improvisation – as opposed to its nearest relative, free jazz – is uniquely defined. (See Appendix One, Example 1.4) The distinction (especially with the SME) can sometimes be subtle, but I will explore this topic in greater depth towards the end of Chapter Three.

Despite this, the SME’s cumulative sonic texture still appears relatively delicate and thin and, on the whole, tends to inhabit a limited dynamic and expressive range. There are no layered harmonies here, only an upper surface woven of irregular, but interlocking, fibres. This apparently continuous activity in the SME’s music is one factor that maintains the appearance of the group’s association with jazz. Although actually metrically irregular, the sheer abundance and dynamic consistency of musical events typically creates a persistent momentum, which tends overall to approximate a conventional mid tempo pace. The music, however, cannot really be said to ‘swing’ (as the characteristic ebb and flow pulse of jazz is commonly known) in any coherent sense. It is too episodically fragmentary and disjointed, lacking the requisite ‘fluidity’ by which bassist Joelle Leandre, for example, does define jazz.<sup>44</sup> Partially, this betrays something of the European classical influence in the SME’s make-up: a music based

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<sup>43</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. “*So, what do you think?*”. 1973. LP. TGS118

<sup>44</sup> Interviewed in Dan Warburton, ‘Invisible Jukebox: Joelle Leandre’, *The Wire*, February 2002. The bassist has previously worked with Derek Bailey: see, for example, *No Waiting*. 1997. CD. Potlach P 198

in more staccato rhythms than those of African descent from which jazz takes its impetus. But it is also an effect of the SME's attempt to create an egalitarian improvising format for its participants. Stevens was committed to a participative, sometimes educational, 'workshop' approach to making music, operating variously under the banner of the Spontaneous Music Orchestra, and later his 'Search and Reflect' course.<sup>45</sup> He founded the SME's music on an elemental and comparable principle, which Evan Parker has paraphrased: 'If you can't hear other players, or aren't playing with due reference to the others, you may as well be solo'.<sup>46</sup> The atomistic phrasing of the SME promoted some level of equal participation between the group's instrumental voices, by a complicit negation of the opportunity for individual grandstanding. This was achieved though, not only by the minimal quality of each successive phrase itself, as much as by the rest that followed it: the moment of perception, and the formulation of response by another improviser. Again, this process is perhaps best audible on *Face To Face*, where the inflection of each reaction displays a logical consideration of the action that preceded it. In short – for the moment – the SME's atomistic improvisation does not 'swing' like jazz, because the linear development of the music is governed by the variable personal responses of one player to another. Jazz improvisation, on the other hand, must inherently be effected within the regular rhythmic stricture of 'swing', because this is one of the fundamental qualities by which 'jazz' itself is defined.

There is another factor that sometimes recalls the SME's jazz origins, that of its instrumental line-up. This has remained flexible up to a point, to accommodate the many shifts in attendant personnel, but some constants remained. Foremost among

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<sup>45</sup> The manual that accompanied this course is a long-deleted rarity. According to Steve Beresford, efforts are, as of this writing, currently being made to have it reprinted. Cited in England, Phil, 'Invisible Jukebox: Steve Beresford', *The Wire*, May 2005.

<sup>46</sup> BBC Radio 3. *Lines Burnt in Light. The Music of Evan Parker: Part 1*. Broadcast 27 March 2004).



these is Stevens' percussion. Modified from a conventional jazz drum kit, this typically comprised an assortment of smaller, shallower drums and small cymbals, which facilitated both the low volume and dry, short duration tones that his atomistic model relied upon. Though the precise components of his kit varied (See Appendix One, Examples 1.3 & 1.7), Stevens employed this instrumental voice (and occasionally, cornet or bugle (See Appendix One, Example 1.6)) throughout the SME's mature career. A solo recording of Stevens' playing, on the CD *Improvising Percussionist*, reveals the integral nature of his percussive style to the SME's overall conception,<sup>47</sup> and a later version of his kit may be clearly viewed on the video, *Gig*, where Stevens duets with Derek Bailey.<sup>48</sup> Otherwise, the most common timbre amongst the SME's music has been that jazz staple, the saxophone. Stevens' duos with either Evan Parker or Trevor Watts have characterised particularly significant phases in the group's career, and the instrument returned to the line-up in the group's final years. Also encompassing, at various times, double bass, trumpet or flugelhorn and/or semi-acoustic guitar, the SME's jazz lineage is conspicuous in its instrumentation for at least its first decade, and the CD *Karyobin* is usefully representative of this period.<sup>49</sup> Thereafter, from the late 1970s and into the 80s, the SME assumed the qualities of a chamber ensemble, with Stevens' percussion and cornet deployed alongside the guitar, violin and cello of a younger generation of improvisers. They may be heard on recordings such as *Biosystem*<sup>50</sup> and *Low Profile*.<sup>51</sup> (See Appendix One, Example 1.6) Recorded in the months before Stevens' death, *A*

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Lytton/John Stevens/Frank Perry/Eddie Prévost/Trevor Taylor. *Improvising Percussionist*. 2001. CD. FMRCD81-0501

<sup>48</sup> John Stevens & Derek Bailey. 'Gig'. 1992. Video. Incus VD04

<sup>49</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Karyobin*. 1993. CD. CPE2001-2: featuring Stevens, Bailey, and Parker, Kenny Wheeler on trumpet and flugelhorn and Dave Holland on double bass).

<sup>50</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Biosystem*. 1977. LP. Incus 24

<sup>51</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Low Profile*. 1999. CD. Emanem 4031



*New Distance* represents a phase of consolidation.<sup>52</sup> Second generation improvisers Roger Smith and John Butcher provide, respectively, Spanish guitar and sax in a line-up that encapsulates the varying and distinctive qualities of the SME's music, method and career. (See Appendix One, Example 1.7)

## 2. AMM

Also formed in 1965, AMM have maintained a presence on the free improvisation scene that endures to the present day. Though they too have musical roots in American jazz and European classical music, AMM show a striking divergence from the SME. As with the previous group, the founding members of AMM gained musical experience in various trad and modern jazz contexts during the 1950s and early 60s.<sup>53</sup> Subsequently, too, the original quartet – Prévost on percussion; Keith Rowe on guitar; Lou Gare, sax; and Lawrence Sheaff, bass – coalesced as a group in the free jazz idiom. In contrast to the SME, this formative period been largely obscured by the passage of time. It has been stated that AMM's debut recording sessions were likewise of free jazz,<sup>54</sup> though these have remained unpublished. Consequently, unlike the SME's *Challenge* and *Withdrawal*, there is no available documentary evidence of AMM's pre-mature sound. They first appeared – stylistically already fully formed – on 1966's *AMM Music*.<sup>55</sup> By this time, Prévost writes, 'the last vestiges of jazz had fallen away'.<sup>56</sup> This is perhaps debatable conceptually, in light of the players' musical roots and jazz's key aesthetic of collective instrumental improvisation. But in terms of the cumulative sound that AMM produced, it is a more valid point. The SME

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<sup>52</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *A New Distance*. 1995. CD. ACTA 8

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Wickes, pp. 52-53, or Prévost, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> Sleeve notes to AMM's *Laminal*

<sup>55</sup> AMM. *AMM Music 1966*. 1989. CD. ReR AMMCD

<sup>56</sup> Prévost, p. 12.

maintained an implicit reference to jazz in its instrumental voices and characteristic phraseology, which AMM broadly did not. Again though, it was the encroaching influence of European musical traditions that informed the move from free jazz to free improvisation. While the timbres of the SME's music remained generally faithful to modern jazz, AMM's more closely resembled those of the classical avant-garde and experimental schools. (See **Appendix One, Example 2**) This transition is apparent throughout the group, but two particularly useful points of contact were Rowe's art school experiences with the likes of John Cage and, later, the induction of pianist Cornelius Cardew. Having previously worked with avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, Cardew met with the group with regards to performing one of his own experimental compositions. Almost uniquely amongst the first generation of free improvisers, Cardew had no background in jazz.

AMM's music is often described as 'laminar', appearing in practice diametrically opposed to the chattering call-and-response of the SME's atomism. Where the latter's sound was delicate, linear, one-dimensional and busy, AMM's was coarse, often loud, and relatively static. Collectively dense, it comprised simultaneously occurring layers of sound that grated against one another, shifting texture and structure only gradually. They also exploited an expansive dynamic range of volume and timbre (rather than tempo), so that dirges of extreme dissonance might be contrasted against passages of apparent silence. The SME distributed improvisational responsibility by the limited extent of each individual's contribution, where each phrase was quickly curtailed so that attention might be returned to the collective. AMM work towards a similar result, but via a different method. Their music consists of a series of collages to which each musician adds concurrently, each episode only very slowly diffusing into another permutation. No one musician races



ahead of the collective. Instead they make their contribution, leaving room for the others to do likewise.

It is not that AMM's instrumentation is necessarily unconventional that defines their music. They have variously employed piano, guitar, sax, drums, cello, etc, just as the SME did. It is that these instruments tend to be played – treated physically – somewhat unconventionally that has informed AMM's particular sound. That their playing is layered in (albeit discordant) harmonies already suggests more of a Western classical influence than the essentially rhythm-driven, jazz-derived SME. But it is also in the intricate combinations and variations of textures, and the means by which they are produced, that AMM's music suggests Europe more than Afro-America. The jazz aesthetic is primarily concerned with the interpretation of melodic material by a limited number of common instrumental voices. The classical tradition, meanwhile, has at its disposal a wider timbral palette on which to draw, and distinctive, completed arrangements prevail over semi-realised opportunities for spontaneity. The avant-garde and experimental practitioners advanced the techniques, forms and timbres available to musicians still further. It is this vocabulary of sounds that AMM employs as intrinsic to their improvisation. Whilst the SME's choice of notes may appear unconventional, the listener is seldom in any doubt that they are hearing a saxophone, or a guitar. In contrast, a typical AMM strategy is to modify the playing techniques of a particular instrument. Attention may be paid to a component or surface of the instrument that is not usually used, for example. The method by which sound is physically produced may be approached differently, or an instrument may be employed in an uncommon functional role within the ensemble. To facilitate the laminar style, instruments commonly perform a drone function, or some minor

timbral or percussive embellishment within the music's dense structure. (See Appendix One, Examples 2.1.a – 2.1.c)

A brief mention of AMM's career should be made here, in order to contextualise these descriptions. Since their 1966 recorded debut, AMM's musical character has assumed a tri-partite existence, informed by changes of personnel within the group. AMM's model of laminar free improvisation, as defined on their first album and broadly characterised above, remained constant from 1966 until 1972. A central quartet of Prévost, Rowe, Gare and Cardew made this music, alongside the transitory Lawrence Sheaff, Christian Wolff or Christopher Hobbs. A political schism – over Cardew and Rowe's radical adoption of Maoism, and subsequent modification of musical interests – left Prévost and Gare alone as AMM by 1973.<sup>57</sup> The duo continued as such until 1976, whereupon some attempts were made to reconvene the earlier quartet.<sup>58</sup> But in the aftermath of this transitory period, AMM emerged as a different duo: Prévost and, once more, Rowe. On their one recorded release, *It had been an ordinary enough day in Pueblo, Colorado*,<sup>59</sup> the duo were billed as 'AMM III'. (Presumably, this cast the Prévost/Gare duo as 'AMM II', as Steve Lake assumes in the sleeve notes to the *Pueblo* CD.) I will make further reference to these two duos towards the end of this chapter; suffice to say for the moment that they do not wholly reflect either the laminar method or, in the case of 'AMM II', strictly even free improvisation (within the scope of this thesis). By the early 1980s, pianist John Tilbury joined Prévost and Rowe, and this trio comprised AMM's core up until 2004.<sup>60</sup> Though perhaps moderated, refined, less sonically extreme than the 1960s version, AMM returned to a comparable mode of music-making with the introduction

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<sup>57</sup> Prévost, pp. 21-25.

<sup>58</sup> Prévost, p. 186.

<sup>59</sup> AMM. *It had been an ordinary enough day in Pueblo, Colorado*. 1980. CD. JAPO 60031 843 206-2

<sup>60</sup> There have also been transitory members during this period: cellist Rohan de Saram, clarinettist Ian Mitchell, and a temporary return for Lou Gare in the early 1990s.



of Tilbury, which has remained in place ever since. (See Appendix One, Examples 2.2 – 2.2.g)

One useful source of comparison by which to examine AMM's career is the CD box set *Laminal*. Released to celebrate the group's thirtieth anniversary, it contains concert recordings from 1969, 1982 and 1994, and as such, the patterns, consistencies and refinements of AMM's musicality become readily apparent. Eschewing traditional roles as either 'lead' or 'rhythm' instrumentalists, AMM's members adopt an homogenous collective approach that feeds the group sound, whilst often blurring the distinction between the contributing players. This, in itself, represents another crucial divergence from the individualism of the 'soloist' role characteristic of jazz. Nevertheless, what may often be heard within the AMM soundscape is Tilbury plucking and striking the exposed innards of a piano; Cardew scraping and manipulating tortured sounds from cello strings; Prévost drawing sustained and piercing tones from cymbals with a violin bow; Gare's sax, too, often assumes a textural, growling drone, contrary to the instrument's common melodic function. 'The key to the sound world' of AMM, however, is Keith Rowe, as Cook & Morton suggest.<sup>61</sup> As John Stevens performs a one-man resume of the SME's style, Rowe does likewise for AMM. His instrument is an ordinary electric guitar, but via various treatments, preparations and permutations of the instrument's functions Rowe can create on his own the kind of sustained, dissonant, creaking textures that typify the group's music as a whole. In contrast to sometime SME guitarists Derek Bailey or Roger Smith, for example, Rowe is to be found 'laying the instrument flat on a table [...] manipulating feedback, overtones, percussive effects and accidentals' (Cook and

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<sup>61</sup> Cook & Morton, p. 37.

Morton continue),<sup>62</sup> creating blocks and fields of electric sound. Bailey and Smith, in comparison, tend towards unconventional series of notes, but their instrument of choice is never in doubt. Rowe and Cardew have also expanded the layered electronic timbres of the group by the use of short-wave transistor radios, both tuned and detuned, an aspect of his playing that Rowe has discussed in some detail on the Internet.<sup>63</sup> His individual and influential musicianship can also be heard in intimate detail on the solo CDs *A Dimension of Perfectly Ordinary Reality*<sup>64</sup> and *Harsh, Guitar Solo*.<sup>65</sup> Rowe's importance to the character of AMM may perhaps be discerned by the enforced shift of emphasis in 'AMM II' (see below), and the substitute electronic textures of Sachiko M that Prévost and Tilbury brought in, post-Rowe, in 2004. [Though see also my Addendum (above), re: the *Norwich* CD.]

Amongst the first generation free improvisers, AMM represent one of the more extreme abstractions of the jazz aesthetic from its point of origin. Indeed, their style of slow-moving electro-acoustic improvisation is now, at the turn of the twenty first century, one of the most conspicuously influential models for subsequent generations of improvisers. The jazz that informed the first generation's innovations has less relevance to the increasingly ubiquitous laptop computer today. Like the SME, AMM's recorded canon comprises (for the most part) a set of variations on a theme. Apart from those already mentioned, recordings such as *The Crypt*<sup>66</sup> (from 1968), *The Nameless Uncarved Block*<sup>67</sup> (1990) and *Fine*<sup>68</sup> (2001) usefully illustrate

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Rowe, Keith, '*Above and Beyond*' <<http://www.l-m-c.org.uk/texts/rowe.html>> [accessed 18 February 2001].

<sup>64</sup> Keith Rowe. *A Dimension of Perfectly Ordinary Reality*. 1990. CD. MR19

<sup>65</sup> Keith Rowe. *Harsh, Guitar Solo*. 2001. CD. GROB 209 LC 10292

<sup>66</sup> AMM. *The Crypt*

<sup>67</sup> AMM. *The Nameless Uncarved Block*. 1991. CD. MR20

<sup>68</sup> AMM. *Fine*. 2001. CD. MRCD46



AMM's character and contribution to free improvisation over the course of several decades.

### 3. Evan Parker & Paul Lytton

Parker and Lytton's musical partnership is representative of certain qualities that distinguish the remaining groups from AMM and the SME. Historically, the other groups are more difficult to catalogue. Each group endured for a lesser period of time and have not been so comprehensively documented. What is nevertheless apparent in their work is the consistency and continuation that they display of the ideas and techniques that AMM and the SME exemplified. Indeed – with the exception of Joseph Holbrooke – these groups are variously based around re-convened SME veterans. And it is perhaps this evident decision to re-convene under a different banner that most usefully illustrates both the versatility and restrictions that this genre has offered its players.

Parker (sometime SME member, and concurrently also in the Music Improvisation Company) and Lytton 'formed their duo in 1969, making their first public appearance the following year. [They subsequently] continued throughout the 1970s', notes Martin Davidson.<sup>69</sup> Currently, there are four available CD recordings of the line-up, culled from performances between 1971 and 1975.<sup>70</sup> Parker & Lytton's music is some of the most wilfully extreme in the free improvisation canon, seemingly based on a policy of deliberate eclecticism. Though comprising only two musicians – ostensibly a sax player and a drummer – their collective music encompasses an especially wide variety of sound sources. Parker, as well as his

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<sup>69</sup> Sleeve notes to Evan Parker & Paul Lytton. *Three Other Stories*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4002

<sup>70</sup> The others are: Evan Parker & Paul Lytton. *Two Octobers*. CD. Emanem 4009; *Collective Calls (Urban) (Two Microphones)*. 2002. CD. psi 02.05; and *At the Unity Theatre*. 2003. CD. psi 03.01

customary saxophones, also employed an assortment of other wind instruments: some homemade and others of various ethnic origins. (See **Appendix One, Examples 3, 3.1.p & 3.1.w**) Lytton's percussion array was, in Davidson's words 'enormous, taking about three hours to set up and about one hour to dismantle [...]; [It] completely surrounded the performer'.<sup>71</sup> Again, it combined influences of jazz convention, orchestral complexity, world music textures and a DIY aesthetic. (See **Appendix One, Example 3**) Lytton played live electronics too (See **Appendix One, Examples 3.1.b, 3.1.e, 3.1.s, 3.1.u, 3.1.v**), and, as in the case of John Stevens, a listen to Lytton's solo performance on the *Improvising Percussionist* CD is a vitally illustrative resource. He has also been credited – on *Three Other Stories*, for example – with whatever other potential instruments were available at the time: air horns, dog whistles, harmonium and klaxon. Both men emitted various vocalisations as well (See **Appendix One, Example 3.1.d**), and Parker was known to introduce tape recordings of the duo's own prior performances, effectively rendering themselves a quartet for the duration of their use. (See **Appendix One, Example 3.1.m**)

It is difficult to describe the cumulative sound of Parker & Lytton's music from this period, but it is also partially unnecessary to do so. Audibly, its character shifts repeatedly and, in a sense, it is more the rationale behind the music that is particularly significant. Arguably it was this duo, of all the groups described here, which suggested most strongly a notion of wholly 'free improvisation'. Though inevitably – as I shall discuss in Chapter Four – their creative resources were *not* unlimited (See **Appendix One, Example 3, final note**), it is nevertheless Parker & Lytton who most conspicuously tried to invoke the idea that they might be. The SME exemplified a freewheeling melodic and rhythmic style, but tempered by Stevens'

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<sup>71</sup> Sleeve notes to Evan Parker & Paul Lytton's *Three Other Stories*



atomistic model and using mostly conventional instrumental voices; AMM's playing obscured these voices, and many of the common and explicit practices of music *per se*. But, having said this, they still consistently operated within certain recognisable soundscapes, focussing on their particular minutiae and possibilities. Parker & Lytton's music appears governed by a much less determinate ethos. Speaking of the duo in the documentary *Line Burnt in Light*, Parker has spoken simply of 'the delight of the activity of making new sounds', while Lytton concurred 'and try[ing to] find a musical context for [them]'.<sup>72</sup> As such, Parker & Lytton availed themselves of a somewhat broader musical spectrum than the other groups.

They could be, intermittently, acoustic and atomistic like the SME (See Appendix One, Examples 3.1.l & 3.1.n) or as electronic and laminar as AMM (See Appendix One, Examples 3.1.b – 3.1.e & 3.1.u), but they would also reach for any other permutation of the free improvisers' vocabulary: anywhere in between the former groups, or anywhere beyond either of their extremes. But inasmuch as Parker & Lytton explicitly compromised the styles of the SME or AMM, it can also be said that they conceptually united them. In terms of the typical rate of successive events in Parker & Lytton's improvisations, they employed a model of jostling – even antagonistic – interaction comparable to that of the SME: patterned, as Parker has described, 'like a non-verbal debate'.<sup>73</sup> With the SME's largely conventional line-up of instrumentation, their improvisational focus and uncertainty was defined in the rhythmic motion and contours of the interaction, more so than in its timbres. For AMM, the opposite was essentially the case. Their sound was the culmination of collective simultaneous textures, with little obviously active discourse in a comparable sense. The best summary of Parker & Lytton's innovation is to say that

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<sup>72</sup> BBC Radio 3. *Lines Burnt in Light. The Music of Evan Parker: Part Two*. Broadcast 3 April 2004.

<sup>73</sup> Interviewed in Scott, p. 257.

they added an extra dimension of musical interplay to the SME's method: that of AMM's textural focus. For any stimulus that Parker might proffer, Lytton would have recourse to either a rhythmic or timbral line of response, for example, with a markedly wider and more pronounced set of options than might have been allowed in the SME or AMM. Parker's reply, in return, could be similarly unconstrained, and so on. The eclecticism of musical resource that Parker & Lytton employed was given the opportunity to increase exponentially, enabling them to encounter musical territory that their contemporaries would not.

From around 1980, and until the present day, Parker and Lytton have operated as a trio with double bass player Barry Guy. Instrumentally, this grouping is more conventional. Parker dispensed with all but his saxophones and Lytton returned to a fairly standard drum kit – no electronics – and some assorted smaller items of percussion. Their collective sound and interactive methods are heavily informed by a post-John Coltrane school of free jazz, though tempered by the free improvisation of such post-SME groups as Iskra 1903. They can be heard on albums such as *At The Vortex*.<sup>74</sup> Occasionally, the line-up has been expanded – as documented on *Toward the Margins*<sup>75</sup> – with the addition of violin, various live electronics, etc. 'The Evan Parker Electro-Acoustic Ensemble' furthers Parker & Lytton's laminar and electronic explorations, tending towards the dense and lingering sound environments of AMM. A versatile and expressive group in its own right, the Parker, Guy & Lytton trio also continues to broaden its scope with various impromptu collaborations. Recent examples have included visiting Swedish improvisers David Stackenas (guitar) and Sten Sandell (piano)<sup>76</sup>, and British electronics duo Furt.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Evan Parker/Barry Guy/Paul Lytton. *At The Vortex*. 1998. CD. Emanem 4022

<sup>75</sup> The Evan Parker Electro-Acoustic Ensemble. *Toward the Margins*. 1997. CD. 1612 453 514-2

<sup>76</sup> At the Freedom of the City festival, Conway Hall, Holborn, London: 3 May 2004.



## 4, 5 & 6. Iskra 1903/Joseph Holbrooke/The MIC

I have previously defined Iskra 1903 as ‘post-SME’. Its members, Paul Rutherford, Barry Guy and Derek Bailey had all previously served in that group, and Iskra 1903’s characteristic musicality both continued and modified the former’s innovations. Iskra 1903 is also ‘post-Holbrooke’ however, with Bailey as the common member once again. The SME and Joseph Holbrooke effectively present two separate lines of descent, whose lineages comprise subtly different sets of characteristics. Though chronologically Joseph Holbrooke pre-dated the SME, in this analysis I will consider them *stylistically*, alongside the post-SME Iskra 1903.

Iskra 1903 formed in 1970 and ‘lasted about four years’ in its original incarnation, notes Martin Davidson.<sup>77</sup> With its relatively brief lifespan, recorded evidence of the group’s music is proportionately scarce. The triple CD collection on Emanem therefore, which includes recording sessions from between 1970 and 1972, is an invaluable resource. (See Appendix One, Examples 4 & 4.1) Instrumentally they comprised amplified guitar, amplified double bass and Rutherford on trombone and, occasionally, piano. (See Appendix One, Examples 4.2 & 4.4 – 4.8) And like the SME, Iskra 1903 disclosed something of their ancestry by the use of conventional instrumentation: the trio of trombone, bass and guitar (for example) could evoke the soundscape – if not the specific detail – of a mid-paced jazz ballad (See Appendix One, Example 4.10). Equally, with Rutherford switching to piano and Guy from pizzicato bass tones to higher register arco lines, the debt to European chamber music that these players had explored on the SME’s *Withdrawal* became apparent (See Appendix One, Example 4.9). Iskra 1903’s most definite post-SME stylistic shift,

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<sup>77</sup> At the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Lawrence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield: 28 November 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Sleeve notes to Iskra 1903. *Chapter One*. 2000. 3xCD. Emanem 4301.

however, was also related to their instrumental line-up. ‘They had’ as Martin Davidson explains ‘a strong desire to work as a percussionless trio’.<sup>79</sup> It may be unfair to paraphrase this statement as ‘a strong desire to work as a John Stevens-less trio’, but nevertheless the absence of the SME’s rhythmic impetus – both personally and conceptually – fundamentally determines the refinements that Iskra 1903’s music exhibited. The SME’s playing concentrated upon the subtleties of rhythmic punctuation, motion and succession, which was unevenly fractured in its phrases and continuity. But it was not only Stevens’ (modified, reduced) drumming and drum kit that facilitated their sound. The other players, too, audibly phrase their contributions such as to approximate the dry staccato attack and rapid decay of Stevens’ percussion. Not only complimenting the SME’s egalitarian policy of interaction, this also accentuated the music’s rhythmic disjointedness. The rests in the SME’s playing may be as pronounced, finely calibrated and expressive as the notes. What might otherwise approximate a basic jazz rhythm therefore may be stretched or compressed incrementally into ‘unswinging’ irregularity. Iskra 1903 did not abandon the atomistic style (See Appendix One, Examples 4, 4.9 & 4.11). But nor did they adhere to such a quasi-percussive vocabulary and inflection in their playing. At different times, Rutherford, Guy or Bailey might each have simulated a percussive and/or rhythmic function or voice (See Appendix One, Example 4.14 & 4.16). But equally, in this regard, the ensemble’s musical brief was less defined or limited than that of the SME. Both in terms of individual notes and longer phrases, Iskra 1903 were more willing to play legato as much as staccato. Notes could be sustained; phrases could take on fluid, melodic form, rather than a seemingly percussive one. As such, they also moved slightly into laminar territory, as instrumental voices sounded simultaneously and

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.



increasingly intertwined. Like Parker & Lytton, Iskra 1903 were certainly not averse to exploring SME-style sounds, but neither did they limit themselves to doing so. Despite comprising of only three members, the legato style of Iskra 1903 also allowed fewer rests to occur in their music. And it is with this more sustained continuity of sound and less jaggedly percussive inflection that – whilst retaining the impressionistic melodic and rhythmic innovations of the parent group – Iskra 1903 helped to define a middle ground of sorts for British free improvisation. (See Appendix One, Examples 4 & 4.3)

Joseph Holbrooke existed from 1963 to 1966, consisting of Bailey, Gavin Bryars on double bass and Tony Oxley on drums. I have briefly described the group's career already; the only other particular point to make here is that Bryars ultimately departed free improvisation for a career in straight composition. Bailey and Oxley moved from Sheffield down onto the London scene. Of the groups under discussion here, Joseph Holbrooke poses a major obstacle to any informed latter day consideration of their work. 'The recorded legacy of Joseph Holbrooke from the 1960s is almost non-existent' admits Bryars, 'there are no recordings of the free playing to the best of my knowledge.'<sup>80</sup> Implicitly, Bryars is referring to those recordings of the trio that *are* accessible, the CDs *Joseph Holbrooke '65* and *Joseph Holbrooke '98*,<sup>81</sup> but also to their problematic status as historical documents. The former, an extract from a 1965 band rehearsal, is quite short. Including some brief discussion between the players, the CD runs for only approximately ten minutes. The quantity of this material, though, is secondary by far to the quality. Simply, it is unmistakably *not* free improvisation in the sense under discussion. It is credited, for one, as a rendition of the John Coltrane piece '*Miles Mode*' and certainly draws

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<sup>80</sup> Notes from Joseph Holbrooke. *Joseph Holbrooke '65*. 1999. CD-ROM. Incus CD Single 01

<sup>81</sup> Joseph Holbrooke. *Joseph Holbrooke '98*. 2000. CD. Incus CD 39

stylistically on the abstract modernism of the Bill Evans Trio.<sup>82</sup> And in terms of melody, rhythm and the manner and structure of theme, accompaniment and solo, *Joseph Holbrooke '65* presents no more or less than a performance of jazz. As Bryars acknowledges, it is not '*free playing*' [my italics]: perhaps instead equivalent to the SME's debut, *Challenge*, as cryptically indicative of future interests. (See Appendix One, Examples 5 – 5.1.o) The scarcity and stylistic incongruity in Joseph Holbrooke's catalogue, however, is further delineated by Bryars as being 'from the 1960s'. *Joseph Holbrooke '98* represents a concert reunion of the trio recorded in Cologne, more than three decades later. Whilst standing alone in terms of full-length recordings of the group, it nevertheless covers enough ground to establish the music as consistent with free improvisation as the first generation had defined it. *Joseph Holbrooke '98* poses no immediate problems of either brevity or stylistic incompatibility, as its predecessor did. Equally though, as a culmination of over thirty years' subsequent musical activity, neither does *Joseph Holbrooke '98* necessarily recreate the musicality of the group's youthful years. [Addendum: The trio made some new studio recordings in the days immediately following their Cologne reunion. These are due for public release in 2006.] Ultimately, neither recording is without value. Neither can be said to be definitive of Joseph Holbrooke's initial period of free playing, but each – and in conjunction with other extant recordings – perhaps suggest some clues to its basic character.

Bailey's CD *Pieces for Guitar* is a useful addition to his catalogue.<sup>83</sup> Recorded at around the same time as *Withdrawal* (1966-67, his earliest preserved SME performances), this collection of solo pieces portrays a similarly transitional playing style. Though partially composed and less angular of phrasing than Bailey's later

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<sup>82</sup> See, for example, Bill Evans Trio. *Explorations*. 1987. CD. OJCCD-037-02

<sup>83</sup> Derek Bailey. *Pieces for Guitar*. 2002. CD. TZ 7080



sound, the *Pieces for Guitar* (like *Withdrawal*) are still discernibly removed from their creator's jazz origins, and indicative of free improvisation's nascent direction. Both melodically and rhythmically, they develop – falteringly it seems – according to Bailey's own inclination, rather than to conventional Western scales or time signatures. And, like John Stevens' inspiration for *Withdrawal*, Bailey too has credited Anton Webern's compositions as a key influence.<sup>84</sup> That said: in instrumental tone and general phrasing style, the progression from *Joseph Holbrooke '65* to *Pieces for Guitar* is not vast, so much as specific and significantly focussed. *Joseph Holbrooke '98* is broadly representative of the mature 'free' playing styles of Bailey and Oxley. It is atomistic, but in the sense that Iskra 1903's music was: less severe and more flexible than that of the SME. By Bryars' intimation, Joseph Holbrooke's playing was to become more extreme, more 'free', than it is on their 1965 recording, and Bailey's *Pieces for Guitar* suggests perhaps the kind of further developments they made. Implying debts of inspiration to free jazz and European modernism (whilst also transcending and hybridising them) it seems likely that the interplay, dynamics and textures of Joseph Holbrooke's early career did establish a working model of free improvisation. From an earlier chronological perspective to Iskra 1903, they refined the patterns that the SME then followed to one particular logical conclusion.

Like the Parker & Lytton duo, the Music Improvisation Company ('MIC') embodied an apparent contradiction amongst the first generation groups. That is to say that they exemplified both differentiation, yet also consolidation, of free improvisation's defining traits. There is some published account of the MIC's existence,<sup>85</sup> but (like Iskra 1903) their musical legacy today is available for scrutiny

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<sup>84</sup> Sleeve notes, Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> For example, Bailey, pp. 94-104, Watson, 146-155, or Ian Carr, *Music Outside. Contemporary Jazz in Britain* (London: Latimer New Directions, 1973), pp. 82-85.

primarily on a lone anthology CD.<sup>86</sup> Around 1968, an early line-up saw Bailey reunited with erstwhile colleague Gavin Bryars, and also included future AMM pianist John Tilbury, Evan Parker and percussionist Jamie Muir. Ultimately, the former pair diverged once more, over their respective commitment to improvisation versus experimental composition. The definitive MIC line-up eventually coalesced around a quartet of Bailey, Parker, Muir, and Hugh Davies on electronics and organ,<sup>87</sup> and in the group's final year or so, they added vocalist Christine Jeffrey. Jeffrey, however, does not feature on the recordings. The group petered out (Parker has suggested) in 1971.<sup>88</sup> Instrumentally the MIC was electro-acoustic, giving them access to a wide range of timbres and composite textures. They sourced eclectically from free improvisation's extant materials to date, and often also approximated the textures – if not the motifs – of rock music (See Appendix One, Example 6.1.e). As such, unlike the SME or Iskra 1903, their music betrayed little of its protagonists' generic associations and history. Hugh Davies' homemade electronic instruments were one obvious escape from precedent, a detailed solo example of which can be heard on the later *Warming Up With The Iceman* CD.<sup>89</sup> (See Appendix One, Examples 6.1.a, 6.1.e & 6.1.f) And like AMM, the other instrumentalists also explored unconventional playing techniques and roles that obscured their 'traditional' identities. (See Appendix One, Example 6.1) Bailey altered and controlled the attack, sustain and decay of his guitar with a volume pedal and the use of feedback. (See Appendix One, Examples 6.1.c – 6.1.g) Parker's sax might assume a drone or whine. (See Appendix One, Examples 6.1.a, 6.1.c & 6.1.d) And Muir's percussion appeared as an

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<sup>86</sup> The Music Improvisation Company. *The Music Improvisation Company 1968-1971*. 1976. CD. Incus CD12. Another LP, issued on the ECM label, is long deleted and a considerable rarity.

<sup>87</sup> Davies was the only other of the first generation without an active jazz background, coming (like AMM's Cornelius Cardew) from the classical avant-garde.

<sup>88</sup> Carr, p. 84.

<sup>89</sup> Hugh Davies. *Warming Up With The Iceman*. 2001. CD. GROB.324 LC 10292



unconnected series of rattling interludes, with no overall rhythmic propulsion as such. (See Appendix One, Examples 6.1.a, 6.1.b, 6.1.d, 6.1.e, 6.1.g & 6.1.h) The group were stylistically diverse in free improvisation's terms, adopting either atomistic or laminar schemes of organisation at will, as well as composite blends of the two. In conventional terms, the MIC's playing perhaps appeared the most 'chaotic' of the free improvising groups, compared even to Parker & Lytton's eclecticism or AMM's dense textural focus. A number of passages on the MIC album evoke a deeply erratic musicality. At one level of activity, the multi-timbral busy-ness and episodic nature of Muir's percussion might suggest the kind of interaction and motion that John Stevens instilled in the SME, whilst at another Davies' electronics could create an AMM-like slowly shifting background. Bailey and Parker (and/or Jeffrey presumably) meanwhile were free and versatile enough to occupy either or both musical territories. Such a density of activity could give the impression of (laminar) layers, each one yet displaying the rhythmic motion and timbral variation of atomism. Where the other improvising groups investigated these forms of interaction individually or, at least, one at a time, *The Music Improvisation Company 1968-1971* shows a group seemingly trying to achieve them simultaneously.

Inevitably some approximation has been necessary in this account. Certainly there are passages where, for example, the SME's improvisation becomes indistinct from that of free jazz, or AMM perform some cogently rhythmic phrasing. Broadly though, what I have indicated here are the styles, characteristics and variations that predominated and defined first generation British free improvisation as different to other musics. (Alongside the group performance analyses of Appendix One, details of individual players are listed in Appendix Two.) I will pursue a more in-depth musicological analysis of free improvisation's influences in Chapter Three. For the

remainder of this chapter, however, I will return to a discussion of the terminology by which I have defined my subject matter and by which certain seemingly close relatives of the free improvisers have been excluded.

## Terms of Reference

I should acknowledge first that ‘first generation British free improvisers’ is not a term in standard use. Strictly speaking it is a composite, assembled to delineate the specific area of study of this thesis. Whether for the purposes of criticism, analysis or marketing, any concept of ‘genre’ is imposed only after the event, and a qualifier such as ‘first generation’ markedly so. The terminology I have employed must be understood as an academic construct; to re-state Chris Cutler’s words, music does not realistically exist in such ‘hard atomic categories’. However, I have not used the terms without precedent. Free improvisation has been the subject of critical discussion since its inception, and – in an environment of performers, audience and critics more insular than most – certain common language has predictably gained currency. The notions of *generations* of a *British* school of *free improvisation* are well-established frames of reference, and even if not often occurring all in the same sentence, these terms are commonly found in the kinds of literature described in my Introduction. So far, I have identified some key groups, individuals and stylistic forms that exemplify the ‘first generation British free improvisers’. For the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the criteria that incrementally qualify this generic term.

In each of this thesis’ four main chapters, I deal with some aspect of what is implied by ‘free improvisation’. Initially, it would be useful to describe the provenance of the term itself and its relevance to my subject matter. In name, as well as practice, the most obvious debt is to free (or free-form) jazz. Essentially, it alludes



to a relaxation of certain compositional strictures, which heretofore had defined conventional musical expression. The most obvious example of this was the change in ratio between improvised and pre-composed material in a given piece, and of equal significance was the modification and extension of playing techniques, and the reassessment of what was considered 'legitimate' musical sound. These technical and aesthetic readjustments fundamentally affected not only how music might sound, but also the processes by which it was made to do so. Free jazz emerged, primarily in the USA, during the 1950s and was at its most conspicuous over the next decade, defined by (amongst others) the groups led by Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler. Though a culturally marginalised form itself, the American free jazz nevertheless enjoyed (and maintains) a stronger presence and influence than free improvisation has. It has been widely documented, and studies by writers such as John Litweiler,<sup>90</sup> Valerie Wilmer<sup>91</sup> and Ekkehard Jost<sup>92</sup> can be regarded as vital texts. With regard to the concept and naming of 'free jazz' (and subsequently 'free improvisation'), one should certainly make note of Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* album, recorded in 1960.<sup>93</sup> More often overlooked, however, but a likely influence on British free players nonetheless, was the music of the Joe Harriott Quintet. Born in the West Indies but based in London, Harriott was investigating simultaneously, but independently, musical techniques akin to those of Coleman in the States. His recorded catalogue was small, and his life ultimately cut short by cancer in the early 1970s. But Harriott's albums *Free Form*<sup>94</sup> and *Abstract*<sup>95</sup> and his presence on the

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<sup>90</sup> John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle. Jazz After 1958* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984).

<sup>91</sup> Valerie Wilmer, *As serious as your life. John Coltrane and beyond* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992).

<sup>92</sup> Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994).

<sup>93</sup> Ornette Coleman. *Free Jazz. A Collective Improvisation by the Ornette Coleman Double Quartet*. 1961. CD. 7567-81347-2

<sup>94</sup> Joe Harriott Quintet. *Free Form*. 1998. CD. 538184-2

<sup>95</sup> Joe Harriott Quintet. *Abstract*. 1998. CD. 538 138-2

British jazz scene<sup>96</sup> seems an unjustly neglected influence on the concept, techniques and nomenclature of free improvisation. A recent biography of Harriott, Alan Robertson's *Fire In His Soul*,<sup>97</sup> adds useful context to any consideration of the era, and I should mention again John Wickes' *Innovations in British Jazz* as a crucial companion piece, detailing the emergence of the British free jazz.

Broadly self-explanatory, 'free improvisation' aspires to a functional description of the activity that it represents. Like 'Spontaneous Music Ensemble' or 'Music Improvisation Company', there is an implied statement of intent, though with ambiguous parameters. Critic Victor Schonfield, for example, makes an early use of the term when reviewing an SME performance in September 1967, within a few months of the maturation of the group's atomistic style.<sup>98</sup> As such, the insularity of the free improvisation scene should be re-stated here, and the critic's role considered in relation to it. Schonfield was a music journalist, and, according to Eddie Prévoist: 'the first critic to focus upon the new improvisation aesthetic emerging in the UK during the 1960s'.<sup>99</sup> Later, Prévoist continues, '[he] abandoned his journalism to take a more active role in organising concerts',<sup>100</sup> and, as Schonfield himself remembers, AMM 'made me its manager'.<sup>101</sup> Free improvisation's esoteric nature has meant that, whilst being unknown, uninteresting and/or alienating to the vast majority of potential listeners, those that remain exhibit a high level of commitment to the genre. Schonfield's commitment is obvious, having spurred his involvement with the scene in two capacities: those of critic/scribe and (non-playing) participant. In these terms, he was in a position both to experience, but also to organise, free improvisation's

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<sup>96</sup> The SME's John Stevens, as well as his friendship and tutelage with Harriott's drummer Phil Seaman, is also believed to have played with Harriott at some point.

<sup>97</sup> Alan Robertson, *Joe Harriott. Fire In His Soul* (London: Northway Publications, 2003).

<sup>98</sup> Sleeve notes to The Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Summer 1967*

<sup>99</sup> Prévoist, Acknowledgements.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Sleeve notes to AMM's *Laminal*.



development. His influence was potentially both practical *and* conceptual in nature. Schonfield's contrasting but complimentary roles effected a reciprocal relationship with the free improvisation scene, one shared similarly by Emanem's Martin Davidson. Schonfield and Davidson both assimilated and rationalised their own (internal) experiences of the (external) music, but they were also in publicly prominent enough positions to disseminate and influence its self-image. Their roles became *internal* to the genre that they then presented (via their respective media) to a further *external* audience. The question does remain, though, to whether in his early reviews Schonfield identified and publicised an *already extant* 'free improvisation', or whether his assumptions, rationalisation, and use of the phrase instead suggested and perpetuated the idea within the embryonic scene.

If Schonfield's position invites such questions, his is not the most extreme example. That accolade is due to Derek Bailey, and his book *Improvisation. Its Nature and Practice in Music*. Bailey's ubiquity in free improvisation is practically unmatched. As well as his contributions to Joseph Holbrooke, the SME, the MIC and Iskra 1903, he has been extensively involved in solo performance and countless ad-hoc collaborations; the Incus record label is run from his home, and for a number of years he organised and participated in the so-called Company<sup>102</sup> events. *Improvisation* has been acknowledged in the mainstream of music reference, as it deals also with more common forms of spontaneity. And it is here that Bailey posits his model of free improvisation, contrasted against the structures that are implicitly present in other, semi-composed/semi-improvised genres (Indian classical music, Flamenco, church organ music and jazz amongst them). Published in 1980, and revised and translated into Italian, French, Japanese, Dutch and German in the 1990s, *Improvisation* was

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<sup>102</sup> An approximately annual series of free improvisation festivals, comprising a series of musicians of Bailey's choice, revolving and recombining into different groupings for the festival's duration. See Bailey, pp. 133-139, and extensive coverage in Watson.

subsequently also adapted for a Channel 4 television series, *On the Edge*, directed by Jeremy Marre<sup>103</sup> and transmitted in several countries. Bailey's experience, insight and influence in his field are widely recognised and respected. He, along with Evan Parker, is arguably the closest thing to a 'big name' that free improvisation has. And in conjunction with the limited documentation relating to the genre, his writing presents a formidable and often unavoidable benchmark. More than anyone else on the scene, it seems likely that Bailey's conception of improvisational practice has gained acceptance beyond the small audience who have personally, or consistently, experienced his music.

If we recognise Bailey and other partisan insiders as valid, significant, and not wholly impartial witnesses to the phenomenon, the likelihood of any other term superseding 'free improvisation' now appears slight. Certainly it is acknowledged as only one of a number of synonyms to describe this music. Bailey lists the alternatives 'non-idiomatic improvisation' (his own preferred choice), 'total improvisation', 'open improvisation', 'free music' and 'improvised music'.<sup>104</sup> Evan Parker adds 'spontaneous music',<sup>105</sup> while Prévost favours 'meta-music'.<sup>106</sup> Only (Schonfield's?) 'free improvisation', however, is registered by all three. In descriptive terms, 'free improvisation' lends itself readily to linguistic versatility: free improvisation; *a* free improvisation; *a freely improvised piece*; *to freely improvise*, etc. 'Improvisation' perhaps might win over all, simply as a statement of fact. But this, though, is just too non-specific; as Bailey's book discusses, improvisation is an activity that occurs in the vast majority of the world's music in one form or another. Perhaps 'free' is retained both as an acknowledgement and a convention of its origins, and for the

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<sup>103</sup> Episode One of the series was shown prior to Bailey's performance at the Electric Cinema, Birmingham, which I attended on 12 April 2002.

<sup>104</sup> Bailey, p. 83.

<sup>105</sup> Sleeve notes to Evan Parker & Paul Lytton's *Three Other Stories*

<sup>106</sup> Prévost, p. 1 and onwards.



word's romantic, iconoclastic, expressive connotations. Whatever the case, the introductory pages alone to the 'Free' half of *Improvisation*<sup>107</sup> alone seem to indicate that 'free improvisation' is the most generally accepted term to describe Bailey's activities. It appears likely that this passage, amongst others, both reflects and has informed a consensus on the scene, which is apparent even beyond its borders. The American jazz critic John Litweiler, for example, cites both Bailey and his book, when assessing free jazz's influence overseas. He qualifies free improvisation as 'what [...] Derek Bailey calls his kind of music'.<sup>108</sup>

### **'First generation...'**

Even more so than the notion of genre, the delineation of generations of free improvisation is a retrospective label, and one that becomes further entrenched with the passage of time. There is demonstrable logic behind such labelling, although naturally – without any literal biological line of descent – they too lack Cutler's 'hard atomic edges'. Martin Davidson identifies 'three "generations" of improvising musicians' in his sleeve notes to the *Vortices and Angels* CD: '[Derek] Bailey (born 1930), [John] Butcher (born 1954) and [Rhodri] Davies (born 1971)'.<sup>109</sup> The key factor is not the musicians' dates of birth, however, so much as their coming of age as 'professional' free improvisers. If we assume that this point might occur approximately during the individual's mid-twenties, we can begin to form an idea of free improvisation's generation gap. According to Wickes, Butcher was certainly professionally active by the end of the 1970s,<sup>110</sup> whilst Cook and Morton refer to

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<sup>107</sup> Bailey, pp. 83-85.

<sup>108</sup> Litweiler, p. 257.

<sup>109</sup> Sleeve note to John Butcher/Derek Bailey/Rhodri Davies. *Vortices and Angels*. 2001. CD. Emanem 4049

<sup>110</sup> Wickes, p. 318.

several recordings featuring Davies from as early as 1997.<sup>111</sup> Bailey, meanwhile, would have reached his middle twenties during the 1950s. This does pre-date the free improvisation scene as such, although (as already noted)<sup>112</sup> he did encounter the practice during these years. He *was* a professional musician by this point, working from 1951-1965 ‘as a guitarist [...in] clubs, concert halls, dance halls, radio, TV and recording studios’,<sup>113</sup> and it should be noted that Bailey is, on average, ten years senior to his contemporaries of the ‘first generation’.<sup>114</sup> Stevens, Prévost, et al, then *would* have been around the requisite age when free improvisation coalesced in the mid 1960s. What Bailey had perhaps lacked prior to this point was indicative musical precedent for his explorations and an extant scene of sympathetic fellow players. This was a problem that neither Butcher nor Davies would have had to have faced in quite the same way. In chronological terms therefore, and as Prévost writes, ‘the so-called “first generation” of improvisers [...] emerged in the UK during the 1960s’.<sup>115</sup> ‘By 1973/4 there had been a noticeable reduction in playing activity’ continues Bailey, although ‘in fact, this proved to be the start of a period during which the music underwent a considerable expansion.’<sup>116</sup> He goes on:

‘Whereas up until this point the small number of people who played this music not only knew each other but quite regularly played together, now there was an influx of newer players who brought with them a whole range of new musical attitudes and resources.’<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Cook & Morton, p. 220, 505.

<sup>112</sup> See also Watson, for an extensive account of Bailey’s formative years.

<sup>113</sup> Sleeve note to Derek Bailey’s *Pieces for Guitar*.

<sup>114</sup> For example: John Stevens, born 1940; Eddie Prévost, 1942; Tony Oxley, 1938; Paul Rutherford, 1940; Evan Parker, 1944.

<sup>115</sup> Prévost, p. 1.

<sup>116</sup> Bailey, p. 125.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.



Between 2001 and 2004 (inclusive), I attended the annual Freedom of the City festival, at London's Conway Hall. Jointly organised by Martin Davidson and Eddie Prévost, the event encompassed the full generational span of British free improvisation. In the circumstances, it was possible to distinguish now *four* active generations on the scene. Of the first generation, for example, I saw AMM, Evan Parker, Paul Rutherford and Trevor Watts at these events; of the second, percussionist Roger Turner, guitarist John Russell, saxophonist John Butcher and multi-instrumentalist Steve Beresford; of the third, cellist Mark Wastell, drummer Steve Noble, double bassist John Edwards and saxophonist Tom Chant. And of the most recent generation of free improvisers, players such as drummer Tim Goldie, saxophonist Nathaniel Catchpole, laptop operator Mattin and guitarist Ross Lambert. From the perspective of the twenty first century, I would therefore suggest approximately 8-12 years as a measure of generational separation between these apparently self-contained scenes (as Bailey alludes to, above).

Bailey implies a further crucial point here, regarding the perception of the first generation today. In Appendix Two, I have included a list of those individuals most conspicuously of 'the first generation'. However, I do not (and conceivably could not) identify everyone who participated on the scene between, for example, 1965 and 1973. I would refer the reader once more to Paul Wilson's *Territories of the Mind*, and the scale of personnel movement that it records, to illustrate briefly why not. Bailey has noted the large number of 'transients' in free improvisation: facilitated by its impromptu nature, those who 'find it briefly serves their musical interest, and then take off.'<sup>118</sup> And Prévost too, compiling the 2001 release of *Silver Pyramid* (recorded in 1969 by the one-off Music Now Ensemble), admits that 'at this point in time it is

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<sup>118</sup> Bailey, p. 127.

impossible for me to tell for sure who took part'.<sup>119</sup> (Both Cook and Morton<sup>120</sup> and Paul Wilson,<sup>121</sup> too, make a similar point regarding the 'Spontaneous Music Orchestra' workshop recordings.<sup>122</sup>) As an individual and self-justified response to a given stimulus, the character of freely improvised music is shaped specifically and ultimately by the improviser(s) present. By implication then, free improvisation (as a genre) was likewise shaped and defined by those that performed it. I have already discussed musicians such as John Stevens and Keith Rowe, whose individual musicality has significantly influenced free improvisatory practice. These and other players have also been contextualised within what is a musical community of strictly limited numbers. What appears inescapable about those musicians that I list in Appendix Two – indeed, the *reason* that they are listed as such – is that, according to the written and recorded documentation of free improvisation that exists, these are the players whose presence and influence time and again pervade and define the genre's ongoing history. Bailey or Prévost's careers, to use obvious examples, display notable longevity, stylistic innovation and distinction, as well as theoretical development of the genre. If John Stevens can be said to have refined atomistic playing, then it is inconceivable that the scene would have evolved in quite the same way in his absence. Alternatively, there are also individuals such as Jamie Muir, whose recorded performances are relatively scarce, but whose reputation endures because of their contribution at key moments of development or consolidation. As I have suggested already, many sometime improvisers will have gone unnamed and lost to history for one reason or another. Their contributions were not necessarily irrelevant or without value at the time, but nonetheless have been subsumed by those who have registered

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<sup>119</sup> Sleeve note to Music Now Ensemble. *Silver Pyramid*. 2001. CD. MRCD40

<sup>120</sup> Cook & Morton, p. 1375.

<sup>121</sup> Wilson, Part 2: 1970 to 1974.

<sup>122</sup> The Spontaneous Music Orchestra. *For You To Share*. 1998. CD. Emanem 4023 and *Mouthpiece*. 2000. CD. Emanem 4039



more prominently in living and recorded memory. Bailey's 'small number of people [...] who not only knew each other but quite regularly played together' within British free improvisation are, realistically, readily identifiable. Bailey added, in 1991, that 'virtually all the first generation have continued to make music in this manner up to the present time'.<sup>123</sup> Stevens and Hugh Davies have died since then [Addendum: Since this writing, Bailey himself has died also]; Muir has retired from music; Trevor Watts' interests have fluctuated; but, in 2005, Bailey's words remain largely accurate. The written and recorded documentation of free improvisation is ever increasing, but remains constant in those protagonists that it cites, discusses and venerates. The relevance of these named individuals shows no immediate sign of being discounted. And within a scene so insular, it likewise seems improbable that any musician of great significance has been forgotten.

I would make one other brief point about the distinctive character of the first generation (as implied by Bailey's quote) in relation to those improvisers that followed them. The first generation, Prévost recounts, 'had had considerable previous involvement in jazz',<sup>124</sup> and to a lesser extent (adds Bailey) 'new [i.e. classical avant-garde or experimental] music'.<sup>125</sup> Despite the technical and stylistic developments that defined free improvisation, clearly discernible qualities of these parent genres did also tend to be retained. Not perhaps from conscious decision, but more probably because of wider musical trends of the time, the influence of jazz held an almost exclusive monopoly. Quite apart from the aesthetic of collective improvisation itself, the musicians' formative disciplines often remained apparent in spite of their subsequent mutation and re-structuring: either in their audible characteristics (the SME, Iskra 1903) and/or their instrumental line-ups (Joseph Holbrooke, AMM). In this respect,

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<sup>123</sup> Bailey, p. 127.

<sup>124</sup> Prévost, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> Bailey, p. 126.

both Parker & Lytton and the MIC suggested a degree of progression and prescience within the genre, signalled by their non-referential eclecticism of approach.

In subsequent generations, the once-ubiquitous jazz background became rather less common, not only amongst the players themselves, but correspondingly in the music that they made. ‘One of the main differences was that we seemed to have no problem including anything [...]’ stated guitarist Peter Cusack to his predecessor, Bailey. ‘It could be any instrument,’ he continued, ‘a tape of bird song or quotes from any style of music. There was nothing which was taboo.’<sup>126</sup> Whilst not necessarily *common* to the first generation, Cusack’s first two ‘taboo breakers’ here *might* still have been found in the music of Parker & Lytton, for example. More tellingly, it is the third – ‘quotes from any style of music’ – which chiefly differentiated the first generation from those subsequent. Of greatest significance, Bailey cites ‘popular music’<sup>127</sup> – itself an expansive category – as an important resource for later improvisers. And, as I suggested in regard to John Butcher and Rhodri Davies’ formative experiences, later players also had a pre-established vocabulary and syntax (that of the first generation) to which to refer.<sup>128</sup> ‘It’s a cross between an SME tiny-elements-interlocking-thing and an AMM landscape’ remarked multi-instrumentalist Steve Beresford of second generation group The Four Pullovers’ music.<sup>129</sup> And of Beresford himself, Julian Cowley has described:

‘[His] performances are necessarily unpredictable  
[...] A piano is often involved, but he may turn to  
bass guitar, trumpet, euphonium, melodica, low  
grade electronics or toys (including small pianos).  
And he might sing [...] You’ll find boxes that

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 125.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, p. 126.

<sup>128</sup> A point that Richard Scott also makes, pp.68-69.

<sup>129</sup> Sleeve note to *Three & Four Pullovers*. 2000. CD. Emanem 4038. The [...] Pullovers, sometimes either a trio or a quartet, also included later SME members Nigel Coombes (violin) and Roger Smith (guitar).



make farmyard animal noises colliding with a musical toothbrush, a duck call, a trumpet fitted with a reed and a taped telephone call. Or a toy piano tussling with a drum, a cymbal and a ukulele.’<sup>130</sup>

Beresford’s approach seems to adopt a wilfully post-modern collage of references in comparison to the SME’s or Iskra 1903’s, for example, and the generic origins of his music are deeply obscured. The second, third and fourth generations of British free improvisers would constitute separate topics of discussion in themselves, which I shall not pursue here. But amongst the later players, it is true to say that a more diverse range of influences is apparent, in addition to the jazz and new music that informed the first generation’s work. In 2000, Steve Noble, John Edwards and Alex Ward recorded *False Face Society*, for example, which bears a strong rock influence.<sup>131</sup> The duo of Richard Barrett and Paul Obermayer – Furt – reference electronic music via the medium of sampling and digital processing,<sup>132</sup> and the laptop is also Mattin’s instrument of choice.<sup>133</sup> And Clive Bell and Sylvia Hallett, in their Freedom of the City performance in 2004,<sup>134</sup> drew upon various folk and world music traditions.

### ‘...British...’

A brief summary of some other musics that bordered on that of the British first generation will sharpen the focus upon my primary subject matter. ‘British’ has here an obvious and logical geographical meaning: that the musicians under discussion all hail personally from the United Kingdom, and the scene developed and retains its

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<sup>130</sup> Cowley, Julian, ‘Game for a laugh’, *The Wire*, Issue 218, April 2002.

<sup>131</sup> Steve Noble/John Edwards/Alex Ward. *False Face Society*. 2001. CD. Incus CD 47

<sup>132</sup> See, for example, Furt. *defekt*. 2002. CD. MRCD50

<sup>133</sup> See, for example, Sakada. *Undistilled*. 2002. CD. MRCD49

<sup>134</sup> Freedom of the City festival, Conway Hall, London, 2 May 2004.

base here. Within the field of leftfield music that free improvisation occupied, however, ‘British’ came to exemplify a more specific set of stylistic distinctions. Derek Bailey has described ‘[having played with] most of the leading German blasters, American groovers, Dutch acrobats and English kaleidoscopists in this field.’<sup>135</sup> His terminology is ironic to a point, but not without evocative meaning. The reference to ‘English kaleidoscopists’ is the most self-explanatory; in terms of the atomistic style (Beresford’s ‘tiny-elements-interlocking’), and Bailey’s apparent ubiquity on the scene, this relates quite clearly to his work with Joseph Holbrooke, the SME, Iskra 1903 and the MIC, etc: i.e. the musicians that are the subject of this thesis. I have argued already that it was those improvisers that were present who effectively defined British free improvisation, and it is their contributions that remain detectable in the documentation of the scene. Though Bailey’s summary of the Germans, Americans and Dutch are based on his own personal experiences, the criteria he uses in this instance are not dissimilar. I will briefly illustrate the nature of the ‘blasters’, ‘groovers’ and ‘acrobats’, in order to isolate more clearly the character of the British music.

The archetypal ‘German blaster’ is saxophonist Peter Brotzmann. As a contemporary of the British first generation, his 1960s albums *For Adolphe Sax*,<sup>136</sup> *Nipples*<sup>137</sup> and *Machine Gun*<sup>138</sup> are crucial points of reference. His music tends toward the dense, dissonant and frenetic end of free jazz – so-called ‘fire music’<sup>139</sup> – as exemplified in the USA by Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp or (late period) John Coltrane. Very briefly, I will cite Cook & Morton’s description of a ‘huge, screaming sound’ in

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<sup>135</sup> Quoted in Ian Carr, Digby Fairweather, Brian Priestley, *Jazz. The Rough Guide* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 30.

<sup>136</sup> Peter Brotzmann Trio. *For Adolphe Sax*. 2002. CD. UMS/ALP230CD

<sup>137</sup> Peter Brotzmann Sextet & Quartet. *Nipples*. 2001. CD. UMS/ALP205CD

<sup>138</sup> Peter Brotzmann Octet. *Machine Gun*. 1990. CD. FMP CD 24

<sup>139</sup> See, for example, Keenan, David, ‘The Primer (Fire Music)’, *The Wire*, June 2001.



order to describe Brotzmann's playing.<sup>140</sup> Though employing fairly conventional acoustic instrumentation – sax, double bass, drums, piano, etc – Brotzmann's music achieves its effect by a combination of relentless rhythmic momentum and harsh sonic textures. There is the impression of instruments being 'overplayed'. Albeit acoustically, Brotzmann's larger ensembles created discordant textures comparable to AMM's early work, yet with the component busyness of interplay more akin to the MIC or SME. Where the timbres of the latter tended towards clean, brisk and rhythmically well-defined phrasing however, those of the German music were distorted, sustained and overlapping. Though of an abstracted and confrontational strain, Brotzmann's music ultimately retained its affiliation to jazz; which it did so via the musicians' collective method of interaction. Unlike the start-stop conversation of the SME, Brotzmann and his musicians played not entirely without reference to one another, yet they did so continuously and simultaneously: in effect, a high velocity laminar approach. In a way that British free improvisation consciously avoided, they *retained* jazz's basic rhythmic swing. Both Derek Bailey and Evan Parker appear variously on *Nipples* and *Machine Gun*, whilst Brotzmann's bass player of the time, Peter Kowald, can be heard guesting with the early-mature SME on *Summer 1967*. And Parker has also worked extensively with pianist Alex von Schlippenbach and drummer Paul Lovens. Although less grating than his work alongside Brotzmann perhaps, this trio (alongside Parker's British group with Barry Guy and Paul Lytton) have also re-investigated free jazz, recreating, for example, the tumbling rhythmic complexity of Coltrane's *Meditations*<sup>141</sup> on the 2x3=5 CD.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Cook & Morton, p. 199.

<sup>141</sup> John Coltrane. *Meditations*. 1980. LP. Impulse A-9110

<sup>142</sup> Parker/Schlippenbach/Guy/Lovens/Lytton. 2x3=5. 2000. CD. CD LR 305

The retention of jazz's foundational traits is also the criterion that defines the 'American groovers'.<sup>143</sup> Ekkehard Jost notes free improvisation's 'partial disengagement from American influences'.<sup>144</sup> This is in contrast to free jazz, as Keenan describes it: 'a primarily African-American art form' that maintained stylistic allegiances to 'venerable idioms like gospel, blues and New Orleans jazz'.<sup>145</sup> Whilst free jazz encompassed a wide range of expressive and interpretative innovations, the adherence to its stylistic origins meant that these still occurred within what may generically be called 'jazz'. Rhythmically, melodically and/or harmonically, the 'groovers' performed a piece from some established and ongoing assumption of that piece's overall character. Its dynamics and development were less tentatively and episodically negotiated than, for example, the SME's were, and Ben Watson has characterised this divergence as 'the speculative spaciousness of the English and the headlong vehemence of the American[s]'.<sup>146</sup>

The triple CD set *Jazzactuel. A collection of avant garde/free jazz/psychodelia [...] 1969-1971*<sup>147</sup> provides a useful overview of the musics that were contemporaneous to British free improvisation's period of maturation. It includes performances by a number of (predominantly American) musicians, who were effectively 'second generation free jazzers'. They came to prominence in the wake of free jazz's seminal 'big names', and their 'headlong vehemence' is well illustrated by the music that they subsequently made. Two particular groups featured on *Jazzactuel* are worthy of special mention here. Musica Elettronica Viva ('MEV') were not

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<sup>143</sup> 'Groove' refers in the vernacular to a repetitive rhythmic pattern: 'swing' in the case of jazz.

<sup>144</sup> Jost, p. 12.

<sup>145</sup> Keenan, *The Wire*.

<sup>146</sup> Watson, p. 272.

<sup>147</sup> Various Artists. *Jazzactuel. A collection of avant garde/free jazz/psychodelia from the BYG/Actuel catalogue of 1969-1971*. 2001. 3xCD. SNAJ 707 CD



fundamentally jazz-based. Rather (on recordings such as 1969's *The Sound Pool*<sup>148</sup>) they were an electro-acoustic ensemble, creating dense, dissonant and continuous drone structures comparable to those of AMM.<sup>149</sup> Like the American free jazzers in relation to the SME however, MEV's music appears less abstracted from musical conformity than that of their British counterparts. And again, this quality is most conspicuous in the rhythmic continuity and momentum of their work. '*The Sound Pool – Part 1*', for instance, is largely drone-based, with detailed improvisational activity apparent under the surface of the greater structure. Unlike AMM's music, though – but more akin to the frenetic interplay of free jazz – the internal motion of the piece proceeds busily and relentlessly. The musicians play with a seeming presumption of the whole piece's ongoing form and the processes by which this will be achieved. Again, rather than the careful dialogue and negotiation of investigative progress, an overarching improvisational scheme seems already in place when the piece commences. The MEV line-up that appeared at Freedom of the City in 2004 also sounded less abstract in their musical materials than AMM; the improvisational velocity of the former was greater and less obviously collective than that of the latter, and (like later British generations) MEV remained more willing to use direct quotes and approximations of established musical genres than their British contemporaries.

There is one further community represented on *Jazzactuel* – whom Jost categorises as 'The Chicagoans'<sup>150</sup> – whose affinity to the work of the British improvisers is perhaps the most pronounced outside of the UK. Part of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians ('AACM'), *Jazzactuel* includes the work of Anthony Braxton and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, both of

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<sup>148</sup> Musica Elettronica Viva. *The Sound Pool*. 1998. CD. SPALAXCD14969

<sup>149</sup> The two groups performed (separately) at London's Freedom of the City festival, on 1 May 2004. The previous day, the combined sextet had recorded a joint session together, which was released in May 2005: AMM & MEV. *Apogee*. 2005. CD. MRCD61

<sup>150</sup> Jost, pp. 163-179.

whose music exhibited some of the most radical abstractions of the jazz vocabulary. The combined AACM discography is extensive<sup>151</sup> and I can offer only the briefest of summaries here. (I would direct the reader to accounts of the Chicagoans not only by Jost, but also Litweiler<sup>152</sup> and Wilmer.<sup>153</sup>) One important and early point of reference is the album *Sound*, credited to the Roscoe Mitchell Sextet.<sup>154</sup> Recorded in 1966 – at the same time as AMM’s debut album, and whilst the SME were still musically premature – *Sound* represents one response to its pioneering mentors in free jazz. (Like the SME’s *Challenge*, *Sound* also name-checks Ornette Coleman amongst its track titles.) But the music is also extrapolated into other patterns and shapes. The British free improvisers and the musicians of the AACM displayed comparable influences to an extent, tempered by different cultural perspectives. Combining the disciplines, techniques and impetus of free jazz and new music, both sets of musicians extended and stylised jazz beyond its conventions of spontaneous interpretation and dialogic interaction, also re-evaluating the parameters of pitch, melody, harmony and rhythm. But in place of the tumbling ferocity of much ‘fire music’, for example, *Sound* demonstrates a sparser, texturally organised and collective musical model. Like their British contemporaries, it is collective in the sense of a restrained, egalitarian approach to musical expression, rather than the more common school of ‘simultaneous soloing’.

If the syntax of the British and the Chicagoans’ music was similar however, it differed fundamentally in its vocabulary. The British first generation played free jazz, eventually modifying and re-expressing it in a European dialect. The AACM began from the basis of free jazz too, and likewise incorporated the strategies of Western

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<sup>151</sup> See Cook & Morton, for example.

<sup>152</sup> Litweiler, pp. 172-199 & 265-286.

<sup>153</sup> Wilmer, pp. 112-126.

<sup>154</sup> Roscoe Mitchell Sextet. *Sound*. 1996. CD. DELMARK DE-408. Sax player Mitchell, trumpeter Lester Bowie and bassist Malachi Favors were all later core members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago.



avant-garde and experimental music. Yet, in association with America's burgeoning Civil Rights movement, they also sought to emphasise their debt and relationship to African music. Once more, this was done via the areas of instrumentation and timbre, collective interaction and rhythmic tradition. If the SME's atomistic playing approximated percussive phrasing, the Chicagoans embraced fully the African percussive tradition. Drums, shakers and many other textural and rhythmic instruments were used to embellish ensemble passages, or to comprise significant interludes of their own. As in African drum choirs, the effect of the percussion was cumulative and collectively focussed; it could approximate both laminar and atomistic movement, yet was often used in a rhythmically abstract way: to provide tone colour and expressive gesture, rather than structure, punctuation or 'swing'. The role of the instrumental soloist – so apparent and vital in much free jazz – was subsumed into a collage of group interplay and complement. Moving away, too, both from electronics and the pitch refinements of Western tradition, the musicians of the AACM suggested a model of pre-European classical music, against the British free improvisers' vision of a post-African jazz.

Bailey portrays the Dutch improvisers – such as pianist Misha Mengelberg, percussionist Han Bennink and saxophonist Willem Breuker – as 'acrobats'. It is a reference to an often highly agile and energetic music: not merely in the execution of notes, phrases and rhythms (as with 'fire music'), but also a rapidly shifting eclecticism of stylistic reference, resource and effect. 'It's collage music where anything goes' Bailey suggests:<sup>155</sup> somewhat at odds with the jazz and new music purism of the British first generation's mentors. Cook and Morton have described 'a hint of Year Zero in modern Dutch music, a response to the (in some cases) near total

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<sup>155</sup> Wickes, p. 244.

destruction of the cultural infrastructure [...] during the war'. This, in turn, resulted in 'a new approach to music out of the ashes and remnants'.<sup>156</sup> Litweiler has elaborated on Bailey's evocation of this 'collage music'. In Breuker's work, for example, he notes 'pageants, one piece always segueing into the next, of juxtapositions, exaggerations, perversions, pastiches of styles'.<sup>157</sup> Stylistically, Cook and Morton add, there are references to 'jazz, special effects, classical forms, jingles and church tunes', whilst *Jazz – The Rough Guide* further cites 'marching bands, European folk musics, and anything else [Breuker] could find'.<sup>158</sup> The Dutch music, then, displayed – and was deeply influential upon – the post-modern collage approach favoured by Steve Beresford, and in contrast to that of Stevens, Rutherford, Guy, et al.

It was not solely in the music itself that the Dutch improvisers differed from the British, but also in the manner of its performance. Mengelberg (according to Carr, Fairweather and Priestley) had had earlier 'involvement with the experimental theatre/music group Fluxus'<sup>159</sup> that, in conjunction with Bennink's 'like-minded theatrical improvis[ing]',<sup>160</sup> often made explicit 'a taste for absurdist humour'.<sup>161</sup> Such a description in itself offers a wide gamut of possibilities, but I can offer one example from personal experience. There was a definite element of slapstick and physical comedy to Bennink's performance with the Michael Moore Quartet, at Leeds' The Wardrobe on 31 January 2001. Due to the late arrival of some of the group's instruments (including Bennink's drum kit), the drummer embarked on an extensive impromptu duet with Moore using whatever resources he found to hand. Without drums, Bennink variously roamed and cavorted in the club, mugging and clowning,

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<sup>156</sup> Cook & Morton, p. 189.

<sup>157</sup> Litweiler, p. 250.

<sup>158</sup> Carr, Fairweather, Priestley, p. 92.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, p. 517.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, p. 59.



whilst playing (with drumsticks or brushes) on any available surface. Predominantly, he sprawled and played on the floor, and also used extensively an empty cardboard box from the stage. Sometimes it provided a playing surface itself; Bennink also briefly wore it on his head. Although the MIC's Jamie Muir adopted a not dissimilar character during his tenure with rock group King Crimson,<sup>162</sup> this element of extra-musical performance was typically absent from the British first generation's work.

### **‘...free improvisers.’**

To complete the chapter, I will summarise some of the music made by the first generation British free improvisers that nevertheless falls outside the remit of ‘first generation British free improvisation’ (as I am defining it). All of the musicians under discussion were/are experienced, capable and active in other more ‘conventional’ areas of musical expression. These potential lines of inquiry though are not the focus of attention here. What is significant is the existence of several closely comparable or stylistically ambiguous projects associated with the free improvisers, whose defining characteristics ultimately preclude them from the model that I am proposing. Some of these I have already alluded to, and others will be mentioned again in later chapters.

A prominent example is the version of AMM that spanned the greater part of the 1970s: the successive duos of Eddie Prévost and Lou Gare (‘AMM II’) and Prévost and Keith Rowe (‘AMM III’). The former duo, which comprised drums and saxophone, is currently documented on two CDs,<sup>163</sup> and the latter – of drums and electric guitar – on one.<sup>164</sup> Despite the AMM name and the participation of key

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<sup>162</sup> See, for example, Sid Smith, *In the Court of King Crimson* (London: Helter Skelter Publishing, 2001), pp. 162-163.

<sup>163</sup> AMM. *To Hear and Back Again*. 1994. CD. MRCD03 and *At The Roundhouse*. 2003. CD. ICES 01

<sup>164</sup> AMM III. *It had been an ordinary enough day in Pueblo, Colorado*. 1980. CD. JAPO 60031 843 206-2

members of that group, the duo formations were musically very distinct from AMM's more typical activities. Fundamentally, as Martin Davidson<sup>165</sup> and Cook & Morton acknowledge,<sup>166</sup> AMMs II and III represent a return for their players to free jazz. With the latter duo, perhaps, this is less pronounced, where the music is transitional between free jazz and AMM's customary laminar approach. Rowe's guitar and electronics textures do approximate 'traditional' AMM up to a point,<sup>167</sup> but his playing is also unusually forthright, active, and sometimes even frenetic in the context of AMM III. (The track 'Convergence', especially, highlights Rowe as a lead guitarist of sorts: tonally and rhythmically disjointed lines broadly in the atomistic style, but with a timbre and momentum evocative of jazz-rock (See also Appendix One, Example 2.1.a, 29:00 – 31:00)). In the album's sleeve notes, Steve Lake cites 'performances with a particularly extroverted edition of Trevor Watts' Amalgam' as a likely source of Rowe's current style. AMM II also retained some elements of the laminar AMM, specifically in certain passages of slow, sustained tones and expressive near-silences. Recorded evidence, however, suggests that these interludes were relatively infrequent and not broadly representative in that line-up's repertoire. In final reckoning, AMMs II and III transcend free improvisation by much the same criteria as I have suggested for the 'German blasters' and 'American groovers'. In the character of Prévost's drumming and Gare's sax lines, there is a stylistic consistency, fluidity, continuity and conventionality that suggests and maintains essentially jazz-like qualities. In Prévost's own words, genre-dependent improvisation is concerned with 'ornament[ing] and transform[ing] [...] given motifs and structures':<sup>168</sup> i.e. that there are *given* elements to the improvisation must negate a certain element of

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<sup>165</sup> Sleeve note to AMM's *To Hear and Back Again*

<sup>166</sup> Cook & Morton, p. 37.

<sup>167</sup> The kinds of timbres that Rowe provides are, in themselves, largely uncharacteristic of jazz.

<sup>168</sup> Prévost, p. 4.



necessary creative decision-making. The phrasing and timbres of AMM II, and propulsive rhythmic momentum of much AMM III, once more suggest simultaneous (mutually sympathetic) soloing, rather than collective investigation and negotiation. And although Rowe's musicality does obscure the music's cultural origins to some extent, Prévost and Gare's interplay resembled simply a variation of the clean-toned, linear free jazz developed by Ornette Coleman's groups in the 1950s and 60s, and exemplified by such later recordings as Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell's *Mu* duets.<sup>169</sup>

Very similar influences are apparent – and credited – on *Challenge*, the SME's debut album. *Challenge*, indeed, is even more explicitly 'jazz' than the interim AMM line-ups. The music of AMM II mostly comprised ongoing passages of 'soloing-style' interplay: though more 'swinging', not wholly dissimilar to the mature SME. The SME of *Challenge* however, also retained a formality of structure, as well as performance. Specifically, as is common to mainstream jazz, the pieces on *Challenge* each had their own composed and arranged theme, which formed the basis of (or an introduction to) the subsequent passage of improvisation. Jazz improvisation will be dealt with at some length in Chapter Three, but this style of playing also has a relevance to the current discussion. In an earlier section, I suggested that Iskra 1903 might be seen as a reaction to the musical strictures imposed by the SME's policy of atomism. The group Amalgam, as Wickes recounts, came together in the late 1960s for very similar reasons.<sup>170</sup> Centred around sax player Trevor Watts and also including bassist Barry Guy and (on the group's recorded debut *Prayer for Peace*<sup>171</sup>) John Stevens, Amalgam nonetheless performed a very different music to Iskra 1903. Indeed, Wickes continues, they sought 'to continue the earlier, less single-minded line

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<sup>169</sup> Don Cherry. "*Mu*" *First Part*. 2001. LP. GET 301

<sup>170</sup> Wickes, p. 57.

<sup>171</sup> Amalgam. *Prayer for Peace*. 2002. CD. FMRC96-V0402

of the SME's development':<sup>172</sup> that is, the free jazz of the *Challenge* era. Amalgam's performances – as suggested by *Prayer for Peace* – do not precisely recreate the SME's early sound. The later group appear less contrapuntal and angular of phrase, more melodious, legato, and rhythmically flowing: they seem more influenced by Coltrane than Coleman. And by such a description, neither do they resemble Iskra 1903.<sup>173</sup> The softening of stylistic severity from *Challenge* SME to Amalgam, however, is analogous to that from 'mature' SME to Iskra 1903. Amalgam continued throughout the 1970s, comprising a number of different musicians (Keith Rowe was a member around 1979). Although, by the impromptu nature of both free improvisation and jazz, there were countless ad-hoc groupings and regroupings of the first generation players<sup>174</sup> during this period, Amalgam seems worthy of particular mention by merit of its longevity and lineage of musicians. Like AMMs II and III however, it is also usefully representative of the subtle distinctions in the work of these players, and the alternative paths that British free improvisation might conceivably have followed.

One final omission from my study, and the reasons for being so, remains to be mentioned. The People Band existed between approximately 1966 and 1972, and was based in London. Until recently, historical documentation of the group has been sparse. Wickes makes mention<sup>175</sup> as does Scott.<sup>176</sup> But an account by Julian Cowley in *The Wire*, in 2002, is detailed and comprehensive,<sup>177</sup> and a rarity as such. Perhaps most significant to The People Band's obscurity is the near-absence of recorded music that they left behind. They recorded one album in 1968 (released in 1970), whose

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<sup>172</sup> Wickes, p. 57.

<sup>173</sup> Although the first Amalgam line-up, Wickes notes (*Ibid*), was likewise a percussionless trio, two thirds of which – Guy and Paul Rutherford – subsequently also became two thirds of Iskra 1903.

<sup>174</sup> Wickes' *Innovations in British Jazz [...]* gives some idea of this.

<sup>175</sup> E.g. Wickes, p. 50.

<sup>176</sup> E.g. Scott, p. 58.

<sup>177</sup> Cowley, Julian, 'People have the power', *The Wire*, June 2002.



esoteric content ensured a limited original pressing, scant sales and the inevitable deletion. *People Band 1968* was finally re-released, with additional archive tracks and sleeve notes, by Emanem in 2004, but remains the unique example of their recorded catalogue.<sup>178</sup> This in itself, though it may have hampered previous studies, does not affect the group's presence in my thesis. Now that the CD has been released, there is as much documentary evidence of The People Band as we have, for example, of the MIC, and more so than the original Joseph Holbrooke. Ironically, in fact, it is *because* of the recorded and written content of *People Band 1968* that I am now inclined (to paraphrase Cowley) to 'sideline them in my account of freely improvised music'. On the basis of the extant written accounts alone, this would have been rather more problematic.

It is a difficult distinction to make, considering the extensive differences between the SME and AMM's music, for example, and on the basis of only one hour's recorded material from a career of seven years. But ultimately, the impression that *People Band 1968* gives is simply of some different musical phenomenon to that which appears inherent to first generation British free improvisation. The social and musical scene on which these bands operated does not seem to have been wholly separate; the People Band's original name, for example – the 'Continuous Music Ensemble' – was changed due to its similarity with that of the SME. But at the same time, in such an insular musical and geographical community as free improvisation represents, there is a striking lack of crossover between the People Band's core membership (of approximately ten musicians<sup>179</sup>) and any of the musicians discussed so far. (The exception is People Band drummer and founder member Terry Day, who was later a member of second-generation bands The Four Pullovers and Alterations.)

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<sup>178</sup> The People Band. *People Band 1968*. 2004. CD. Emanem 4102

<sup>179</sup> The People Band, in one respect like the larger free improvisation scene, incorporated a large number of transient members, whilst also retaining a committed nucleus.

Again, this quality cannot disbar the People Band's inclusion from free improvisation by itself. In an area of music, however, that is fundamentally defined by those that actively participate, the relative absence of People Band people in the ongoing documentation of British free improvisation suggests some essential degree of distance between them: that different methods and a different aesthetic was at work. In a sense (and despite the duration of its existence) there is an implicit quality of *musical* dilettantism in the People Band's playing. For one, the majority of its musicians appear not to have persisted, influenced or made their presence felt in British free improvisation. Scott also notes 'an anarchistic "anything goes" aesthetic'<sup>180</sup>, while Cowley records the group's involvement with performance artists The People Show. Furthermore, *People Band 1968*'s sleeve notes reproduce the group's 'philosophy, beliefs, policy', and excerpts from the final couple of points include:

'[...] an "open music", non-exclusive, inclusive of everyone'; '[...] political/social stance: a music of the people by the people – "equality"'; 'emphasis is on people – therefore the word "people" is emphasised and all that the word "people" emotes': 'Therefore the People Band'.

The late 1960s – the era that spawned British free improvisation – was also, of course, that of the 'counterculture'. As Scott's thesis discusses, there was a significant undercurrent of political comment, activity and idealism implicit in free improvisation's development, which related to its purportedly collective and egalitarian practices. Eddie Prévo's books, *No Sound is Innocent* and *Minute Particulars*,<sup>181</sup> are indicative texts in relation to this aspect of the genre. And he has

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<sup>180</sup> Scott, p. 58.

<sup>181</sup> Edwin Prévo, *Minute Particulars. Meanings in music-making in the wake of hierarchical realignments, and other essays* (Harlow: Copula, 2004).



admitted that AMM's ideologies and expression were also somewhat 'affected by the tenor of the times'.<sup>182</sup> Though it is a subtle distinction, ultimately there seems a divergence of impetus between the first generation British free improvisers and the members of the People Band. The former perhaps investigated – via their musical practices – the potential for certain models of social and political organisation. The latter, it seems, sought to express a particular libertarian model of social and political organisation, and used music as the medium by which to do so. There appears to be a contrast of priorities here, between the musicological and the performative.

Quite apart from the People Band's secondary documentation, there remains the matter of the music itself. Terry Day writes that the album 'is not representative [...] It doesn't cover the range or breadth of PB music – not as raw, free, anarchic, and chaotic as a gig'.<sup>183</sup> In one sense, we are returned to the fact that one compact disc is being made to stand in for a performing career of several years, and as such, no, it cannot be considered necessarily representative of the whole. To an extent though, Day also appears to be discussing the circumstances of the music's performance, as much as the music itself. Perhaps these edited excerpts of longer recordings<sup>184</sup> did, as Day continues, '[lack] the spirit of spontaneity and the organic flow of gigs [...], the ambience and spirit of live performance'<sup>185</sup> as the discipline and constraints of studio recording and LP reproduction might demand. There is less reason to accept, however, that such parameters need alter the musical language *per se*. Day goes on to describe how various preparatory work was done towards each of the group's improvisations: to ensure structure and stylistic contrast in the material, and to meet the technical and aesthetic requirements of the album format. It seems reasonable to

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<sup>182</sup> Sleeve notes to AMM's *AMM Music 1966*.

<sup>183</sup> Sleeve notes to The People Band's *People Band 1968*.

<sup>184</sup> 'There was enough material recorded to warrant 2 to 3 other albums.' (Ibid).

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

accept that this may have compromised the group's usual working methods. What Day also admits though, is that 'we seemed to be drawn into time, meter, rhythm, harmony, etc.'<sup>186</sup> In this instance, he is actually talking about the music itself, not its execution. And here, too, are the criteria by which the People Band is ultimately excluded from my definition of British free improvisation.

In the music captured on *People Band 1968* – like that of the Germans and Americans – there is simply too much 'headlong vehemence' (to re-quote Watson), and too greater resort to the 'ornament[ation] and transform[ation] [of] given motifs and structures' (ditto Prévost). In other words, the People Band musicians seem too readily to not just refer to, but to *reproduce* (even exaggeratedly) *extant* musical patterns, styles and conventions. Common to the British first generation, the People Band's music exhibits a debt to both new music and, especially, free jazz. But whilst, for example, the People Band's jazzier passages are not indistinguishable from that of Coleman, Coltrane, Brotzmann, etc, neither do they quite make the kind of evolutionary next step that, say, the SME appeared to. I reiterate that this analysis is based only the hour's worth of period recordings available. However, *People Band 1968* still *is* evidence, and on the basis of that evidence I have chosen not to pursue the group's music any further in this analysis. To some extent, this is regrettable. In the sleeve notes to the People Band CD, it is written that 'unlike [AMM and the SME], [the People Band] did not develop its own distinctive methodology and language. Its approach was more [...] anything goes'.<sup>187</sup> If this was indeed the case, and *People Band 1968* truly is unrepresentative of the group's playing, then perhaps they might have informed my arguments in Chapter Four more directly, where I will discuss the problematic and contradictory implications of British free improvisation.

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. Not all the sleeve notes are directly attributed to one author, although I have assumed them to be compiled by Martin Davidson.



As it is, the People Band appears to have comprised a versatile and formidable musical experience, albeit not one convincingly affiliated to my current study.

## Conclusions

The music that I have characterised as ‘first generation British free improvisation’ may be understood primarily as a reaction to, and extrapolation of, the innovations of the predominantly Afro-American free jazz. Tempered by European-derived classical and avant-garde influences, the nascent British improvisers moved from a period of imitation, refinement and specialised differentiation of the parent forms, ultimately towards a committed investigation of the process of the music’s creation itself. This shift of attention, from the pragmatic to the conceptual, reflected and precipitated an increasing abstraction of extant musical vocabulary and syntax. And by the extent of these abstractions, the British free improvisers transcended the characteristic, parameters of their predecessors, to effect new modes of musical creativity and interaction. Though, from its earliest maturity, British freely improvised music exhibited some sweeping stylistic divergences in itself, these were nonetheless founded on comparable principles of musical practice. These principles have been reassessed and emphasised differently by a variety of permanent or semi-permanent groupings of the first generation, as well as providing a model of activity and conception for successive improvisers. There remains a distinctiveness to the music of the first generation players, however: a concentrated and particular, but developmentally logical, series of refinements to the conventions of modern musicality. As such, they form a unique, specialised and conceptually significant presence amongst the creative and expressive arts.

## Chapter Two: *Tunes Without Measure Or End*

### The criteria and parameters of music

*'They were alone and not understood'.<sup>1</sup>*

#### Part One

The quotes from John Fordham and Eddie Prévost at the beginning of Chapter One evoke something of free improvisation's marginalized status in popular culture. To a non-partisan audience, Fordham characterises only a 'traumatic [...] din',<sup>2</sup> while Prévost recalls the criticism that what he did 'was not music'.<sup>3</sup> These do not appear to be isolated opinions. In *The Times*, an anonymous writer suggested that one 'may prefer to call [AMM's improvisation] something other than music'.<sup>4</sup> And – according to Evan Parker – *Melody Maker* critic Richard Williams said of Parker & Lytton's playing that 'this has turned into noise.'<sup>5</sup> '[Williams] could no longer make sense of it as music' Parker explained further, though he himself claimed not to worry about the distinction.<sup>6</sup>

Free improvisation is certainly unconventional, in the abstracted musical forms that it presents. Nevertheless, it is still a problematic conclusion that Prévost's critic, Richard Williams, or the anonymous *Times* writer come to. In this chapter, I will discuss the 'musicality' of free improvisation with reference to two basic lines of inquiry. First, I will construct a hypothesis by which the term 'music' can be ascribed or denied to a particular stimulus. Second, I will examine the idea of 'musicality' –

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<sup>1</sup> Anon, 'The New Statesman', 1966: Quoted in Anon, *AMM – a selection of reviews 1966-2000* <[http://www.matchlessrecordings.com/amm\\_review.html](http://www.matchlessrecordings.com/amm_review.html)> [accessed 23 September 2001].

<sup>2</sup> John Fordham, *Shooting from the Hip. Changing Tunes in Jazz* (London: Kyle Cathie Limited, 1996), p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Edwin Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent* (Harlow: Copula, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Anon, 'The Times', 1967: Quoted in Anon, *AMM – a selection of reviews 1966-2000* [accessed 23 September 2001].

<sup>5</sup> BBC Radio 3. *Lines Burnt in Light. The Music of Evan Parker: Part Two*. Broadcast 3 April 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



the quality of being *musical* – and the manner in which free improvisation has interpreted its criteria. The arguments here will be of a primarily theoretical focus. In turn, they will establish a critical context for the historical and practical analysis of Chapter Three.

I will be referring in this chapter to the analytical framework of ‘deconstruction’. What is evident amongst the quotations above is an inconsistency in what Prévost called ‘everyone’s everyday *meaning* of things’.<sup>7</sup> There seems to be contention as to what kind of phenomenon or experience ‘free improvisation’ actually is. And it is within such areas of conceptual uncertainty that deconstruction may be a relevant and useful tool.

## EXCURSUS: Deconstruction

“Deconstruction” writes Nicholas Royle ‘in its [...] contemporary usage is best understood in terms of its association with the writings of Jacques Derrida’.<sup>8</sup> A French academic (born 1930, died 2004), he is commonly identified with the ‘poststructuralist’ school of modern philosophy. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Richard Harland describes, Derrida’s reputation was established by ‘three crucial books [...]: *Writing and Difference*, *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology*’,<sup>9</sup> and it is from these texts that the principles of deconstruction have essentially been derived. From 1972 onwards, Derrida lectured at several universities in the USA, including Yale, John Hopkins and Irvine. During this time, notes Christopher Norris,

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<sup>7</sup> Prévost, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Deconstructions. A User’s Guide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Harland, *Superstructuralism. The Philosophy of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism* (London: Methuen, 1987), p.125.

‘[Derrida’s] following among American critics has grown apace’:<sup>10</sup> so much so that Anthony Easthope defines deconstruction specifically as ‘the movement [that] *developed out of the American reading of* [my italics] the work of Jacques Derrida’.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, adds Royle, it ‘took hold [...] in North American and Western European universities in the late 1970s and early 1980s’.<sup>12</sup>

With the influx of new writers and theorists under deconstruction’s influence, some of the discipline’s key tenets began to change. Easthope, for example, has classified five major variations in deconstructive practice and emphasis,<sup>13</sup> including so-called ‘American deconstruction’ (which Norris also discusses at some length).<sup>14</sup> Norris also distinguishes further sub-divisions within the movement, often ascribing them to particular writers, such as Geoffrey Hartman or J Hillis Miller. At this point, however, Norris identifies too a decrease in academic precision by which deconstruction was being applied. He notes disparagingly a swing towards a more ‘dizzy, exuberant’ style,<sup>15</sup> reflecting an increasingly literary, rather than philosophical, basis. This, as I discussed in the Introduction, lead to certain unsubstantiated critical misappropriations of the idea, which have afflicted deconstruction ever since. The ‘choice between rigour and freedom’, in Norris’ words,<sup>16</sup> had become noticeable and seemingly disagreeable to Derrida, even by 1980. In conversation with James Kearns and Ken Newton, he decried ‘a misunderstanding of deconstruction, one which sees [it] as free interpretation based on the fantasies of the reader’.<sup>17</sup> To use Julian

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction. Theory and Practice* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Easthope, *British Post-Structuralism Since 1968* (London: Routledge, 1991), Preface, p. xii.

<sup>12</sup> Royle, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Easthope, pp. 187-188.

<sup>14</sup> Norris, pp. 89-123.

<sup>15</sup> Norris, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Easthope, p. 238.



Wolfreys' phrase, deconstruction came to represent a somewhat 'broader process of interpretation'<sup>18</sup> both in academia and popular criticism.

Ultimately, as Royle reiterates, 'Derrida remains the key figure for an understanding of what deconstruction is about [in philosophical terms]'.<sup>19</sup> 'Derridean deconstruction', he defines thus:

'[A] critical analysis of inherited binary oppositions in which a left-handed term claims privilege through its denigration of the right-hand term on which it depends, the analysis aiming not to reverse the values of the opposition but rather to breach or undo them by relativising their relation.'<sup>20</sup>

In the Introduction to the revised edition of Derrida's *Positions*, Norris roots the author's thinking in a fundamental scepticism that provokes him to '[raise] questions – searching questions – about truth, knowledge, meaning and representation'.<sup>21</sup> And Wolfreys focuses closer still, observing that it is 'the nature of how identities come to be formed [with which Derrida] interests himself'.<sup>22</sup> There are two vital pointers to the functioning of Derrida's deconstruction here: Wolfreys writes of 'identities', and that they are *formed*. They do not have *a priori* existence. 'Identity' is the series of characteristics by which something or someone is recognised and differentiated from all else around it. As such, identity is only functional in the presence of another party: one that makes that distinction of individuality. Norris, furthermore, suggests criteria by which identity is perceived and rationalised: what is *known* of an entity; what it might *mean* or *represent*; and the implied, cumulative *actuality* of that entity's nature

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<sup>18</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Deconstruction. Derrida* (London: Macmillan, 1998), p.36.

<sup>19</sup> Royle, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Easthope, p. 188.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Norris, 'Introduction' in Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Continuum, 2002), p. xiii.

<sup>22</sup> Wolfreys, p. 60.

or properties. But he also notes Derrida's element of scepticism, that qualities apparently such as 'the truth' may yet be vulnerable to questioning. If such is the case, then 'truth', 'knowledge', etc, could not be regarded as absolute or inviolable, and neither therefore can any identity that they might immediately imply. Identity is created in the perception of the other party. And it is the question of the interrelationship between these three entities – the other party, its perception, and the resultant perceived identity – that Derrida's deconstruction fundamentally addresses.

Identity, notes Martin McQuillan, is 'entirely relative to where you stand'.<sup>23</sup> Deconstruction relies on a series of subtle but specific contemplations of this premise, focussing on the subject, concepts and/or terms under contention. By placing their provenance under intense logical scrutiny, it may be possible to expose (what Norris calls) 'unrecognised twists of implication'<sup>24</sup> in the reasoning and conclusions that they purport to represent. McQuillan's 'Five Strategies for Deconstruction'<sup>25</sup> illustrates the main lines of inquiry that Derrida's writing has pursued, and the essay has provided a crucial reference point for my own analyses. To conclude this brief introduction to deconstruction, and reiterate concerns from the beginning of this chapter, I will deal with perhaps the most important point of entry to a deconstructive investigation: the 'binary opposition'. Rodolphe Gasche emphatically states that:

Deconstruction is *not* to be mistaken for a nihilism, nor for a metaphysics of absence, nor for a negative theology. It is *not* a demolition and a dismantling to be opposed by or calling for a rebuilding and a reconstruction.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Martin McQuillan (ed.), *Deconstruction. A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Norris, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> McQuillan, pp. 1-43.

<sup>26</sup> Rodolphe Gasche, 'Deconstruction as Criticism' in McQuillan, pp. 126-133.



Anthony Easthope has already suggested something similar. Whilst deconstruction works against certain conceptual hierarchies or biases, its purpose is not simply to replace one unfavourable *status quo* with a preferred one. Moreover, it is to acknowledge the multiplicity of possible perspectives from which the contentious term or concept can be viewed, and to consider them of relative and equivalent value. Derrida's – and deconstruction's – influence has been felt throughout the humanities: not only in philosophy, but also in literature, critical theory, historical and political analysis, etc. These disciplines have proved vulnerable to, or appropriate for, deconstructive analysis because of their fundamentally interpretative nature, in regard to human communication. They each examine, define and influence various forms of cultural identity, whilst being deeply subject to the influence of individual perspective itself. In such disciplines, the flexibility – or malleability – of 'truth, knowledge, meaning and representation' is demonstrably at work.

Derrida himself made little mention of music, although one exception can be found in his seminal text *Of Grammatology*. It appears in a chapter dealing with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Genesis and Structure of the Essay on the Origin of Languages',<sup>27</sup> and is also briefly discussed by Norris.<sup>28</sup> Derrida's writing owes considerable debt to that of Friedrich Nietzsche (born 1844, died 1900). Nietzsche performed much of the groundwork for deconstruction (see Norris again)<sup>29</sup> with his self-professed 'great declaration of war [against] puffed-up [cultural] idols'.<sup>30</sup> Biographer Curtis Cate outlines the reasoning behind one of Nietzsche's key aphorisms, 'The Chemistry of Concepts and Feelings':

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 165-268.

<sup>28</sup> Norris, pp. 32-37.

<sup>29</sup> Norris, pp. 55-69.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Fearn, *Zeno and the Tortoise* (London: Atlantic Books, 2001), p. 122, originally from *Twilight of the Idols*.

‘For the past 2000 years [...] the basic concern of philosophers had been to explain “how something can emerge from its opposite” – order out of chaos, the rational from the irrational, feeling from what is unfeeling and dead, logic from the illogical, disinterested contemplation from greedy desire [...], truth from errors.’<sup>31</sup>

The foundations had been laid, Cate continues, for ‘what Nietzsche called a “metaphysical philosophy”’.<sup>32</sup> This describes a system of thought that intrinsically relies on ideal, or absolute, abstract paradigms – ‘good’ and ‘evil’, for example – as conceptual and argumentative points of reference. To use the simplest analogy, such a system functions on the difference between ‘black’ and ‘white’. Each quality is separate from and mutually exclusive of the other, and is therefore also implicitly defined by its opposite. These are the conceptual ‘binary oppositions’ from which trails of deconstruction tend to begin.

Nietzsche made the further point that this mode of thought had persisted for a number of centuries, ubiquitously and largely unchallenged. And in such circumstances – which I will elaborate upon in the main body of my analysis – the notional existence of ‘*metaphysical truths*’ became sufficiently ingrained as to become one itself. Metaphysical paradigms formed an intellectual basis of assumption to the extent that philosophy became difficult to conceive or discuss without them. Nietzsche’s contention, – and that that Derrida later pursued – was to contest the nature and origins of these metaphysical values’ authority, and consequently also their currency as absolutes. If these apparent absolutes might yet be shown to be logically inadequate, then the systems of thought that are structured around them might also be called into question. Derrida himself suggested that deconstruction ‘interpret[s]

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<sup>31</sup> Curtis Cate, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Hutchinson, 2002), p. 250.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



interpretation'.<sup>33</sup> At one level it is the very substance of Western thought that deconstruction has challenged; and on Derrida's terms, the Western philosophical canon is less a cumulative tradition of impeccably reasoned deduction than mere *interpretation*, based on a flawed metaphysical model.

In the context of this study, the identity that has come into question is that of 'free improvisation'. In their writings on the subject, practitioners such as Eddie Prévost and Derek Bailey clearly regard their expressive medium as one particular species of 'music'. John Fordham's evocation of a 'traumatic [...] din' however, finds equal currency amongst certain of Prévost and AMM's critics, and even with the otherwise partisan Richard Williams.<sup>34</sup> Even practitioner Evan Parker has expressed ambiguity, or perhaps ambivalence, towards the precise conceptual nature of the work for which he is known. Using these comments and criticisms as a basis for investigation, this chapter will comprise a deconstructive analysis of the nature of the 'free improvisation' experience.

Both McQuillan and Wolfreys stress that deconstruction is 'not a method' in itself,<sup>35</sup> so much as (in McQuillan's words) a 'field of knowledge'.<sup>36</sup> At first glance, the statement appears at odds with the wide range of deconstruction texts that are available. If this was the case, then those that purport to summarise deconstruction's tenets perhaps appear questionable. But there is an important distinction to be made. To illustrate the discrepancy, McQuillan defines 'method' as 'a general set of rules, practices, prescribed formulae and so on which will operate consistently every time [...that] if followed will produce a predetermined result'.<sup>37</sup> What he is describing here

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Wolfreys, p. 55.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Williams' favourable reaction to Iskra 1903, quoted in Watson, p. 162, originally from the *Radio Times* [n.d.]

<sup>35</sup> McQuillan, p. 3, Wolfreys, p. 15 & 50.

<sup>36</sup> McQuillan, Introduction, p. xii.

<sup>37</sup> McQuillan, p. 3.

is a specialised tool for an explicit purpose, the means to fulfil one agenda. More appropriate, perhaps, is the idea of an explorative strategy or a trail of provocative suppositions be identified and tested. (In these terms, Richard Scott implies, we may analogously discern the act of free improvisation too.)<sup>38</sup> ‘We have to encounter each text on its own terms’ notes Wolfreys.<sup>39</sup> While deconstruction in general suggests areas of weakness or hidden implication in the traditions of Western thought, the course of each individual deconstructive analysis is subject to the specific priorities, influences and circumstances of its subject matter. More than this, deconstruction too is always effected from a particular and determining perspective. It relativises, perhaps, the mechanisms of some contentious cultural identity, but cannot claim definitive status, impartiality of approach, or even immunity from subsequent deconstructive analysis itself.

Provisionally, however, it is a useful mode of thought for exploring the kind of conceptual tensions to which free improvisation appears subject. Terms such as ‘music’ and ‘noise’ are ostensibly those of the everyday; they have been, and may legitimately be, used as such. But equally, a more in-depth consideration of these terms can reveal subtleties and contradictions of our society’s cultural institutions. Music may simply be listened to for pleasure (although the notion of the ‘pleasure’ inherent to abstract auditory stimuli is a point of discussion in itself). But historically, socially and politically, ‘music’ has had far less of the arbitrary or abstract about it than the casual listener or participant necessarily registers. In these contexts, the identity of ‘music’ has been formed, shaped and governed by an ornate, but often obscured, network of cultural, technical and aesthetic relationships. It is merely the seeming ubiquity of ‘conventional’ music that renders the question of free

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Scott, *Noises: Free Music, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde; London 1965 to 1990* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1991), p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> Wolfreys, p. 15.



improvisation problematic. Conversely, however, the practice of free improvisation also implicitly problematises the convention and conventions of ‘conventional’ music, because of what it suggests about the latter’s hidden formalities. Derrida makes the point (according to Norris) that

‘any attempt [...] to raise [human communication] into a full-scale theory [...] with regulative sanctions attached is one that will generate problems [...] through [its] readiness to cite “deviant” examples which go against the gist of [its] own argument.’<sup>40</sup>

With reference to this point, the remainder of Chapter Two will comprise a discussion of ‘music’, ‘musicality’ and the nature of free improvisation.

## Part Two

I have already noted that – for the purposes of description – ‘free improvisation’ has a useful linguistic versatility. One can derive noun, adjective and verb forms quite readily, according to contextual need. But for this reason also, it becomes necessary to define my use of the term in the specific sense that it relates to the rest of this chapter. Comments from Richard Williams, and Prévost and AMM’s (anonymous) critics, for example, have suggested a point of contention: that free improvisation is ‘not music’. This, though, appears to contradict the assumptions of the free improvisers themselves (as well as those of this thesis). My analysis will develop from this premise.

There are three interpretations of ‘free improvisation’ that might relate to such a suggestion. Two of them may be discounted, however. First, there is the umbrella term that describes this genre of activity in overview (as I have in Chapter One). ‘*[The genre of] free improvisation is not music*’ may be the ultimate conclusion of its

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<sup>40</sup> Norris, in Derrida (2002), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

detractors, but it is not a convincing *source* for such an argument. It is too generalised a statement, based on too abstract an encounter, to be so critically forthright. The second sense of ‘free improvisation’ describes the act or process by which the SME, et al, made their contentious ‘music’. Like the generic term though, it again seems arbitrary to dismiss the free improvisation *process* as inherently un-musical. Earlier in this chapter, I quoted from Martin McQuillan that deconstruction was not ‘a method’, in the sense that a recipe is. More so – and *like* the free improvisation process – it represents suggested areas of inquiry that offer finite, though also initially indeterminate, results. As such, it is problematic to assume an *a priori* conclusion. Recorded evidence ably demonstrates that the process of free improvisation may result in the layered dissonances of AMM or the squawking disjointedness of the SME. But there is no factor or requirement *intrinsic* to the process that precludes the improvisation of more ‘conventionally’ musical pieces. (As I will discuss later, it is the personal agenda of the British free improvisers that *does* preclude this.) For this reason, neither is ‘[the process of] free improvisation is not music’ a likely interpretation of our original premise.

What we *may* discern about the comments under discussion – and which suggests the third interpretation of ‘free improvisation’ to be the relevant one – is that they derive from the perspective of an audience. The emotive, and probably pejorative, tone of Williams’, etc, commentary gives the impression of an intimate and disagreeable encounter with ‘free improvisation’. And presumably this must have occurred in the context of its performance. What ‘free improvisation’ refers to, in the



context of the current discussion, is the *sensory experience*<sup>41</sup> of free improvisation: the perception of those sounds produced by the processes of the free improvisers.

‘Sounds are presented to a single privileged sense modality’ writes Roger Scruton in the opening lines of *The Aesthetics of Music*, ‘[you] can hear them, but you cannot see them, touch them, taste them or smell them.’<sup>42</sup> Hearing though, is essentially a psychological process, which the ear facilitates. Sounds may also be imagined or remembered, without the simultaneous need for physical stimulus. But even in these circumstances, the brain still effects a representative recreation of auditory sensation. Whether originating externally (i.e. heard) or internally (imagined or remembered), sounds are only humanly perceivable in this form, in the ‘mind’s ear’. Music, therefore, must also be subject to the same criteria; and the implication stands that [the sensory experience of] ‘free improvisation’ functions likewise. It is only in the terms of auditory perception that the controversial status of ‘free improvisation’ may be decided.

## Dividing the sound world

In *The Anthropology of Music*, Alan P. Merriam illustrates a debate that is a central concern of his discipline: the question of

the distinction, implied or real, made between music on the one hand, and noise, or non-music, on the other; this is basic to the understanding of music in any society. It is logical to assume that if no distinction can be made there can be no such thing as music, for either all sound will be music

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<sup>41</sup> The sight of the free improvisers performing could, theoretically, also be cited in this context. But although humanly sensible, the sight of free improvisation in action is again an inconclusive qualifier by which to justify the ‘not music’ criticism. Visually, there is little to distinguish the free improvisers from any conventional musician. Like Keith Rowe’s table-top guitar, for instance, the improvisers’ equipment can sometimes appear out of the ordinary. This, however – like the *process* of free improvisation – does not preclude ‘conventional’ music being made either.

<sup>42</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 1.

or no sound at all will be music and thus music cannot exist. Further, what is considered to be music or non-music sound determines the nature of music in any given society.<sup>43</sup>

In this short extract, there are elements already familiar from the current discussion. There is the idea of a binary opposition at work between what is 'music' and what is 'non-music'. And, furthermore, music's antithesis is specifically given as 'noise'. Merriam's terminology is a useful point of departure, but it is necessary to broaden and clarify his frame of reference to better understand our own.

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali further differentiates Merriam's model of the sound world. Music, he suggests, 'is inscribed between noise and silence'.<sup>44</sup> We are now presented with two sonic alternatives to music. And whilst designating qualitatively contrasting properties, music, noise and silence must still implicitly share some degree of equivalence if such a comparison is to be valid. According to Scruton's model of the 'single privileged sense modality', music, noise and silence may indeed be regarded as alternative states within a single medium. They are experienced uniquely as auditory stimuli, and, as such, the purported relationship between them seems initially satisfactory. But Attali's assertion – the introduction of silence into the music/noise equation – is problematic. His model places silence and noise at contrasting ends of a hypothetical axis, with music at some point between them. Silence and noise, he seems to imply, are polar opposite states of nonetheless the same essential quantity: as ice is to steam. Attali's comparison is misleading, however. There are unresolved questions here, concerning the assumed boundaries

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<sup>43</sup> Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 19.



between these states; and of particular significance is the role and nature of ‘silence’ in this context.

## ‘Silence’

Scruton makes a vital contribution, when he writes of ‘confus[ing] the musical idea of dissonance with the purely acoustical idea of discord’.<sup>45</sup> Attali has overlooked a basic incompatibility between his terms. He attempts the direct comparison of stimuli that, in fact, we comprehend by different criteria and modes of perception. A key reference point in modern music is (American experimental composer) John Cage’s notorious 4’33”, premiered in 1952. The performers of this piece were required to remain tacet for its prescribed duration<sup>46</sup> and it was ‘often referred to colloquially as *Silence*’ as a result, as David Toop recounts.<sup>47</sup> ‘Nothing happens’ he continues, ‘except for a growing awareness of the immediate sound environment.’<sup>48</sup> Michael Nyman’s assessment is concise, if initially cryptic. The piece, he writes, poses questions as to ‘what composition, realization and audition may or may not have to do with one another’.<sup>49</sup> Issued in 2001, and compiling the work of musicians including Keith Rowe, the CD 45’18” provides further insight into Cage’s concept. Under the subheading *9 Versions of 4’33”*,<sup>50</sup> these later interpretations (with annotated comments) make explicit the allusions of the original piece and the problems of ‘silence’. Specifically, the CD reveals a notable variety of auditory conditions that nonetheless have been presented uniformly as ‘silent’. Silence, apparently, is not an

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<sup>45</sup> Scruton, p. 301.

<sup>46</sup> John Cage, *4’33”* (New York: Henmar, 1960) [Score]

<sup>47</sup> David Toop, *Ocean of Sound. Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), p. 140.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music. Cage and Beyond* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.2.

<sup>50</sup> Various Artists. *45’18”: 9 Versions of 4’33”*. 2001. CD. KP 3005

absolute quantity; 4'33" questions whether we can actually experience it at all. As Toop describes, 'Cage had discovered the non-existence of silence in Harvard University's anechoic chamber, a sound-proof room without any reflective surfaces.'<sup>51</sup> 'Try as we may to make a silence, we cannot', Cage himself wrote. Even in the anechoic chamber, he heard 'two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation.'<sup>52</sup>

Hypothetically, for the purpose of considering Attali's statement, let us assume that there *is* an absolute, physical silence that we may humanly access. In such a case, the critical mismatch of ideas that Attali makes (and to which Scruton alludes) becomes rapidly clear. Silence, as a 'purely acoustical idea', would be a scientifically measurable quantity, physically present and effective. It must equate to the total absence of sound. This, then, does place it perceptually as part of the sound world (of auditory phenomena), alongside music and noise. Any closer affiliation of the three, however, is more difficult to sustain. If nothing else, music cannot be considered as a physical absolute, in the sense that our hypothetical silence would be. Albeit expressed in one specific and tangible medium, music is an invention and representation of human culture. In this case, Attali's comparison of silence and music – effectively a fact and an opinion – presents an unreasonable basis for an argument.

The term 'noise' poses similar difficulties because, like music, it stands as a value judgement,<sup>53</sup> not a physically defined entity. Once again, it makes an inappropriate comparative model. It is conceivable that Attali intends 'noise' simply as a synonym for 'sound', i.e. as *a* noise. And, in these circumstances, it could be considered a physically measurable quantity, like the hypothetical silence. But I

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<sup>51</sup> Toop, p. 140.

<sup>52</sup> John Cage, *Silence. Lectures and Writings* republished edn. (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p.8.

<sup>53</sup> I will return to this point presently.



discount this alternative for two reasons. First, the title and thrust of Attali's *Noise. The Political Economy of Music* implies a subjective, evocative and provocative use of the word, rather than an objective, literal and dispassionate one. Second, even if silence and noise *are* accepted as opposing but comparable physical states, music remains solely and unavoidably a cultural construct. It cannot logically signify any direct incremental shift between them, and therefore cannot complete Attali's model. Furthermore, if this 'silence' is to be regarded as absolute, there could literally be *no* middle ground between itself and sound of any kind. Conditions could only be *silent* or *not*.

## Apparent Silence

A performance of 4'33" – rather than mere exposition of its ideas – reveals another kind of 'silence'. To use a term that David Toop has also suggested,<sup>54</sup> this may be classified as an 'apparent silence'. In lieu of the hypothetical absolute that Cage discredits, this is the closest approximation of silence that can remain. And in turn, it exhibits two sub-categories of its own.

The first is a commonly used device across many genres of music. Typically occurring as a brief and measured hiatus in playing and/or singing, this silence is best described as an effect. It provides a sense of dynamic punctuation to a piece. The end of one section is signified, establishing a brief structural tension. The pause suggests a need for resolution by a continuation of the music, which may be either the repetition of a previous section or the movement to new one. One typical and widely familiar example of this device can be heard in The Beatles' first single, 'Love Me Do', in the

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<sup>54</sup> David Toop, *Haunted Weather. Music, Silence and Memory* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004).

immediate wake of the sung line “ [...] Someone like you.”<sup>55</sup> The silence lasts only for a single beat, less than a second’s duration. But the sudden contrast in sonic texture – in the absence of singing and playing – coupled with the enforced suspension of the song’s forward momentum,<sup>56</sup> creates a striking *musical* space within the song. Whilst ‘musical’, however, it is also seemingly ‘silent’.

During a performance by the free improvisation trio Konk Pack (at the Termite Club in Leeds, February 2001), I witnessed an impromptu silence of a comparable nature and similar duration to that in ‘Love Me Do’. The effect was memorable in such a context, almost startling at the time. Konk Pack tends towards the loud, frenetic and discordant end of free improvisation, as exemplified by numerous passages on their *Big Deep* album.<sup>57</sup> Their improvisations recall those of the MIC somewhat, comprising electro-acoustic timbres similar to AMM and a less spacious version of the SME’s atomistic interplay. Most obviously in terms of volume, the sudden silent break created an emphatic contrast to the remainder of Konk Pack’s set. Yet equally, amongst the densely packed and chaotic rhythms, the effect was largely created by the sheer improbability – the surprise – of each improviser falling silent at the same moment.

This kind of ‘apparent silence’, then, is characterised by the allusion to (the hypothetical, absolute) silence, as perceived by both performers and audience. It occurs, however, without the necessity of actually *being* silent. If the break in the ‘Love Me Do’ recording was analysed in detail, any number of slight background interferences might be found to be present: lingering instrumental overtones, or the sound of the performers drawing a breath, for example. But in such a context, this

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<sup>55</sup> The Beatles. *The Beatles/1962-1966*. [n.d.] 2xLP. PCSPR 717

<sup>56</sup> This is based upon an audience’s familiarity with the conventions of their culture’s music, and its typical patterns of rhythmic, harmonic and melodic development and resolution/tension and release.

<sup>57</sup> Konk Pack. *Big Deep*. 1999. CD. GROB.102 LC 10229



kind of close scrutiny would be an irrelevance to the effectiveness of the piece as 'music'. To describe the effect as a shock tactic would be an overstatement. Yet by the accuracy of its timing and placement within a piece of music, this kind of 'apparent silence' functions, and is accepted, at its fleeting face value. It acts only as the most casual allusion to the idea of absolute silence; but by the sonic contrast that it presents against its surroundings, a distinctive and dynamic musical gesture is made.

The other form of 'apparent silence' is that with which *4'33"* engages for expressive effect. The silences of 'Love Me Do', etc, are dramatic pauses of a few seconds duration, or less. In contrast, the most pronounced departure of this second variation is its increased duration. Periods of tens of seconds are most common, as can be heard on AMM's *To Hear and Back Again* CD.<sup>58</sup> And as *4'33"* demonstrates, those of up to several minutes are not unknown. The previous species of 'apparent silence' functions musically by approximating the absence of sound. Extended 'apparent silences', however, are used to evoke the very opposite effect. Cage suggested that 'silence' is fundamentally illusory within the limits of human sensibility. *4'33"* focuses its audience's attention on a seemingly readily available auditory state; at length, though, the piece goes on to deny and question the values and the tenability upon which it is ostensibly based.

Initially, Cage and AMM also invoke 'silence' as an effect, a temporary contrast to their more active and audible music-making. The combination of duration and implied musical context, however, serve to alter this perception. Though the apparent silence increases in length, the complicit audience and/or performers are discouraged from the assumption that *nothing is happening*. This is achieved by an implied consensus: that despite the absence of conventional sensory stimuli, they are

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<sup>58</sup> AMM. *To Hear and Back Again*. 1994. CD. MRCD03

still witnessing, or engaged in performing, an act of 'music'. Cage creates this consensus by his status in the canon of Western music. He prescribes a duration for his silence and presents the plan as a composition, which in accordance with his cultural position he is *allowed* to do. To partake in the experience of 'Cage's silent work' therefore becomes palatable. It is a recognised event amongst those classical music audiences likely to attend a concert, in a way that *sitting quietly, and contemplating it* perhaps would not be.

AMM also capitalise upon the audience's understanding of their working methods to subvert distinctions between silence, apparent silence and musical event. AMM's 'free' improvisations are of intrinsically unspecified content, until they have actually been performed. An audience will not consciously prepare themselves for 'AMM's silent work' now, in the way that they might for Cage's. In AMM's improvisation, 'silence' may or may not occur at any time, and likewise may or may not be anticipated by the members of the audience. Unlike, for example, at a classical concert, they would have no prior reference to a planned programme of music. What *will* be apparent to an audience of free improvisation is the active and ongoing state of the improvisatory process. As long as the players are present and recognisably participating, in other words, the improvisation continues. To effect this sense of continuation during a 'silent' interlude, the players will maintain – and physically suggest as much – a level of awareness, concentration and preparedness towards the music's ongoing performance. Though visibly engaged with their respective instruments, the other players and the current musical situation, they remain tacet. In free improvisation, the sensibilities and judgement of each player ultimately informs their contribution. And whilst considering their next interjection – even if not making



a sound themselves – the improviser is still effectively involved with, and shaping, the ongoing music.<sup>59</sup>

By maintaining their state of implied preparedness, a group such as AMM is able to sustain the suggestion of musical activity, even if the players are all *simultaneously* waiting to make their next sound. Even during an extended ‘silence’ of this nature, a willing audience will assimilate it as being integral to the musical experience. In my experience of free improvisation in live performance, there is also a further manifestation of ‘apparent’ or ‘tacet’ silence, which is worthy of note for its apparently universal occurrence. Roger Scruton makes the point that, in lieu of Western music’s formal methods of tonal resolution, ‘attempts to bring atonal music to a perceived conclusion [...] are essentially rhetorical: a noisy climax, or a dwindling into silence.’<sup>60</sup> Noisy climaxes in free improvisation are seemingly uncommon. In classical atonal pieces, a ‘dead stop’ could be written into the composition or timed by a signal from the conductor. An improvised dead stop, however, though not impossible, is unlikely. That it might occasionally happen by coincidence – like Konk Pack’s moment of ‘silence’ – is more probable than by deliberate execution.

Typically, free improvisation tends towards the latter of Scruton’s options: the music ‘dwindling’ away. This exemplifies the ongoing ‘start/stop’ interaction of the players. They bide their time (individually), waiting to see if (collectively) an improvisation is considered to have run its course. Gradually, the ‘calls’ and ‘responses’ become more tentative and infrequent, until improvisational momentum

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<sup>59</sup> Of a 1973 improvisation by King Crimson, ‘*Trio*’, Eric Tamm notes that ‘[although drummer Bill] Bruford does not play on “Trio”, he is listed [on the album that documented the improvisation] as one of the co-composers [...]. Bruford was awarded joint authorship on the basis of his having “contributed silence”’. Eric Tamm, *Robert Fripp: From King Crimson to Guitar Craft* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 73. ‘Trio’ can be heard on King Crimson’s *Starless and Bible Black*. 1974. LP. ILPS 9275

<sup>60</sup> Scruton, p. 303.

subsides altogether. This sometimes takes time; by the impromptu nature of the event and the defining (and perhaps conflicting) influence of the personalities involved, the process does not always coalesce at all. I have witnessed several performances – Anton Lukoszevieve’s duet with Eddie Prévost, the ‘Procession 2’ grouping<sup>61</sup> and Roger Smith’s duet with Louis Moholo<sup>62</sup>, for example – where one instrumentalist seemed reluctant to end a piece, despite the apparent inclinations of the other(s).<sup>63</sup> More often though, the players will grind to a halt by mutual consent, and the ensuing quiet is left long enough to ascertain that it *is* collective. This final negotiation is such a uniform feature of live free improvisation that the partisan audiences are fully aware of the significance of the ‘inactivity’. They, too, wait to see if anything more will be played, and effectively prolong the process even further before acknowledging the performers with applause. It is a time of tense attentiveness for all concerned, and only eventually leads to a relieved breathing out. Of my experiences, the effect was most pronounced at an AMM performance in 2001. Presumably aware of the group’s history of silent interludes, the audience lingered on the ending for well over a minute. Only very briefly, the quiet was disturbed (as I annotated at the time) by ‘the man who dared to clap’. He rapidly fell silent again, and the wait continued. Eventually, Keith Rowe felt obliged to make a very obvious point of getting up and putting his jacket on.<sup>64</sup>

Under such circumstances, the traditional boundaries and roles that separate silence and music (and potentially ‘noise’ as well) become less categorically defined. If Cage or AMM’s audiences engage conceptually and perceptually with their silences – by *listening* to them – they implicitly also question our conventional cultural and

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<sup>61</sup> Both at the Freedom of the City festival, Conway Hall, London, 6 May 2002.

<sup>62</sup> At Freedom of the City, same venue, 2 May 2004.

<sup>63</sup> Although this, in itself, represents an improvisational choice too.

<sup>64</sup> AMM, The Warehouse, Waterloo, London, 31 October 2001.



physical understanding of the sound world. In the first stages of the piece, the audience accepts that 'music' is occurring. More traditional material may be used to preface a 'silent' passage, for example, or music's presence may suggested intellectually by the given context of 'a composition' or 'an improvisation'. Subsequently, the music moves into 'apparent silence'. In the contrasting quiet, an audience will likely, at first, hear 'nothing': that is to say *consciously audibly perceive* 'nothing'. Cage refutes the possibility of experiencing absolute silence, because of the contamination of unavoidable background noise. And as the 'silent' passage gradually lengthens, the silence becomes defined as only *apparent* after all. Not to hear a sound, is not to say that there is no sound to be heard. At the beginning of the 'silent' passage (like the break in 'Love Me Do') the audience merely perceive the sudden absence of the auditory stimulus that had preceded it. The drastically altered auditory environment appears strikingly austere by comparison, and the effect temporarily obscures the finer details of any remaining ambient sound. 'Love Me Do' regains its musical momentum almost instantly, allowing no time and encouraging no inclination to consider the 'silence' that intervened. Cage and AMM's lengthening silences, however, enable a period of both physical and psychological (or perceptual and conceptual) acclimatisation to occur. In the apparent silence, as David Toop has suggested, a 'growing awareness' of actual auditory conditions will begin to filter through to the audience. The minutiae of activities and processes that are usually obscured become audible, and, having done so, they draw further attention to themselves, their existences and their nuances. This is the perceptual auditory experience. If an individual is sympathetic to the notion that 'a composition' or 'an improvisation' is taking place, then the sounds that are now audible – while perhaps

unconventional in that context – may yet be conceptually categorised and aesthetically appreciated as ‘music’.

Cage’s 4’33” implies certain conclusions about our current model of the sound world. For one, we can observe the fallacy inherent to Attali’s correlation of silence with music and noise (i.e. that they exist as contrasting states of the same phenomenon). Music is *not* inscribed between noise and silence, because silence (perceptually and conceptually) is of a fundamentally different nature to the others. If, – against Cage’s intimation – there *is* an available absolute silence, its existence can only preclude any incremental shift towards either music or noise. Music and noise, as audible phenomena, can only negate the possibility of silence. Even, for a moment, to disregard any aesthetic criteria, neither music nor noise can be said to be any *less* silent than the other.

To interrelate these terms conceptually is likewise problematic. Silence, if a physical absolute, is that alone. It is immune to the subjectivity of cultural interpretation, which is precisely the criterion by which music and noise *are* defined. Only the latter two are negotiable quantities, and so to relativise them with a physical absolute – as Attali’s model does – is essentially suspect. Physics and music, to reiterate, are defined by incompatible principles.

The modes of ‘apparent silence’, too, tax Attali’s hypothesis, on their own terms, and by their allusion to the absolute state. The apparent silence(s) of short duration – those of ‘Love Me Do’, or the pre-acclimatisation phase of 4’33” – have both perceptual and conceptual significance. That is, they are functionally dependent both on auditory detection and the subsequent intellectual rationalisation. Although, if Cage is correct, there is always some manner of auditory stimulus humanly available, this is not to say that we may always perceive it. Prior to the readjustment of sensory



awareness (e.g. to compensate for a sudden and dramatic decrease in volume), our senses register only the absence of that stimulation that hitherto had drawn the attention. This absence evokes, without necessarily fulfilling, the apparition of silence. And whilst that silence may not be absolute, for the period that we perceive it as such, it shares the same preclusive relationship to music and noise that absolute silence would. If – rightly or not – ‘silence’ is being *perceived*, then music and/or noise simultaneously cannot be. From the opposite perspective, too, this remains the case. As Cage or AMM’s ‘silences’ lengthen, and their audiences begin to perceive sounds, music, or noise of any kind, then definitively ‘silence’ has discontinued.

There is one further relationship between silence and music that should be observed, and which again challenge Attali’s assumptions. In this analysis, I have identified both ‘silence’ and ‘apparent silence’ as structuring and dynamic effects: distinct entities or, at least, individual components within the language of musical expression. As such, these ‘silences’ may also be understood simply as ‘music’ themselves. They serve a timbral, dynamic and durational role as much as any instrument or voice, within a greater scheme of musical construction. In these terms, then, ‘silence’ may have a perceptual existence, but not a conceptual one. It is effectively subsumed by ‘music’.

Silence is an auditory phenomenon of several perceptual and/or conceptual shades. What Attali is incorrect in assuming, however, is that ‘silence’ is *fundamentally* comparable either to ‘music’ or ‘noise’, or that ‘silence’ may *qualify* what we hear as ‘music’ or ‘noise’.

## Ambient Sounds

Both Merriam and Attali's models of the sound world omit one key component: one that is distinct from music, noise and silence, but which may encompass each of them. I will not deal with (what I have called) 'ambient sounds' at any length here. I would, however, emphasise that an understanding of the criteria by which they are defined is likewise vital to an understanding of the criteria that define music and noise.

Ambient sound equates to the sound world in its entirety. All humanly audible stimuli identify and are produced by some aspect of the physical environment. Music, noise and silence, in this sense, are merely specialised sub-species of ambient sound. What differentiates these quantities is our relative *perception* or *conception* of them. Of the two kinds of 'apparent silence', one (that of 'Love Me Do') functions at face value as a dynamic and textural contrast. The other (that of 4'33") serves to question silence's ultimate untenability, and the nature of what occurs in its place. For the purposes of human cognition, it is difficult to separate entirely the complimentary processes of perception and conception. What may be suggested is that different kinds of experience place greater emphasis on either one or the other of these cognitive functions. Of the examples above, the 'silence' in 'Love Me Do' depends more on perception, and the 'silence' of 4'33" on conception.

Essentially, this is also the difference between ambient sounds and the more specifically defined 'music' and 'noise'. Ambient sounds are those that we perceive 'at face value'. They are the product or by-product of some physical process, and representative to us only *of* that process. We do not, as such, attribute any further abstract, cultural significance to them; merely we are content to recognise the sounds made by traffic, the weather, a dripping tap or a tweeting bird. Conversely, as I will



discuss in the next section, ‘music’ and ‘noise’ are fundamentally, definitively and solely abstract conceptions of a cultural origin.

Both Merriam and Attali’s depictions of the sound world make basic categorical distinctions, but neither pursues them far enough. Merriam contrasts ‘music’ and ‘non-music’ – not without validity – by noting the conceptual nature of their dissimilarity. ‘Non-music’ by itself, though, is too simplistic a term. He further qualifies non-music as ‘noise’, however: the subject on which Attali focuses. But there is reason to suggest a discrepancy in their respective interpretations of the term. Merriam seems to imply ‘noise’ in the sense that I describe ‘ambient sounds’, i.e. that it is distinguished from ‘music’ according to perceptual and/or conceptual emphasis. Attali’s breakdown of ‘non-music’ illustrates a greater complexity than Merriam’s model, but still lacks certain areas of clarity. I have already discussed Attali’s ‘silence’ at length, and also identified his probable interpretation of ‘noise’ (as a subjective quantity, rather than just a synonym for ‘a sound’). Cumulatively, Attali’s sound world is problematic because it is too narrowly defined in some aspects, but too broadly in others. Merriam’s ‘non-music’, meanwhile, inadequately reflects the potential scope, variation and inflections of extra-musical sound.

Like silence, ambient sounds may be appropriated into ‘music’ or ‘noise’: respectively, for example as atmospheric sound effects, or by causing distraction or discomfort. In these contexts though, they too become conceptualised and changed, into ‘music’ or ‘noise’ themselves. Of greater significance are the characteristics by which these phenomena exclude one another. Ambient sound bears the most immediate comparison to absolute silence, as each presents literally an acoustic effect of the physical world. Without further abstract meaning or cultural subtext, they share properties that render them mutually exclusive against music and noise. For the

reasons that music and/or noise precluded silence (and vice versa), their compatibility with ambient sound is precluded also. If one is being perceived, then the other simultaneously cannot be.

By defining them as literally indicative and independent of cultural perspective, of course, ambient sounds too are a concept in a sense. But it is the concept – the understanding, perversely – that these sounds are *not conceptualised*, but literally perceived data that identifies music and noise as something other.

## Music, musicality & noise

Although ultimately revealing crucial flaws in their conception, Merriam and Attali's models of the sound world better define the context of this thesis' central concern: the contentious nature and status of free improvisation. There is marked similarity between Merriam and Attali's terminology and juxtapositions, and that of the practitioners and critics of the genre that I noted at the beginning of this chapter. A conflict of perspective is apparent, and not only over the propriety of individual terms. More fundamentally, questions are being raised over the respective values of those terms.

Regardless of the rationale or practical processes involved, it is ultimately the sound(s) that the British free improvisers made to which Eddie Prévost's and AMM's critics and Richard Williams responded as they did.<sup>65</sup> Auditory experience has so far been divided into four categories: music, noise, silence and ambient sounds. Therefore, the auditory experience that defines free improvisation is implicitly also named and conceptualised amongst them. On the evidence already presented, it is reasonable to dismiss 'silence' as a likely candidate. Free improvisation clearly entails

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<sup>65</sup> Respectively, that free improvisation 'was not music', that 'we may prefer to call it something other than music' and that '[it] has turned into noise'.



a considerable degree of sonic activity of at least *some* kind, and where ‘apparent silences’ have been employed, they tend to do so in the context of ‘tacet improvising’. ‘Silence’ is simply not a logical option here.

The category of ‘ambient sound’ is more promising and may, as I have suggested, broadly subsume all sub-divisions of the sound world. AMM’s improvisations are particularly textural in approach. These textures, for example, often comprise amplified explorations of various metal or wooden surfaces. And if the sound sources that they present are *too* literally representative and lacking in further connotation, it is conceivable that AMM’s playing could be qualified as merely ‘ambient sounds’. There is, though, a factor that discounts this reasoning. By both the deliberate performative nature of free improvisation and the manner of its aesthetic reception (either pro- or anti-), it is difficult to equate the phenomenon only to arbitrariness or functionality. The sound of free improvisation, it would appear, implies more than just a perceptual experience.

At the centre of debate is the binary opposition of ‘music’ versus ‘noise’, and the question of either term’s propriety as a description of free improvisation. But as such, there are already assumptions being made as to what the values of ‘music’ and ‘noise’ *themselves* define. These assumptions – and the fact that they *are* only assumptions – go largely unchallenged, because ‘music’ and ‘noise’ hold the currency of being ‘everyday’ terms, under no dispute of their own. This potentially problematic terminology, however, needs to be qualified more accurately than it is.

I have demonstrated already that ‘music’ and ‘noise’ share a degree of conceptual compatibility with one another, which is not the case with ‘silence’ or ‘ambient sounds’. But there are still quantitative – as well as qualitative – differences between them. The immediate task of this section then, is to establish a theoretical

basis for my discussion of music, via a demonstration of that which can be said to be *musical*. Music, self-evidently, has governed the research and development of my thesis. My understanding of free improvisation is, and has been, in terms of a musical phenomenon of some kind. In this section, I will illustrate the conceptual criteria that have defined ‘music’, in order to justify my analyses and perspective on the subject.

## Musicality

Musicality reflects the conceptual leap between ‘ambient sound’ and ‘music’: the process of realising the abstract in physically sensible form. For this to be possible, the medium of *sound* – in which music functions – is requisite. As a function of human perception and conception, music is intrinsically artificial. In ‘musicality’, therefore, is the suggestion of the humanly rationalised manipulation of sound. Michael Nyman,<sup>66</sup> Peter F. Ostwald<sup>67</sup> and Chris Cutler<sup>68</sup> have listed physical properties and malleable qualities of sound that may be manipulated to create music. Between them they cite pitch, timbre, texture, attack/duration/decay, density, continuity, volume, dynamics, ‘sliding’, ‘wavering’ and overlap.<sup>69</sup> Each of these is both a physically defined and physically accessible term. While they all describe elemental musical devices however, by their literal functionality they are not specifically representative of ‘music’ as such. More so, these terms are descriptive of ambient sound(s), but with the possibility of referring to musical ones. There is, though, a significant exception in the list, ‘pitch’, which transcends and usefully

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<sup>66</sup> Nyman, p. 107.

<sup>67</sup> Peter F. Ostwald, *The Semiotics of Human Sound* (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1973), p. 178.

<sup>68</sup> Chris Cutler, *File Under Popular. Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music* (London: ReR Megacorp, 1991), p. 32n.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. also Cage, *Silence*, p. 9, who describes ‘five determinants: frequency or pitch, amplitude or loudness, overtone structure or timbre, duration, and morphology [i.e. the attack/duration/decay envelope]’.



illustrates the difference between our perception and conception of music. It also helps to explain the sensible expression of ‘music’ via ‘musicality’.

The terms ‘pitch’, ‘rhythm’, ‘melody’ and ‘harmony’ are central to our organisation and understanding of music. Scruton calls them ‘core musical experiences.’<sup>70</sup> Effectively, they are dimensions of the sound world. Unlike those other qualities listed above, they structure specifically *musical* sound. Pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony function in both abstract and material contexts, encompassing physical variations of potentially any sound, but also implying the conceptual patterns and functions of musical structure. In a reciprocal partnership, music is inseparable from the qualities of pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony: neither can be conceived or invoked without allusion to the other.

Composer Howard Goodall notes a fundamental consistency throughout musical history, concerning the materials from which musical instruments, and therefore music, have been made.<sup>71</sup> All sounds that we hear, regardless of origin or character, are derived from variations of the physical criteria suggested by Nyman, Ostwald, Cutler and Cage. Analogously, while the materials used to construct musical instruments also vary, the processes by which they are made to emit sound are strictly limited. There are four basic types of acoustic instrument. The idiophone produces sound via the resonance or friction of a solid body; the membranophone adds a taut membrane as the playing surface; the chordophone delineates stringed instruments; and aerophones function on the basis of the movement of air.<sup>72</sup> From these principles, all subsequent musical instruments have been developed and refined.<sup>73</sup> All that we

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<sup>70</sup> Scruton, p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> Howard Goodall, *Big Bangs* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (London: J M Dent & Sons, 1978), pp. 455–467.

<sup>73</sup> Hugh Davies makes an important further distinction (though it does not affect the overall argument): ‘All the basic principles of instruments were discovered in prehistoric times [...]. Except one:

hear as ‘music’, too, ultimately consists of the same materials and properties as ambient sound. But they are transformed by reference to the concepts, patterns and juxtapositions of pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony.

The terms themselves have become specialised allusions today. Predominantly, in our culture, this is derived from the technical and aesthetic refinements that define – and were defined *by* – Western classical music. (Despite much insightful and comprehensive analysis, the potency of Scruton’s *Aesthetics of Music* is ultimately compromised by too rigorous a devotion to these same standards). Globally the Western tradition exerts colossal influence over what is, or is not, regarded as ‘musical’. It holds an elevated cultural status as a model of achievement, organisation, efficiency, elegance and emotive power, based on the triumphs and reputations of its most feted practitioners. The tradition, too, has refined pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony into self-contained, self-supporting, logical and incremental processes and systems. *Refinements* they are, though.<sup>74</sup>

Whilst in place for longer than any living memory, these conventions of Western music date back no further than a few centuries: a tiny fraction of humanity’s (musical) life. Pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony have accrued precise values and roles in modern use. However, that they have been refined to their current specifications must also indicate the existence of earlier, more elemental forms of the

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electricity’, in *The Sound World, Instruments and Music of Luigi Russolo* <<http://www.l-m-c.org.uk/texts/russolo/html>> [accessed 27 August 2003]. Sachs, too, describes the *electrophones*, which he classifies as either the ‘electromechanical’ or the ‘radioelectric’ (Sachs, p. 467). But Davies, again, updates the idea, distinguishing ‘electroacoustic’, ‘electromechanical’ and ‘electronic’ instruments, in his article ‘New Musical Instruments in the Computer Age: Amplified Performance Systems and Related Examples of Low-level Technology’, in *Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought, Volume 1*, ed. by John Paynter, Tim Howell, Richard Orton and Peter Seymour (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 500-513 (pp. 501-502). See also the section on Edgard Varèse in Chapter Three, and various entries in Appendix One.

<sup>74</sup> When I refer to ‘Western music’ (as I will, many times) I do so – unless specifically stated otherwise – as shorthand: not merely for the ‘classical’ ‘European art music’ tradition that it often denotes, but also the many contemporaneous and/or subsequent forms of music associated with Western society. The ‘classical’ connotation is vital, however: as the *source* of those definitive refinements by which the vast majority of our music has been made possible in the form that it has.



principles they represent. Deriving from the aesthetic conceptualisation of ambient sounds, music flourished for many centuries without the Western classical canon to define it. Conceivably then, the subsidiary concepts of pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony were also derived from objective, acoustic effects and properties, which were extant prior to any singular cultural reinterpretation. It is in these circumstances, perhaps, that a more complete and inclusive model of human musicality might be found.

Derek Bailey proposes that ‘mankind’s first musical performance couldn’t have been anything other than a free improvisation’.<sup>75</sup> It is not my intention – nor presumably Bailey’s – to imply that prehistoric humans were performing the music of AMM or the SME (or vice versa). What seems less likely still, however, is that they played anything akin to the music of Beethoven (to use an obvious example). Bailey alludes to a period of crucial psychological development for early humanity, when the sound world was expanded beyond the arbitrariness and functionality of the natural environment. (The reasons for the emergence of music are an anthropological study in itself, and not one that I intend to make here.)<sup>76</sup> The appearance of music is based on a convergence: of the awareness of aesthetic, ritualistic or expressive connotations to otherwise abstract sounds, with an understanding and development of the means to physically effect them. And writing of the free improvisation of another era, Eddie Prévost is evocative of the conditions that prehistoric humankind may have explored. He describes ‘direct engagement of musician with musician, musician with materials, musician with environment’<sup>77</sup> and furthermore, ‘sounds [...] placed in contrast to, in

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<sup>75</sup> Bailey, p. 83.

<sup>76</sup> But see, for example, Nils. L Wallin, Bjorn Merker, Steven Brown (eds.), *The Origins of Music* (London: MIT Press, 2001).

<sup>77</sup> Prévost, p. 67.

parallel to, in imitation of, in respect of, without regard to, other sounds'.<sup>78</sup> The prehistoric musicians' and the free improvisers' mutual concerns are well represented here: the process of *making* music (from scratch).

The Western tradition functions by virtue of *being* a tradition. It relies upon standardised, extant musical materials from which to customise more elaborate structures and variations. Musicologist E.M. von Hornbostel, though, has suggested that early musical organisation was inclusive but localised, 'determined by the physical properties of instruments and by "extramusical" considerations: [...] there was neither need nor occasion to establish systems of stable tones [i.e. precise pitch values] and intervals.'<sup>79</sup> This also seems to reflect the practices of the free improvisers. In either scenario, pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony are actively engaged as much as in any Western piece. The difference lies within the calibration of the respective musical systems. Compared to the measured order of Western scales, for example, those of prehistory or free improvisation are of imprecise or indeterminate ratios. A prehistoric musician or free improviser needs only to follow the self-determined logic of the current passage they are playing. In the Western tradition, meanwhile, a failure to comply with its established, precise and exacting standards by its own definition results in a 'failure' of (the) music itself.

To return to the 'not music' comments of free improvisation's critics: the performances that they had found so disconcerting were not lacking in 'musical' content itself. What *may* be said is that the pitches, rhythms, melodies and harmonies on display did not compliment each other, develop, or achieve greater 'logical' structure in the familiar Western sense. Although, effectively, its musical refinements

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<sup>78</sup> Prévost, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Stephen Blum, 'European Musical Terminology and the Music of Africa' in *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music. Essays on the History of Ethnomusicology*, ed. by Bruno Nettl and Philip V. Bohlman, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 11.



are singular and arbitrary, the music of the Western tradition is inconceivable without them. Music itself, though, as an invention of our prehistoric past, cannot have been dependent on modern innovations.

When Bailey invokes a ‘free improvisation’ in the prehistoric context, it is as the only available option for creating music. Musicality was being defined, or considered, then for the first time, and can only have been so without recourse to the kinds of stylistic, intellectual, technical and technological precedents upon which the Western *tradition* relies. Human sensibilities developed during this period, in a manner to which Cage’s 4’33” alludes in microcosm. And with even a rudimentary concept of musicality, ‘music’ became available to the willing participant unrestricted by prior assumptions of prejudice or precedent.<sup>80</sup> Albeit for different reasons, the prehistoric musicians, 4’33” and the free improvisers all refute a certain conservatism: the unilateral modern distinction between what is ‘musical’ and what is not. Nevertheless, refined or otherwise, music must still comprise *some* kind of audible source materials.

## Pitch, rhythm, melody, harmony & tonality

One further concept, ‘tonality’, can be added to the list of core musical experiences: a concept with a specific relevance to refined systems such as that of the Western tradition. It makes use of the system’s precision and symmetry of ratio, emphasising certain pitches and patterns of interval (between pitches). Although a piece may start on any note of the octave, a sense of structural significance and developmental logic is achieved by sequences of pitches that are, at length, cyclical. Thus, they create an impression of motion, resolution and repetition. To an audience familiar with a

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<sup>80</sup> The former, perhaps more pertinent to Cage’s audiences or the free improvisers, the latter to the prehistoric humans.

particular tonal system, the effect is comparable to that of a linear literary narrative: it enables the perception of ‘beginning, middle and end’, as well as the subtleties of progression from one to the next. And in such a tradition, it is the recognition of a piece’s sense of logic that influences the aesthetic and/or intellectual response of the audience.

By its Western definition, tonality is cumulative and proportionately complex. Without exactitude, its effects become unworkable in the familiar sense. Roy Travis, however, has proffered a less rigid model: a tonality whose ‘motion unfolds through time a particular [pitch], interval or chord’.<sup>81</sup> What he appears to suggest is that an initial musical stimulus might be allowed to be developed according to arbitrary or individual interpretation, rather than by a merely systematic response. Scruton is dismissive of this, his briefest of contentions being that Travis’ tonality ‘excludes virtually nothing’ (i.e. that it allows for almost any successive outcome to legitimately be called ‘music’).<sup>82</sup> The terms of Travis’ tonality, though, are useful to the reconciliation of prehistoric and contemporary free improvisation. As a sub-concept of music, tonality is also inherently artificial: a *deliberate* ‘motion through time’. It entails a conscious process of extrapolation, which emphasises the initial stimulus (the pitch, interval or chord) as its focus and impetus. It does not appear to presume a specific result, or even the exact manner of its development.

But – to address the terminology – Western tonality denotes the progressive and directional momentum of a piece, derived from implicit structural and developmental ordering within it. Objectively, the schemes that decide the progressions and momentum are arbitrary and illusory. But to a culture that recognises and accepts the logic of its indigenous tonal system, the reference to and

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Scruton, p. 239: originally from ‘Towards a New Concept of Tonality’, *Journal of Music Theory*, 3 (1959), p. 26.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*



fulfilment of its expected patterns evokes informed and ordered navigation towards an expected destination. In lieu of such extant and familiar signposts, however – either by design (Cage, the free improvisers) or historical circumstance (prehistoric humanity) – the subjective, ‘guiding’ function of tonality must derive from elsewhere.

Tonality metaphorically represents the potential and parameters that direct and define a piece of music. It acknowledges subjective choice, logic and resources all as potential influences. In the free improvising scenario, this broadly derives from those players who are participating.<sup>83</sup> Tonality – in Travis’ definition, and regardless of the precise nature of the music’s developmental impetus – conceptually precludes the suggestion of a-musicality; like the melodies and harmonies that it orders, ‘tonality’ is *not* a quality attributable to ambient sound. The term is nowadays culturally entrenched in associations with the Western tradition. But, by implication, the abstract concept that it represents is more fundamental to ‘music’ and ‘musicality’ than formalised interpretations may concede.

I have suggested that pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony, whilst ultimately abstract ideas, have become culturally specialised and specific in today’s common usage. Yet they may also be reduced to their bases in human perceptions of physical phenomena. I return, for example, to a sympathetically received performance of *4’33”*, when the ‘apparent silence’ has passed and the audience are becoming aware of the actual detail of their sonic environment. Ambient sounds are being physically perceived, but (under Cage’s influence) are psychologically conceived as ‘music’ as well. There is perhaps an unconscious comparison taking place in the audience, between the available ambient sound and the characteristics by which ‘music’ is familiar to them. The working mechanisms of the air-conditioning, someone sniffing,

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<sup>83</sup> Specifically, it is acceptance from the perspective of the listener (that what is happening *is* ‘musical’) that holds this authority. In an interactive, improvisational context, however, a contributing/responding player is also to some degree ‘audience’.

and a door banging somewhere outside, for example, may be the only perceptibly apparent sounds. But from these too, it may be possible to conceive events, fluctuations and patterns of the same essential physical kind as those that denote pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony. Genuinely arbitrary ambient sounds might yet be heard for their resemblance to music, and consequently accepted as much. If this is the case, then the ‘musical’ experience in progress would be at a considerable remove from that which the Western tradition usually endorses.

The precise calibrations and components of the tradition have gauged the musical language of our culture – what *is* and *is not* ‘music’ – for the last three centuries. Foremost amongst the refinements and standardisations are those concerning pitch. As composer Howard Goodall describes,<sup>84</sup> fundamental to Western music is the series of select pitches said to be of ‘Equal Temperament’: the octave range of twelve tones and semi-tones exemplified in the construction, tuning and arrangement of a piano keyboard. Regularity of pitch and interval is intrinsic to the functioning of Western tonality, and, accordingly, the series of Equally Tempered pitch values has its basis in multiples, factors and symmetry. There is a degree of approximation intrinsic to Equal Temperament, though. The acoustic frequency values of its pitches have in fact been subtly ‘rounded off’ from their natural forms, into more convenient integers. This allowed Equal Temperament to be defined in its idealised form, and enabled its workable ratios of pitch and interval relationships. But what the regularity of ratio also compensates for is the practical difficulty of always achieving Equal Temperament just so; even if tuning up to a reference pitch that is strictly a little off ‘Equal’, a group of musicians may still tune up *relatively* to it and remain ‘in tune’ unto each other. Nevertheless, the achievement, standard and, at

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<sup>84</sup> Goodall, pp. 101-134.



least, semblance of Equal Temperament has been established by repetition and cultural ubiquity to the point that we accept and expect it axiomatically. We ‘now hear all music through the filter of Equal Temperament’ as Goodall notes.<sup>85</sup> But to consider ‘pitch’ *literally*, can illustrate an inconsistency of values that has deeply affected our assessment and identification of inherent musicality.

Once more, the key difference is between that of perception and of conception. Pitch – in the sense that Nyman, Ostwald and Cutler refer to it – denotes a physical quality of sound. It is a variable quality too, that we commonly describe and compare as a spatial metaphor; we compare how relatively ‘high’ or ‘low’ a pitch is. This is expressed further by a greater or lesser numerical value, which we measure in Hertz: the unit of sound waves’ frequency of vibration. Pitch, in this context, is an acoustic dimension, governed by a sound’s physical source and the medium of its transmission. All sounds, therefore, are of a certain pitch as much as any solid object will be of a certain weight. Pitch then, even in its barest physical terms, seems to be a logical prerequisite of any concept of ‘musicality’. Within the spectrum of humanly audible sound, it identifies and quantifies (individual) pitches both as isolated phenomena, and in relation to one another. But formalised tonal traditions have imposed subjective limitations on this idea. In musical terms, ‘pitch’ no longer merely represents movement within one dimension of sound. Rather, it has been re-rationalised, and confined to the connotation of a limited number of pitches, standardised and set in their frequency values.<sup>86</sup> *These* pitches have become those of ‘musical’ value, at the expense of others.

Tonality shapes and restricts the choice of pitches from which melodies and harmonies are assembled. But the Western tradition (for example) has formalised

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<sup>85</sup> Goodall, p. 131.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. the notion of *perfect pitch*: an individual’s ability to correctly identify and/or sing any of the Western standardised tones without an external audible point of reference.

these constructions too, to levels of arbitrary complexity and subjective legitimacy. It is not only the pitches that fall outside of Equal Temperament that are generally excluded from Western melody and harmony either. Many combinations and progressions of even these favoured pitches are deemed undesirable also.<sup>87</sup> Like pitch, though, melody and harmony likewise seem to derive from phenomena that are intrinsically physical. Without recourse to specific cultural definitions of ‘pitch’ or ‘tonality’, melody and harmony are distinguished primarily only by chronological organisation. ‘Melody’, objectively, refers to nothing but a sequence of pitches that occurs successively, and ‘harmony’ to those sounding simultaneously. Though Western classical aesthetics might disagree, the SME’s (atomistic) improvisation may be described as fundamentally ‘melodic’, and AMM’s (laminar style) fundamentally ‘harmonic’, in this respect.

Music’s remaining core experience – rhythm – shares characteristics with both pitch and tonality. As with pitch, *a sense of rhythm* can logically be reduced to an awareness of, and the ability to differentiate within, one dimension of the physical sound world. But where pitch relativises the audible frequencies of sound, then rhythm denotes a perception of the passage of time. Again though, the spectrum of rhythm has been incrementally formalised in order to facilitate a self-supporting and exclusive paradigm of ‘musicality’. The redefinition of rhythm, however, is subtly different to that of pitch. Equal Temperament is defined by a series of pitches, each of specific and fixed frequency. Though these values have intervals of regular ratio between them, it is the value of the individual pitch (i.e. that it is culturally ‘in tune’) that is considered of primary importance. The elemental units of rhythm, however,

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<sup>87</sup> For example: ‘In traditional tonal music theory, the tritone – so named because it spans three whole steps or tones [...] – is classed among the most dissonant of the thirteen fundamental intervals in music. [...] Because of its searingly harsh, problematic sound, the tritone was called the *diabolus in musica* (“the devil in music”) by medieval theorists, and some forbade its use entirely’. Tamm, p. 78.



function conversely. It is not the value of each beat that has become standardised, but the duration of the 'rest' between them. (One rest, in other words, will typically have a 1:1 ratio to the one either side of it.) Rhythm is juxtaposed over a (physically stated or implicitly counted) matrix of regularly spaced 'beats'. The expression of rhythm over time – i.e. across the assumed beat matrix – is a four-tiered process. The first, most basic, level of rhythm is that of the unaccented beats themselves; the second is the 'pulse'. This represents the lowest common denominator of *accented* beats and reflects again simple, but emphases corresponding between the beat matrix and the phrase that overlays it. The beats' chronological value may then be subdivided by accents of regular and recurring numerical increment, to give the piece its 'metre'. And over this rudimentary but distinct rhythmical pattern, more elaborate and intricate emphases and subdivisions of the metre are superimposed. They combine into longer-form phrases of successive articulation and spacing, which comprise '*the rhythm*' *per se*. Without the temporal displacement of selected pitches via 'rhythm', a 'melody line' would consist only of those pitches sounding in unison. The layered structures of pulse, metre and rhythm establish the basis of duration, character and continuity for a piece of music, and create a framework of supportive repetition, contrast and/or inflection against which melody and harmony may function. Like pitch, formalisation has attributed a uniform, incremental calibration to the concept of 'rhythm'. The physical phenomenon that rhythm represents, however, implies or imposes no such distinction.

A piece (or a distinct sub-section of a piece) of music, then, will be said overall to have *a* rhythm: a summation of its recurring points of emphasis. Typically this is understood and expressed by reference to both the metre – which is stated numerically as the 'time signature'– *and* the characteristic rhythmic patterns that

overlay it.<sup>88</sup> (It may also be evoked by the nomenclature of a musical form with its own generic rhythmic association, such as ‘waltz’ or ‘bossa nova’, etc.) And in this respect, there are also similarities between the rhythm and the tonality of a given piece. Both are organisational devices by which that piece’s structure, linear development and ‘legitimate’ musical parameters are determined (in the dimensions, respectively, of time and pitch). If it is to exist as a physically sensible experience, then music *has* to function on these terms. Without pitch, there is no auditory stimulus, and without rhythmic event, nothing has actually occurred at all.

By their cultivated exclusiveness, Western rhythm and tonality function successfully on their own terms. A music such as free improvisation, however, becomes immediately problematic under such restrictions. To play to a prescribed tonal progression or specific rhythmic pattern must, to some extent, pre-empt the *creative* musicality of the performer. Their interpretative involvement and vocabulary becomes effectively limited, in order that they remain ‘correct’ by the conventions of the tradition. Tonality, I have suggested, is ultimately a metaphor to describe the process and parameters of musical extrapolation; it is the decision to consciously legitimise a particular co-incidence or succession of pitches. And in its most essential form – exemplified by 4’33” – rhythm can be understood in a similar manner. It represents no more than the decision to make ‘musical’ sounds at a deliberate and aesthetically significant point in time. It is choosing *when* to make ‘music’ (happen).

## ‘Music’ & ‘Noise’

It has been claimed that free improvisation (or, specifically, the audible results of the free improvisers’ performances) is ‘not music’, although its practitioners tend to

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<sup>88</sup> Though it is more complex in construction than metre, the rhythm will also suggest its own recurrent pattern with staggered incremental points of emphasis, analogous to those of a tonal melody line.



dispute the claim. The term 'noise' has been used instead to describe the phenomenon. Such forthright contradiction, over ostensibly everyday ideas like 'music' and 'noise', calls into question the criteria by which each term is being ascribed.

Deconstruction identifies this kind of contention in terms of a binary opposition. Both 'music' and 'noise' are seemingly sensible experiences and definable concepts in their own right. Individually they are absolute, and by their purported natures, mutually exclusive. As such, Western philosophy might categorise each as a 'metaphysical' point of reference: irreducible and characteristically unique. But the matter is still manifestly problematic on two fronts. Whilst 'music' and 'noise' are apparently diametrically opposed, they cannot entirely be separated. At the very least, each is a relative value. Imbued with their own particular defining characteristics, each is nevertheless still partially defined by the other, in terms of its absence or diminishing relevance. What is implicit here is that the two concepts are also of some mutual interdependence, contrary to their apparent opposition. There is a wider context that both divides, but also unites, these terms. Practically, this schism has been demonstrated by the examples of Eddie Prévost, Richard Williams and Evan Parker, who, whilst all referring to the same phenomena, in the same language, during the same era, nevertheless categorised free improvisation as 'music' or 'noise' or 'either or both' respectively. The following analysis will discuss the nature of this discrepancy, and the ramifications that it poses for the aesthetic consideration of British free improvisation.

I have suggested that a 'wider context' is exerting influence on, and ultimately subsuming, the music/noise opposition. This is discernible in the contextual compatibility of the terms, even when they remain semantically divided. The

description of free improvisation as ‘noise’ implicitly also refers to an idea of ‘music’: the criteria of which have been inadequately fulfilled. Rather than as metaphysical opposites then, it is more useful to consider music and noise as facets of a single phenomenon. Ambient sounds and silence, ultimately, are not dependent on, and do not aspire to, metaphysical status. They are, as distinct entities, objective, scientifically measurable *physical* phenomena. We interpret them literally as acoustic stimuli, of primarily perceptual – rather than conceptual – emphasis. ‘Music’ and ‘noise’ cannot fit into this category, because they are human conceptualisations. The physically generative sources of sound may be the same, but ‘music’ and ‘noise’ imply an added context of abstract meaning to the experience. What is generally overlooked is the extent to which these ‘meanings’ are extra-musical, humanly rationalised concepts, which persist only by implicit consensus from the same source.

Music and noise, then, function in the wider context of subjectively interpreted and defined sound. This makes their apparent metaphysical status seem dubious. Metaphysics is based on the assumption of irreducible, unambiguous, and universally constant paradigms. In relation to free improvisation however, the contentious use of both ‘music’ and ‘noise’ illustrates an ambiguity in its definitive nature and/or a subjective interpretational influence upon the debate. Music and noise’s metaphysical statuses seem increasingly doubtful, and this places interrogative pressure on the validity – or at least, the unquestionable values – of the ideas that they purport to represent.

The disparaging commentary of free improvisation’s critics implicitly invokes comparison to a metaphysical ‘music’, a comparison in which free improvisation is found wanting. Free improvisation’s critics clearly did not enjoy their encounters. Although presenting all the familiar trappings of a musical event – i.e. players,



instruments, audience, performance and a performance space – they still did not experience ‘music’, not even ‘unusual’, ‘badly performed’ or ‘unpleasant’ music. This stated lack of musicality represents not only an aesthetic, but also an intellectual and empirical, response. Lytton and Prévost have described their respective group’s sounds as ‘very harsh’<sup>89</sup> and ““difficult””<sup>90</sup> during that era, and AMM’s *The Crypt* or Parker and Lytton’s *Three Other Stories*<sup>91</sup> depict the kind of sounds to which Richard Williams and Prévost’s anonymous critics were responding. (See, again, Appendix One, Examples 2 – 2.1.c & 3 – 3.1.w) Demonstrably, in either case, there were no *tunes*. No structuring harmonic progressions emerge; no obvious rhythmic or melodic patterns coalesce; references to familiar genres are vague or distorted. And despite even the improvisers’ openly demonstrative gesture, of assembling before an audience and ‘performing’ with (mostly traditional) *musical instruments*,<sup>92</sup> the critics still felt a deficiency in the basic ‘musical’ content that they had anticipated. I considered earlier the possibility that ‘noise’ may be treated as casually synonymous with ‘sound’, as an objective term for any auditory stimulus: *a* noise. There are, in a sense, instances of physical noise. Noise may be electronic, a signal that interrupts the flow of information, for example; acoustically, it may refer to random combinations of sound frequencies, such as ‘white noise’,<sup>93</sup> which likewise are of an unruly or unhelpful nature. But even these seem to correspond to the wider sense of ‘noise’, which implies negative connotations and subjectivity of interpretation. In the essay ‘The Aesthetics of Noise’, Torben Sangild notes that ‘[e]tymologically, the term “noise” [...] refers to

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<sup>89</sup> BBC Radio 3. *Lines Burnt In Light. The Music of Evan Parker: Part Two*. Broadcast 3 April 2004.

<sup>90</sup> Sleeve note to AMM. *The Crypt – 12<sup>th</sup> June 1968: The Complete Session*. 1992. 2xCD. MRCD05

<sup>91</sup> Evan Parker & Paul Lytton. *Three Other Stories (1971-1974)*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4002

<sup>92</sup> Which, although often played unconventionally or, sometimes, of uncommon type themselves, would still voice timbres broadly associated with, or evocative of, ‘music’ in our culture.

<sup>93</sup> Indeed, there are different ‘colours’ of noise, differentiated by the kinds of frequencies that comprise them. Many modern synthesisers include ‘noise generators’, that reproduce these variants of ‘noise’, and make them available for musical manipulation. Though ‘noise’ is referenced by name, however, such musical use automatically necessitates an opposition-breaking reassessment, absorbing the ‘noise’ into ‘music’. (See also my discussions of ‘silence’ and ‘ambient sound’).

states of aggression, alarm and tension and [also] to powerful sound phenomena in nature such as storm, thunder and the roaring sea'.<sup>94</sup> This description, in its latter part, accounts for the other common use of 'noise', referring to sounds of specifically high volume. Such a definition of the 'noisy' though, detracts from its more fundamental meaning. The physical volume of a sound is less significant to its status as 'noise' than its effect upon human sensibilities. It is not just that a thunderstorm is loud, for example, but that it is loud to the extent that it is perceived as unpleasant, disturbing or potentially threatening. Noise does not necessarily need to be loud. John Cage's experience in the anechoic chamber, unable to escape the sounds of his own bodily processes, suggests the contrasting example of tinnitus,<sup>95</sup> as a specifically *quiet* noise. Literally of minimal volume itself, the condition may nevertheless prove intensely unpleasant and disruptive for the sufferer.<sup>96</sup> Conversely, an environment densely layered with high volume sounds – such as a stadium sporting or musical event – may be experienced as circumstantially appropriate and exhilarating by those involved, rather than just 'noisy'. 'Noise' is inherently intrusive upon the *status quo* of the listener's (environmental, aesthetic, cultural or experiential) expectations and perceptions. Although it functions as a component of the sound world, it is not representative of physical qualities as such. 'Noise' is defined by circumstance alone, and ultimately the individual sensibilities of those experiencing it.

By this criterion, Richard Williams' judgment of Parker & Lytton's improvisation as merely 'noise' stands beyond reasonable reproach. The subjective experience and response of the individual cannot be denied to him or her. What is problematic is the assumption of Williams or Prévost's critic that they were

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<sup>94</sup> Sangild, Torben, 'The Aesthetics of Noise' <<http://www.ubu.com/papers/noise.html>> [accessed 19 October 2004]

<sup>95</sup> The medical complaint, which manifests as a sustained and distracting 'ringing in the ears' without direct, present, external stimulus.

<sup>96</sup> Sangild also notes the etymological derivation of 'noise' from *nausea*.



expressing an objective criticism. To consider the sound of free improvisation as 'noisy' is the prerogative of any audience member; but to dismiss it entirely as 'not music' (or definitively as 'noise') is more difficult to sustain. It is both to deny the free improvisers their subjectivity, as well as to allude to an objective conception of 'music' that is logically untenable. The comments inaccurately presuppose the values associated with the terms of their argument, and neglect the inherent conflict of perspective between physical, ostensibly metaphysical, and subjective experiences. To equate the *sound* of free improvisation with the characteristics of 'noise' is to repeat the error of Jacques Attali's mismatch of silence with music and noise: it incorrectly assumes that a set of physical phenomena may be directly compared to an abstract concept. But there are deeper complications, too, to the debate here.

The 'not music' claims imply that further distinctions are being made. 'Music' (a concept) is being compared with 'noise' (a concept), but 'noise' (the concept) is also being used to rationalise one specific and personal experience of 'noise'. Whilst semantically related however, *concept* and *experience* are not automatically interchangeable. In the process of comparison, the 'noise' experience of free improvisation's critics is being elevated and equated to an authoritative, metaphysical status. Simultaneously, the assumption is being made that since an individual experience of 'noise' corresponds to the conceptual definition of 'noise', then a reciprocal effect must also be present: that the experience accurately embodies the concept. This misapprehension is not limited to the rationalisation of 'noise' either (which *is*, as I have suggested, ultimately defined by the individual).

Of greater significance here, are the assumptions being made regarding 'music', a subtly more complex phenomenon. Explicitly, free improvisation is being characterised by a perceived absence of 'music', although this deduction again

appears subject to the same kind of confusion. 'Music' is being alluded to as a fixed value: a metaphysically self-evident paradigm of the qualities that are 'musical', which free improvisation seemingly does not display. Again, the qualities and values of concept and experience are being too readily merged, in the assertions of free improvisation's critics.

I will continue this discussion with particular attention to two influential and interrelated factors. What I have suggested about the reciprocal exchange of meaning between concept and experience – i.e. that it occurs, defining and modifying our understanding of them both – is not specifically the area of contention. I will argue, however, that it is by a misrepresentation of the values of 'musicality' in this instance that the anti- free improvisation criticism has been presented and rationalised. To this end, I shall question the nature of the criteria by which human society/societies has/have defined 'music', and also articulate conflicts of cultural and historical perspective that render the process problematic. Though the subjective interpretation of a concept is not necessarily an incorrect one, nor does it represent a perspective of definitive authority over other potentially differing interpretations. The play of subjectivity and objectivity has a vital and inescapable role in any consideration of music, a phenomenon tempered by personalised preferences and perspectives over several strata of its conceptual organisation.

## **Subjectivity**

The particular abstract significance associated with a given example of 'music' or 'noise' may be common to a great many people. But each individual formulates the association uniquely, based on his or her own preferences, experiences and knowledge. These personal qualities, however, do not exist or function in isolation



from the wider environment. Though in effect they influence a singular interpretation of a ‘musical’ event, such interpretation is also made under an *a priori* assumption: that it is ‘music’ per se under consideration. A judgement or experience of *musical* merit, in other words, cannot be made without reference to an extant idea of *music*.

Experience, I have suggested, is qualified by its perceived correspondence to a governing concept (that basis of principles that uniquely defines a given phenomenon). It is in this respect that a concept aspires to the metaphysical, that it culminates from and represents the most essential and – crucially – ostensibly irrefutable traits of its subject. But the metaphysical concept itself cannot be considered inviolate, because of the mutual influence between concept and experience (and between concept and its presumed conceptual opposite[s]). This ultimately devalues either as a source of definitive insight. To be ‘metaphysical’, must be to go beyond the objective, physical world. This, however, leaves only that which humanity itself has abstracted and imagined to be significant. And as a rationalisation of the human mind, the concept (in this instance, ‘music’) is no more inherently immune to subjectivity than the personal experience of any individual.

Music is subjectively experienced, by reference to a hypothetically objective concept of the qualities that define it. Where this process of reconciliation is flawed, however, is that (as Julian Wolfreys puts it) it ‘mistak[es] immensity for infinity’.<sup>97</sup> A conceptual paradigm of ‘music’ can ultimately only be a relative value, distilled and agreed by human consensus. Even if humanity adopted a single, uniform model of musicality – which, demonstrably, it has not – the paradigm could still not be attributed with ‘infinite’ relevance and influence. ‘Music’ itself is fundamentally artificial, and thus subjectively defined. If it is to be categorised as unique, against

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<sup>97</sup> Wolfreys, p. 24.

other kinds of auditory experience, then it must also exclude something of those other experiences in order to remain its own uniqueness. And by exclusion, ‘music’ cannot be infinitely flexible in character. In its subjective artificiality, no inherent universal consistency can be assumed; conversely though, in order to *be* a distinct phenomenon, ‘music’ cannot exist without defining limits.

## ‘Music’, Culture & History

I have discussed pitch, rhythm, melody, harmony and tonality as essential criteria by which ‘musicality’ is effected. ‘Music’ is the abstract concept that creates context for these ideas, and it too exhibits some common foundational characteristics. First, music is sensible and intelligible solely as a component part of the sound world. It physically stimulates by means of vibration in the air, and is conceptualised in the mind’s ear as a representation of sonic activity. Second, music is inherently artificial; as it is individually conceptualised, so is it also a collective human rationalisation. This subjective conceptualising is necessarily inescapable. (Although in practice it is usually performed on purpose, ‘music’ may also be heard in arbitrary sounds, as per the example of 4’33”). Third, by the abstract significances and patterns that coalesce around ‘music’, it expressively represents in some sense the aesthetic values of (a) human culture. Where ‘noise’ is considered intrusive or disruptive upon the intelligible environment, ‘music’ reflects an implicit consensus of form, content and context for that culture whose music it is.

The criteria by which free improvisation’s critics define music *against* free improvisation appear consistent to these principles, but neglect the determining influence of relativism: the contextual play of objectively sensible sounds and subjectively generated responses. Aesthetically undesirable to its critics, free



improvisation is dismissed as 'noisy', as structurally nonsensical and culturally incompatible. By implication, it is not only quantitatively different to 'music', but qualitatively also. The former is merely sonic disturbance, the latter, 'art'. This is the distinction that seems to underlie the hostile criticism, both in the reasoning of the critics and the social conditioning that influences them. One culture's ostensibly objective concept of 'music', however, is nothing more than that culture's consensual preference. To an individual indigenous to that culture, this subjectivity may be disguised by its widespread – seemingly universal – acceptance. Nevertheless, inevitably, criticism is based on experience, a subjective interpretation of a governing concept. The concept can only, truly, be relative and subjective too. In such terms, a plainly subjective and categorical dismissal of free improvisation as 'not music' is deeply suspect.

'Music' and 'noise', as conceptual modes of production and reception, are readily opposed. Neither term, however, can be attributed solely on the basis of objective, audible qualities alone. Only a provisional and localised distinction can be made, dictated by the sensibilities of the audience present. The degree to which the distinction is 'localised' is also a pertinent consideration; it is this factor that makes the subjectivity of 'music' more oblique than that of 'noise'. 'Noise' will tend to affect only a small number of individuals at any one time, and each instance is a distinct and isolated occurrence. 'Music', on the other hand, represents the consensus of a culture. This, too, might only comprise a handful of individuals. But typically it implies far more, in increments up to and including the multi-national. In these circumstances 'music' is also often a well-established tradition. By its ubiquity and common currency, cultural perspective is specific, static over long periods and hegemonic within its own sphere of influence. It is in such a context that (Wolfreys')

‘mistaking immensity for infinity’ is prone to occur. My contention is now to challenge – but also to place into context – the assumptions made by the anti-free improvisation critics.

Eddie Prévost and his anonymous critic, for example, clearly envisage ‘music’ by reference to substantially differing concepts. Their *perspectives* wholly converge, ironically; it is their separate responses to that perspective which causes the disparity. We know that first generation British free improvisation was defined between the mid 1960s and the early 1970s, and that these musicians were primarily active in the UK, with excursions to Western Europe and the USA.<sup>98</sup> The perspective that both the free improvisers and their critics implicitly share, then, is that of the mid-Twentieth Century Western European. From a process of technical and aesthetic homogenisation over the course of centuries, Western tradition is arguably the most pervasive set of musical standards in the modern world. These standards were refined within what we now call the ‘classical’ genre, but – with certain minor stylistic variations – they now form almost exclusively the functional and aesthetic basis of our society’s music, and musical taste. The single most unifying construct is the Equally Tempered series of pitches upon which Western tradition is based. There are exceptions: sometimes the articulation of these pitches is modified, by the ‘bending’ of notes (in blues-influenced sub-genres, for example); we are also, to some extent, familiar with the pitch series of other cultures, such as those from the Indian subcontinent or China; and the avant-garde of classical music, jazz and rock, too, have deviated from Equal Temperament in various contexts. Less commonly, these devices have formed whole bases of aesthetic activity, more often they have been used as contrasting and evocative ‘effects’ in more conventional contexts. But these examples do not

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<sup>98</sup> See, for example, the sleeve notes to AMM’s *The Crypt*, which details the group’s performance schedule between June 1965 and October 1970.



represent the mainstream Western musical experience. Our understanding of the relative values and compatibility of our pitch series is shaped by classical homophonic tonality, which orders progressions and coincidences of pitches that tend towards ultimately consonant and cyclical patterns. These patterns occur ‘vertically’ as harmony and move ‘horizontally’ as harmonic progressions, in tonal and textural support to a foreground motif and/or melody line. And in turn, they are given implied musical structure by reference to a constant temporal pulse. This, typically, will remain constant throughout an entire piece, but is more subtly and complexly inflected by recurrent and repetitive metrical stresses. Over the metre, in finer (though still regular increments) of the basic pulse, further rhythmic motifs and lines provide dynamic continuity, structure and emphasis to the music’s passage: like harmonies and melodies, in cycles of development, resolution and repetition. Western music is organised and expressed in self-contained, sectional compositions, whose form and content are conceived, structured and rehearsed – to a greater, rather than lesser degree – prior to performance. Performers are likely to have some interpretative responsibility towards a piece, and elements or passages of improvisation may or may not also be incorporated. Perhaps of greatest significance to Prévost (et al.) is the culturally accepted delineation of role, context and, often, perceived ‘worth’ in music. There are distinctions made, and hierarchies based upon them: between music and ‘not music’; musician and non-musician; composition and improvisation; composer and performer. There are countless genres and sub-genres descended from, and derivative of, the musical standards established by Western classical tradition. Each one differs in its combination and emphasis of these devices’ relative qualities, but each will nevertheless exhibit them to some extent.<sup>99</sup> In the broadest terms then, the

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<sup>99</sup> Again, some allowances should be made for the avant-garde extremities of music (primarily in the

criteria above define the common Western *concept* of ‘music’. Though demonstrably of enormous potential for re-interpretation, the concept is not unlimited in its scope. Its most striking elements have come to appear indispensable, and this is the matter over which Prévost and his critic conflicted. In musical terms, they interpreted free improvisation as a measured response – of differing shades – to the model of ‘musicality’ that Western tradition had created.

The cultivated (pre)dominance of an orthodox tradition is distracting and obscuring if attempting to see past familiar values from within their sphere of influence. It is a question of cultural systemisation, under the allusion (and illusion) of metaphysical paradigm. I am not going to pursue my analysis any further in this direction, but Alan Durant’s *Conditions of Music* provides an extensive and insightful account of the formalisation (both technical and aesthetic) of Western music over a number of centuries.<sup>100</sup> Roger Scruton, too, makes a compelling assessment in a more directly musicological vein, in *The Aesthetics of Music* (despite ultimately betraying an unflattering arch-conservatism of his own). In short, Western musical convention defined the cultural context into which free improvisation was presented. Free improvisation’s opponents found it lacking in *de rigueur* Western musicality; the free improvisers felt that their culture’s musical concept was unnecessarily limited. Globally, it is not only the Western tradition that camouflages the subjective nature of its musicality, but it is the Western tradition that is the most likely target of the British free improvisers’ subversion. In the next chapter, I will address some specific practical examples of this.

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classical and jazz genres during the period under discussion), although they do not avoid many of the conventions detailed above either. By their nature, they cannot be broadly representative of Western musical understanding anyway.

<sup>100</sup> Alan Durant, *Conditions of Music* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 3-29, 58-85.



## Deconstruction & Conclusions

Admittedly, the sounds of free improvisation seem unconventional alongside the majority of what is presented as 'music' today. Nevertheless, there are both practical and conceptual grounds for questioning those critics who have dissociated free improvisation from 'music' altogether. At the centre of such a suggestion is a misunderstanding and/or misappropriation of that which 'music' represents. And under scrutiny such a position becomes logically untenable.

By the process of repetition, ubiquity and cultural celebration, the model of 'music' with which free improvisation was being compared was that of the Western classical tradition. The perpetuation of this tradition over a dozen generations has obscured the fact (to the more ephemeral human audience) that 'music' could be, or ever has been, any different. Western classical music, and those forms that rely on its innovations, stand today as a teleological culmination of practical and theoretical refinement. But, as Bailey implies, such a pattern of linear development may also be extrapolated historically and culturally backwards, to an earlier condition of partial amorphousness and inconclusive statement. Bailey's evocation of prehistoric musicality makes it difficult to ignore that any modern interpretation must yet rely on principles that pre-date it, and over which it can make no definitive claim of authority.

There is a certain contradiction to the 'not music' verdict on free improvisation. By implication, the critics are listening *musically* to free improvisation – to the fluctuation and succession of pitches over an emphasised period of time – and hearing the same elemental musical structures that must also have been present to prehistoric humanity. It is only by the stylistic and cultural dialect that 'music' is being misunderstood. 'Music', essentially, is being confused with *a species of* 'music'. The suggestion that free improvisation is just 'noise' has some subjective

validity, but no more or less than that it *is* ‘music’. If nothing else, this debate illustrates something of the essentially comparable nature and evocative power of both ‘music’ and ‘noise’. Though the critic professes not to hear free improvisation in ‘musical’ terms, it appears that instinctively they have *tried to*. It is unlikely that they would have made a similar protest over self-evidently ‘ambient sounds’; there is no need to further qualify the air conditioning, a door banging or someone sniffing as ‘not music’.

To conclude, I offer a brief consideration of music in terms of what Martin McQuillan describes as the ‘dead metaphor’.<sup>101</sup> The covertly subjective paradigm that I refer to above is employed to represent ‘music’ in three senses. First, ‘music’ as a distinct phenomena in itself, a subjective experience of the sound world; second, ‘music’ as specifically adopted and interpreted by one particular cultural group; and third, ‘music’ as the individual defines it. This combines a notion of the former two, mediated by personal experience and preference. Each of these interpretations, however, also shares an implied meaning; this may be expressed colloquially as ‘[something that is] music to my ears’. The phrase informally acknowledges the receipt of welcome – possibly joyous – information. Furthermore, it stresses that the sense of welcome or joy is very personal to the recipient.

The phrase functions metaphorically by the allusion to ‘music’: that too which is both an aesthetically pleasing and subjectively defined experience. But on such terms, it is neither logical nor possibly desirable to deny ‘music’ to anyone else, as the cited criticism attempts to do. Music is a representation – in the medium of sound – of the preferences, understanding and values of one particular culture or individual. Its uniqueness is cultivated to express qualities that that culture or individual deems

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<sup>101</sup> McQuillan, p. 11.



‘positive’, and it discards (as ‘noise’) those seen as ‘negative’. The value of music as an expressive device is not only an invention of subjectivity, but is also *dependent* on it for effect. ‘Music’, a culture or an individual is defined by what they are *not*, as much as by what they *are*. And in this context, the criticism ‘not music’ makes little sense.

It would better reflect the interests of the hostile critic to take the music’s subjectivity into account, and remark instead that “I do not like the music that AMM or Parker & Lytton plays”. By doing so, it is implied that the free improvisers’ values are (perhaps) questionable, unwelcome, incompatible, etc, while the critic’s own are (perhaps) well reasoned, pleasing, sophisticated, etc. An objective, metaphysical concept of ‘music’ cannot legitimately be alluded to because it cannot exist; but neither would it be desirable for it to do so. It is the quality of subjectivity – the potential for personally dictated expressive interpretation – that ‘music’ exemplifies, and by which it thrives. An authentically objective ‘music’ would deny the opportunity to represent one’s own values and juxtapose the values of others against them. Prévost’s critic assumes that they and/or their culture understand(s) and determine(s) *definitively* what ‘music’ is, or is not. By claiming a unilateral authority for ‘music’, the expressive potential of the phenomenon is effectively denied. If ‘music’ – conceptually or practically – was devoid of personal aesthetic preference, then the metaphor dies.

Ultimately, the schism over free improvisation as either ‘music’ or ‘noise’ must reach a point of aporia (that is, irresolvable contradiction).<sup>102</sup> I have argued more actively in this analysis for free improvisation’s inclusion as ‘music’, or at least that it cannot be definitively *denied* that status. But, as I have also stated, the designation of

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<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, California: University of Stanford Press, 1993) or, more concisely, Norris or McQuillan, various references.

‘music’ or ‘noise’ may only be provisional and localised at best. In Derrida’s terms, ‘music’ and ‘noise’ have a *supplemental* relationship. They are, by definition, mutually exclusive; yet equally, neither concept can be entirely defined without acknowledgement of the other.<sup>103</sup> The quality of subjectivity that defines them, though, also implies the processes of selection and exclusion. And that which is excluded from one perspective may yet be championed from another. Therefore, ‘music’ (for example) is *inherently* and *only* defined subjectively. But simultaneously it *cannot* be definitively fixed in this manner, if it is constantly vulnerable to redefinition from another perspective. Both ‘music’ and ‘noise’ are intrinsically dependent upon, but also immune and resistant to, restrictive interpretation.

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<sup>103</sup> See Jacques Derrida, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), pp. 63-171 or, again, such as Norris or McQuillan.



## **Chapter Three: *The Only Geezer An American Soldier***

### ***Shot Was Anton Webern***

#### **Antecedents of free improvisation**

This chapter presents a theoretical and historical discussion of the twentieth century musical developments that informed British free improvisation. It will add musicological detail and clarity to the overview of the first chapter and establish the music and methods of these players as distinct and deliberate innovations, albeit of identifiable and logical derivation. And continuing from the second chapter, I will give practical examples of extended musicality, those which challenged Western orthodoxy and ultimately converged and coalesced in ‘free improvisation’.

Free improvisation’s progenitors have been readily revealed, both by the players themselves and those sources that document their work. Indeed, some of the names to be discussed below are cited time and again: in interviews, in such reference texts as are available, and in many an album sleeve note. And, of course, despite the stylistic advances that the free improvisers implemented, the voices and mannerisms of those who influenced them may often be discerned in their playing. Free improvisation is an active engagement with, critique of, and interpretation of certain traditions. It unashamedly betrays the evidence of that which it has modified, and these concerns will be of central relevance to the current and the next chapter.

It is necessary to acknowledge a deliberate selectivity in my investigation. I have considered a limited number of influential musicians and musical innovations. Almost unavoidably this has been at the expense of others, perhaps with a significance of their own. This, in part, reflects the sheer volume of extant material

(within music, and also art, performance and communication)<sup>1</sup> that could conceivably be related to this study. But furthermore, such an endeavour is also subject to the limits of definitive and provable historical narrative.

Primarily though, I will discuss those names that cannot easily be avoided in connection with free improvisation. In the Introduction, for example, I cited a typical allusion to Webern and Coleman's work, and I, too, will deal with both of these influences in this chapter. Reference points such as these are not uncommon in discussions of British free improvisation. More often than not, however, it is as reference points that they remain. The nature of the influence is left implicit: the allusion more an intimation of connoisseurship than useful analysis.

In this chapter then, I will redress, consolidate and clarify the limited material that is available, in order to identify free improvisation's definitive characteristics and musical debts. A second analysis will also proceed in parallel to this. I will discuss the shifting forms and emphases of improvisation itself, basing my deductions on Derek Bailey's idea of 'non-idiomatic improvisation'.<sup>2</sup> Using his terminology and extrapolating a model from it, I have structured a scale of increasing improvisatory focus that ranges from 'composition' to 'non-idiomatic improvisation' via various intermediate stages.

In *Music and the Mind*, psychologist Anthony Storr gives several examples of that which might be considered 'deviant' from mainstream Western musicality. He cites 'the atonality of Schoenberg [...]; [...] music based primarily on rhythmic variation rather than upon melody; or music using a pentatonic scale; or music using

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<sup>1</sup> I would direct the reader to Richard Scott's thesis, for example, for wider discussion of these areas.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Bailey, *Improvisation. Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992).



intervals smaller than the semitone'.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, he suggests a very prescient summary of that which follows.

## 1. Composition

Composition appears fundamentally removed from free improvisation. The term traditionally implies a completed work: predetermined of structure and content, and able to be faithfully reproduced and repeated according to its composer's original design. 'Composition' and 'the composer' are terms chiefly associated with classical music in the West, but the notion of extant repertoire and the author figure are commonplace throughout the many genres that reference its aesthetics and techniques. It is, however, from the starting point of classical music that I will describe the conceptual and practical derivation of free improvisation.

At certain extremes of Western music, there are examples of *totally* composed pieces. That is to say that in their audibly realised forms they are self-contained and complete, and inflexibly so; they accommodate no element of improvisational restructuring or interpretation. In some cases, this is due to the medium of the compositions' construction and presentation. So-called *musique concrete*, for example, makes use of magnetic tape recordings of ambient sounds as its musical material. In pieces such as *Déserts*, by Edgard Varèse,<sup>4</sup> and *Etude aux Chemins de Fer*, by Pierre Schaeffer,<sup>5</sup> recorded sounds were artificially manipulated and/or then assembled into tape collages that stand as completed pieces (or sections thereof) in their own right. The recording, manipulation, assembly and playback processes necessary to effect these pieces, however, were limited by the technology of the mid-

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Storr, *Music and the Mind* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> Edgard Varèse. *Arcana. Intégrales. Déserts*. Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra. Cond. Christopher Lyndon-Gee. 2001. CD. 8.554820

<sup>5</sup> Various. *OHM: the early gurus of electronic music: 1948-1980*. 2000. 3xCD. CD3670

twentieth century. Lacking, for example, the digital sampling and processing technologies of today, they were not conveniently malleable in real-time. Instead, after painstaking construction, they were presented as taped *fait accomplis* of the recording studio. Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Elektronik Studie I* and *II*<sup>6</sup> were also taped compositions, though using sounds of electronic origin rather than treated acoustic recordings. As such, their forms were dictated by the same technological criteria as Varèse and Schaeffer's pieces, but Stockhausen's pieces were compositionally 'set' for a second reason also. I will return presently – when discussing Anton Webern – to Serial composition; for the moment, suffice it to say that Serialism was a mode of composition that depended on a precise and formulaic regimentation of its component tones. What Stockhausen was exploring around the time of the *Elektronik Studien* was an advanced and complex form of Serialism that used not only very precise increments and ordering of pitch, but also of rhythm and timbre. Having conceptualised these pieces, it was the only available technology that allowed him to physically realise them: to calibrate and compose these micro-elements in slow-time with a requisite precision that would have been extremely difficult to arrange for and play in any conventional manner.

In these examples then, the (prior-) composition of each piece has been total, and inflexible, either because of the technical constraints of 'performing' the music or due to the sheer complexity of the composer's intended design. While subject to these same considerations up to a point, however, the vast majority of classical compositions are not fixed entities in the same way. Improviser Simon Fell has spoken of 'the fixity of the score' as a paradigm of musical organisation and preordination, one that continues today from 'a late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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<sup>6</sup> Karlheinz Stockhausen. *Elektronik Musik 1952-1960*. 1991. CD. Stockhausen 3



phenomena [sic]’.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, it derives from the period since when the modern system of music notation reached maturity and predominance.<sup>8</sup> In an era that pre-dated recording technology, the development of an advanced notation – the ability to retain a fixed copy of a composition – helped overcome the difficulties in reproducing it by memory or by chance alone. By doing so, it also allowed the composer to prescribe and disseminate more complex ideas with greater accuracy than had been possible before; the ‘fixity of the score’ that Fell describes is representative of the enthusiasm with which this opportunity was taken by the composers of recent history. Despite the undoubted status of the composer and the score in classical music hierarchy, and the creative and expressive potential of the medium, it would be incorrect to assume that a composition and its score are definitively prescriptive.

Most typically, the recital of a composition – not necessarily just a classical one – will present an interpretation of the piece. There must be set form and content up to a point if there is said to *be* a composition in the first place, and some faithfulness to the score, too, if a performance is to *interpret* an extant piece.<sup>9</sup> But some performance parameters may be more flexible than others. A score that uses standard modern notation may include written melodies, bass lines and harmonies, details of rhythmic inflection, as well as numerically expressed time signatures and, perhaps, chords. In such terms, sufficient qualities may be expressed in order to distinguish an individual piece of music and make it replicable with some degree of

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<sup>7</sup> Anon, *Form is Only Emptiness... Emptiness is Only Form. A discussion between Tim Hodgkinson, Simon Fell, Charles Hayward and Phil England* <<http://l-m-c.org.uk/texts/form.html>> [accessed 18 February 2001].

<sup>8</sup> In contrast, for example, Roger Sutherland notes that ‘Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance notation was a comparatively rudimentary affair and improvisation was a normal aspect of musical performance’: *New Perspectives in Music* (London: Sun Tavern Fields, 1994), p. 204.

<sup>9</sup> The debate over more abstract forms of scoring, and the attribution of authorial intention and credit to them, centres on considerations such as these. I will return to less conventionally notated scores later.

accuracy. A written score does not, or cannot, always express other aspects of performance practice, however. It is with regard to these aspects – the subtleties of dynamic articulation, particularly; perhaps arrangement; even generic musical style – that the process of interpretation most commonly occurs.

Western classical music is renowned for its compositions and composers more than as an arena for improvisation, though improvisation is not without its place. It is fair to say, though, that composition predominates by far, and for several reasons. For one, by the processes of cultural evolution, familiarity and expectation, composed music simply *is* the aesthetic priority of the genre, in the same way that improvisation is considered of inherent worth in jazz. Classical composition, in other words, recognises and is representative of the fact that music *may be* formally composed, that the act itself is a means of exploring artistic impulse, and that this means – once recognised – is one of extensive potential for creative and expressive reinterpretation. The development of the score, via the modern system of notation, is also a related factor. It both served the functional needs of the composition process and also nurtured the composition as a viable, efficient, challenging and rewarding medium of work. And – as with any area of human culture – fashions have changed over the centuries, the composers and compositions of some eras more accommodating to improvisation or interpretation than others. One must also look at the limitations of the score and/or improvisation itself to understand the latter's reduced role in classical music. Historically, it is less the case that improvisations did not occur, so much as that they have not survived. In some ways, the score circumvented the problems of inscribing and transmitting music prior to the invention of recording technology. A notated score, however, is a *written* composition as well as being representative of a musical one; it is neither conceived nor constructed in real-time. Where it may be



used to collate and express complex and detailed musical form as a finished artefact in itself, it cannot capture precisely a performance as it occurs. Classical music has lost much of its association with improvisation today at least partially from the lack of first hand evidence that it existed. Even if an improvised passage – from, say, the early eighteenth century – were somehow notated as it occurred, in the written form it loses something of the impromptu context. If studied today, the transcription would likely highlight the developmental structuring and logic of the completed passage rather than suggesting the processes of its performance.

What have been recorded, if not the improvisations themselves, are the formats in which classical composition incorporated improvised material. Both figured bass and ornamentation, for example, were common devices in the eighteenth century. The former was a technique for keyboard players, who played a written bass-line and chord sequence but filled-in their own melodic improvisations around the rhythmic and harmonic structure; the latter was in itself the practice of elaborate melodic embellishment or structural accentuation, though of an extant piece. The cadenza, too, has variously come and gone from favour. An unaccompanied exhibition piece for a lead soloist, it provided – at the soloist's discretion – at least an opportunity for improvised performance. In a long-term consideration of improvisation, and particularly in the context of this study, it is worth noting that these same devices – (the rhythmically-led, sparse harmonic framework; the decorative melodic counterpoint; the 'solo spot') – later formed the improvisational bases of jazz, and what I will define later as 'structured, idiomatic improvisation'.

The compositional process allows a degree of refinement to an idea that improvisation cannot. But equally, and of apparent concern to some dedicated improvisers, it also restricts certain elements of the performer's creative involvement.

Evan Parker has cited these concerns as a source of tension within the improvising community, when, for example, (sometime composers) Tony Oxley and Barry Guy have tried to '[impose] parts on other people'.<sup>10</sup> And I have noted elsewhere, too, Derek Bailey and Gavin Bryars' disagreement over the same matter.<sup>11</sup> The relative merits of composition versus improvisation seem to have provoked militant response amongst the free improvisers. It is an ambiguous relationship, certainly. So far, I have dealt primarily with 'composition' in the sense commonly associated with the mainstream of Western classical music, i.e. that which is chiefly prescribed in structure and content by the composer, and expressed in standard modern notation via the score. There are also subtler and more complex distinctions between composition, interpretation and improvisation, however, which have characterised the avant-garde or experimental works of certain later musicians. I will return to this matter in later sections.

Even in the most basic terms, it would be incorrect to distance composition irreconcilably from improvisation. 'Improvisation has always been part of the method of composition' says Tim Hodgkinson<sup>12</sup> (referring to the trial and error testing of new material, as part of the composition process). Charles Hayward concurs: 'There's a moment there where there was nothing and suddenly there is something'.<sup>13</sup> In similar terms, Eddie Prévost describes contributing to an improvised piece. Each new musical element, he suggests, is 'placed in contrast to, in parallel to, in imitation of, in respect of, without regard to, other sounds'.<sup>14</sup> In the kind of collective improvisation that the first generation British players espoused, each new gesture still reflected the

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Ian Carr, *Music Outside. Contemporary Jazz in Britain* (London: Latimer New Directions: 1973), pp. 85-86.

<sup>11</sup> The conflict of interests arose in both Joseph Holbrooke and the proto-MIC line-up.

<sup>12</sup> Anon, *Form is Only Emptiness [...]*, [accessed 18 February 2001].

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Edwin Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent* (Harlow: Copula, 1995), p. 3.



accumulating compositional logic of the developing piece. Considered attention was due both to the character of the improvisation so far, as well as the functional role and implicit consequences that newly introduced material might create.

Essentially, the interests and emphases of composition and improvisation diverge between ‘events and processes’, as Roger Scruton describes.<sup>15</sup> Although composition is a process (of which improvisation is a part), the ultimate aspiration is towards an event: the realisation of the completed composition itself. It is to this form of the piece that future performances will refer and will aspire to interpret, while the process of its creation ceases to be of especial relevance. With improvisation, however, it precisely *is* the process – of participation, interaction and creation – upon which attention is focussed. In this respect, Steve Day’s assertion that improvised music is ‘not a dialogue, but a collective statement’<sup>16</sup> appears partially problematic.<sup>17</sup> A particular combination of musicians who have come together to improvise, or the instruments or location of choice on that occasion, might conceivably meet Day’s criterion. By the time that music is being improvised, these factors are complete and non-negotiable events. British free improvisation, though, characteristically lacks resolution. It has tended towards episodic and eclectic vignettes that display ‘kaleidoscopic’ shifts of emphasis (to use Bailey’s earlier epithet). Structurally or thematically, British free improvisation attempted to work against anything as pre-ordained and coherent as Day’s ‘collective statement’. Day’s terms are slightly ambiguous, though, and in Chapter Four I shall discuss free improvisation’s encroaching formalisation with the passage of time. But, at close quarters, to dismiss

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<sup>15</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Day, *Two Full Ears. Listening to Improvised Music* (Chelmsford: Soundworld, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> What his assumption perhaps characterises more accurately is the free jazz of the ‘German blasters’, the ‘American groovers’ or Amalgam, as discussed in Chapter One. The given adherence to idiomatic form – free jazz, in this instance – in effect pre-determines their ‘collective statement’, in a manner that the discursive negotiations that defined British free improvisation sought to preclude.

the dialogic qualities of British free improvisation seems to neglect due consideration of the genre's idiosyncratic schemes of interaction.

In a free improvisation, the players respond to one another until they decide to end the piece. Individual collages of sound may come together and be experienced at the moment that they occur, but the overall the music is more characteristic of a continuum, which is subject to constant and detailed revision. British free improvisation is very much a dialogue, and one that does not reach a 'conclusion' in a deductive, linear, methodical or Western tonal sense. It merely eventually stops happening. The performance of a composition, meanwhile, will finish when that composition has been recited in its pre-arranged entirety.

If an act of improvisation is recorded, it may then take on some characteristics of a composition.<sup>18</sup> To listen to the recording, one could recreate the improvisation as an *event*, with a predetermined and quantifiable duration, content and structure.<sup>19</sup> Instances of apparent 'compositional logic' may be discerned and scrutinised retrospectively, but fundamentally the music will still be comprised of successive ephemeral moments that merge into one another. They show stages of an ongoing process, rather than any recognisable and refined individual statement. In some respects then, the gulf between composition and free improvisation is illusory. They are both part of the process of making music, albeit reflecting a different set of aesthetic interests and priorities in relation to that process. Whilst the free improvisers broadly departed from the conventions of classical composition, this is not to deny

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<sup>18</sup> Both Bailey and musicologist Karlton Hestor note the synonyms 'instant [...]' and 'spontaneous composition' that are sometimes used to stand for improvisation. Respectively: Bailey, Introduction, p. ix and Karlton Edward Hestor, *The Melodic and Polyrhythmic Development of John Coltrane's Spontaneous Composition in a Racist Society* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> On certain CDs, for example, a single improvisation of an hour plus' duration has been subdivided into, say, half a dozen tracks, each of which displays some internal cohesion of its own. AMM's *Fine*. 2001. CD. MRCD46 and the Music Now Ensemble's *Silver Pyramid*. 2001. CD. MRCD40, for instance, both bear the legend 'The music is continuous. Time codes have been inserted [...] to assist retrieval'.



their undoubted debt to certain aspects and practitioners of European art music. Ironically, some of free improvisation's earliest antecedents were associated with composition of a most rigorously intricate and precise nature.

## **Anton Webern**

Free improvisation sounds as it does because of its unconventional approach to the principles of musical organisation: the culturally regulated notions of pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony. Primarily due to the enduring influence of Western tradition, music today is defined internationally by these notions in set and standardised patterns, combinations and functional roles. Nonetheless, in the early years of the twentieth century, a pronounced challenge to this legacy came from within the Western tradition itself. Anton Webern's influence on free improvisation is twofold. It encompasses the 'atonal' restructuring of harmonic and melodic function, and the subsequent promotion of timbre as an expressive and developmental focal point in its own right.

Composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) pioneered the concept of 'atonality', which I will later describe in two distinct sub-forms. As the name implies, atonality diverges from the primary Western system of tonal organisation (although Schoenberg's music did remain conventional in other respects: rhythm, timbre, arrangement, etc). Melody, essentially, is the distinctive foreground line of a piece of music, or what would commonly be referred to as the 'tune'. 'Harmony' refers to the progression of chords that form the basis and structure of the piece, and to which the melody corresponds. And Western melodies and harmonies are constructed from combinations of incremental pitches: the standardised 'tones' and 'semi-tones'. These units share an affinity because of the proportionate frequency ratios at which their

respective sound waves vibrate, and the step from one pitch to another – depending on the difference in frequencies – creates a tonal ‘interval’ of distinctive character.

‘Musical structures are built on the principle of creating and relieving “tonal tension”’ writes Daniel Belgrad in *The Culture of Spontaneity*; ‘[this] is achieved through the introduction of “dissonance” and its subsequent “resolution” into “consonance”’.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, states musicologist Eric Tamm:

The trained musician or listener feels a sense of key, a sense that there is a central point of gravity [...] Chord progressions are movements through tonal space, movements that give a sense of depth to the music, and, via constant reinforcement through repetition, a sense of logic and rightness, however learned and thus culture-specific that sense may be.<sup>21</sup>

What Tamm is discussing here is the principle of ‘tonality’, as addressed in my second chapter. It is the structural weight that a standard harmonically-based composition uses to anchor the melody and accompaniment, in order for the piece to remain (culture-specifically) ‘in tune’. As well as the quality of polyphonic unity (between pitches, melody and harmony), tonality implies repetitive, cyclical structures that create a linear consistency also. To Western attuned ears, these conventions are not merely appealing, but vital components of music. Anthony Storr has characterised a compulsion in humans ‘to make coherent patterns out of our mental processes if we are to retain them in consciousness [...]: meaningful, [and] easily remembered’.<sup>22</sup> Atonal music, however, was formulated in a manner that did not easily satisfy this aesthetic.

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity. Improvisation and the Arts in Post-war America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 183.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Tamm, *Robert Fripp. From King Crimson to Guitar Craft* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 144.

<sup>22</sup> Storr, p. 175.



Schoenberg's atonality, in contrast to some later forms, did utilise the standardised tones and semi-tones. His melodies, though, were constructed according to a very particular model, which came to be known as Serialism. Serial melodic lines were assembled using each of the Western octave's twelve pitches once only before any of them could be used again. From the Original form of the melody, an Inversion, a Retrograde and a Retrograde Inversion form could be derived; these four forms then had the potential, at least, to be transposed to each of the twelve semitones (although in practice most pieces used only a few of these variations). The cyclical sense of development – so central to the appeal and understanding of 'conventional' music – was precluded by atonality. Since no one pitch was featured more prominently than any other, there was no implied 'tonal centre', and no obvious point of incitement or resolution for a traditional melody line. And effectively, the equal regimentation of atonal pitches stripped away attendant harmonic progression as well. Individual chords are comprised of pitches that combine to produce a characteristic whole, and these bear proportionate and ultimately consonant relation to the pitches of the melody. Serialist atonal lines, though, as Roger Sutherland notes, suggest only a 'framework of static harmony':<sup>23</sup> one chord that neither develops nor resolves. In a broader sense, it is this lack of tonal movement (caused by the disruption of melody and harmony's traditional functions) that made atonal music sound peculiar – unusually 'tuneless' and disjointed, perhaps unrewarding – to many traditionally attuned ears.

Onetime apprentice Anton Webern (1883-1945) continued Schoenberg's work. And it is to his name that we begin to find explicit attributions of influence upon the later free improvisers. This influence was not derived from the specific

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<sup>23</sup> Sutherland, p. 14.

techniques of Serial composition. It did, however, rely on the atonal aesthetic which Serial music characterised and on the substitute aesthetic that Webern developed to replace tonal movement as music's centre of interest. In lieu of other aspects of musical activity, Schoenberg's atonal works made a study of instrumental timbre as an expressive quantity. This, too, became fundamental to Webern's music. In the following section, I will quote extensively from Sutherland's account of Webern's legacy; the detailed, but succinct, descriptions that he makes of Webern's music preempt too closely that of certain later improvisers to be ignored. (Derek Bailey and John Stevens are obvious candidates here. Each one is a 'big name' in free improvisation and both were involved – to varying degrees – with the seminal and Webern-influenced SME.) Apart from an extensive background in new music himself, Sutherland was also a free improviser (of a later generation), who performed with the electro-acoustic ensemble Morphogenesis. It seems likely that he would have been familiar with the work of Bailey and the SME, whose music is so heavily evoked by his passages on Webern. Indeed, he even cites the familiar-sounding term “‘atomisation’” at one point,<sup>24</sup> albeit without further explanation. In *New Perspectives in Music*, however, Sutherland states categorically that he ‘offers only one possible perspective’ – that of classical music – and makes ‘little reference to groups with a jazz orientation’,<sup>25</sup> which the SME predominantly were.

Stevens was influenced by Webern's *Five Pieces For Orchestra*, as Paul Wilson notes,<sup>26</sup> and this was later evident in the sparingly constructed, multi-timbral counterpoint of the mature SME.<sup>27</sup> *Five Pieces* is not a Serial composition, but it does display the reduced harmonic and melodic priorities of atonal music. It is from this

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<sup>24</sup> Sutherland, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> Sutherland, p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> Sleeve note to The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Withdrawal*. 1997. CD. Emanem 4020

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Anton Webern. *Orchestral Music*. Ulster Orchestra. Cond. Takuo Yuasa. CD. 8.554841 or *Orchestral Works*. Staatskapelle Dresden. Cond. Giuseppe Sinopoli. CD. 0927 49832 2



given basis that the piece – and those who took inspiration from it – then readdressed *timbral* composition and variation as an alternative point of focus. As Wilson continues, the SME were at a ‘significant transitional point [around 1966-67], experimenting with instrumentation and composition, before taking the plunge with free improvisation’.<sup>28</sup> Sutherland and Bailey, too, have described lines of influence deriving from Webern’s work that further illustrate the nature of the SME’s debt. On the one hand, avant-garde composers such as Boulez and Stockhausen used forms of Serialism as a compositional tool; on the other, Sutherland writes, there were musicians ‘less interested in how Webern’s music was constructed than how it sounded’.<sup>29</sup> Even cursory comparison between *Five Pieces For Orchestra* and the SME’s post-free jazz playing is enough to identify them with the latter. Two particular points of reference are the *Withdrawal* and *Low Profile*<sup>30</sup> albums, which reference most clearly Webern’s atonality, his use of timbre as a means of expression, and the kinds of instrumental timbre that he used. *Withdrawal* dates from the period just prior to the SME’s full adoption of the atomistic method, but does contain ‘Seeing Sounds and Hearing Colours’: the suite in which Wilson detects the influence of *Five Pieces*. It also features an expanded instrumental line-up that, uncharacteristically of jazz, includes oboe and glockenspiel. *Low Profile* details what David Toop describes as an ‘essentially chamber’ line-up<sup>31</sup> of (amongst others) cornet, violin and cello. (See Appendix One, Example 1.6) The CD’s second track (‘The only geezer an American soldier shot was Anton Webern’), notes Martin Davidson, was given its title ‘by John Stevens immediately before they commenced

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<sup>28</sup> Sleeve note to The Spontaneous Music Ensemble’s *Withdrawal*

<sup>29</sup> Sutherland, p. 18. Bailey, quoted in Carr, p. 82.

<sup>30</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Low Profile*. 1999. CD. Emanem 4031

<sup>31</sup> David Toop, *Haunted Weather: Music, Silence and Memory* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2004), p. 215.

[playing], no doubt with a view of influencing certain aspects of the music'.<sup>32</sup> And Bailey, meanwhile, has acknowledged Webern as his 'strongest single influence'<sup>33</sup> whilst developing his distinctive guitar style in the mid 1960s. Colleague Tony Oxley, too, recalls Bailey 'in the process of transcribing [...] Webern piano pieces for guitar'.<sup>34</sup> From these pieces of Webern's, Bailey notes, he would study and experiment with 'phrases/bits/notes/all sorts of things'.<sup>35</sup>

There is one similarity between Webern's atonality and that of certain free improvisers which is often missed, but for which there is evidence. Despite its unfamiliar sound and aesthetic, Webern's atonal music nevertheless retained the relative tonal units of Equal Temperament, albeit in phrases of unconventional coincidence and succession. That is to say, its effects were not created merely arbitrarily by series and collisions of un-gauged tones, but were fashioned very specifically from a limited choice of measured but 'incompatible' elements. Contrary to what might be perceived as randomness in the guitarist's phraseology, Ben Watson notes Bailey's very precise and deliberate command over the notes that he plays. It is the peculiar intervals that Bailey selects, and the way in which he juxtaposes them with those of other improviser's instruments<sup>36</sup> that scuppers the appearance of conventional tonality in his playing. Shrewdly, Watson remarks that Bailey 'needs to be perfectly in tune to achieve these determinate indeterminacies'.<sup>37</sup> I make this brief observation in respect of my own experience with double bass player Barry Guy. Just

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<sup>32</sup> Sleeve note to The Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Low Profile*

<sup>33</sup> Sleeve note to Derek Bailey. *Pieces for Guitar*. 2002. CD. TZ 7080

<sup>34</sup> Sleeve note to Tony Oxley Quintet. *The Baptised Traveller*. 1999. CD. 494438 2

<sup>35</sup> Sleeve note to Derek Bailey's *Pieces for Guitar*

<sup>36</sup> It is likely that much free improvisation *is*, to some extent, semi-random of pitch. In a musical environment that willingly permits both Equal Temperament *and* random pitching, however, it is difficult to describe one as any more out of place than the other. (See also the following section, on Luigi Russolo).

<sup>37</sup> Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and The Story of Free Improvisation* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 245. He also refers to the point at least once again, p. 360.



prior to his appearance at the Freedom of the City festival in 2004,<sup>38</sup> in an unexpectedly traditional act of preparation, I saw Guy tuning his instrument up with the piano. Whilst doing so – and echoing Watson’s assessment of Bailey, above – I overheard Guy comment to (pianist) Sten Sandell: ‘...So I know where everything is’.

Webern, as described by Sutherland,

applied [Schoenberg’s] principles of the non-repetition of pitches to other facets of musical sound, especially the colour of the note itself [...], distribut[ing] the melodic line among several instruments so that its tone colour continually changes. The result is a texture made up of sparks and flashes of contrasting colour [...].<sup>39</sup>

This is an evocative passage, strongly suggestive of the impetus behind the SME’s singular playing. Largely stripped of redundant harmonic layers, the SME’s music – like Webern’s *Five Pieces* before it – is pared down to an unaccompanied melody, with (as Stevens has commented) ‘everybody playing the same line’.<sup>40</sup> The ‘sparks and flashes’ of different timbre are, of course, carefully orchestrated by Webern,<sup>41</sup> but are the product of wilfully sparse interplay amongst the SME. By the deferential ‘call and response’ style by which Stevens defined the group, each improviser contributed a brief continuation of the melody line before pausing to assimilate another’s reply. As such, the melody was timbrally fragmentary, yet also continuous by virtue of the successive momentum of attentive, but fleeting, responses. In this context, the relevance is apparent particularly of the enlarged *Withdrawal* SME, with its potential for upwards of seven different instrumental colours on any given piece. Conversely

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<sup>38</sup> Freedom of the City 2004, Conway Hall, Holborn, London: 3 May 2004. Guy played variously with Evan Parker, Paul Lytton, David Stackenas and Sten Sandell.

<sup>39</sup> Sutherland, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in John Wickes, *Innovations in British Jazz 1960-1980. Volume One* (Chelmsford: Soundworld, 1999), p. 222.

<sup>41</sup> Stevens’ (we will assume) choice of specific participants for any one SME line-up fulfilled a similar function too, as the expanded *Withdrawal* grouping, for example, suggests.

though, this also highlights the frustrations of atomistic playing – suggested by Toop, and that perhaps afflicted Trevor Watts:<sup>42</sup> that ‘a method that stimulated considerable variety in a large group [...] quickly became an unproductive limitation for a duo’.<sup>43</sup>

Sutherland goes on to note that within Webern’s music ‘the rhythms are fully asymmetrical [...], [containing] a superabundance of rests [...], [and displaying a] studied avoidance of strongly accentuated patterns’.<sup>44</sup> (Though primarily facilitated by the techniques of jazz percussion – something to which I will return – it is arguably the interjection of European rhythmic influences such as these that most singularly defines British free improvisation.) Once more, it is hard to deny certain immediately audible similarities between Webern’s work and that of the atomistic improvisers. Typically, across most forms of music, the rhythmic line functions to reinforce the structural foundations of a piece. It suggests patterns of duration, repetition and emphasis within the music and establishes a framework against which the more intricate melodic and harmonic shapes are superimposed. Perhaps even more fundamentally than the Western adherence to tonality, patterns of rhythmic consistency are expected, recognised and responded to by most audiences. Storr has suggested that ‘if [...] repetition is eschewed [...] the listener may be unable to perceive the work’s structure [...]. His [sic] perception of structure is an integral part of his musical experience’.<sup>45</sup> Like melody and harmony, the element of rhythm is seemingly a ubiquitous feature in music, and as such, any deviation or disruption of its conventions has considerable potential to disconcert an unsuspecting audience. Webern’s atonal works, such as his *Five Pieces For Orchestra*, display an austerity of

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<sup>42</sup> The definitively atomistic Watts/Stevens duo documented on the *Face to Face* CD was nearing the end of its ongoing working relationship. See again my comments re: the SME and Amalgam in Chapter One.

<sup>43</sup> Toop, *Haunted Weather*, p. 187.

<sup>44</sup> Sutherland, pp. 16-17.

<sup>45</sup> Storr, p. 179.



form by the nature of their conception. There is no audibly repetitive rhythmic component, yet, as Sutherland states, ‘underlying the disembodied colours is a rigorous architecture’.<sup>46</sup> It should be remembered that, for all his unorthodoxy, Webern remained a composer in the Western tradition (and Serialism especially is a form as musically regimented as any). Webern’s atonal lines, though apparently fragmented and skittish of rhythm, were wholly composed, and to each successive performance his score serves as the same formal blueprint for the piece’s re-creation. The rhythmic schemata, if implicit or obscure to the listener, are nevertheless made explicit to the performers by the notated score, and embodied – in the classical tradition – by the conductor.

In a different musical context, Valerie Wilmer records (early jazz drummer) Baby Dodds’ assertion that ‘the drummer [is the] conductor of the band’.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, notes Howard Goodall, ‘African music brought rhythm back (with a vengeance) to Western music’,<sup>48</sup> an opinion with which drummer and improviser (of various shades) Bill Bruford concurs:

The British are one of the most determinedly arrhythmic nations surely that the planet has yet witnessed: [...] the rise of Western tonal harmony as the pre-eminent interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music ensured that the only thing this nation could think to do with a drum for about three hundred years from the early sixteenth century to the [...] beginning of this [i.e. the twentieth] century was to send soldiers to war with it. Having therefore no rhythmic culture of my own to draw on, I have freely borrowed from the cultures of others in an effort to forge something for myself.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Sutherland, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Cited in Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life. John Coltrane and Beyond* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1992), p. 155.

<sup>48</sup> Howard Goodall, *Big Bangs* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 173.

<sup>49</sup> Bill Bruford, *When In Doubt, Roll!* (New Jersey: Modern Drummer Publications, 1988), p. 123.

In contrast to the notated and conducted rhythms of European tradition, African-American music reintroduced the urgency and physicality of percussive timekeeping to Western society, via jazz, rhythm and blues, and countless derivatives. Most commonly, this was the function of a band's 'rhythm section', which would comprise a drummer and bassist, and sometimes a pianist, rhythm guitarist or percussionist. It is they who would maintain the characteristic rhythms of a piece, mark time by the regular emphasis of the beat, and also provide accompanying embellishment and punctuation. The immense influence of African-American musics ensured that the rhythm section's role became recognised, established and indispensable within popular music (and Storr's correlation of rhythm-perception and musical appreciation suggests why). It is in this scenario, as Bruford describes, that the young John Stevens, Eddie Prévost and Tony Oxley would have found themselves during the 1950s.

By the mid-to-late 1960s, however, and specifically in Stevens' case, it was no longer the vocabulary of contemporary jazz that his drumming appropriated,<sup>50</sup> but the asymmetrical and unaccented lines and rests of Webern's compositions. (Although Bruford bemoans the essential lack of a British percussive tradition, it is not difficult to see Stevens' acknowledgement of his wider European background as analogous to that of the black American free jazzers such as Archie Shepp and their explorations of African music). The casual listener's expectations of rhythmic repetition and emphasis are likely to be confounded by the SME's Webern tributes, as much as their hopes of tuneful development and resolution. Effectively, in this scheme, traditionally rhythmic, melodic and harmonic roles were now re-deployed in pursuit of a single concern: the timbre-oriented atonal line. Stevens' four limbs, working around the

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<sup>50</sup> At least, not within the confines of his free improvisation work.



various components of his drum kit, suggest a microcosmic example in itself of the interplay of the whole ensemble. Neither he nor Barry Guy (the bassist on *Withdrawal*) is differentiated as 'the rhythm section', any more than the other musicians function particularly as frontline melodists. Both the rhythmic and tonal components of the music appear at once potentially unlimited in variation, but also indistinct and ineffectual by conservative musical terms. This dilemma, once again, suggests the conflict of aesthetic priorities that informs the respective pursuits of composition and improvisation: the imperative towards either 'event' or 'process'. Ironically, in this instance, such criticism might be directed equally at Webern as much as the SME. The problem lies in this music's 'outward impression of arbitrariness', which the composer Pierre Boulez has suggested.<sup>51</sup> It is, of course, a false impression in each case; Webern's compositions were intricately contrived, and the SME's improvisations the result of a focussed and deliberate call-and-response interaction. Yet the implication remains, says Roger Scruton, that 'when the music goes everywhere, it also goes nowhere'.<sup>52</sup> Arguably, as I have already suggested, such a concern is largely irrelevant to those engaged in free improvisation. It is more significant that the music is going (on) at all. With Webern's work too, it is perhaps pertinent to suggest that the music simply isn't going where Scruton would like it to, which is a very different matter. The fragmented atonal and rhythmic lines of Webern were themselves a deliberate culmination of his sensibilities and priorities. For the atomistic improvisers they implied merely a model, or point of departure, from which to explore collectively a very specific music-making activity.

The SME's improvisations were less precisely executed and spacious of construction than Webern's compositions, but the improvisers were eager to

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<sup>51</sup> Cited in Sutherland, p. 27: originally from Pierre Boulez, 'Aléa', *Darmstadter Beiträge*, 1958.

<sup>52</sup> Scruton, p. 303.

improvise, and even within the relatively austere collective sound of the SME, individual contributions clash and overlap. As I describe in Chapter One, this is demonstrably related to the number of improvisers clamouring to participate, and there is a noticeable difference between (for example) the music of the two-man SME on *Face to Face* and the five-man line-up on *Karyobin*. (See Appendix One, Examples 1.4 & 1.5) Each player's contributions and responses appear to be considered and delivered in the course of split seconds, and without recourse to the restraint or rhythmic pre-structuring that Webern's works concealed. And unlike in the extended process of composition, a phrase improvised in real time cannot be withdrawn once it has been made. That the works of the SME are reminiscent of those of Webern, yet reflect widely differing attitudes and practices in their creation, is indicative of deeper relationships that exist within the phenomenon of music. Whilst acknowledging 'some direct quotes' during the recorded improvisation 'The only geezer an American soldier shot was Anton Webern', Martin Davidson remarks that (amongst other things) the 'sheer length of the piece [is] very un-Webern'.<sup>53</sup> In excess of half an hour in length, it dwarfs *Five Pieces For Orchestra* approximately six-fold, yet a consistency remains between them. 'Processes are by definition always in motion' writes Michael Nyman, 'and can be equally well expressed in two minutes or twenty-four hours'.<sup>54</sup> The 'process' here belongs to, and has defined, the SME. Broadly expressed, it is that strand of atomistic improvisation that, based on the interplay of jazz musicians, has been used to reinvestigate and reinterpret the rhythmic motifs, instrumental timbres, and types of arrangement particular to certain of Webern's works. The tribute is explicitly made in the title of the piece from *Low Profile*, although *Karyobin* illustrates Nyman's point better. Divided functionally into

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<sup>53</sup> Sleeve note to The Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Low Profile*

<sup>54</sup> Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music. Cage and Beyond* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 12.



‘Parts 1-6’, any of *Karyobin*’s tracks – or, indeed, almost any arbitrarily chosen excerpt from them – ‘equally well expresses’ the foundational model on which the SME’s music was built. *Face To Face*, too, in its instrumental austerity clearly reveals the mechanics of its creation.

Regardless of any popular psychological expectations that might have been thwarted, neither Webern nor the SME can be accused of anything less than making music. Their musical backgrounds, if nothing else, are demonstrably generic and conventionally disciplined. These musicians were neither ignorant of, nor intrinsically opposed to, the formal progression and resolution of tonal structures, or the steady emphases of regular rhythm. If anything, their combined musical knowledge, experience and facility made possible a heightened awareness of these forms, and the devices and mechanisms by which they are achieved. Perhaps, ultimately, it is the idea of ‘resolution’ and the perspective of scale that is contentious. Toop notes that free improvisation is ‘always oriented towards lateral movement rather than static, centralised rootedness’,<sup>55</sup> whereas a composition in the classical idiom tends to display this latter quality in both content and form. By the conventions of modern Western musical history, such a composition will likely display a tonal centre around which abstract but familiar narratives are played out. The character and individuality of the work (and that of its composer) are reflected in its chosen embellishments and stylistic focal points. As a consequence of this given identity – that has been contrived as a complete and self-contained vignette – a composition is colloquially, but also quite literally, a *piece* of music/Music. It represents effectively a subjective personal selection from, and vision of, the resource of musical sound (which is not the same as embodying any ideal state of music itself).

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<sup>55</sup> Toop, *Haunted Weather*, p. 178.

As I discussed in Chapter Two – and is implicit in the works of Webern and the SME – melodies, harmonies and rhythms (in the Western sense) are not music's irreducible base components. Moreover, melody, harmony and rhythm are dimensions of musical space in which smaller units of pitch and temporal increment exist in continuum. To return to the notion of process – so vital to free improvisation – it is ironic that Webern's work is associated with a school of such intricately measured composition. For Serialism, in the rationalisation of its conventions and the musical aesthetic that it facilitated, seems fixated with an exploratory process. These criteria equally defined the SME – or any improvising group with a discernible stylistic policy – though a divergence of interests still clearly remains. The perspective of scale may, again, clarify this discrepancy. A tonal composition indeed displays and depends upon its 'central rootedness', both in stylistic convention and its own 'logical' compositional structure. It is this quality that defines the scope of its lateral movement – gives expression to a distinct aesthetic identity – and enables the construction, completion and presentation of a self-contained 'musical' statement. To an extent this was true of Webern's works also, yet it was the refinement of the atonal *system* itself that took precedence in his work. The system, in effect, was *his* 'central rootedness', shaping how his compositions were written. As such, Webern made a certain popular-cultural sacrifice, becoming esoteric. To conventionally attuned ears, his process brought intellectual challenge – from aesthetic discomfort – *before* possible emotional reward. Historically, works such as *Five Piece For Orchestra* exemplify the mechanics and potential of Webern's compositional thinking and represent the most accurate and concise realisation of this ideas; but they are also perhaps notable for *that quality* more than the experience of the pieces themselves. They present his manifesto as composer, rather than his legacy, and it is in this context that the SME



has drawn influence from his work. By developing the strategies implicit in the sound of Webern's music, rather than his rigorous theories of construction, they too are motivated by process. That their referencing of Webern's ideas was less precise – less 'efficient' in his terms – than his own, perhaps sheds some light on Webern's decision to formally compose after all. But this is also indicative of the SME's essentially more inclusive relationship with the variable elements of music.

The classical composition is aesthetically rooted in its own state of completion, facilitated by movement within the conventions of its genre. Webern's central concern was the distinctive possibilities of his (and Schoenberg's) own atonal methods, which dictated an adherence to the principles that had been developed. The SME, however, relied intrinsically less on formalised extant musical material. For lateral movement they allowed themselves access to a microcosmic conception of music, of minutely incremental units of pitch and time. To work below the strata of traditional melodies, harmonies and rhythms goes against the studied and popular norms of Western music; but although predictable emphases and resolutions were not a given quality in the SME's playing, there was certainly movement and variety. 'The underlying principle, [...] in virtually all of Webern's mature work' writes Roger Sutherland, 'is one of perpetual variation within a highly compressed structure'.<sup>56</sup> This, in essence, is the primary source of Webern's influence over the British free improvisers. His compositional background enabled and dictated that Webern might devise for posterity paradigms of his own singular creativity. The improvisations such as those on the *Low Profile* album are of far greater duration than Webern's miniatures, and indeed, the SME explored similar musical territory for the best part of two decades. Deriving vital inspiration from Webern's music, but without the

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<sup>56</sup> Sutherland, p. 16.

compulsion to limit themselves by its parameters, the SME's mature sound was a significant development of the free improvisational ethic. Recognising both the implication of, and manipulation of, unusually elemental structures in Webern's work, they evolved a means of approach to music that was both intimate and fundamental, yet also expansive in expressive scope. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this contribution to the free improvisation genre.

## Luigi Russolo

There is a second distinct form of atonality that influenced the free improvisers, and it, again, depends on the sound of its practitioner's music more than his creative methodology. Like Schoenberg, Webern retained the tonal units of Western tradition, yet arranged them so as to preclude the tuneful progressions and resolutions that chiefly characterise Western music. Also, Webern used the format of atonality to explore tone colour and instrumental timbre as organisational, developmental and compositional devices. The concept of atonality has been taken a stage further, however, by circumventing not only the conventions of Western melody and harmony, but those of pitch also.

In the name of Futurism, the Western musical 'atom' was split in the first decades of the twentieth century. Founded in 1909 by poet F.T. Marinetti, Futurism in its Italian incarnations was an art movement of an avant-garde and iconoclastic bent. (A Russian school of Futurism, of a different complexion, also existed in its wake.) The Futurists engaged with a number of disciplines – including painting, sculpture and theatre, as well as music and poetry – drawing aesthetic influence from then-current advances in technology, automation and industrialisation. As David Toop describes, Marinetti 'visualised speed, electricity, violence and war as empowering



elements'.<sup>57</sup> In his 'Futurist Manifesto', Luigi Russolo (1885-1947) makes many aspiring references of his own: for example, to 'the noises of trams, of automobile engines, of carriages and brawling crowds'; of 'air or gas in metal pipes'; 'the shrieks of mechanical saws'; 'the din of rolling shop shutters'; 'the varied hubbub of train stations, iron works, thread mills, printing presses, electrical plants and subways' and to 'the newest noises of modern war'.<sup>58</sup> In a primarily musicological analysis, I do not intend to explore the ramifications of Futurism any further; see instead, Mark Sinker's 'Destroy All Music',<sup>59</sup> for example, or Richard Scott's thesis for a more thorough account. I will, however, record one brief statement of Futurist intent apposite to my discussion: 'Futurist composers should continue to enlarge and enrich the field of sound'.<sup>60</sup>

The quote, again, is from Russolo. He was the prominent musical exponent of Futurism, and his work suggests a crucial line of descent to the British free improvisers. The MIC's Hugh Davies has carried out extensive research into Russolo's music, and he specifies a particular proviso to any consideration of the composer's work. It is difficult, writes Davies, to speak of Russolo's music on any kind of 'knowledgeable basis [...] because so little of it still exists'.<sup>61</sup> Russolo's music relied upon both instrumentation and notation of his own devising and construction, and the instruments themselves – his 'intonarumori' – have simply not survived. The only remaining physical evidence of them is either photographic or, as Davies notes,

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<sup>57</sup> David Toop, *Ocean of Sound. Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995), p. 74.

<sup>58</sup> Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. by Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), pp. 25-26.

<sup>59</sup> Mark Sinker, 'Destroy All Music. The Futurists' Art of Noises' in *Undercurrents. The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*, ed. by Rob Young (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 181-192.

<sup>60</sup> Russolo, p. 28.

<sup>61</sup> Davies, Hugh. *The Sound World, Instruments and Music of Luigi Russolo* <<http://www.l-m-c.org.uk/texts/russolo.html>> [accessed 27 August 2003].

on a single ‘old pre-electric gramophone recording (from around 1921)’<sup>62</sup>. And without Russolo’s original sound sources, his customised notation is beyond accurate recreation. What Russolo *has* left behind in terms of primary evidence are his writings. The most significant of these has been translated as *The Art of Noises*, which documents Russolo’s own descriptions of his *intonarumori*, as well as various extended statements of Futurist musical policy. It is upon the provocative and outspoken nature of his texts – yet in the absence of his actual music, as Davies suggests – that Russolo’s later ‘substantial influence’ is arguably based.<sup>63</sup>

Like Webern, Russolo was responsible for developing what Sutherland calls ‘a music composed primarily of timbres rather than of conventional harmonies, melodies or rhythms’.<sup>64</sup> Russolo’s proposals, however, tangentially advanced Webern’s ideas in the areas of instrumentation, pitch and arrangement. Although often in unconventional combinations, Webern based his music on the timbres of familiar instruments. *Five Pieces For Orchestra*, for example, is scored for standard woodwinds, brass, percussion and strings, as well as the slightly more exotic harmonium, celesta, mandolin, guitar and harp.<sup>65</sup> (This was characteristic, too, of the SME, who used traditional Western acoustic instruments almost exclusively.)<sup>66</sup> In contrast, Russolo conceived his compositions as ‘networks of noises’.<sup>67</sup> ‘[He] lamented the poverty of orchestral sounds’, notes Prévost,<sup>68</sup> because (as Russolo himself confirms) of ‘the meagreness of [their] timbres’.<sup>69</sup> It was to this end that the *intonarumori* were designed and built. The physical specifications of these instruments are described in

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Sutherland, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Anton Webern, *Fünf Stücke für Orchester* (Wien: Universal Edition, 1951) [Score]

<sup>66</sup> The only notable exception was, on occasion, an amplified guitar.

<sup>67</sup> Russolo, p. 33.

<sup>68</sup> Edwin Prévost, *Minute Particulars. Meanings in music-making in the wake of hierarchical realignments and other essays* (Harlow: Copula, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> Russolo, p. 86.



*The Art of Noises*' Chapter Nine,<sup>70</sup> but it is the rationale behind them that is more important here.

Music was changing, according to Russolo, – becoming more complex and dissonant – reflecting the fact that cultural aesthetics were changing. What was previously shocking, he suggested (giving the example of 'the famous dissonant chord Beethoven's *Ninth*') was being continually superseded.<sup>71</sup> It was the complex sonorities of industrial sounds, Russolo believed, that could be effective beyond the scope of instruments associated with such consonant traditions as Romanticism. The *intonarumori*, therefore, were designed on fundamentally different principles. Sinker describes the common translation of these instruments' names as 'abrupt',<sup>72</sup> but they strongly evoke both Russolo's aims and the reasons for his continuing reputation: howlers, roarers, cracklers, rubbers, bursters, gurglers, hummers and whistlers.<sup>73</sup>

'By the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, most of the musical instruments commonly used in [Western] musics had developed into externalisations of the [equally] tempered system of tuning' states Toop; 'Implicit in [playing these instruments] was an acceptance of [...] the tempered system'.<sup>74</sup> With the *intonarumori*, Russolo effectively dispensed with two classical traditions. Although not (by that time) a common occurrence, the creation of new instruments was not aesthetically problematic in itself. Russolo's defining achievement, though – and the repercussions of which have become almost a standard of free improvisation – is the extrapolation of atonality beyond Equal Temperament and into wholly untempered sound. Several commentators have made the point that all sounds must effectively equal a note of

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<sup>70</sup> Russolo, pp. 75-80.

<sup>71</sup> Russolo, pp. 85-86.

<sup>72</sup> Sinker, in Young (ed.), p. 186.

<sup>73</sup> Russolo, p. 75.

<sup>74</sup> David Toop, 'Frames of Freedom. Improvisation, Otherness and the Limits of Spontaneity' in *Undercurrents. The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*, ed. by Rob Young (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 237-238.

some pitch (and vice versa).<sup>75</sup> This observation offers a crucial frame of reference for both Russolo's work and that of the free improvisers. Such a loose and inclusive definition of what a 'note' may be stands in marked opposition to the ornate and exact calibrations of Western tonality. It is common practice in the West, for example, to use the A above Middle C – which has a frequency of 440 Hz – as a reference tone to which instruments are tuned.<sup>76</sup> Far from such exacting constraints however, if every sound must be considered to have or be of a pitch – that fundamental unit of 'music' – then 'music' may *theoretically* include any sound within human auditory perception. Working, as Davies describes Russolo, in 'intervals smaller than a semi-tone'<sup>77</sup> does not preclude musical organisation. Karlton Hestor uses the example of Indian classical music to illustrate the point, which is rationalised to contain twenty-two semi-tones (as opposed to the Western twelve), in turn comprising sixty-six microtones.<sup>78</sup> And 'between any two pitches' Scruton points out, 'there lies a third'.<sup>79</sup> The ascription of the abstract quantity 'A' with the numerical quantity 440 (Hertz) suggests a useful demonstration of Scruton's model. By assigning mathematical value to individual pitches (and therefore also to the intervals between them), the mechanisms of tonality – such as those that have defined Western music – are made more explicit.

Briefly, let us disregard specific note/frequency values, and instead call 'X' one pitch, and 'Y' the pitch one *musical* tone higher. This whole tone *interval* we will call 'Z'. If Z, then, is the *difference* between X and Y, then it too must have a numerical value: an axis of pitch increment that respective cultures may potentially

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<sup>75</sup> Sutherland, p. 10; trombonist Ronnie Boykins, quoted in Wilmer, p. 87 (originally interviewed by Eugene Chadbourne, 'Wandering Spirit Song', *Coda*, December 1974); Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, p. 34.

<sup>76</sup> The integer 440 itself is a rounded approximation that better facilitates the structure and workings of Equal Temperament.

<sup>77</sup> Davies, p. 3 of 11.

<sup>78</sup> Hestor, p. 123.

<sup>79</sup> Scruton, p. 15.



divide up in different ways. Hypothetically, an indigenous musical culture might 'legitimize' any single value on the Z axis as their equivalent of the semi-tone (between X and Y). As demonstrated by Hestor's description of Indian music, however, another culture equally might adopt several values on this same axis – either regularly or irregularly spaced – as a calibrated series of microtones. In either case, it is these chosen values that they consider legitimate for musical use (within this spectrum of pitch) at the exclusion of others. But if that spectrum is understood as the *numerical* difference between two other values, then that axis of difference may itself be divided further. Any integer may be divided, equally or not, into a number of lesser, component increments; to paraphrase Scruton, *between any two numbers there lies a third*. Based on the ratios of Equal Temperament, for example, Western tonality functions around a very specific and carefully calculated series of chosen pitches. But if values are quantified in linear numerical form, there must also be implicit acceptance of intermediate number values *between* those of one's subjective interest. And, in conjunction with the inherently artificial nature of 'musical legitimacy', the necessary existence of these intermediate numbers/values/*pitches* must also make feasible the potential for further, alternative, increments of musical pitch than those of one's own common acceptance.

Alois Hába, for one, has demonstrated just such flexibility of the Western scale, with compositions based on regular increments of quarter-, sixth- and fifth-tones. Nyman, too, cites further examples: 'Busoni invent[ing] 113 different scales using the [twelve tone] octave, and propos[ing] scales based on thirds and sixths of a tone' and 'Harry Partch [developing] a 43-degree scale system'.<sup>80</sup> And it is by such a process that the incongruity between Western and Indian tonalities has been

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<sup>80</sup> Nyman, p. 39.

established, and may be understood. Upon hearing it, we (in the West) instinctively recognise Indian music – or, at least, that it is *not* European – by its unfamiliar pitch values and melodic and harmonic combinations. Scruton, though, is perhaps too self-assured and exclusive in his reasoning when he states that ‘*all* [my italics] musical people, from whatever tradition, will divide the octave into discrete pitches or pitch areas, and hear intervening pitches as “out of tune”’.<sup>81</sup> *Most* will, certainly.

What should not be in question is that these seemingly specialised scales, too, are systems in their own right, as rigorously pre-ordained as any other. They move through (to us) unfamiliar subdivisions of the octave, but with as much self-supporting unity, regularity and logic as the Equally Tempered scale does. The idea and practice of microtonal pitches is certainly a useful scale at which to gauge the inflections of Russolo’s ‘noise’ music and much free improvisation. But it should be stressed that the selection, ordering and precision values of microtones is not (necessarily) regimented, predictable or logical in these latter musics in the same way that it is in, say, Indian classical music. Russolo’s ‘noise’ and/or free improvisation *may* hit upon sixth-tones, quarter tones, etc; but equally, their use of the microtonal spectrum is often finer in value, wider in scope and arbitrary in choice. Davies – himself an inventor of various microtonally variable electronic instruments – makes the link explicit. He notes the manifesto promises of ‘atonality [...] and microtones’ by Futurist composer Francesco Balilla Pratella. They were not, apparently, delivered; but they did inspire Russolo to pursue the ideas himself.<sup>82</sup> Conceptually, microtones – (again, here: not so much a specific pitch increment as a micro-scale of calibration) – have the potential to dissect the entire spectrum of humanly audible sound, and more accurately and comprehensively than the larger units of familiar tonal tradition. Either

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<sup>81</sup> Scruton, p. 16.

<sup>82</sup> Davies, p. 2 of 11.



calibrated very precisely, or considered somewhat flexibly over small spectra of pitch frequencies, microtonal movement may be identified equally in the untempered machine sounds of Futurism, in the drones of Keith Rowe's guitar or Hugh Davies' electronics, or the quasi-percussive textures of the SME.<sup>83</sup> As with Webern's small-scale compositions, popular misconceptions and distrust of microtonal musics are essentially due to a culturally ingrained lack of an alternative perspective. Serialism (and atomism) abstracted the importance of individual pitches and timbres from the extant traditions of tonal development and resolution. Microtonality, as implied by Russolo's thinking, focuses the elements of musical material to an even finer level: that of the component layers of individual tones. By doing so (and although inevitably limited by the strictures and sensitivity of human hearing), microtonal music potentially broadens the scope of available musical sound exponentially.

Although not a direct development of Webern's innovations, Russolo's designs exhibit one more characteristic that was reflected in the later free improvisation. The implication of prior organisation in the word 'arrangement' derives from the compositional ethic. Nevertheless, in terms of the stylistic deployment and combination of instrumentation in pursuit of a particular effect, Russolo's legacy may be detected once more. The SME drew influence from Webern most significantly with reference to the sound of his music, rather than the method of its creation. And in this sense, a certain affinity is evident also between Russolo's music and the laminar style of AMM. Michael Nyman suggests that

Russolo saw [...] that with the piling up of dissonance [...] a chord was beginning to have a separate identity in its own right, symptomatic of

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. footnote (above), re. Derek Bailey, Equal Temperament and randomness of pitch.

and contributing to the disruption and breakdown  
of tonal movement and relations.<sup>84</sup>

Although the line of descent from Russolo to AMM is more oblique than that of the SME's direct referencing of Webern, a relationship is discernible. Although this must remain partially an assumption, AMM's sound – if not their methods – appear to draw comparison to that of Russolo. Early AMM recordings, such as *AMM Music* and *The Crypt*,<sup>85</sup> perhaps best illustrate the similarity. (See Appendix One, Examples 2 – 2.1.c) The music here is densely textured: the instrumental laminae 'piled up' concurrently, not flowing sequentially like that of the SME. Furthermore, as Nyman alludes, such subtle inflections of microtonal collage as AMM created had considerable potential flexibility of combination, detail and effect. They could effect extra-musical identity and allusion. The intricacies of their soundscapes made them conducive to remaining static, in forms that might reward prolonged scrutiny and contemplation. By their seeming evasion of momentum and propulsion, AMM implied and loitered in a sound world neither conceptually, structurally or timbrally dissimilar to Russolo. As Webern and the SME shared relatively traditional acoustic arrangements, so the timbres (though not actually the instruments themselves) employed by AMM would not have been unfamiliar to Russolo's ideals. Favouring droning, screeching, often electric, quasi-industrial textures – controlled (or otherwise) feedback, short wave radio interjections, scraped metal and piano innards – such sound sources readily suggest a reprise of the technological cacophonies of the *intonarumori*.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Nyman, p. 42.

<sup>85</sup> AMM. *AMM Music* 1966. 1989. CD. ReR AMMCD & *The Crypt* – 12<sup>th</sup> June 1968. 1992. CD. MRCD05

<sup>86</sup> I have noted before that, whilst often phrased asymmetrically and lacking a strongly stated pulse or metre, works such as Webern's *Five Pieces For Orchestra* were nevertheless composed, notated and performed with reference to a formal time signature. Despite their unconventional aspects, the same



Almost by reputation alone, Russolo has invoked some measure of the power of ‘noise’ – disruptive, disturbing, incongruous approximations of music and/or ambient sounds – to create a yet ‘musical’ context. His unique compositions and instrumentation, by wont of the recording technology of the time, have ironically proved more ephemeral than AMM’s improvised sessions. But his proposals for the equivalence and interrelationship of art with ostensible ‘noise’ have proved an enduring legacy. Russolo’s work asked questions of our conceptual, interpretative and experiential boundaries within the sound world. His attitude of inclusiveness has influenced and characterised so much of the twentieth century avant-garde, by addressing that shift in ‘perceptual’ to ‘conceptual’ emphasis by which we selectively transform and transpose music, noise and ambient sound.

Russolo’s ideas brought several (subsequently near-ubiquitous) characteristics of free improvisation to life. They suggested, for example, the model of microtonal inflection and progression within the music, and the co-option of previously illegitimate or inaccessible sound sources and textures in order to execute that model. From Russolo’s ‘industrial’ atonality, the clearest line of descent to free improvisation is apparent in those groups that worked electro-acoustically: the MIC, the Parker & Lytton duo and, especially, AMM. These groups’ styles, though, are perhaps even better illustrated here in the microcosm of their members’ solo performances. Russolo’s latter day chronicler, Hugh Davies, pursues Futurism’s technological vistas in miniature on his *Warming Up With The Iceman* CD.<sup>87</sup> The album’s sleeve notes portray Davies’ distinctive arsenal of electronic sound sources: homemade contraptions of circuit boards, soldering, and tiny contact microphones, which he uses to amplify his abrasions and manipulations of assorted surfaces. Pieces such as the (in

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was also true of Russolo’s noise pieces. An extract from one of his scores for the *intonarumori* clearly shows standard metrical notation: Russolo, pp. 72-73.

<sup>87</sup> Hugh Davies. *Warming Up With The Iceman*. 2001. CD. GROB.324 LC 10992

*this* context) self-explanatory ‘Music For A Single Spring’ invoke the inner workings of Russolo’s technological ideal with great clarity. In it, percussive chimings and scrapings intersperse with more sustained, friction-driven metallic textures, and bleats and bursts of electronic tones and static. Played on a conventional, if unusually treated, electric guitar, (AMM’s) Keith Rowe employs physically similar methods and processes to those of Davies. But where Davies’ music is delicate in actuality, Rowe’s sound world also comprises the Russoloan virtues of confrontational volume and dissonance. Rowe’s personal discography has increased significantly in recent years, as the increasing abundance of laptops and effects pedals has drawn many younger collaborators of comparable inclination from the woodwork. But in post-Russoloan terms, an apposite point of reference is Rowe’s 1990 piece, ‘City Music’.<sup>88</sup> Beginning with what sounds like a tractor or chainsaw engine attempting to fire up, Rowe’s ‘city’ also includes the air-wave static, shifting tuning and overheard music and commentary of a background transistor radio, the dull metal impacts of a building site and only the occasional glimpse of what sounds like an amplified guitar string. That we must, in the twenty-first century, rely on informed guesswork as to how Russolo’s ‘noise’ music may have sounded, can inextricably be linked to free improvisation’s status as only a minority interest. ‘Noise’, by its very nature, is culturally and individually problematic, whether perceived as intrusive upon our ambient sounds or our ‘music’. And, a century after its inception, atonality (and more so *microtonal* atonality) still provokes mass distaste and/or relative obscurity, especially for Russolo and his musical descendents.

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<sup>88</sup> Track 3, Keith Rowe. *A Dimension of Perfectly Ordinary Reality*. 1990. CD. MR19



## Edgard Varèse

An acquaintance of Russolo, the French-born American composer Edgard Varèse's music has been preserved where his mentor's has not. Several factors conspired to influence this fact. Varèse worked within established classical music circles; his music was published in score form; his period of composition is more recent than Russolo's,<sup>89</sup> and his music relied on conventional – and therefore easily imitable – instrumentation. With regard to the confluence of 'music' and 'noise', Varèse's reputation was greatly enhanced (at perhaps unfair detriment to Russolo) by the patronage of John Cage,<sup>90</sup> and later acknowledgement by counter-culture and rock icon Frank Zappa has also assisted his public longevity.<sup>91</sup> What Varèse's work contributes to the current analysis is a consolidation and refinement of the atonal tradition. Pre-empting certain of the free improvisers' music already, the stylistic traits of Varèse's compositions also display something of an affinity to the jazz avant-garde, to whom the free improvisers owed their most obvious debt.

Varèse makes his lack of reverence plain when he refers to the 'arbitrary, paralysing [equally] tempered system',<sup>92</sup> and he writes of 'liberating music [...] from years of bad habits, erroneously called tradition'.<sup>93</sup> As Sutherland, Toop and Watson (for example) have summarised,<sup>94</sup> Varèse eschewed the conventions of tonality to construct a music primarily based on timbral variation. Like Russolo before him, Varèse liked to employ dense layers and blocks of sound; Nyman, however, illustrates one crucial difference when he describes 'a density of what happen to be *pitched*

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<sup>89</sup> Varèse's works date mostly from between 1920 and 1936, then resumed more than a decade later. See sleeve notes to Varèse's *Arcana. Intégrales. Deserts*. CD.

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, John Cage's article 'Edgard Varèse' in *Silence. Lectures and Writings* republished edn. (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), pp. 83-84.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, sleeve notes to The Mothers of Invention. *Freak Out*. 1987. CD. RCD 10501

<sup>92</sup> Edgard Varèse, 'The Liberation of Sound', in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, ed. by Elliot Schwartz and Barney Childs (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 200.

<sup>93</sup> Varèse, in Schwartz and Childs, pp. 204-205.

<sup>94</sup> Sutherland, p. 15, Toop, *Ocean of Sound*, p. 83, Watson, p. 143.

notes [my italics]’.<sup>95</sup> A good example of this comes in the opening section of *Arcana*, where a fanfare replies to a bass ostinato. The fanfare provides neither melodic hook nor counterpoint nor ornamentation. Instead it forms a complex and dissonant harmonic layer, of sustained notes with a characteristic brass timbre. A similar device is also used around the mid-point of *Intégrales*. This time arranged for brass and woodwinds, there is a *progression* of these dense chords, which develops as one sustained note is substituted for another. And again, the opening of the third movement of *Déserts* creates such a sound field. Across four octaves, new pitches and/or timbres are gradually introduced into an unfolding composite texture (rather than a linear homophony). A mixture of both ‘pitched’ and ‘unpitched’ instruments, and single notes and short motifs, the accumulating music here also points in the direction that AMM, especially, later made their own. By Nyman’s depiction of ‘pitched notes’, and Sutherland’s more specific identification of ‘minor seconds or ninths or major sevenths [i.e. intervals quantifiable under Equal Temperament]’ in Varèse’s compositions,<sup>96</sup> it is apparent that Varèse’s work was akin to Schoenberg’s and Webern’s in some respects, as well as that of Russolo. Like Serial atonality, Varèse’s pieces do not harmonically develop and resolve, so much as loiter episodically, then leap from place to place. They do still maintain their basis in the twelve tones of the Western octave, and use arrangements of (mostly) conventional orchestral instrumentation. Unlike Schoenberg or Webern’s atonal melodies, however, individual pitches were largely subsumed and obscured – were made less individually relevant – in a music based on so-called ‘zones of intensities’ that Varèse envisaged. These he ascribed to levels of projected timbre and volume that might stimulate and affect the audience bodily: ‘a feeling akin to that aroused by beams of

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<sup>95</sup> Nyman, p. 44.

<sup>96</sup> I.e. Recognised/recognisable intervals, between pitches of Equal Temperament: Sutherland, p. 15.



light sent forth by a powerful searchlight'.<sup>97</sup> In his choice of language here, as well as his practical approach to timbre, harmony and aesthetic effect, Varèse leaned cumulatively nearer to Russolo and his microtonal music than to the Viennese atonalists. In the 1931 composition *Ionisation*, for example, Varèse used sirens for effect in lieu of the *intonarumori*.<sup>98</sup> It is with this latter aspect of his work – that is, microtonal arrangement – that Varèse's greatest legacy to free improvisation lies.

In the first instance, there is Varèse's use of electronic sound, which may be sub-divided into two further categories. As with Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète*, Varèse sometimes used pre-recorded tape material (although as a part of his orchestral compositions, not as the medium itself). This material comprised recordings either of ambient sounds or of unique effects created electronically or mechanically in the studio. Examples of both may be heard in the alternating electronic movements of *Déserts*: one interlude uses industrial sounds – of the metallic crashing and scraping of machinery and gears – and those of a steam train and machinegun-fire; another uses self-consciously electronic 'blips', tape hiss, and artificial acoustic effects to make ambient sounds unrecognisable for quite what they are. In free improvisation, Parker & Lytton were known to use this kind of technology; Martin Davidson's sleeve note to the *Three Other Stories* CD makes explicit acknowledgement of the debt to Varèse, and also details the duo's practice of introducing tapes of their own prior performances into improvisations.<sup>99</sup>

Alternatively – though still something of a fledgling art during Varèse's 1950s electronic period – there were the resources of electronic instrumentation and processing themselves (distinct from the studio-bound techniques of tape

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<sup>97</sup> Varèse, in Schwartz and Childs, p. 197. The idea seems prescient of the effects associated later with rock music (especially) of high amplification in confined spaces. See also Appendix One, re: AMM in *The Crypt*, and my discussion of Varèse and rhythm (below).

<sup>98</sup> Edgard Varèse, *Ionisation* (New York: Colfranc, [n.d.]) [Score]

<sup>99</sup> Evan Parker & Paul Lytton. *Three Other Stories (1971 – 1974)*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4002

manipulation). These were the ‘electrophones’, variously of electroacoustic, electromechanical or electronic specification, that Curt Sachs and Hugh Davies have discussed.<sup>100</sup> As purpose-built instruments (rather than manipulated ambient sounds), they tended to produce more traditionally ‘musical’-sounding tones and effects, and had an attendant degree of real-time interactive playability that tape music did not. The ‘blips’ on Varèse’s *Déserts* may or may not have been played using technology of this sort, but within British free improvisation there were certainly several notable examples of electronic musicianship that relied on the research and development to which Varèse had contributed. Hugh Davies and Keith Rowe, I have already discussed (and will do so further); but percussionists Paul Lytton and Tony Oxley are also worthy of mention. Oxley has given some account of his electronic set-up.<sup>101</sup> Like Davies’ earlier, it primarily used the close amplification of certain (acoustic) playing surfaces, the textural minutiae of which would not ordinarily be loud or distinct enough to be musically viable. Other than that, Oxley (and Lytton) also relied on such basic electronic processing devices as ring modulators and octave dividers, which could be used to manipulate the characteristics of electrically produced audio signals.<sup>102</sup> Both these kinds of electronic sound-source represent technological upgrades of the *intonarumori*, and their enhanced expressive versatility, portability and ease of replication are surely further factors that have prejudiced Russolo’s music in comparison to Varèse’s.

In the second instance – and still more significantly – we must consider the relationship between free improvisation and Varèse’s use of percussion. In reference

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<sup>100</sup> See footnote in the section on ‘Musicality’ in Chapter Two.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Watson, pp. 154-155: originally from an interview with Brian Priestley, *The Wire*, October 1986.

<sup>102</sup> See, for example, Oxley on the Howard Riley Trio’s *Synopsis*. CD. Emanem 4044 or Lytton on Lytton/Stevens/Perry/Prévost/Taylor’s *Improvising Percussionist*. 2001. CD. FMRC81-0501. The former is an example of ‘electroacoustic’ technique, the latter of ‘electromechanical’.



to the ‘Liberation of Sound’ essay (above), Sutherland describes Varèse ‘liberating the percussion section from its traditional subservience to pitched instruments’.<sup>103</sup> Once more, atonality was being used to address entrenched hierarchies of musical organisation and expressive language. Schoenberg and Webern had de-emphasised the priority of harmony and melody, but Varèse actively *promoted* the values and potential of rhythm. *Ionisation*<sup>104</sup> Nyman notes, ‘is the first musical piece [in the Western canon] to be organised solely on the basis of [...] instruments of indefinite pitch’.<sup>105</sup> In this sense, the classification ‘indefinite’ needs to be understood in the context of Western temperament (under which Varèse was ostensibly operating). Once more, though, if considered on a microtonal scale – where *every sound equals a note* – the ‘indefinite’ pitches of these instruments are nothing of the sort. Their exact frequency values may not have been measured, named or valued. It would be inaccurate to suggest, though, that they either *could* not have been or that their departure from extant tradition negated any inherent musicality as such. Varèse was liberating not only the percussion section, but also – like Russolo – microtonal pitch as an aesthetic and practical paradigm.

In Varèse’s work then, both vocabulary and syntax were discernible of what later became the dialect of British free improvisation. Respectively, these were the audible characteristics of percussion and the organisational principles of rhythm. By his use of percussion instruments – often in roles of unaccustomed prominence – Varèse was restating both Webern’s attention to timbral variation and Russolo’s

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<sup>103</sup> Sutherland, p. 15.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, Edgard Varèse. *Arcana. Intégrales. Ionisation*. The Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. Zubin Mehta. 1972. LP. SXL 6550

<sup>105</sup> Nyman, p. 44. Strictly speaking, *Ionisation*’s arrangement includes piano and glockenspiel a clavier, which are both Equally Tempered instruments. In this composition though, it is their rhythmic deployment and timbral qualities that are the aesthetic focus, rather than their tonal delicacy, versatility or associations. The piano part, for example, is scored in note clusters to be played ‘making use of the forearm’. Amongst all the instruments of ‘indefinite pitch’, the piano and glockenspiel’s precise pitches are functionally merely relative and anonymous. See Varèse. *Ionisation*.

admittance of microtonally-calibrated sounds into music. The massed percussion section – Nyman totals up 37 instruments – scored for *Ionisation*<sup>106</sup> also evokes Paul Lytton's 'big drum kits' that Evan Parker has described (with some understatement).<sup>107</sup> (See Appendix One, Example 3) Apparently taking several hours to assemble, Lytton's kit itself provided an almost orchestral array of timbres. Lytton recalls:

What I was looking for at that time was a new way of defining music for me. And so I was very interested in the most abstract of sounds, or sounds from odd bits of equipment [...]; kitchen [utensils], anything that would make a sound [...] and try to find a musical context for it.<sup>108</sup>

As Lytton's *Improvising Percussionist* solo demonstrates, sufficient rhythmic, textural, dynamic and developmental possibilities were available from 'indeterminately pitched' instruments alone, as to question the musical primacy of Western tonal tradition. Lytton's use of kitchen utensils – and that by Tony Oxley and Jamie Muir – is unconventional, certainly. But in terms alone of those timbres inherent to a saucepan, this is simply another example of deliberate musical (and tonal) inclusiveness on the free improvisers' part, in the tradition exemplified by Russolo and Varèse. The Parker & Lytton duo created (what Lytton has called) 'huge moving fields of sound'<sup>109</sup> of sometimes clear descent from Varèse and Russolo's orchestral works, if more frantic, episodic and technologically advanced in their execution. Many examples of free improvisation, though less stylistically similar, have also explored the implications of Varèse's extended percussive studies: I refer again to my earlier description of the SME, who (although instrumentally more akin

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, Nyman and Varèse, *Ionisation*

<sup>107</sup> Sleeve note to Evan Parker & Paul Lytton's *At The Unity Theatre*. 2003. CD, psi 03.01

<sup>108</sup> BBC Radio 3. *Lines Burnt In Light. The Music of Evan Parker: Part Two*. Broadcast 3 April 2004.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



to a jazz ensemble than an orchestra) played a music that approximated percussive textures almost as a given; Oxley's ornately *Ionisation*-like percussion kit, which is photographed on the cover of his *Ichnos* album<sup>110</sup> and is also described by Watson;<sup>111</sup> and Sutherland's description of Varèse's 'glittering alloy of timbres, textures and rhythms'<sup>112</sup> evokes many of the percussive timbres, motifs and effects – of John Stevens and Eddie Prévost, as well as Oxley, Lytton and Muir – from across the free improvisation canon.<sup>113</sup> (See Appendix One, Various examples)

Varèse's approach to rhythmic function and articulation was also broadly at odds with his background in the Western tradition. In conjunction with Webern's model of timbrally organised melodies, Varèse worked additionally on the synthesis of rhythmic definition and continuity. Examples of this can be heard throughout both *Arcana* and *Déserts*. A variety of percussion is prominently featured once more, although conventional orchestral strings, brass and woodwinds perform the main themes. These themes, although composed of Equally Tempered pitches, nevertheless remain atonal. They do not develop as part of a structuring harmonic progression, and their melodies are of limited content. Rather, they comprise a series of short, interlinked staccato phrases that, whilst harmonically compatible – 'in tune' – with one another, are also harmonically static and remain individually distinct. They are consecutive, but also angular and disjointed in character and, as Sutherland writes, consist of motifs, instead of themes.<sup>114</sup> Whilst *Arcana* or *Déserts* are arranged conventionally for orchestra in some respects, the characteristic dynamics, patterns and dovetailing of their motifs suggest strongly that their inspiration comes from

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<sup>110</sup> Tony Oxley. *Ichnos*. 1971. LP. SF8215

<sup>111</sup> Watson, p. 143.

<sup>112</sup> Sutherland, p. 15.

<sup>113</sup> See, for example, Stevens' duet with Derek Bailey on *Gig*. 1992. Video. Incus VD04 or, again, Appendix One, and the transcription of Prévost's contribution to AMM's *Fine*. 2001. CD. MRCD46

<sup>114</sup> Sutherland, p. 15.

percussive techniques and schemata. Large sections of these compositions – those that are not, in the first place – could be transcribed solely for percussive/microtonal instrumentation, without significant detriment to their compositional identity or aesthetic effectiveness. Again, here, Varèse is re-prioritising the values and structures of classical music, away from homophonic melody, harmony, pitch and tonality, towards the percussive, the rhythmic and the tonally ‘indefinite’. Varèse’s consistency of tempo and rhythmic interval aside, it is tempting here to cite again the SME’s ambiguously rhythmic/melodic language. But a closer comparison can be made to Evan Parker’s solo saxophone improvisations, as can be heard on (amongst others) *Monoceros* and *Lines Burnt In Light*.<sup>115</sup> Parker is known to use ‘circular breathing’ techniques – so that he does not need to pause for breath during playing – in order to produce near-continuous melodic lines for extended periods. Like Varèse’s orchestrated motifs, though, Parker’s lines fall short of ever becoming tunes, or even necessarily melodic ostinatos. Again, they comprise repetitions and variations on the most minimal of staccato patterns. Though the (saxophone’s) instrumental tradition and physical design are associated with a melodic role, Parker’s re-interpretation is one of rhythmic atonality. Subverting not only mainstream Western musicality, Parker’s ‘circular’ solo improvisations also comment upon those of Webern and the SME, to some extent. The latter two emphasised the importance of timbre in atonal music by splitting the ‘melody’ between differing instrumental voices; Parker stresses the variable nuances of rhythmic phrasing by seeming to rearrange the motif-driven music of Varèse’s orchestra or John Steven’s improvising group for one solitary saxophone.

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<sup>115</sup> Evan Parker. *Monoceros*. 1999. CD. CPE2004-2 and *Lines Burnt In Light*. 2001. CD. psi 01.01



Conversely, Ben Watson intimates a further rhythmic/percussive legacy from Varèse that he suggests *resists* ‘overarching systems of [...] rhythm’.<sup>116</sup> The important distinction pertains to the word ‘systems’, however, whose essence is also implied in Nyman’s description of *Ionisation*’s rhythmic basis: ‘regular subdivisions of a regular beat’.<sup>117</sup> I return to my discussion from Chapter Two here, regarding different conceptions of what ‘rhythm’ connotes: alternately the temporal dimension of musical activity, or a specifically regimented framework for the division of such. Watson and Nyman are both writing of the latter quantity here, *a* rhythm, an organisational template for realising (for example) *Ionisation*’s predetermined structure and emphases. What *I* am referring to is Varèse’s approach to rhythm (in the former sense) as one level of conceptual musical space. Varèse’s pieces – like those of Webern – do each have prescribed rhythms, which allow their accurate and effective execution by an orchestra. But the rhythms are not expressed linearly and repetitively (as per the ‘rhythm section’ in popular music, for example), so much as their passage is tacetly acknowledged by the performers and conductor, and only stated at key points. It is the characteristic manner in which Varèse punctuates temporal motion, with (seemingly) unconnected points of deliberate, sudden rhythmic emphasis that points the way to free improvisation’s distinctive style.

Referring both to Varèse’s antipathy towards Western formalities and to the proposed ‘zones of intensities’ in his music, Toop cites Varèse’s conviction ‘that music should be experienced physically’<sup>118</sup> not merely intellectually. A (regular) rhythm, of course, may be physically experienced: it manifests itself most obviously as the urge to mimic the pulse, and to dance. Yet the perception of, and response to, the regularity seems to reflect the greater role of the intellect. The rhythmic elements

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<sup>116</sup> Watson, p.143.

<sup>117</sup> Nyman, p. 44.

<sup>118</sup> Toop, *Ocean of Sound*, p. 79.

are not heard successively in isolation, but conceptualised, formulated and ultimately anticipated as a pattern of ongoing and characteristic constancy. The experience of regularity implies an understanding not only of what has immediately passed and what is current, but also what is imminent and inevitable. Perhaps, then, Varèse's interest in the *physical* experience of music represented a desire to confound the intellectual 'sense of [musical] security' inherent to perceived regularity. Watson characterises Varèse's music as indicative of a fascination with 'the impact of noise'.<sup>119</sup> Both 'impact' and 'noise' are indicative of violence, a pronounced disturbance of the *status quo* for which the subject is not prepared (aesthetically, culturally or physically). With this in mind, the notion of 'impact' might usefully be envisaged in the form of a crash cymbal.<sup>120</sup> The quality of rhythmic division and demarcation that is vital to Varèse's work is the strategic – but occasional and isolated – punctuation of the passage of time and music. These are performed by conspicuous and dramatic, but precisely placed, interjections against the procession of the piece: stabbing fanfares, dense block chords and sudden flourishes of tympani and cymbals. They express rhythmic events, not rhythmic processes. It is the staccato and episodic quality already discussed (that made Varèse's ostensibly tonal motifs seem more rhythmic than melodic), which defined his characteristic model of rhythmic inflection. And it is by this same quality that free improvisation's defining abandonment of regular rhythm has been characterised. Tony Oxley, particularly, has been cited in a

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<sup>119</sup> Watson, p. 143.

<sup>120</sup> This onomatopoeically classified instrument is a highly typical component of the rock drum kit or orchestral percussion set up. Its harsh, bright and loud tone, and rapid attack and decay, is used to mark a strong emphasis on one beat of a piece of music. There are numerous refinements and variations on the crash cymbal, but I use this generic example in contrast to that of the 'ride' cymbal, which is played constantly, and at a more subdued dynamic level on *every* beat. *It* denotes the linear continuation of a pulse, more akin to a metronome.



post-Varèse context,<sup>121</sup> but broadly this style of disjointed percussive punctuation is inherent to the free improvisation of everyone from the SME – *particularly* the SME – on down. It is the characteristic that served to negate the ‘swing’ of the jazz tradition, and to which I will return below.

Varèse’s unusual approach to arrangement and the role of timbre were echoed many times in the mutated jazz groups and chamber ensembles of free improvisation’s formative period. Differing interests in his music also prefigured the free improvisers’ divergences of style, from the ambiguously melodic/rhythmic motifs of the SME to the dense layering and electro-acoustic sound of Parker & Lytton and AMM. To be perverse, one might suggest that so much of Varèse’s music (like that of Webern) sounds like a rhythmically ‘together’ – a *composed* – British free improvisation. And there is a less direct trail of influence, too, which led from Varèse’s work to free improvisation via a younger generation of iconoclastic Western composers.

## Avant-garde Composition

Like Webern, Varèse demonstrated that melody, harmony, rhythm and pitch – whilst separated by function and expressive hierarchy in Western tradition – had the potential to be equal, interchangeable, ambiguous or mutually influential in their roles. Varèse’s immediate successor in some respects was John Cage, who championed both his mentor’s name and ‘the musical use of noise’.<sup>122</sup> He was perhaps most infamous of all for 4’33”, but Cage was active and influential throughout avant-

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<sup>121</sup> Apart from Oxley’s aforementioned appearances in Watson, Wickes, p. 99, discusses similar aspects of his career, furthering the ‘impact of noise’ theme with a spectacular paragraph of elemental, violent and dramatic metaphors.

<sup>122</sup> Sleeve note to John Cage. *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*. Boris Berman. 1999. CD. 8.554345

garde and experimental music. Eddie Prévost remembers a journalist's description of AMM as 'John Cage jazz',<sup>123</sup> which was perceptive and nearer the mark than many commentators came. Prévost himself has refuted a direct influence at that time; he 'simply assumed [Cage] was a drummer I hadn't heard of'. Only later, he 'discovered that Cage had indeed been a percussionist at one time!'<sup>124</sup> In fact, for a time prior to his experimental notoriety, Cage was writing specifically for percussion, drawing particular inspiration from *Ionisation* amongst Varèse's other works.<sup>125</sup> Despite Prévost's professed ignorance, Cage's continuing focus upon the potential of the percussion section provided another link between the free improvisers and the atonality from earlier in the century. Cage's 'preparation' of the piano, for example,<sup>126</sup> has a clear descendent in Keith Rowe's guitar modifications,<sup>127</sup> and Rowe's (art school) background had exposed him to Cage's work where Prévost's had not. In their respective discussions of the Joseph Holbrooke years, too, both Watson and Bailey note Tony Oxley's close study of the timbres, effects and techniques used in Cage's *First Construction In Metal*.<sup>128</sup>

What Cage took from Varèse – which he explored *via* the 'indefinite' pitches of percussion music – was a fascination with modes and means of ordering that were alternative to Western temperament and tonality. In tandem with this, however, and where Cage moved away from what to Varèse remained a convention, was an interest in new kinds of compositional process. An important and early example of these concerns is apparent in Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, from 1951. Roughly

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<sup>123</sup> Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, p. 12. The comment was made by later AMM manager, Victor Schonfield.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>125</sup> Sleeve note to Cage's *Works for Percussion*. Quatuor Hélios. 1991. CD. WER 6203-2 286 203-2

<sup>126</sup> That is, altering the piano's timbre and/or Equal Temperament by attaching various small items to its innards, which affect the tension, mass and, therefore, resonance of its strings.

<sup>127</sup> Keith Rowe. *Harsh, Guitar Solos*. 2000. CD. GROB 209 LC 10292. The CD cover artwork consists of Rowe's own cartoons, of guitar strings treated variously with crocodile clips, a contact microphone, a hacksaw blade, steel rule and hand-held electric fan.

<sup>128</sup> Watson, p. 79 & Bailey, p. 88.



contemporaneous with Varèse's tape work on *Déserts*, Cage's piece is also for electronic instruments: in this case, twelve transistor radios.<sup>129</sup> In a musical context, the transistor radio pointed both backwards and forwards in time. With its potential for generating undifferentiated static and extremes of volume, one can see how it might have appealed to Russolo's ear for technology and 'noise'; but, like the tapes of Varèse or Pierre Schaeffer, the radio could also selectively access the 'real world' sounds of public broadcasts, as well as being adjustable in real-time in a way that taped *musique concrète* was not.<sup>130</sup> As such, it was indicative, too, of devices that would become familiar to free improvisation. In the most general terms, the radio provided a controllable source of (in this context) unusual sound effects and textures: not unlike *any* of the free improvisers' instruments in that respect, but especially reminiscent of Hugh Davies' electronics, for example. The allusion to Varèse's tapes also extends forwards to Parker & Lytton's use of similar sounds, and, of course, there is Cornelius Cardew's and, particularly, Keith Rowe's 'playing' of the transistor radio, both within and without AMM.<sup>131</sup> In very broad terms, Cage was extending still further his use of 'indefinite' pitches. By taking advantage of available technology, in *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* he investigated the potential of writing for a dozen electronically-controlled, multi-timbral instruments rather than perhaps a greater number of more functionally limited acoustic ones. A vital and recurrent theme for the musicians under discussion: Cage was, again, attempting to widen the parameters of what could be considered 'musical' sound.

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<sup>129</sup> See John Cage, *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (New York: Henmar, 1960) [Score]

<sup>130</sup> See, for example, John Cage. *Imaginary Landscapes*. Maelström Percussion Ensemble. Dir. Jan Williams. 1995. CD. hat ART CD 6179

<sup>131</sup> Making note again of Cardew's background in the classical avant-garde and Rowe's at art school, it is safe to assume a direct link between Cage's and their (later) use of the transistor radio as a musical instrument. Rowe's influence especially on later generations of electro-acoustic improvisers seems to have continued the tradition further; the transistor radio (and many comparable sound sources) are still to be heard today in, for example, the Music In Movement Electronic Orchestra. See MIMEO. *Electric Chair + Table*. 2000. CD. GROB.206/7

Like Webern, Russolo and Varèse, Cage's main influence upon free improvisation was the sound of his music, not the method of its creation. It is in this respect that *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* has its secondary relevance to this study, both on the 'Composition' to 'Free Improvisation' axis and (despite its audible character) in the inverse relationship of its creative process to that of the free improvisers'. There are certainly comparisons to be made between, for example, the Maelström Percussion Ensemble's rendition of *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* and sounds that are distinctive of British free improvisation. There are the obvious similarities of timbre shared with Keith Rowe or Hugh Davies, and the seemingly arbitrary tonal material on which the genre is almost entirely dependent. More surprisingly, perhaps, the performance recalls strongly the sound of atomistic playing. As the radio operators tune back and forth between stations and static, what one tends to hear is a mixture of white noise tones, brief excerpts of (conventional) musical performances and out-of-context syllables of human speech. Moreover, it is the way in which the tuning alters these sounds' characteristics that creates the effect. Even a short 'turn of the dial' is likely to pass through one broadcast frequency that is transmitting recognisable sounds. It is this rapid phasing in-and-out, however, which condenses and fragments the snippets that one hears and creates an artificial, unfamiliar and stark attack-and-decay envelope around otherwise ordinary sounds. In short, human voices (especially, though not exclusively) blurt out in irregular shapes that are curtailed at unpredictable moments; everyone and everything starts to resemble Paul Rutherford's trombone-playing.

Despite the similarities of sound, the Cage piece and the hypothetical Rowe & Rutherford duet are, as I have suggested, of fundamentally different origins. The former, to all intents and purposes, is a composition in the Western tradition and the



latter a free improvisation. Up to a point, though, they share an aesthetic, if not a process. One motif that both parties have pursued – after Varèse’s example – is that of the ‘indefinite’. In performance, this refers to their use of the increments of rhythm and pitch that lie *between* those specified as legitimate and valuable by mainstream culture. The *definite* of Western music – Equal Temperament, classical tonality, etc – is, of course, its main strength: a dependably regular framework of self-contained and self-supporting logic. It makes precision demands of the composer, but also enables the intricate, elegant and completed composition to form and function. Speaking of his early playing career in modern jazz, the MIC’s Jamie Muir bemoaned ‘playing in keys with five sharps and so on [which] seemed like intellectual masochism getting in the way of the creative process’.<sup>132</sup> By admitting indefinite increments of sound, Cage and the free improvisers expressed a more relaxed and inclusive attitude to the form and content of their music. And this, in turn, influenced their attitudes towards the processes by which it could be made.

The quote from Muir, above, is indicative of the free improvisers’ reluctance to accept technical conformity as a qualifier of musical expression. He refers to the nebulous ‘creative process’. In terms of free improvisation, this appears to relate to the act of participation itself, on one’s own aesthetic terms: to be present and responsive and influential upon the music being made at that moment. Such a mindset is also necessary for the performance of Cage’s *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*. But there is a proviso, too, about on *whose* terms one is participating. At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed the role of *interpretation* of the score in the performance of a composition. Though there were also influences of contemporary fashion that affected the relative roles of composition, interpretation and improvisation in classical music,

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<sup>132</sup> Quoted by David Teludu, ‘Interview with Jamie Muir in Ptolemaic Terrascope’ <http://www.elephant-talk.com/intervws/muir.htm> [accessed 4 September 2001]

two basic facts should be reiterated. The maturation of standard modern notation in the eighteenth century both facilitated and encouraged formal composition: it allowed complex musical designs to be recorded, copied and distributed with a new efficiency, and in so doing presented itself as an opportunity for further refining and perpetuating the form. Conversely, despite its sophistication, standard notation could *not* reproduce music with unchanging precision as, for example, electronic recording technology later could. As such, the parameters of a classical composition that could not be exactly notated were open to interpretational reworking in performance.

This idea was the focal point for a number of composers in the classical avant-garde during the mid-twentieth century, and John Cage (especially) and his *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* are important examples. Compositional features that are open to interpretation are also, in a sense, in the tradition of the ‘indefinite’, although the term that became more strongly identified with this tradition was ‘*indeterminate*.’<sup>133</sup> There have been both varying uses and varying degrees of indeterminate principles in modern music. Some examples have used or borne comparison to techniques bordering on free improvisation, and, as such, I shall return to them further along in my analysis. Others though, are more obvious extensions of traditional techniques than their reputation and audible results might suggest. There is common misunderstanding of what ‘indeterminate’ really means or represents in this context (as there is, too, of the term ‘free’). Unfamiliarity with the controlling aesthetics of, say, *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, or AMM’s *Crypt* performance or Stockhausen’s *Elektronik Studien*, for example, might all lead to the kind of ‘not music’ criticisms that I discuss in Chapter Two. The musicality on show in these pieces is of such unconventional extremity that ‘indeterminate’ is sometime taken to mean that

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<sup>133</sup> Cage lectured on ‘indeterminacy’ in the 1950s, and his piece of the same title is reprinted in John Cage. *Silence*. pp. 35-41.



*anything goes*: that nothing could be considered ‘wrong’ in the presented context.<sup>134</sup>

But the techniques of indeterminacy are not themselves indeterminate, any more than those of British free improvisation are really free.

*Imaginary Landscape No. 4* is an illustrative example once again, and which Roger Sutherland counts as ‘Cage’s first foray into indeterminacy’.<sup>135</sup> It is useful because it is based in several different types of indeterminate process.<sup>136</sup> The piece was, in fact, indeterminately *composed* to begin with, via a sub-process of *chance* or *aleatory* practice. Composer Earle Brown has elaborated on this, in conversation with Derek Bailey:

Aleatory is a word that [the composer] Boulez used [...] which means throwing of dice and so forth.<sup>137</sup> It’s really chance, [...] Cage was literally flipping coins to decide which sound event was to follow which sound event and that was to remove his choice, his sense of choice, and it was also not to allow the musician to have any choice either.<sup>138</sup>

The references to dice, coins, gambling and chance relate to Cage’s use of the *I-Ching* (*Book of Changes*), a Taoist text used for divining answers to certain kinds of questions. This is a well-publicised aspect of Cage’s work that I am not going to pursue further, except to refer the reader again to Sutherland, Nyman, etc, and particularly to Cage’s own article ‘Composition’, which details his use of the *I-Ching* in specific relation to *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* and another piece, *Music of Changes*.<sup>139</sup> Basically though, he followed the techniques of the *I-Ching* in order to

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<sup>134</sup> The irony here is that, despite how they sound, the Serial *Elektronik Studien* could hardly be more *determinate*.

<sup>135</sup> Sutherland, p. 122.

<sup>136</sup> Both Nyman and Sutherland’s texts are invaluable in-depth studies of this area of music, and Bailey’s book, too, makes useful reference to the subject.

<sup>137</sup> Sutherland, p. 33, defines ‘aleatory’ as deriving ‘from the Latin word “alea” meaning “a game of dice” or “aleatorius” (a gambler).’

<sup>138</sup> Bailey, pp. 60-61.

<sup>139</sup> Cage, *Silence*, pp. 57-59.

divine certain characteristics of the pieces he was trying to compose. As Brown suggests, Cage was interested in removing the element of his own choice, prejudices, clichés or habits from the developing piece, and to this end relied on events that he could not control to make decisions for him. First, he established a number of flexible compositional parameters for each piece, each of which suggested a number of different quantifiable options. It was then that Cage resorted to tossing the coin. By the rules of the *I-Ching*, certain combinations of ‘heads’ or ‘tails’ corresponded to patterns of response to the questionable elements that Cage had introduced. As such, the piece could be assembled from its component parameters without the precise values of those parameters having been imposed by Cage himself. There is, of course, a contradiction in this: that, as Sutherland says of *Music of Changes*, ‘the pre-compositional stage entailed extensive planning’.<sup>140</sup> What he means is that the composition’s questionable elements, and the questions to be asked about them, had already to be determined by Cage in order for the divining process to have a subject; Cage himself has admitted as much.<sup>141</sup> This, though, is an example of one aspect of ‘indeterminacy’: that definite results may be reached by objectively random processes to which a subjective interpretation or responsibility is then ascribed. *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* and *Music of Changes* both included chance as part of their actual processes of composition. The former, too, makes use of another unpredictable factor in performance. Its score presents a complete and notated composition to be followed, as do the rituals of the *I-Ching*. But the precise activities that *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* prescribe cannot foresee or influence the broadcast-content on the airwaves, which will be accessed at the time and in the locality of each new recital.

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<sup>140</sup> Sutherland, p. 119.

<sup>141</sup> Cage, *Silence*, p. 36.



Chance, then, is one kind of indeterminacy; the two are not synonymous, however, and neither is chance the most common form of indeterminate practice. More so are the methods that explore indeterminacies between the composer and the interpreter of the composition. By their nature, these tend to revolve around modifications of the traditional notated score, and give rise to indeterminate performances rather than to the compositions themselves. Some indeterminate scores capitalise upon standard notation's capacity for ambiguity, and emphasise the parameters of necessary dynamic interpretation to which most modern scores are subject. (Sometime AMM collaborator) Christian Wolff composed three pieces, *Tilbury*, *Tilbury 2* and *Tilbury 3*, in the late 1960s, which provide examples of this idea.<sup>142</sup> Each of these is notated on the stave and also includes a passage of written instructions for performance practice. One indeterminate feature common to all three pieces is the performer's choice of clef: respectively, this may be of the performer's choice but constant throughout the piece, or varied from note to note, or varied between sequences of notes. Each of these – the second option especially – gives very extensive interpretative leeway to what is apparently a formally composed melody. There are several other examples in these pieces, too, of how this kind of hybrid notated and written score can create indeterminate results in performance. The treatment of rhythm, for one, is at least equally significant to that of the melodic material. No metre is specified at all; *Tilbury* is notated without precise rhythmic inflection, and it is used only sparingly in *Tilbury 2*. The potential variation that such devices allow (both within a single performance and between different performances of the same piece) need only be alluded to, and the range of stylistic and associative

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<sup>142</sup> See Christian Wolff, *Tilbury* (New York: Peters, 1969) and *Tilbury 2 & 3* (New York: Peters, 1969) [Score]. See also Christian Wolff. *Tilbury Pieces; Snowdrop*. Roland Dahinden/Hildegard Kleeb/Dimitrios Polisoidis. 1999. CD. CW3 mode 74. Varying combinations of melodica, trombone, piano, violin and viola are used on these tracks.

characteristics that the rhythmic execution of these pieces could evoke would be vast. Without the value and continuity of pulse or metre either, they might also be performed over the course of seconds or of hours. As well as these quite radical built-in indeterminacies, the *Tilbury* pieces are also subject to, or make use of, precisely the same potential dynamic variations inherent to a standard score: *1* and *3* do each specify a dynamic character, although in practice these are as imprecise communications as any; despite the eponymous reference to AMM's pianist,<sup>143</sup> none of the pieces are arranged for any particular instrument; and the score of *Tilbury* [1] also actively invites embellishment (i.e. ornamentation) or transposition of the written phrases.

The indeterminacy of these pieces is partially related to each and any of the above factors, but more specifically it is the product of their mutual combination. As with the (merely suggestive) rhythmic notation, it would be folly to attempt to quantify the possible repercussions of an instruction such as 'Any of the instructions for these pieces can be used for any part of the pieces' (from *Tilbury* 3). Yet the resources and variations open to performers of a piece such as this are *not* without restriction. The central metaphor of Chaos Theory, to which I allude in my Introduction, is worth re-stating:<sup>144</sup> that of 'sensitive dependence on initial conditions'. So, too, is Roger Sutherland's observation on Cage's 'chance' composition of *Music of Changes*: that 'the pre-compositional stage entailed extensive

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<sup>143</sup> John Tilbury was not a member of AMM when these pieces were composed, although he was involved with the proto-MIC line-up around that time.

<sup>144</sup> See James Gleick, *Chaos* (London: Vintage, 1998). I call Chaos Theory a 'metaphor' in the current context in reference to its more usual and literal application to the physical sciences, and the manner of the *suggestive* influence that it had on my thinking. But the conditions that the 'indeterminacy' of such pieces creates – the manner of their variability; the necessarily mutual dependence of their component processes; the nonetheless finite number of possible outcomes – do, in effect, create a system of action and consequence that is comparable to those that James Gleick discusses. *Tilbury* 3 or the SME's *Karyobin* do not share the subtlety and complexity that affect the existence of a snowflake; but in terms of the possible micro-variations of frequency and chronological occurrence of acoustic event that these pieces instigate, the opposite is also true. That 'complexity' and 'infinity' are not interchangeable is, in essence, the basis of my argument in Chapter Four.



planning'. With pieces such as *Tilbury* [1], 2 and 3, the parameters of indeterminacy and the instructions for accessing and modifying them are themselves *determinate* via the score, alongside the notated music. Interpretative performance practice is integral to the aesthetic of the piece, but neither the manner of interpretation nor the material to be interpreted are themselves open to subjective – much less *random* – choice. If the interpretation and performance is a sympathetic one, it will acknowledge the extant bases of the music. In indeterminate compositions like Wolff's *Tilbury* pieces, these extant bases are open-ended by certain criteria, but also quite specifically defined by as many others. It is this factor that makes such pieces *compositions* rather than *structured improvisations*: the quantity and quality of the materials provided by the composer, as well as the manner of response demanded of the performer.

There is any number of indeterminate scores of a similar nature to the *Tilbury* pieces: those with a basis of composed material in (semi-)standard notation, but whose performance practice exaggerates the interpretative features common to the most traditional score. Wolff's *Electric Spring 3*, for example, is another.<sup>145</sup> In this case, it is scored for particular instruments (violin, electric bass, horn and electric guitar), but the notated sections are written on tiny fragments of stave. The players' rate and method of progression from fragment to fragment – individually, and relative to one another – are the key indeterminate parameters. Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* works on the same principle, but adds complexity by the increased number of specified performers (and the conductor, too, has a particular and open-ended role, using timings from a stopwatch).<sup>146</sup> Earle Brown's *Available Forms 1*<sup>147</sup> and Cornelius Cardew's *Autumn 60*<sup>148</sup> – both for larger groups of players – cover similar

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<sup>145</sup> Christian Wolff, *Electric Spring 3* (New York: Peters, 1967) [Score]

<sup>146</sup> John Cage, *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (New York: Henmar, 1960) [Score]

<sup>147</sup> Earle Brown, *Available Forms 1* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1961) [Score]

<sup>148</sup> Cornelius Cardew. 'Autumn 60' in *Four Works* (London: Universal Edition, 1967) [Score]

ground, too. But in addition, their respective notated scores are divided into sections, whose successive orders may be varied according to the conductor's interpretation.

'Graphic scoring' is another related but distinct development of indeterminate practice, one which makes specific use of unconventional notation. In effect, the graphic score (and I will describe some more extreme examples in the section on Experimental Composition) acts to transmit the notion(s) of indeterminacy, whilst also coercing in practice a response of some kind from the interpreter: a response which once performed has then become a determinate musical gesture. If indeterminate composition highlights, utilises and plays upon the ambiguities which are inherent to standard notation and communicable intention, then graphic scoring provides a means of yet making these properties into referable artefacts. The notation itself may take on virtually any kind of abstract hieroglyphic form; like the experience of 'music' *per se*, it is the context and acceptance of the presented material and symbols that ultimately define the limits of a graphic score's content. But there are certain typical functions that unconventional graphic notation has been used to fulfil. As I have suggested, graphic notation may notate what is usually un-notatable or un-notated, as well as indicate and/or characterise 'empty' spaces to be filled. Wolff's *Electric Spring 3* gives examples of both of these functions, combining a disjointed collage of conventionally notated staves, written instructions and customised notation, specific to this piece. Common to much avant-garde music – indeed, one of the features that often makes it so – are physically and functionally unconventional, 'extended', playing techniques. And in *Electric Spring 3*, such techniques are used to create effects of timbre and dynamics that are as important to the realisation of the piece as much as any tonal or rhythmic device. Dynamic inflection, as we have seen, is one that standard notation cannot wholly prescribe anyway. Neither can it directly



express timbre, though in the mainstream of Western tradition this is not necessarily an obstacle: to score a piece for string quartet, for example, is to invoke a pre-defined and historically conventional set of timbral and inflective parameters that do not need further exposition. By definition, the avant-garde tries to avoid or subvert this kind of traditional constancy and predictability, but in doing so it also closes certain conveniences off to itself. What the score of *Electric Spring 3* shows – in notated form qualified by written instruction – is an attempt by Wolff to be able to allow for, access and transmit the details of extended technique in the context of a formal composition. Cage's *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* is, once again, another good example. It references standard notation up to a point, gives some rhythmic instruction and is written on a conventional stave. But it also focuses uncommonly on expressing periods of duration, and on relative calibrations and glissandos across the airwaves as the piece's array of transistor radios are tuned and re-tuned. *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*'s notation primarily involves a series of horizontal bars, with vertical (and numerically marked) points of variation and emphasis across the page. Cage uses these markings to record passing increments of 'musical', yet formally 'unpitched' sounds, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that his score somewhat resembles that which survives of Russolo's, for his *intonarumori*.<sup>149</sup>

The graphic score, then, may be used to compose and communicate extended musicality that standard notation does not cater for, but it need not necessarily do so. It may equally stand for unusual or very specific effects, combinations or juxtapositions of what is otherwise fairly *conventional* playing technique. Although he has not published the entire scores of any of his 'Game Pieces', in the sleeve notes

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<sup>149</sup> Russolo also noted that 'the complicated timbre of noise [...] has an *indeterminacy* [my italics] whose composition the ear intuits but cannot account for.' Russolo, p. 83.

to *Xu Feng*<sup>150</sup> John Zorn indicates a number of specifically scored – though functionally ordinary – playing configurations and motifs that may nevertheless significantly alter the character of a performance: ‘sparse’, ‘dense’, ‘crossfade’, ‘intercut’, ‘soloist alone’, ‘two duos’, etc. The same distinction may also be applied to graphic scoring’s other common function: the delineation of ‘spaces needing filling’. The ‘collage’ effect of the *Electric Spring 3* score is representative of this idea. Though each section of the stave is notated in short, isolated fragments, it is their separation and the requisite specialised musicality of this piece that indicate both the intention and the means to link them into a continuous whole. There are also many examples of stylistically self-contained graphic scores: ones that move away from standard notation altogether and effectively establish their own systems, language and ‘tradition’ of written music. As such, in order to actually read or perform such pieces, a preparatory period of familiarisation and acclimatisation with the composer’s accompanying explanations tends to be necessary, as well as with the scored notation itself. Wolff’s *For 1, 2 or 3 People*, for example, is a fully realised graphic work<sup>151</sup> of attendant practical complexity, and Stockhausen’s *Nr. 14: Plus Minus* even more so.<sup>152</sup> Using colour, shape, line, contrast, font, texture and/or external references, graphic scoring has been used to suggest (particularly) dynamic, structural or emotive qualities desirable of the indeterminate passage (often using associations and aesthetics related to those of abstract art). Whether alongside conventional notation or standing alone, it indicates the need of practical resolution to a conceptual proposition: that ‘music’ is to be realised, continued, but from resources other than the formal score.

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<sup>150</sup> John Zorn. *Xu Feng. John Zorn’s Game Pieces, Vol. 1*. 2000. CD. TZ 7329

<sup>151</sup> Christian Wolff, *For 1, 2 or 3 People* (New York: Peters, 1964) [Score]

<sup>152</sup> Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Nr. 14. Plus Minus* (London: Universal Edition, 1967) [Score]



## 2. Structured, idiomatic improvisation.

Beyond formal composition, the first step towards Bailey's 'non-idiomatic' freedom might be termed 'structured, idiomatic improvisation'. In the section that follows, I will illustrate this idea by reference to the mainstream of jazz.<sup>153</sup> It is both an established and widely recognised music within Western culture and, as I have mentioned, it provided the formative musical training and experiences of the majority of the first generation improvisers. John Wickes' *Innovations in British Jazz* is a detailed source of historical data in this regard, and as Evan Parker has remarked, (for a number of reasons) free improvisation 'couldn't really have existed without jazz'.<sup>154</sup>

The Latin *ex improviso*, as Reginald Smith Brindle notes, describes the essence of improvisation: that it is 'without preparation'.<sup>155</sup> What this precludes, to one extent or another, is a foreknowledge of the precise pitches and articulations to be played, prior to the moment of performance itself. Such a scenario might occur in the absence of a written score, or in the example of an orally perpetuated piece (usually associated with popular or folk musics). But a vital and contentious issue, in respect of purportedly 'free' improvisation, is the extent to which the notion of 'without preparation' can be said to apply. This argument will form the basis of the remainder of the thesis. I will be demonstrating and analysing the mutual influences that structure, idiom and improvisation exert over one another, as well as considering the differing strata of musical organisation from which improvisational resources may be derived.

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<sup>153</sup> Free improvisation's immediate predecessor, free jazz, will be covered in a later section.

<sup>154</sup> BBC Radio 3. *Line Burnt In Light. The Music of Evan Parker: Part One*. Broadcast 27 March 2004

<sup>155</sup> Reginald Smith Brindle, *The New Music. The Avant-Garde since 1945* 2nd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 84.

Both Bailey<sup>156</sup> and Stuart Jones<sup>157</sup> have cited *making it up as [they] go along* as improvisation's 'defining catchphrase': a cursory and often misunderstood assessment. The improvisation typified by mainstream jazz is both structured and idiomatic due to its dependence on extant composed source material. More specifically, and though sometimes obscured by extensive instrumental soloing, the mainstream and majority of jazz is based on standard song forms. The repertoire is primarily composed, arranged and performed in alternating verse/chorus patterns, (as Paul F. Berliner writes) 'consisting of a melody and an accompanying harmonic progression'.<sup>158</sup> In this sense, a jazz piece comprises the same components as any popular or folk song might, and is broadly faithful to Western tonality. Such improvisation as there is is ornamentation of the melody line or during featured instrumental solos, and it is performed with strict reference to the form and materials of the composition. Although the improviser will have some scope for interpretation, they function primarily in an elaborative role. Overall, the piece represents chiefly the composer's work, and the improvisation is determined rigidly by the composition that it embellishes.

'Composition' in this context is not exactly equal to that of the *classical* composition. In that tradition, organisational responsibility culminates with the composer who, via the written score, functions as auteur. The protracted process of composition – of close scrutiny, revision and refinement – allows the developing piece to represent in some sense 'perfection' when completed: a paradigm of one specific combination of composer, ideas, materials and circumstance. As such, the classical composition may – and typically does – show a great intricacy and unity of

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<sup>156</sup> Bailey, Introduction, p. ix.

<sup>157</sup> Stuart Jones, 'Making It Up As You Go Along', *Leonardo Music Journal*, No. 11 (2002), p. 61.

Jones is a onetime colleague of the MIC's Hugh Davies, in the 1960s/70s electronic group, Gentle Fire.

<sup>158</sup> Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz. The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 63.



form, structure and content that is unlikely to be equalled without similar preparation, and almost certainly not by free improvisation.<sup>159</sup> Alongside its rigorously constructed passages however, the classical composition may or may not then also include less specifically notated sections – such as with figured bass – during which improvisation of some kind may be performed. It is to these sections that the majority of jazz compositions *do* compare. In developmental structure, arrangement and harmonic progression (especially), jazz compositions are typically less intricately conceived and so less complex to perform than classical ones. It is in this manner that a jazz composition becomes more flexible, and more conducive to improvisational reworking in performance.

In Bailey's *Improvisation*, he discusses briefly what Curt Sachs calls 'the instrumental impulse': the differentiating impetus between either vocal or instrumental music.<sup>160</sup> Vocal melody, it is suggested, derives from an expressed understanding of music's perceived aesthetic, evocative and emotive qualities. Instrumental music, however, reflects a greater emphasis on the bodily actions and sensations of manipulating an instrument. It satisfies, Sachs continues, in the coordination of a 'brilliant display of virtuosity'. Bailey concludes from this that 'the stimulus and recipient of this impulse, the instrument, [is] the most important of [the improviser's] musical resources'.<sup>161</sup>

Instrumentalism seems rooted less in the 'statement' itself, than how it is effected. Again, the contradictory aesthetics of 'event' or 'process' become apparent.

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<sup>159</sup> As I have noted, the SME's and Parker & Lytton's improvisations sometimes *approximated* the sound of Webern's and Varèse's compositions respectively, referencing particular features of interest in the latter's music. Approximation, however, is intrinsic and subject to the real time intractability of collective improvisation. Though not without creative advantages of its own, improvisation naturally runs the irreparable risk of missing its target.

<sup>160</sup> Bailey, p. 97, and also referenced in the Music Improvisation Company CD sleeve note: originally from Curt Sachs, *The Wellsprings of Music* (London: 1944).

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

The jazz composition is a hybrid form, existing at a particular point of intersection between Sachs' notions of vocal and instrumental musicality. This has influenced the nature of improvisatory practice within jazz's mainstream, and therefore, implicitly, also the stylistic responses and divergences that followed. As I have noted, jazz composition is generally akin to the format of a song. This is not to say that vocal arrangements are a constant feature; instrumental voices tend to assume at least an equal role, and often predominate. But the compositional elements – rhythmic patterns, harmonic progressions, verses and choruses – are essentially short-form and cyclical. They support a simple (and if not necessarily vocal, then at least 'lyrical') melody line. Such melodies are the most immediately identifiable point of reference for each composition, and the most enduring examples have become jazz's 'repertory of [...] standards', as Berliner describes.<sup>162</sup> It is in this context that both Derek Bailey<sup>163</sup> and Evan Parker<sup>164</sup> came to be performing versions of Johnny Green's ballad 'Body and Soul', for example, decades after its original composition. The arrangements differ quite dramatically – Bailey on solo acoustic guitar, Parker's sax within a big band setting – but the common origin of the 'Body and Soul' theme remains apparent. In this sense (i.e. the attention to the evocative quality of a standard melody), the jazz composition seems to correspond with Sachs' notions of vocal music.<sup>165</sup> Yet the jazz composition's lyricism and condensed formal structure also makes possible the emergence and cultivation of the 'instrumental impulse' to which Sachs and Bailey refer. '[With] most jazz tunes' notes Bill Bruford,

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<sup>162</sup> Berliner, p. 63.

<sup>163</sup> Derek Bailey. *Ballads*. 2002. CD. TZ 7607. This album is based on the premise of Bailey revisiting jazz standards, such as 'Laura', 'Stella By Starlight' and 'You Go To My Head', in 'his own inimitable, enigmatic style' (as the sleeve note knowingly suggests).

<sup>164</sup> Charlie Watts and The Tentet. *Watts at Scott's*. 2004. CD. BBJ300. This boasts 'the inimitable [again] outsider edge of Evan Parker [as part of] a retrospective musical feast [of material from the 1940s, 50s and 60s]'.

<sup>165</sup> The transcription of the melody from a vocal to, say, guitar arrangement represents a stylistic, rather than compositional, reinterpretation.



the playing of the [...] main tune is not a particular problem; the fun starts with, and the [...] expertise is judged by, the skill and grace of the embroidery or improvising.<sup>166</sup>

Bruford's choice of language is revealing here, in several instances returning us to Sachs' 'brilliant displays of virtuosity': *expertise, skill and grace, embroidery, fun*. The implication is of the musician's heightened abilities and sensibility, and a sense of achievement or reward when 'expertise is judged'. As Sachs suggests, there are considerations at play here beyond those of the aesthetic satisfaction of a pleasing melody. A key factor appears to be of controlled facility, to be able to exert a personalised transformation of extant materials. Perhaps a more extroverted musicality is on show here than that of the affecting and communicative (but of the performer, less-representative) vocal line.<sup>167</sup> The improvisational remodelling of a piece in this context is analogous to the composition process. Via an applied knowledge of its organising conventions and the ability to instrumentally elaborate on them, an improviser may create new music from the components of an existing piece. Likewise, a deliberate ordering and arrangement of musical resources exemplify the composer's work, although it is from the wider areas of established theory and tradition that existing materials are referenced. Each process ultimately reflects the skills and preferences of the individual protagonist, in the personal reinvention of materials that are not of their own devising.

The hybrid status of the jazz composition is, broadly speaking, derived from the composite make-up of jazz as a (series of related sub-) genre(s). The origins of jazz, around the beginning of the Twentieth Century, lie in the fusion of two musical

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<sup>166</sup> Bruford, p. 123.

<sup>167</sup> One particular exception to this, of especial relevance to jazz, is so-called 'scat singing'. In contrast to the note above, whereby an instrumentalist may effectively assume a vocal function, scat-singing redeploys the human voice in a characteristically instrumental role.

cultures: the Afro-American and Western European. In *As Serious as your Life*, her study of latter-day jazz innovation, Val Wilmer describes her encounter with musician ‘Guitar Shorty’, which is worth quoting at length:

Some of his words were made up on the spot, others were as old as the music itself [...] each phrase derived from the rich musical legacy of Black America. Shorty’s instrumental work, likewise, was a combination of things remembered and things invented [...]. For the earnest student of the blues, though, there was one thing distressingly wrong: the guitarist seemed blissfully unaware of the classic eight-bar, twelve-bar and sixteen-bar structures of the most common kinds of blues. He fragmented the time and switched from one pattern or chord sequence to another whenever the change sounded right to him [...].<sup>168</sup>

As Wilmer acknowledges, her disquiet at the music’s apparent irregularities is likely to have resulted from her modern, European perspective. What she encountered in Guitar Shorty’s music, it is suggested, was a throwback to a more instinctively realised folk blues: one of Afro-American tradition, prior to European co-option. ‘Spirituals, hymns, marches [and] blues’ from the former tradition (writes Michael J Budds)<sup>169</sup> were subject to new levels of formalisation, in conjunction and interaction with Western influences. It is from this process that what became ‘jazz’ coalesced. *Jazz: The Rough Guide* summarises, first, that ‘the idea of selected notes sounding together to form chords is the great European additive to African-American music’;<sup>170</sup> and second, that it was ‘the input of early jazz instrumentalists that was responsible [for the standardisation of such structures as the 12 bar blues]’.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Wilmer, p. 9.

<sup>169</sup> Michael J. Budds, *Jazz in the Sixties. The Expansion of Musical Resources & Techniques* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1978), p.1.

<sup>170</sup> Ian Carr, Digby Fairweather, Brian Priestley, *Jazz. The Rough Guide* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 874.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p. 865.



In his discussion of the invention of Equal Temperament,<sup>172</sup> Goodall illustrates its significance to the development of ordered harmony and tonality. Alongside such refinements as the delineation of rhythmic ‘time signature’ and the construction of instruments tempered to the new standards, such devices established a self-contained incremental logic of musical construction. They created finite, but also potentially expansive and flexible, resources of standard and referable musical materials. As such, a comprehensive knowledge of the system allowed the possibility of detailed and complex, but guided, exploration of the form. Essentially, a comparative base ensued: a unifying influence that assisted in the music’s reproduction, dissemination and longevity. Furthermore, the internal logic of these conventions also enabled musicians to actively engage with an extant piece themselves. While remaining (both colloquially and culture-specifically) ‘in tune’ with a composition, a musician now had a framework in which to develop, reinterpret or accompany the materials of the piece. And this could be achieved in a language common both to that piece *and* to other players. The idiosyncrasy that Wilmer detected in Guitar Shorty’s performance is symptomatic of the absence of culturally-anticipated formulaic responses, or (at least) *different* cultural formulae. What he favoured instead was a personal interpretation of his performance’s aesthetic potential, as and when he perceived it (cf. Roy Travis’ model of ‘tonality’ in Chapter Two). As Wilmer found Shorty’s musical logic unpredictable, probably so too would other musicians conversant only with the twentieth century’s standardised blues forms. Without this degree of complicit compromise at certain levels of musical organisation, active collaboration becomes a far greater challenge. Guiding preconditions must apply, formalised music theory

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<sup>172</sup> Goodall, pp. 101-134.

seems to dictate. If not, (pianist and writer) Steve Race concurs, ‘only one man could play at a time without disastrous results’.<sup>173</sup>

## Idiom, structure & improvisation

Jazz then, as Budds states, is ‘defined by the nature of [...] borrowed material’.<sup>174</sup> As a hybrid of Afro-American folk and European classical traditions, it reflects respectively both Sachs’ theories of aesthetically conceived song and technically achieved instrumental construction. ‘Jazz’ *per se* represents a generic meta-structure: ‘a system of fundamental agreements that regulated [...] basic compositional matters’ which, Budds continues, ‘allowed performers to concentrate on improvisation’.<sup>175</sup> The implications of this brief description are vital to the consideration of what ‘to freely improvise’ might entail. It is the shifting relationship between ‘idiom’, ‘structure’ and ‘improvisation’ that I will pursue in the remainder of this chapter, and upon which ultimately this thesis is based. In the current example – of structured and idiomatic improvisation – I have suggested the denomination ‘jazz’ as having meta-structural significance. Budds’ ‘fundamental agreements’ help to illustrate this idea.

‘Jazz’ is an abstract noun, used to describe a specific cumulative interaction between certain ‘borrowed materials’. Referred to as a whole, it is representative of that subjective interpretation of sound by which we define ‘music’. We differentiate it further, too – as a *genre* of music – which we understand in terms of the precise contextual combination of its component parts. I have argued that the concepts of melody, harmony, rhythm and pitch are intrinsically anticipated of ‘music’. Consistent with this – and reflecting jazz’s status as a unique musical dialect – the

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<sup>173</sup> Quoted in Alan Robertson, *Joe Harriott. Fire In His Soul* (London: Northway, 2003), p.84: originally from *Jazz News*, 11 February 1961.

<sup>174</sup> Budds, p. 1.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.



same concepts collectively shape ‘jazz’ too, albeit in differentiated forms. The most common examples of these are: pentatonic scale melodies; harmonic progressions derived from traditional blues forms (though rationalised by Western reinterpretation); the dragging, rhythmic character of ‘swing’; and the microtonal ‘slurring and bending of notes’ to which Prévost refers.<sup>176</sup> (This is an expressive deviation from Equal Temperament developed and exemplified by cornet player Buddy Bolden, Scott notes).<sup>177</sup> These conventions are usually reinforced timbrally as well. Drums, double bass, piano and/or guitar in the rhythm section for instance, and a frontline of various brass and reeds would typify a jazz line-up.

If the cumulative characteristics that define ‘genre’ equate to a meta-structure (and each separate song or instrumental piece a *macro*-structure), then these distinctive conceptual and practical elements fulfil a *micro*-structural role. Whilst individually, each one is a defined and self-contained unit of musical language, it is only in specific conjunction with each other that they culminate in ‘jazz’. This process has both an historical and a cultural component. The former pertains to the arbitrary, but ultimately definitive, material circumstances in/by which jazz emerged, in the early twentieth century; the latter refers to the perceived axiomatic value of the ‘jazz’ identity, during the subsequent years of the genre’s existence and evolution. By the weight of tradition, in other words, the concepts listed above now have a deeply rooted cultural association with jazz. They are lowest common denominators: discrete configurations that define the character of the meta-structure and are irreducible in key areas, if the genre is to retain its identity. The example of the SME is again useful here, whose descent from jazz was clearly apparent by certain criteria. Nevertheless,

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<sup>176</sup> Prévost, *Minute Particulars*, p. 121.

<sup>177</sup> Scott, p. 39.

this association was ultimately compromised, by the micro-structural absence of either 'swing' or blues-based tonality in the group's mature work.

The relationship between meta- and micro- structure is reciprocal, as in any musical genre. While the components may be regarded in terms of their collective association, 'jazz' itself can have no separate basis of existence without reference to those parts and processes that define it. This is the key to Budds' 'system of fundamental agreements'. The idiom serves as both hypothetical paradigm and limiting precedent, and the perpetuation of these qualifying categories maintains the genre tradition in its agreed form. Budds writes of 'compositional matters', but in this context it is less the *musical* connotation of 'compositional' that is relevant, than the more general *organisational* sense of the word. Any one of the micro-structural schemes above might inspire or provide focus to a new jazz melody, harmonic progression or arrangement. In a wider sense, however, it is the rationalisation and knowledge of the idiom that removes the need to re-conceptualise the fundamental details when composing or improvising a new piece. Knowing what 'jazz' is (historically and culturally) *supposed* to sound like, and acknowledging that other musicians and the audience do *too*, enables the composer or improviser to rely on what has already been taken for granted.<sup>178</sup> Jazz, as a functional meta-structure, acts as a musical template upon which finer points of interpretation and interaction may be elaborated. It may inform subsequent music, if taken as a starting point. Alternatively, it may be invoked itself, by the convergence of particular musical materials or references. Essentially, a classical composition will represent one precisely executed critique of its genre, reasoned from the perspective of its composer. A jazz composition, on the other hand, provokes conversation from a reduced and evocative

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<sup>178</sup> In a related, but more specialised, sense this is akin to working within the Western tradition, and thus not needing to re-define your parameters and choices of pitch and tonality, for example.



premise. To create within an idiom is both to implicitly take advantage of, and also to submit to, the predetermined qualities of that idiom.

### **3. Non-structured, idiomatic improvisation**

British free improvisation owes its greatest debt – in terms of influence, aesthetic and technique – to jazz, and specifically the sub-genre of ‘free jazz’. In the essay ‘Frames of Freedom’, David Toop cites several instances of jazz musicians experimenting with early notions of ‘free’ playing, including Lennie Tristano, Lee Konitz and Bill Evans.<sup>179</sup> Ultimately though, it seems that these episodes were experiments rather than permanent shifts of musical direction. This perhaps accounts for their relative obscurity in the annals of free jazz iconography. I have already mentioned saxophonists Joe Harriott and Ornette Coleman, for their influence on the terminology of ‘free’ music. And it is in their playing too – as well as that of Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane and Albert Ayler<sup>180</sup> – that the origins of free improvisation are more clearly apparent. Free jazz was concerned with two broad areas of musical practice. One was the redefinition of pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony. The free jazz players worked with extended forms of these concepts and also sought to cultivate a greater musical parity between them. Although its methods were different in practice, in this respect free jazz explored similar intellectual themes to Webern, Russolo and Varèse. Second, there was a shift in emphasis between creative and interpretative roles within the ensemble. The expansion of jazz musicality resulted in greater opportunities for participation, contribution and self-expression for all players. The creative role of the

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<sup>179</sup> Toop, in Young (ed.), pp. 246-247.

<sup>180</sup> In this context, I name Harriott, Coleman, Taylor, Coltrane and Ayler as shorthand for the groups that they (individually) led. As I will discuss, much free jazz innovation was of a collective and collaborative nature.

improviser increased in these circumstances, in inverse proportion to that of the composer.

By the end of the 1950s, trumpeter Miles Davis had released two albums, *Milestones* and *Kind of Blue*,<sup>181</sup> which greatly advanced the scope of jazz improvisation. These recordings, according to Ekkehard Jost, were ‘representative of the early phase of modal playing’,<sup>182</sup> a technique that would loosen the constraints of composed structure on the would-be improviser.<sup>183</sup> Rather than a set, teleological song form or instrumental composition, individual scales (or ‘modes’) were the structural basis of a piece. They formed the thematic basis of improvisation as well, similar to the standard ‘head’ arrangement that is common in jazz. But while modes and heads were used comparably to begin and end a piece, they shaped the intervening improvisation differently. ‘Modality’ represented a macro-structural simplification of the jazz composition. By their melodic sparseness (rather than harmonic development), modes offered a flexibility and open-endedness of reinterpretation that more structurally formal heads did not. In its reduced sequences of chords, and the focus instead on a limited melodic line, modal playing shares a likeness with Schoenberg and Webern’s atonality. While Schoenberg wrote permutations of the complete twelve-tone octave however, modes typically comprised a lesser number of pitches each. But in their subsequent diversity of pitch and interval combinations, modes tended to be more individually characteristic than the melodies of Serial atonality allowed. Modes, writes John Wickes, ‘can be any scales besides the two which dominated three hundred years of European music, the major and minor

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<sup>181</sup> Miles Davis. *Milestones*. 1958. CD. CK 85203 & *Kind of Blue*. 1960. LP. CBS 62066

<sup>182</sup> Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p.21.

<sup>183</sup> Such is the manner of playing documented on Joseph Holbrooke’s only available 1960s recording, where they perform John Coltrane’s theme ‘Miles Mode’. See Chapter One and Appendix One.



diatonic. They re-connect with both distant and ancient musical cultures.’<sup>184</sup> As such, modes have sometimes been used for their ‘exotic’ nature and their ability to invoke environment or mood. The pentatonic ‘blues scale’, that melodically informed so much of jazz, is one example of this. Using a distinctive mode as the theme and basis of a piece (at the expense of harmonic progression) recalled the traits of atonality, in a jazz context. With harmonies no longer developing and resolving according to strict Western tonality, chords now often assumed the role of a textural drone. They complemented the foreground activity, but were no longer dominant or determinant of the piece. The foreground activity itself did not just furnish or embellish the music any longer, but progressively came to define it.

In comparison to British free improvisation, Afro-American free jazz has been documented and analysed extensively. Even the much-neglected Joe Harriott is the subject of a recent biography (though his recordings remain scarce). Musicological, historical and cultural accounts of the genre – such as those by Wilmer, Litweiler, Jost and Robertson – are not uncommon, and preclude the necessity of re-telling the story here. And as I have already described, British interpretations of the legacy may be heard in extant recordings by Joseph Holbrooke, the early SME, AMM II and Amalgam, etc. What is most significant to my analysis is the process by which free jazz made the techniques of the avant-garde composer available to the real-time, interactive improviser. Though my account of free jazz is relatively brief, the reader should not infer a merely superficial relevance between the genre and British free improvisation. In fact, such an investigation could be inappropriately lengthy. For the present, however, a discussion of shared characteristics between the two genres is most appropriate to the wider argument.

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<sup>184</sup> Wickes, p. 12.

Non-structured idiomatic improvisation is defined by the de-emphasis of macro-structural organisation. There is still an essential genre (i.e. meta-structure) affiliation that informs the overall character of the music, but improvisation is negotiated and assembled in increments of the genre's micro-structures. There is no greater, pre-determined structure to be fulfilled: no 'correct' layering and succession of micro-structures, in order to recreate a particular song (for example). The relative properties, functions and uses of the micro-structures, therefore, may be explored on their own terms. Depending on the individual distinctiveness of each micro-structure, the use of just one or two can readily maintain a recognisable approximation of the parent genre.

Steve Lacy remembers Ornette Coleman explaining to him that 'you just have a certain amount of space and you put what you want in it'.<sup>185</sup> (There is a fundamental connection here to a sympathetic experience of 4'33"; though creative involvement is centred on the performer in the first instance and the audience in the second, each is ultimately governed by a reciprocal and subjective acceptance of 'musical context' and 'musical content'. The performer, too, functions as critical audience when expressing their own musical sensibilities.) Some of Coleman's earlier pieces, especially, are more formally composed and 'tuneful' than others, but his aphorism is usefully applicable to the free jazz that he influenced so heavily. Contrary to the later inclinations of the free improvisers, Coleman (and his band) did not suppose to play 'non-idiomatically'. They were jazz musicians, albeit of an avant-garde persuasion. The 'certain amount of space' to which he refers can be interpreted as the meta-structure 'jazz', in the case of his own music. Although – especially with 4'33" – the process of 'putting what you want in' appears wilfully vague, a given assumption of

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<sup>185</sup> Interviewed in Bailey, p. 55.



meta-structure makes it less so. The essential materials of the meta-structure are its micro-structures. And despite the professed 'freedom' of free jazz, it remains fundamentally rooted in the vocabulary of jazz's more mainstream forms. The modes that Miles Davis was employing at the end of the 1950s can be seen as a micro-structure, in this context. The melodically fragmentary themes, too, on which Coleman's improvising was based around this time, functioned in a similar fashion.<sup>186</sup> Free jazz was to become more musically abstract than this, however.

In a music that increasingly focussed on the potential of microstructures, the input of the composer was marginalized. Instead it was in the process of creative improvisation that the characteristics of jazz atonality were developed. Saxophonist Ken Vandermark has spoken of modernist 'negation [in order to] find different sets of aesthetics'.<sup>187</sup> In the case of atonality, this tended towards the negation of conceptual delineations and hierarchies, and the reassessment of expressive language: Webern and Varèse's exploration of timbre and rhythm at the expense of melody and harmony is the most obvious example. Similarly, Valerie Wilmer makes an insightful allusion with regard to the playing of pianist Cecil Taylor. She describes an approach that reinvented the instrument as 'eighty-eight tuned drums'.<sup>188</sup>

Taylor's musicianship is one of the most conspicuously close relatives of free improvisation. His fusion of both classical and jazz influences remains apparent, and in the 1980s Taylor recorded duets with both Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley.<sup>189</sup> Rhythmically, he can be energetic: combining fast fluid runs of notes with dramatic emphases of jagged and staccato inflection. Though his melodies and harmonies do

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<sup>186</sup> See, for example, Ornette Coleman's *Tomorrow is the Question*. 1988. CD. OJCCD-342-2, or *The Shape of Jazz To Come*. 1966. LP. 288022

<sup>187</sup> Interviewed in Mike Barnes, 'Invisible Jukebox', *The Wire*, March 2005, p. 22.

<sup>188</sup> Wilmer, p. 51.

<sup>189</sup> Cecil Taylor & Derek Bailey. *Pleistozaen Mit Wasser*. 1989. CD. FMP CD 16, and Cecil Taylor & Tony Oxley. *Leaf Palm Hand*. 1989. CD. FMP CD 6

not wholly avoid Western connotations, his unusual clustering of notes in both succession and simultaneity often appears arbitrary and dissonant. Wilmer implicitly acknowledges the de-emphasis of musical hierarchy, which the classical atonalists, Taylor and the free improvisers all demonstrated in some form. Functionally, the piano embodies Equal Temperament, and is a vital and expressive medium for melodic and harmonic construction. Yet it is also grounded in percussion and rhythm, and is timbrally versatile enough to effect the tonal 'indeterminacy' and physical presence of the drum. Taylor presents, in effect, a one-man approximation of the SME's busier soundscapes, of shifting tone colour in frenetic rhythmic flux. By his own singular extremity of style, Taylor is a useful overall example of the contribution of free jazz to atonal practice. The innovative qualities of his playing, though, were honed more specifically by a number of the genre's other practitioners.<sup>190</sup>

Though the language of free improvisation recalls elemental and prehistoric concepts of musicality, the free improvisers' own historical context cannot be directly reconciled with that of the earlier era. Between them were millennia of musical evolution, which in one instance culminated in the Western tradition. It is more accurate to say that free improvisation represents a subsequent *abstraction* of these later Western refinements. Such was the previous example of modal jazz, at the end of the 1950s. In its immediate wake, Ornette Coleman's music extended the model further still, ultimately bringing about an abstraction of traditional melody, composition and pitch that is one of the most recognisable bases of free jazz. Jazz is founded on the alternation of composed themes, interspersed with passages of instrumental extemporisation; and modal jazz is not dissimilar. As well as acting as a melodic guideline, the theme or mode would also be used to bookend improvised

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<sup>190</sup> See (as an example of Taylor's playing alongside that of Elvin Jones, which is discussed below) Dewey Redman/Cecil Taylor/Elvin Jones, *Momentum Space*, 1999, CD, 559 944-2



passages and suggest a compositional unity to the whole. Free jazz tended to retain these ‘bookends’ in some form, although they themselves became increasingly elemental, as Coleman’s early example demonstrates. (See also Appendix One, Examples 1.1 & 5 – 5.1.o) Though Coleman certainly has conventional melodies to his name, his themes tended to take the form of motifs, rather than tunes.<sup>191</sup> This reflected the diminishing relevance of the composer’s work in the new jazz, and also reinforced the micro-structure as its alternative currency.

By the use of motifs, Coleman’s music emphasised the discrete musical gesture, rather than traditional longer-form structures of melody and tonality. And in doing so, he instigated a process of acclimatisation to the free jazz aesthetic, which free improvisation later developed. The disjointed and linear character of his music suggested a growing independence from the Westernised homogeny of mainstream jazz. By negating the fluidity of its line, for example, Coleman’s phrasing helped to break down the associative expectations of a ‘tuneful’ melody. Coleman pointed towards micro-structural construction with both his group’s improvising vocabulary, as well as their structuring themes.<sup>192</sup> Their melodic phrasing took on speech-like rhythms instead, in conjunction with a loosening approach to the definition of pitch. Free improvisation’s ‘atonality’ in fact reflects several different interpretations of the term. It references the arbitrary microtonal pitches of Russolo’s quasi-industrial sounds, as well as Varèse’s ‘unpitched’ percussion. And from Webern and Cecil Taylor, it makes dissonant or seemingly non-developmental selections from the range of Equal Temperament. From the basis of blues and jazz technique, however, horn players such as Coleman and Albert Ayler accessed another, intermediate source of melodic pitches. I have mentioned the tradition of ‘bending’ and slurring notes for

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<sup>191</sup> In this respect, they may be said to resemble some of Varèse’s work (see above).

<sup>192</sup> Ultimately, although maintaining some semblance of idiomatic character, much free jazz neglected a theme at all. Like the free improvisers, they simply moved straight to the interactive material.

expressive effect. Though deliberate and controlled, these were microtonal ‘near misses’ of Equally Tempered notes: their dissonance, in the context of otherwise Westernised music, commonly used to evoke the blues’ melancholic or anguished character. The free jazz players bent and slurred notes further and further.<sup>193</sup> They also developed the horn player’s arsenal of punctuation and inflections to ever-greater extremes; with distinctive pitch bends, trills, controlled overblowing and vocal-like effects, Coleman, Ayler (particularly) and others created an emotive musical slang at notable odds with formal order and consonance.

As the 1960s progressed and Afro-American free jazz became increasingly associated with the Civil Rights movement, players such as Archie Shepp sought to convey the African roots – rather than the European co-option – of their music. And John Litweiler implies such a throwback in Ayler’s particular use of ‘primitive concepts of sound and musical line’.<sup>194</sup> As with British free improvisation, the allusion and aspiration to earlier, pre-formalised models of musicality suggests a reaction to an imposed cultural hegemony. Though the political cause was clearly more urgent and explicit in the USA than in London or Sheffield, a deliberate subversion of tradition is apparent, and comparably realised, in each case. The corrosion of melody and distortion of pitch values was achieved by carefully controlled manipulation and development of technique, on instruments originally built to express Equal Temperament. The emergent music was cultivated to be aesthetically striking, sometimes startling, challenging and emotive. It was also achieved in an era of acoustic instrumentation, without the common later recourse to extreme amplification, feedback and the electric guitarist’s ubiquitous distortion pedal. Horn

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<sup>193</sup> This is especially apparent in Albert Ayler’s playing. Often performing essentially simple folk and blues melodies, Ayler’s bending of notes in unexpected places gave his music a peculiarly a queasy, off key aspect. See, for example, (two versions of) ‘Ghosts’ on the Albert Ayler Trio’s *Spiritual Unity*. 1999. CD. ESP CD 1002

<sup>194</sup> John Litweiler, *Ornette Coleman. The Harmolodic Life* (London: Quartet Books, 1992), p. 101.



players such as Coleman and Ayler vastly extended the instrumental ranges and functions of their own instruments. But their innovations were also significant to the free jazz and improvisation ensembles as a whole. By reducing the conceptual and technical contrasts between pitch and melody, and harmony and rhythm, instrumentalists' traditional roles could be reassessed, and a greater expressive and participative equality effected amongst them.

Conventional harmonic macro-structures had already been largely displaced by modal jazz's melodic and rhythmic focus, and the trend was continued by the early free jazz of Ornette Coleman. His group's improvisations comprised interactive polyphonic linear counterpoint, and their direction was guided in response to the last note played rather than the next chord coming. With the use of conventional harmony decreasing in the new jazz, the music's foundational layers also underwent a change. Of Cecil Taylor, Wilmer notes that: 'It is the overall effect of his music [rather than the specific notes and lines therein] to which the listener responds'.<sup>195</sup> The 'harmony' of free jazz could be said to function in a similar sense. John Coltrane's *Meditations* album, recorded in 1966, is one good example.<sup>196</sup> While Ornette Coleman's groups appeared frantically active, they still retained a transparency of texture in their sound (which the SME approximated later on). Coltrane's later groups, however, exhibited a densely packed swamp of instrumentation, more akin in effect to AMM. *Meditations* featured an extended rhythm section, of piano, bass and two drummers (and the doubling-up of instruments became an increasingly common feature of free jazz). Unlike AMM – who produced different kinds of instrumental sonorities to fill out their sound – Coltrane's later groups displayed little in terms of instrumental restraint. They formed an opaque and tumbling matrix of activity that was awash with detail

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<sup>195</sup> Wilmer, p. 24.

<sup>196</sup> John Coltrane. *Meditations*. 1966. LP, A-9110

and overtones, and short on silence. Of a comparable Coltrane recording, *Ascension*,<sup>197</sup> Archie Shepp noted that the ‘emphasis was on texture rather than [...] organisational entity’.<sup>198</sup>

This, primarily, was the form and function adopted by free jazz harmony. Solo voices – especially horns – were sometimes apparent in such circumstances. But essentially, the increasing tonal and rhythmic parity of (the former) front line and rhythm section brought about a collective soundscape of intense, ever-shifting detail. ‘Harmony’ in free jazz came to suggest a kinetic and volatile, but malleable, textural basis of activity rather than a guiding and inflexible support structure. It embraced especially the kinds of percussive and tonal ambiguities that characterised Varèse’s compositions, but reflected instead the personalities and styles of the participant improvisers.

As the example of *Meditations* shows, free jazz brought about an emancipation of the rhythm section akin to that which Varèse had granted the percussionists of the Western orchestra. One key pioneer of free jazz percussion was Coltrane’s drummer, Elvin Jones, who represents a prime example of the genre’s shift towards the atonal aesthetic. As well as pulse and rhythm, Jones’ virtuoso playing evoked both melodic and harmonic shapes, also providing the full range of timbral and textural variation from the drum kit. Jones moved about his kit in a style that sometimes approximated to a constant solo, but nevertheless paid keen attention to the timing of the music being played. His chief innovation was his intricately syncopated approach to subdividing, expressing and fulfilling jazz’s essential ‘swing’. (See **Appendix One, Examples 5.1.f & 5.1.m**) Under the influence of Western tonality, a melody will develop through increments of increasing dissonance, back to a point of

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<sup>197</sup> John Coltrane. *Ascension*. 1965. LP. A-95

<sup>198</sup> Sleeve note to John Coltrane’s *Ascension*.



consonant resolution. As Michel Budds' model suggests,<sup>199</sup> Jones' playing worked in a comparable way: exploiting rhythmic syncopation, tension and release at a new level of sophistication. A sixteen beat phrase, for example, could conventionally and simply be divided up into four measures of four. Jones, however, might perhaps choose a measure of four, one of six, another of four, and then overlap with another 'six' into the next sixteen beat phrase. This kind of phrasing, of course, is not unconventional for a 'melody instrument', but is somewhat more so for a drummer, especially at the protracted successive lengths over which Jones performed such feats. Though inherently percussive and rhythmic, Jones' playing was equally melodically fluid and harmonically textural. He provides, as such, a concise and useful summary of the opportunities that free jazz presented to the able instrumentalist, which free improvisation developed further still.

I will return to Jones, and more so his *Meditations* co-drummer Rashied Ali, in the final section of this chapter. But for all his virtuosity and innovation, Jones' playing is also representative of the factor that makes free jazz 'non-structured idiomatic' improvisation, rather than 'free'. Though it demonstrates some interpretation of 'freedom' that more mainstream forms do not, free jazz is self-explanatorily still 'jazz' of some kind. It retains its meta-structural identity, therefore indicating some degree of micro-structural constancy also. Budds emphasises the 'solo break' – whereby a soloist will continue unaccompanied, while the ensemble briefly drops out – as 'an important evolutionary step' in jazz.<sup>200</sup> The device is another example (on the ensemble's part) of 'apparent silence', of the kind in The Beatles' 'Love Me Do'. The solo break (in mainstream jazz) was not a 'blank canvas' for the soloist to fill arbitrarily; it was a measured sub-section of the macro-structure.

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<sup>199</sup> Budds, p. 68.

<sup>200</sup> Budds, p. 5.

Most probably, the passage of (the piece's) time would be counted in micro-structural terms, perhaps two or four or eight bars. But bound by the harmonic and rhythmic template of the piece, the soloist would continue to play effectively *as if* the ensemble were doing likewise. Some manner of audible timekeeping might be used to keep the musicians synchronised. But particularly in a short solo break, both soloist and tacet ensemble may continue to perceive the music's momentum uninterrupted, without actually performing or hearing it. In such circumstances, meta-, macro- and micro-structure, and the accurate contextual perception of them, are vitally engaged in order to realise structured and/or idiomatic improvisation. It is the implicit influence of the meta- or macro-structure that is the basis of the improvisation, but the phrasing of the micro-structures that gives it sensible form.

Free jazz then, as non-structured idiomatic improvisation, largely dispensed with song-based macro-structure, making music instead from jazz's micro-structural components. Reinforced by a continuity of instrumental timbres, free jazz audibly retained the evidence of blues and gospel phrasing, and the African-derived rhythmic character of 'swing'. In the 1970s, with recordings such as *Dancing In Your Head*, Ornette Coleman rationalised his idiosyncratic model of jazz as 'harmolodic'. The neologism references certain core musical concepts quite clearly, which Coleman described as being 'equal in relationship' in his music.<sup>201</sup> But he approximates the hierarchical shifts of atonality and free jazz *too* far here. In an Orwellian sense, some of the music's elements are expressively more equal than others. Coleman's 'harmolodicism' is one particularly strong example of free jazz's lingering idiomatic dependency. Instrumentally it suggested a fusion of electric jazz, funk and rock rather than acoustic jazz, but its vocabulary was still recognisably similar to Coleman's

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<sup>201</sup> Sleeve note to Ornette Coleman's *Dancing In Your Head*. 2000. CD. 543 519-2



earlier music. The traditional melody and harmony instruments especially<sup>202</sup> perform expanded, versatile and demonstrative roles – each simultaneously a solo and an ensemble voice – in Coleman’s harmolodic jazz. Nevertheless, in terms of rhythmic drive, ‘freedom’ seems limited to that of interpretation, rather than instigation. Like the syncopated and textural patterns of Elvin Jones’ playing, within ‘free’ jazz broadly there is (what Ben Watson calls) a ‘rolling continuity’.<sup>203</sup> It is that of ‘swing’. Swing is jazz’s fundamental rhythmic characteristic, and ‘rhythm’ is similarly fundamental to the experience of ‘music’ at all. Free jazz – for all its tonal distensions – retains the implication of ‘swinging’ propulsion even in some of its most extreme examples. The influence is powerful and distinctive. And it is this that prevents any final departure from jazz. Unlike the ‘impact’ model of punctuation that Varèse sometimes used, free jazz still seems to demonstrate an irreducibility beyond a certain pre-ordained model of rhythm. Even if not always *quite* in a regular 4:4 time signature, free jazz’s headlong regularity of pulse nonetheless suggests an approximation of it.

As well as swing, free jazz also tends to exhibit residual tonal characteristics of the blues, and by which it remains idiomatically anchored. The seesawing, two note bass line of the Art Ensemble of Chicago’s ‘Get In Line’, for example, suggests how the most elemental application of rhythm and harmony can give idiomatic shape to otherwise seeming cacophony.<sup>204</sup> And likewise, the CD that Derek Bailey recorded with rhythm section veterans of Coleman’s harmolodic music<sup>205</sup> does seem more

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<sup>202</sup> On *Dancing In Your Head*: alto saxophone, clarinet, electric guitars and bass guitar.

<sup>203</sup> Watson, p. 294.

<sup>204</sup> Various Artists. *Jazzactuel*. 2001. 3xCD. SNAJ 707 CD

<sup>205</sup> Derek Bailey/Jamaaladeen Tacuma/Calvin Weston. *Mirakle*. 2000. CD. TZ 7603

aptly described as ‘noise funk’<sup>206</sup> than ‘free improvisation’ in any sense that he has helped to define it.

Whilst an adherence to either a genre-specific rhythm *or* tonal scale could constitute an idiomatic association, I have chosen deliberately to focus on the element of rhythm for two reasons. Whilst researching around the subject of free improvisation, it is the factor of characteristic rhythm that seems most often to remain a constant, in otherwise the most avant-garde music. The seminal free jazzers, such as Coleman and Coltrane are obvious examples, though the funk inflected music of Miles Davis’ 1970s electric period – (commercially far more successful) – functions on not dissimilar terms.<sup>207</sup> In a similar era, the rock group King Crimson (which for a time featured ex-MIC percussionist Jamie Muir) regularly improvised sectionally disjointed and atmospheric textural soundscapes. However, as Eric Tamm notes, more often than not ‘everyone slams into a downbeat at precisely the same moment’<sup>208</sup> and the improvisation turns to a passage of joint 4:4 soloing. The impromptu nature of the execution is not necessarily in doubt, but the apparent conventions of its phrasing point strongly and easily to a genre of ‘free rock’.<sup>209</sup> And AMM’s contemporaries in the psychedelic underground of 1960s London, The Pink Floyd,<sup>210</sup> fall into the same category. Through the pioneering use of now common electronic effects, their early improvisatory style called upon an extensive range of abstract textures, tones and atmospherics. But as period pieces such as ‘Interstellar Overdrive’ and ‘Nick’s Boogie’ show, these effects seldom occurred for any length in isolation from a basic

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<sup>206</sup> Sleeve note, *ibid*, and Richard Cook & Brian Morton, *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD* 6<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 70.

<sup>207</sup> See Miles Davis recordings from 1969s *Bitches Brew* through to 1975s *Pangaea*; refer, for example, to Cook & Morton, pp. 379-382.

<sup>208</sup> Tamm, p. 73.

<sup>209</sup> See King Crimson’s *The Great Deceiver. Live 1973-1974*. 1992. 4xCD. KC DIS 1 CAROL 1597-2

<sup>210</sup> Julian Palacios dedicates an unusual amount of space to AMM’s presence at such counter-culture venues as the Spontaneous Underground. He also notes the influence (especially) of Keith Rowe’s guitar style on the early, free-form Pink Floyd. See *Lost in the Woods. Syd Barrett and the Pink Floyd* (London: Boxtree, 1998), pp. 70-72, for example.



underlying rock pulse.<sup>211</sup> Rhythm, as well as being arguably the most fundamental of musical concepts, is also perhaps the most rudimentary to effect. The tonal concepts of music have tended towards precisely ordered systems. Refined models of pitch, melody and harmony, therefore, are more readily and noticeably open to avant-garde disruption than a simple pattern of rhythmic repetition. It is much easier to comply with, rely on, or slip into a consistent pulse than it is to accidentally approximate Western tonality. This is demonstrated by the generic constancies of non-structured idiomatic improvisation, and also makes the achievements of British free improvisation all the more remarkable.

The legacy of non-structured idiomatic improvisation is chiefly that of the emancipation of the instrumentalist from the hegemony of the composer. As the 'instrumental impulse' became representative of a viable, self-determining means of creativity, the formal limitations of Western musical orthodoxy were increasingly eroded. This left elemental principles of musical organisation – those that defined 'micro-structure' – exposed and integral at a potentially macro-structural level. The result was a newly negotiable format, which allowed access to composition for otherwise traditionally interpretative players. It both reflected and celebrated the parent genre, but emphasised an increasingly egalitarian version of the individual's role within it. By chronological circumstance, it was the early free jazz musicians that impressed these opportunities upon those who shaped free improvisation. The two groups shared clearly common ancestry. But the modifications of tradition that the free jazz players suggested did not only enable a closer relationship between the free improvisers and that 'borrowed' tradition. They also facilitated the means to re-investigate and reinterpret the innovations of the free improvisers' own Western

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<sup>211</sup> Pink Floyd. *London '66 – '67*. 1994. Video. PFVP 1

European musical culture. As an intermediate form – between ‘composition’ and ‘improvisation’ – non-structured idiomatic improvisation usefully exposes certain otherwise perhaps overlooked characteristics of music. Through the uncommon emphases and/or omissions inherent to this kind of music-making, we may discern levels and components of organisation and hierarchy that go traditionally unchallenged. By ignoring the potential influence of these factors, immediate limitations are placed upon our understanding of music. As Eddie Prévost pithily suggests, ‘playing it wrong is the only way of proposing other worlds’.<sup>212</sup>

#### **4. Structured, non-idiomatic improvisation: Experimental Composition**

Structured, non-idiomatic improvisation displays a decisive shift of emphasis toward the *process* of making music. Specifically, it is the process itself that focuses and defines any activity, rather than an idea or design of its generic results. Its heyday between 1950 and 1970, this hybrid form of composition and improvisation was a further development of the ‘indeterminate’ compositions of the classical avant-garde, and pieces of this latter – ‘experimental’ – kind have been attributed to Stockhausen, Cage, Cardew and Earle Brown, amongst others. However, it is that very hybridity that also makes these pieces difficult – and sometimes controversial – to define. Though they are often lumped together in common usage, Nyman makes a distinction between the so-called ‘avant-garde’ and ‘experimental’ musics. The avant-garde, he suggests, represents new extrapolations of otherwise traditional musical techniques. Experimental forms, meanwhile, question more fundamentally the nature of ‘music’

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<sup>212</sup> Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, p. 162.



itself and the accepted means of its creation.<sup>213</sup> This, then, is how I have separated avant-garde indeterminacy (above) and experimental indeterminacy (here): that which I am now categorising as ‘structured, non-idiomatic improvisation’. The distinction becomes clearer in practice.

As with the majority of Western compositions, structured non-idiomatic improvisation represents the interpretation of a score, which suggests, limits or implies certain kinds of performed response. Experimental scores, though, are often of a more abstract quality than normal, either in the manner of notated instruction or the medium of the score itself. As such, the extant ‘composed’ materials that the score is meant to convey may become questionable or oblique: either in terms of how they are to be practically translated, or indeed whether they prescribe very much at all. This is not an obstacle to making music *per se*, if the performer is prepared to interpret or improvise *some* response from whatever stimulus they are given. The controversy arises, though, around the experimental compositions of Stockhausen, Cage, et al, when definitions and delineations of role – and the creative credit assigned to them – are not easily qualified. Theirs (for example) is the music that Emanem’s Martin Davidson disparages in his sleeve note to AMM’s *To Hear and Back Again*. He characterises it as an indulgence: compositions amounting only to an instruction to “improvise but pay me royalties”.<sup>214</sup>

There are less contentious kinds of abstract score. One method of influencing performance is to refer to an artefact that has particular stylistic, atmospheric, dynamic or emotive associations itself, and then to attempt to mimic and/or compliment those effects musically. Miles Davis’ soundtrack for the film *L’Ascenseur*

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<sup>213</sup> Nyman, pp. 1-2, etc. In fact, the use of ‘chance’ that I discussed earlier is better defined as an *experimental* process. In the context of pieces such as *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* and *Music of Changes*, however, it was used by Cage in the private process of composition itself. The interpretation and performance practices of these pieces nevertheless remain examples of avant-garde technique.

<sup>214</sup> Sleeve note to AMM. *To Hear and Back Again*. 1994. CD. MRCD03

*pour l'échafaud* is one example of this, in an idiomatic context.<sup>215</sup> The music was improvised live by Davis and his group whilst watching pre-recorded (but previously unviewed) footage. Their modal blues/jazz style was used to evoke and engage with the tense, melancholic urban imagery of the film, and the effect is achieved by the specific combination of stimulus and response, which accesses subliminal cultural associations and established cinematic devices familiar to its audience. Cook and Morton have made direct comparison between this piece and Iskra 1903's *Buzz Soundtrack*,<sup>216</sup> though an earlier example of the same technique was undertaken by the SME (which also included Rutherford, Guy and Bailey at that time). It is documented on the *Withdrawal* CD, from the film of the same name. Prior to performance, the group read the novel upon which the film was based, in order to get an idea of its aesthetic character and structural dynamics. In light of this research, some skeletal but appropriately evocative themes were then prepared<sup>217</sup> and, finally, they too were interpreted live in accompaniment to the projected 'score'. In the SME's soundtrack, it is creaking, brooding atonality, of course – not blues scales – that is used to suggest the film's mood of suspense and psychological disquiet. (See **Appendix One, Example 1.2**)

With examples such as these, the suggestive nature of the stimulus and of the anticipated results is relatively unambiguous. While there is a 'score' to be interpreted, there is not formally a composer as such. The music is basically a guided improvisation, and the participants will likely acknowledge it as such. Where there is a delineated 'composer' figure and a 'score' (of some form) that they have composed, the complications are potentially greater. Traditionally, performers are termed

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<sup>215</sup> Miles Davis. *L'Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*. 1957. CD. 836305

<sup>216</sup> Cook & Morton, p. 1288. See Iskra 1903. *Buzz Soundtrack*. 2002. CD. Emanem 4066

<sup>217</sup> As I discuss in Chapter One, the SME were at a transitional stage in their development during the *Withdrawal* period, experimenting with 'compositions for improvisers'.



‘interpreters’ of a scored composition, and even sections of expressed improvisation are designated and characterised by the composer’s design. As we have seen, in mainstream and even avant-garde practice, there tends to be sufficient, pre-composed and explicitly stated material in these circumstances so that ‘a composition’ is undoubtedly extant. With encroaching experimental abstraction, however, it may become uncertain what the ‘composer’ is contributing that the ‘interpreter’ is not (as they improvise from the vaguest of guidelines). Experimental composition, for the most part, has occurred as an offshoot of Western tradition. It is the hierarchies of Western music upon which Davidson is casting aspersions: those credits that favour the (formal status of) ‘composer’ at the expense of the musicians who actually make this kind of music. This is the point of discrepancy: between what one calls an ‘experimental composition’ or a ‘structured, non-idiomatic improvisation’.

The artefact of a written, printed and/or published score presents the trappings of Western classical ordering and authority, even if self-consciously experimental in content. One example that both Tamm and Bailey have cited is Stockhausen’s composition cycle *Aus den Sieben Tagen*.<sup>218</sup> Hugh Davies (who helped translate the English version of the text) gives some account of the piece in Bailey’s book,<sup>219</sup> and the composer himself elaborates on the score in the LPs’ sleeve notes. Essentially though, it consists of twelve short passages of suggestive, New Age-influenced writing, some more cryptic than others. Most of the sections are scored (quite vaguely) ‘for ensemble’; ‘Gold Dust’ is ‘for small ensemble’; ‘Right Durations’ is ‘for circa 4 players’. And the instructions, too, range from the semi-practical (‘play a sound [...] for so long until you feel that you should stop’, from ‘Right Durations’) to the very abstract (‘play a vibration in the rhythm of dreaming and slowly transform it

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<sup>218</sup> Tamm, pp. 42-43 & Bailey, pp. 79-80. See Karlheinz Stockhausen. *Aus den Sieben Tagen* (Mai 1968). 1972. 7xLP. 2720 073.

<sup>219</sup> Quoted in Bailey, pp. 79-80.

into the rhythm of the universe', from 'Night Music'). These passages are the composer's edict. They outline types and general sequences of micro- and macro-structural motifs that form the exploratory basis of each section. Essentially, each suggests an improvisational style or format. In 2001, Eddie Prévost gamely reprinted a similar piece of his own devising, '*Silver Pyramid – A Mystery*' from 1969.<sup>220</sup> Today, it is easy to be cynical of text-pieces such as these, and Prévost reiterates 'the tenor of the times'<sup>221</sup> in the CD's sleeve note. Realistically, both these examples are in *some* way open to practical musical interpretation, but also demand an application of imagination tempered by a sympathetic leap of faith. Of the two, Stockhausen's piece is actually the more explicitly suggestive. There are, at least, references to certain characteristic rhythms, for example, or the use of single notes, or sustained notes, or the kind of self-governed tonality suggested by Roy Travis.<sup>222</sup>

Certain characteristic motifs *are* overtly suggested by *Aus den Sieben Tagen* as the material to be developed (by improvisation), and these *are* likely to identifiably recur in successive performances of the texts. This is Hugh Davies' position – in opposition to that of Martin Davidson – on the questions of authorial intention, responsibility and credit that this kind of 'composition' tends to raise. As with Christian Wolff's *Tilbury* pieces, for example, he maintains that there *is* an extant basis of pre-composed material – however malleable – that the performer merely *interprets*. It is not 'improvisation', from scratch. Seemingly, there is a conflict of two irreconcilable perspectives here. Davies' understanding and stance on the issue is certainly related to his own background within the Western tradition, where the role of composer is especially venerated. Davidson's standpoint is also clear, though: he

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<sup>220</sup> The text begins: 'The pyramid has as many sides as you can see and more. Look further, not with your eyes...' Sleeve note to the Music Now Ensemble's *Silver Pyramid*. 2001. CD. MRCD40

<sup>221</sup> From the sleeve note to AMM's *AMM Music 1966*. 1989. CD. ReR AMMCD

<sup>222</sup> See Chapter Two. Roger Scruton, of course, suggested that Travis's tonality itself excluded 'virtually nothing'.



does not criticise the musical *processes* of *Aus den Sieben Tagen* as such, but he favours an environment of *collectively attributed* investigation into those elemental motifs and structures that Stockhausen merely seems to invoke cryptically. Both Davidson's personal interests and livelihood are demonstrably invested in this idea.

The problem is: listening to a recording of *Aus den Sieben Tagen*, one forms the impression that this is music that *could be* freely improvised. There are distinct controlling ideas apparent in each of its sections, but they are also very impressionistic in notated content, in suggested performance practice and, finally, in practical realisation, too. To achieve essentially similar results, Davidson is suggesting, *this music might as well have been* freely improvised. Conscious, active musical improvisation implies and requires its own sense of compositional logic. (In this example) Stockhausen's role seems closer to that of an absentee improviser than anything else. The stimuli that guide the general character of each section, and sometimes suggest structural turning points, may be said to be Stockhausen's (that is, expressed through his text) up to a point. But to distinguish his contribution utterly from those of the performers – whose interpretative leeway is really very broad – seems too strong a distinction to make.<sup>223</sup> A score that reads 'play a sound with the certainty that you have an infinite amount of time and space',<sup>224</sup> for example, addresses similarly fundamental issues to *4'33"*, but does little to dispel Davidson's prejudices. The elemental motifs and structures that Stockhausen proposes by proxy are perhaps better understood as pre-emptive improvised gestures to which the performers may then respond as if he had just made them, present and in real time. John Stevens used similar kinds of instruction and suggestion as the basis of his

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<sup>223</sup> So it does, too, to equate the 'compositions' of *Aus den Sieben Tagen* with those technical and aesthetic achievements of the mainstream Western tradition, for example.

<sup>224</sup> 'Unlimited' in this case, from *Aus den Sieben Tagen*.

workshop pieces,<sup>225</sup> and the SME's egalitarian musical policy was founded on a comparable idea. Conversely, perplexingly, and also controversially, however, he too was known to claim compositional credit for group-improvised pieces.<sup>226</sup> This sometimes occurred even within the context of the SME<sup>227</sup> (Evan Parker has claimed), on the basis of little more than a 1-2-3 count-in.<sup>228</sup> It should be noted as well that, although *Silver Pyramid* is not far removed from being an AMM performance and its music was derived from a text more vague in instruction than *Aus den Sieben Tagen*, the CD credits music copyright to Eddie Prévost alone.<sup>229</sup>

The graphic score has also reached extremes of abstraction: often the appearance, and almost the status, of abstract art in its own right. Beyond the extended ideas of notation that I discussed earlier, the graphic score mutated further into what might be described as dynamically or texturally *suggestive* design works. Keith Rowe, for one, has returned to the abstract graphic score on several occasions. An interest perhaps connected to his art school background, Wickes has cited Rowe's pre-AMM use of Paul Klee prints in this context. He would apparently 'substitute a picture he considered an appropriate stimulus [...] for his copy of whatever score the

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<sup>225</sup> See, for example, the Spontaneous Music Orchestra's *For You To Share*. 1998. CD. Emanem 4023 and *Mouthpiece*. 2000. CD. Emanem 4039

<sup>226</sup> Day, p. 19.

<sup>227</sup> This is demonstrated by the sleeve notes to the Spontaneous Music Ensemble's "*So, what do you think?*". 1971. LP. TGS 118, for example.

<sup>228</sup> BBC Radio 3. *Lines Burnt In Light. The Music of Evan Parker: Part One*. Broadcast 27 March 2004.

<sup>229</sup> Tony Oxley fronts – and takes compositional credit on – a trio of albums recorded in the late 1960s and early 1970s: *The Baptised Traveller*, 1999, CD, 494438 2, *4 Compositions for Sextet*, 1999, CD, 494437 2 and *Ichnos*, 1971, LP, SF 8215. They stand as a useful comparative body of work encompassing a range of styles and techniques that mix 'composition' and 'free improvisation' and which make use of several of the genre's 'name' players (Bailey, Parker, Rutherford, etc). The free improvising is tempered or interspersed variously by the jazz, classical, avant-garde and experimental idioms. Oxley contributes some written, 'head' themes – including one Serial-style tone row – and the briefest of punctuating group fanfares; on other occasions, he skilfully guides the expressive versatility of the group dynamic: shifting arrangements, textures and tempos, and creating 'features' *for* and *from* the distinctive styles of various band members (himself, Bailey and Parker, especially). He also explores sparser and more suggestively *indeterminate* compositional elements (more akin to those of *Aus den Sieben Tagen*). Sometimes he shapes the course of improvisations by reference merely to a time signature pattern; he also specifies timbrally-precise (but tonally and structurally vague) passages of, for example, 'bowed cymbal and bass harmonics'; and (though the artefact itself is not reproduced alongside the recording) Oxley also reveals – in the *Ichnos* sleeve note – his use of graphic scoring.



band was performing'.<sup>230</sup> Rowe also interpreted excerpts from further graphic scores on a later solo recording, including one by Cornelius Cardew.<sup>231</sup> Cardew himself, as Prévost notes, initially became involved with AMM whilst looking for musicians to interpret his graphic work '*Treatise*'.<sup>232</sup> In itself, it is a case in point: 193 pages of geometric diagrams, collages and patterns. Many of the symbols used appear to be abstracted themselves from those of standard notation, but the only indications of conventional scoring are two (blank) staves that run across the bottom of each page. Neither are there any written instructions for performance practice. In an (admittedly extreme) example such as this, 'indeterminate' does not seem an adequate description in terms of communicated musical intent. Evan Parker has characterised graphic scores of this kind as merely 'something to look at and think about, to compare with others of its type', while ultimately he relies on his own persona and skills to inform his 'interpretative' contribution.<sup>233</sup> Even with its own paragraph of exposition, another well known example, Earle Brown's *December 1952*,<sup>234</sup> cannot be said to really 'instruct'. It does not *limit* one's potential response either, but that is contrary to what the role of 'composer' represents. In such circumstances, Martin Davidson's concerns seem to bear even more weight. Neither of these pieces offers *practically* very much more than the opportunity to be interested or to have faith: to contemplate them, as Evan Parker does. Still, though, it is the graphic score and its composer that retain the reputation and remuneration, over those that interpret them (by improvising). It is perhaps best left said that one's overall attitude to either 'experimental compositions'

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<sup>230</sup> Wickes, p. 52.

<sup>231</sup> Keith Rowe. *A Dimension of Perfectly Ordinary Reality*. 1990. CD. MR19: Tracks 2 & 3, 'Ode Machine No. 2' (Cardew) and 'City Music' (Abbinanti).

<sup>232</sup> Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, p. 15. See also Cornelius Cardew. *Treatise*. 1970. Score. Edition Peters No. 7560

<sup>233</sup> Interviewed in Bailey, p. 80.

<sup>234</sup> Earle Brown, 'December 1952' in *Folio and 4 Systems* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1961) [Score]. The score itself consists of lines of various lengths and thicknesses, traced onto the (erased) outline of a three-dimensional diagram of a cube.

or ‘structured, non-idiomatic improvisations’ does seem finally dependent on one’s own perspective on the composer-score-performer hierarchy. We should not ignore, either, the nature of what the ‘experiment’ is.

I began this section by emphasising the definitive importance of process, rather than result, to structured, non-idiomatic improvisation. The pieces that I have mentioned here all conform to this,<sup>235</sup> allowing us to examine their precise natures, that of ‘structured non-idiomatic improvisation’, and also their relationship to ‘free’ improvisation, more closely. By virtue of their unspecified inclusiveness, Cage’s *4’33”*, Stockhausen’s *Unlimited*, and Cardew and Brown’s graphic works all implicitly potentially embrace the extended models of pitch, rhythm, melody, harmony and tonality that avant-garde musicians of various traditions ‘rediscovered’ during the twentieth century. They also examine and criticise the music-making process itself, by relativising the roles and functions of compositional and improvisational method.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the most fundamental form of compositional arrangement by which ‘music’ may be classified is that of its chronological occurrence. ‘Form [equates to] the length of programmed time’ stated composer Christian Wolff:<sup>236</sup> an idea which he demonstrated with his composition *Duo for Pianists II*.<sup>237</sup> An indeterminate piece (using both graphic and written instructions), Wolff’s processes and directions do not presume or predetermine a specific duration for its performance. What he does suggest is that the performers choose their own duration – prior to the event – and then adhere to that decision. Regardless of where they have come to in their interpretation of the score, the performers should effect an

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<sup>235</sup> The Miles Davis soundtrack, though, *is* idiomatically based.

<sup>236</sup> Quoted in. Nyman, p. 11: originally from Christian Wolff, ‘New and Electronic Music’ in *Audience* vol. 5, no. 3, Summer 1958.

<sup>237</sup> Christian Wolff, *Duo for Pianists II* (New York: Peters, 1962) [Score]



‘appropriate’ ending as they reach their allotted time.<sup>238</sup> Despite its eponymous duration, 4’33’’ works on a similar principle (the title actually pertains to David Tudor’s debut performance of the piece). Cage structures his piece – nominally – in formal terms, making it a piece of *three movements*, but ‘that may last any lengths of time’.<sup>239</sup> Though not without irony, 4’33’’ demonstrates how elemental the mechanics of structured, non-idiomatic improvisation may be, and Cage makes an extra compositional gesture that Stockhausen does not, with his otherwise conceptually comparable *Unlimited*. Cage does not programme chronological time as such: rather implicitly *musical* time, which he then manages to ‘compose’ further without actually specifying form, content or duration for his three movements either. Practically, the macro-structure implied by these compositions is defined by the period of active response to a predetermined stimulus, which we call the ‘score’; and the stimuli for these pieces are the film sequence, the graphic score or the clock. So, while the content of the pieces is extraordinarily flexible (by the terms of the process), the period when this ‘music’ is said to happen nevertheless still refers to, and is gauged by, some representative token that is external to the performers themselves. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this form (and a quality that it shares with free improvisation) is its permitted expansiveness of meta- and micro-structural parameters. 4’33’’ was first performed at the piano, although it is scored for ‘any instrumentalist(s)’<sup>240</sup> and in practice often involves none at all. Likewise, the various musical associations presented by the 45’18’’ CD indicate a lack of idiomatic

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<sup>238</sup> I have noticed essentially the same device in the free improvisation context at the Freedom of the City festivals (see the Bibliography). Typically, each group performed one uninterrupted improvised piece. According to the logistical demands of the bill, however, they always seemed to do so in convenient increments of forty-five minutes or an hour. (See Appendix One, Example 4.18)

<sup>239</sup> John Cage, 4’33’’ (New York: Henmar, 1960) [Score]

<sup>240</sup> Cage, 4’33’’ [Score]

constraint where pure process is concerned.<sup>241</sup> And *Unlimited*'s 'play a sound with the certainty that you have an infinite amount of time and space' offers to omit virtually nothing from under its banner. The concepts of pitch, rhythm, melody, harmony and tonality inherent to these pieces are as subjectively malleable as 'music' itself. Regardless of the stylistic affiliations of those who use it, structured, non-idiomatic improvisation intrinsically precludes generic result. To some observers – whom Martin Davidson has implicated – the final, applicable definition of 'improvisation' perhaps remains unsettled. I have included Stockhausen's, Cardew's and Brown's pieces in this section because I cannot reconcile them with anything other *than* the permission specifically to improvise without idiom: if, that is, 'composition' is to retain any sense of a dictated, already-formalised musical construction. I have suggested that Stockhausen acts as 'improviser-by-proxy' in (for example) the pieces from *Aus den Sieben Tagen*; one proviso that should be made, however, in regard to *Unlimited*, *Treatise*, *December 1952*, etc, is their potential to create the 'composer-by-proxy' also. In accordance with the principal subject matter of this thesis, I have dealt with these pieces' scores primarily in terms of stimuli provoking a real-time response. But they also provide and *suggest* the opportunity – in lieu of explicit instruction otherwise – to prepare and craft a more considered interpretation. In effect, they allow scope for the composition of whole new pieces, albeit under their (and their composer's) own name and within whatever parameters (if any) that they *do* specify.<sup>242</sup> The active gesture of engagement with *Unlimited*, *Treatise* or just John Stevens' '1-2-3-4...' cannot but raise questions about who is composing, who is interpreting and who is improvising. And as Hugh Davies's and Martin Davidson's

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<sup>241</sup> The recordings themselves range from rock group improvisation, to location recordings of rural 'silence', to digital CD-quality 'silence'.

<sup>242</sup> Cage's *Fontana Mix* is one quite complex and detailed example, which nevertheless illustrates this idea. See John Cage, *Fontana Mix* (New York: Henmar, 1960)



respective stances have exemplified, it is perhaps difficult to assume other than a strictly subjective and localised answer. The quality that can – that, by definition, *must* – be assigned to the realisations of these pieces, however, is that of *musical* sound at the meta-structural level.

4'33" remains as something of an enigma. In a sense – existing solely as a conceptual musical framework without prescribed content – it is nothing *but* a 'composition'; there is no 'performance' inherent to its performance and therefore no act of 'improvisation' either. Yet, if 'music' *is* sympathetically experienced by an audience of 4'33", then that music has been *improvised* – in the broader sense – from the acoustic materials to hand. Quite apart from the matters of structure and idiom, however, this passive involvement is one characteristic that 4'33" and free improvisation does not share.

Despite certain similarities of meta- and micro-structure, performance practice and audible character, one must be careful of comparing experimental composition and free improvisation too closely. Once more, it is the sometimes subtle differences between interpretation and improvisation that mark the divide. Tony Oxley has summed up the conflict of interests:

The improvisatory quality was not strong enough for me, [...] I felt – quite honestly – [...] that I as an improviser did not want to improvise Cage's music, because then I as an improviser would be doing the very thing I was trying to get away from, which was imitating somebody else.<sup>243</sup>

There are two aspects here to Oxley's distrust of Cage's (and more broadly, the indeterminate composers') methods. At one level, as a technically gifted and creative musician in his own right, Oxley is highlighting the fundamental self-sufficiency in

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<sup>243</sup> Watson, p. 66.

improvisation. An external composer is not intrinsically necessary in order to generate new music, and in light of the traditional imbalance of creative recognition in Western music Oxley may simply not have been interested in playing and promoting Cage's music at the expense of his own. (Although, as Oxley's *Baptised Traveller*, *4 Compositions* and *Ichnos* demonstrate, he was clearly interested enough in other people playing *his* indeterminate pieces.) But there is also a second implication in Oxley's words. To be able to improvise your own music – whether idiomatically or not – suggests a different level of ability and understanding than to be able merely to replicate someone else's. It shows a grasp not only of the organising principles and foundational units of (the) music, but also the sensibility to rearrange them to your own ends and the physical dexterity by which to do so. These are developments of presumably great personal value and interest to the musician who bothers to cultivate them. Improvising, in this sense, is a process of active engagement between the musical situation at hand and the improviser's own preferences and abilities. Beyond a certain stylistic point, therefore – perhaps defined by the improviser's own militancy – there seems only questionable aesthetic worth in a free improviser pursuing indeterminate compositions.

As I have discussed, the extended musical resources which experimental pieces such as *4'33"* and *Unlimited* helped legitimise are qualitatively similar to, and were extremely influential upon, the emergent British free improvisation. But it is pertinent, too, to re-emphasise the almost exclusively jazz-based derivation of free improvisation's methods and techniques. Prior to their ventures in free improvisation, Stevens, Bailey, Prévost, etc, were all either trained in, or taught themselves, certain interactive and interpretative skills of musical construction and expression. These are the primary characteristics and functions – and perhaps also the allure – of jazz



musicianship. In such terms, the idea of John Tilbury engaging with the composed minutiae of Wolff's *Tilbury* pieces presents a very different proposition to him freely improvising effectively in the name of Stockhausen. The latter option, to the free improviser, does not seem plausibly attractive to any serious extent. Derek Bailey (whose longevity and collaborative experience is as extensive as anybody's in the field) states that: 'improvisers might conduct occasional experiments but very few, I think, consider their work to be experimental'.<sup>244</sup> In response to Gavin Bryars' embrace of experimental music too, Bailey is keen to distance himself: 'I'm a conventional musician' he insists.<sup>245</sup> In the context of both his post-jazz and post-Webern techniques, it seems that Bailey is associating himself – and the British free improvisers in general – with the 'avant-garde' here, in the sense that Nyman defines it. Bailey's work, as he suggests, represents practical modifications of an extant playing tradition, but he is not a 'conceptual pioneer'.

Free improvisation, by definition, is a process open to a number of practical influences. As far as the musicians under scrutiny here are concerned, however, their musical backgrounds, the mature rationalisation of their 'free' styles and their prolonged consistencies of method suggest an involvement with the free improvisation process of very deliberate focus and intention. Despite essential similarities of content, technique and audible character, the relative methodologies of experimental 'structured, non-idiomatic improvisation' and avant-garde 'free improvisation' nonetheless exhibit some crucial inconsistencies.

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<sup>244</sup> Bailey, p. 83.

<sup>245</sup> Interviewed in Watson, p. 128.

## **5. Non-structured, non-idiomatic ('Free') improvisation**

British free improvisation, as it emerged during the 1960s, stood as an immediate successor to the innovations of free jazz and indeterminate composition. From the former, it inherited an expanded virtuosity of instrumental technique, egalitarian creative interaction and expressive self-determination; from the latter, unrestricted access to the sound world as a source of legitimate musical materials. In practice, there are audible areas of similarity and overlap between these three forms. They share instrumental voices and techniques to some extent, as well as an unconventional approach to the foundational principles of Western music. Yet both of the antecedent forms also encompass certain restricting elements. These both define and maintain the genre's respective meta-structural identities, but in order to do so must also preclude the improvisational ethic in some sense. Indeterminate composition has been employed amongst the free improvisers with differing results and responses. Ultimately though, it would appear that fundamental conflicts arise between composers and improvisers of strong preference towards either extreme. That an individual opts to explore free improvisation at all is indicative of a powerful inclination towards musical self-sufficiency at the expense of external dependences, and the dedication of the First Generation is pronounced by their constancy and their longevity. Amongst those that have defined British free improvisation, the use of premeditated compositional elements (of whatever kind) is not unknown, but it has also compromised the genre's central premise. Various an interesting diversion, unnecessary distraction, or actively unwelcome infringement of their apparent 'freedom', formal pre-composition has remained largely a subsidiary concern for the musicians under discussion.



The discrepancy between free improvisation and indeterminate composition is a procedural or conceptual one, rather than a refinement of musical technique itself. Free jazz's evolution into free improvisation, however, *did* represent such a refinement. The distinction between the two was sometimes subtle: particularly so with the jazz-inflected SME, for example. Nevertheless, the difference was present, crucial, and one that bears up to repeated scrutiny. In his study of John Coltrane's musical development, Karlton Hestor notes that

static devices like ostinati [i.e. repetitive, self-contained melodic figures, 'riffs'] and metrical clarity provide a focal point inexorable enough to prevent the listener becoming totally disoriented by the recalcitrant music that occurred above these functional devices.<sup>246</sup>

A key facet of free improvisation's development is re-stated here. The various and progressive moves away from Western tradition during the twentieth century have themselves been considered 'recalcitrant' in many instances, precisely because of their culturally unconventional and disorientating character. Yet, until the emergence of free improvisation, each successive idiom had continued to retain 'static devices' (macro- or micro-structures) that reflected and perpetuated their ongoing generic style. Latter-day free jazz saxophonist David S. Ware succinctly makes this point, in reference to his own tradition, when he states that 'You can get almost as avant-garde as you want to be, as long as you keep that steady pulse'.<sup>247</sup> Jazz's blues-based, Western tempered song forms underwent some extreme tonal distensions in order to become 'free', in other words. But by retaining a discernible measure of its

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<sup>246</sup> Hestor, p. 106.

<sup>247</sup> Interviewed in Howard Mandell, 'Divine Wind', *The Wire*, July 2002.

characteristic swinging momentum, 'jazz' ultimately survived the transformation intact.

Cage's categorisation of 'duration' (the marking of time) and Ornette Coleman's 'certain amount of space [that] you put what you want in' both suggest rhythmic emphasis as the most fundamental level of musicality. And it is this too that distinguished British first generation free improvisation from the contemporaneous free jazz. The music on the SME's debut recording, *Challenge*, was jazz 'for the same old reason – it swings' as bassist Chris Cambridge put it.<sup>248</sup> Coleman's harmolodic music likewise allowed a wide range of improvisational interaction between its practitioners, but it did not forsake the driving, regular propulsion of jazz, funk and rock rhythm. Even the discordant and fluid soundscapes of Ayler, late-period Coltrane, and successors such as Peter Brotzmann still display what Watson calls 'the rolling continuity that characterises [...] jazz'.<sup>249</sup> Until playing ceases entirely, there is a distinct element of consensual relentlessness about their music. 'There was little use of silence [in 1960s free jazz]' observes Michael Budds.<sup>250</sup> Quite apart from the subtle double meaning here – an allusion to Cage's *Silence* (?) – free improvisation defined itself by a very contrary methodology. But it was not the timbral use of silence as such that is relevant here. It is of greater significance that the silences are the result of the players remaining tacet.

Whether in the propulsive momentum of the rhythm section or in the fluidity of a soloist's melodic phrasing, the insistent quality of 'swing' implies reliance on a pre-established musical pattern. It is the collective recognition and adherence to this pattern that establishes and maintains the music's characteristic motion and allows the participating musicians to interact in a sympathetic and complimentary equal footing.

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<sup>248</sup> Sleeve note to the Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Challenge*. 2001. CD. Emanem 4053

<sup>249</sup> Watson, p. 294.

<sup>250</sup> Budds, p. 40.



Free jazz is the most pertinent example here, but equivalent rhythmic schemata organise the vast majority of musics before a note has even been played; this can be said of the notated time signatures of Webern's Serialism, or the cyclical 'grooves' of jazz, blues or rock; even the prescribed movements of 4'33". But in this implied rhythmic regularity, and the players' conscious adherence to it, there is an intrinsic remove from the idea of a 'freedom' of improvisation. In 2004, Bailey suggested that 'everybody gets to know the music and as soon as that happens and you start playing the music, you stop improvising'.<sup>251</sup> If there is one innovation alone that crystallised the music of the first generation British free improvisers, it was the identification of this problematic fact, and their attempts to avoid it.

The 'silences' that I refer to above are, for the most part, not necessarily the absences of all sonic activity. More specifically, they are the (albeit brief) tacet silences of individual musicians. (Some allowance needs to be made for individual group styles here: although they sometimes collectively paused for quiet, AMM's music was generally densely textured, although this still does not necessarily mean that everyone was playing, all the time. The SME's harmonically thin music more readily illustrates my point, in that the sparseness of their arrangements often allowed (tacet) silences to be glimpsed or implied in the spaces between their atomistic phrasing.) Common to all British free improvisation, however, is that both the 'silent' rests and the sounded pitches that comprise a given improvisation are of irregular length, spacing and emphasis. And this was due to the free improvisers' basic and deliberate avoidance of the kind of foundational rhythmic model such as 'swing' gives to jazz.

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<sup>251</sup> Interviewed in David Keenan, 'The Holy Goof', *The Wire*, September 2004.

Without recourse to such a paradigm, so to replicate and fulfil some extant generic criteria (if the deeply entrenched convention could be resisted), the free improviser would theoretically have no pre-ordained ensemble role to play, no phrasing to fall back on, and no common pulse to meet and keep up with. And if such musical pre-conditions could be disregarded, then the improvisational dialogue between players might become self-defining and self-governing. It could rely upon and be characterised by only the reciprocally negotiated ‘tonality’ and ‘rhythm’ (in the extended sense) of the participants themselves. As the sparser moments of free improvisation best illustrate (the SME’s *Face To Face*, or AMM’s quieter, post-1981 passages) (See Appendix One, Examples 1.5 & 2 – 2.2.g), one improviser will tend to wait for the other(s) to posit a phrase, before making his own reply. They have neither the assurance of, nor the obligation to, say, a bar length of a predestined eight beats. As such, there is uncertainty in the development of the music. There is no given, characteristic point or obvious way in which the other improviser’s phrasing will end. Neither is there a precise way to gauge how one’s own reply will intersect and/or resolve in relation to them. A useful and familiar analogy here is to compare free improvisation to a verbal conversation. Each participant alternately starts and stops talking, to assess the theme and tone of the discussion and find a singular and appropriate place within it. Subject matter is wholly down to consensual discretion. In a sense, it was the individual’s willingness *not* to play that informed free improvisation. Or, at least, it was an ideal: of not fulfilling an implicitly presumed musical model, but of creating and exploring a discourse on one’s own terms. ‘Call and response’ was in effect, though in the context of a speculative discussion, rather than ritual chant.



As described in the earlier section on Varèse, I return to the notion of ‘rhythmic impacts’ as free improvisation’s characteristic method of marking time. The kinetic continuity of the latter music consists less a constantly flowing stream of beats or pulses, so much as a succession of individual, percussively-inflected points of emphasis. These are irregularly spaced, and linked or spanned by comparably asymmetrical melodic phrases. While Ornette Coleman’s harmolodic system destabilised jazz’s conventional tonal hierarchies by the retention of its sustained and regular drive, the emancipation of rhythm remained incomplete. John Stevens, however, who was a noted fan of Coleman and a truly indispensable formative influence on free improvisation, later redefined his mentor’s music with just this concern in mind. Stevens’ model of ‘rhythmelodics’<sup>252</sup> exemplified an apposite new ideal for the free improvisers, which was clearly evident in (for example) the SME’s sound. Each instrument was effectively interchangeable, and the group’s egalitarian music was collectively negotiated within shifting rhythmic, melodic and/or harmonic roles.

As I discussed in Chapter One, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that all British free improvisation exhibited these innovations in either equal measure or comparable style. It would perhaps be difficult to reconcile anything in free improvisation’s recorded canon with a regular and specific time signature, but some examples of the genre did display a stronger hint of rhythmic continuity than others. I have cited already the Evan Parker, Barry Guy and Paul Lytton trio, for example, whose playing lurks in rhythmically ambiguous territory between British free improvisation and post-Coltrane free jazz,<sup>253</sup> or the surprisingly (conventionally-) musical interludes of Iskra 1903. And Tony Oxley’s drumming – though sounding

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<sup>252</sup> Sleeve note to the John Stevens Quartet’s *New Cool*. 1994. CD. TJL006CD

<sup>253</sup> Evan Parker/Barry Guy/Paul Lytton. *At The Vortex*. 1998. CD. Emanem 4022, for example.

‘freely’ developmental – is often constructed of complex and obscure (but nevertheless *counted*) subdivisions of jazz rhythms, rather than their apparent abandonment.<sup>254</sup> The continuity of Iskra 1903’s music was, in some instances, illusory, but suggested by the legato and overlapping phrases of their post-atomistic style. Even the hardcore of atomism becomes blurred, above – or, apparently, below – a certain tempo and/or number of enthusiastic participants: the fittingly titled *Dynamics of the Impromptu* (featuring Bailey, Stevens and Watts)<sup>255</sup> is one example, which displays in some passages the full effect of Stevens’ atomistic method, but in others the frantically tumbling and snaking lines of Parker, Guy and Lytton.

## Rhythmic Precedents

There are, however, examples that clearly illustrate free improvisation’s singular rhythmic character. And it should not be surprising that these examples are to be found chiefly amongst the works of the SME and AMM, the groupings whose methods have characterised all along the stylistic extremes of the first generation. While the respective atomistic and laminar musics of these groups bear little immediate audible similarity, in practice they concern themselves with the same strategy. That is, to be independent of a regular rhythmic momentum that might impose unwanted generic associations and detract from the active responsibility of improvisational choice. Though the execution of this principle ultimately distinguished free improvisation from its mentor form, the SME and AMM’s rhythmic approaches are not without debt to certain aspects of free jazz. While

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<sup>254</sup> See Wickes, pp. 58-59, or Watson, pp. 156-157.

<sup>255</sup> Perhaps tellingly, it is *not* billed under the SME name: Derek Bailey/John Stevens/Trevor Watts. *Dynamics of the Impromptu*. 1973/4. CD. entropy-004



discussing the career of free jazz drummer Sunny Murray, Cook and Morton make the observation that

All revolutions in jazz are fuelled and driven by the rhythm section. For every horn player or pianist hailed as a “revolutionary”, you can assume that there is at least one bassist or drummer in the background, unacknowledged. The history of the 1960’s avant-garde is very largely the history of what Garrison and Jones, Haden and Blackwell or Higgins, Cyrille, Graves and Sunny Murray brought to it.<sup>256</sup>

Given free jazz’s broad influence upon free improvisation and the essentially rhythmic basis of the discrepancy between the two, then Cook and Morton’s assessment has crucial relevance likewise to the current analysis. It is in relation to the playing styles of two particular American free jazz drummers, that I shall discuss the rhythmic organisation of the SME and AMM’s music. One of the drummers is Murray himself, the other Rashied Ali.

Ali is principally known for his work with John Coltrane, from 1965 until the saxophonist’s death in 1967, although he continued subsequently to explore music in a similar vein. Cook and Morton provide a succinct overview of his playing career.<sup>257</sup> Coltrane’s group’s improvisations already owed much of their character to Ali’s predecessor, Elvin Jones. The latter’s virtuoso subdivision and re-emphasis of jazz rhythm, and exploitation of the drum kit’s extensive range of timbral variations, had set new standards of percussive technique in the early 1960s. Jones’ pronounced instrumental presence also helped to redefine the level of constructive participation that the rhythm section might attain in the improvisational context. As such, he was an

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<sup>256</sup> Cook & Morton, p. 1094. Jimmy Garrison & Elvin Jones are particularly renowned for their playing with John Coltrane; Charlie Haden, Ed Blackwell and Billy Higgins with Ornette Coleman; Andrew Cyrille with Cecil Taylor; Milford Graves with Albert Ayler; Sunny Murray with Taylor and Ayler.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid, pp. 25-26, 321-322.

exemplary figure of the advancements that free jazz represented. The tone of Jones' drums was typically deep and resonant, and his playing rolling, undulating and swelling towards crescendo. (Julian Cowley has evoked such an effect as being 'tidal'.)<sup>258</sup> His phrasing was ornately syncopated, but nonetheless precisely structured and played to reinforce the fundamental swing of a piece.

Ali's playing, in Jones' wake, was drier of tone and typically busier, and Jost describes 'an abundance of accentuations, superimposed on one another and in part cancelling one another out'.<sup>259</sup> Ali's clipped but frenetic phrasing served to fill the spaces formerly occupied by the hanging reverberations and overtones of Jones' drum skins. Coltrane drew particular inspiration from African drumming in his later music, and often augmented the percussion section of his bands.<sup>260</sup> By combining layers of contrasting, but complimentary rhythms, the music exhibited a powerful propulsive forward motion. The additional percussion created a far greater number of marked accents, so the band also had a potentially wider variety of melodic and rhythmic paths to follow. Intertwined throughout the fabric of the music, the intricate rhythmic matrix allowed considerable directional liberty by the melodists without the risk of ever really going 'out of time'. Ali's drumming, however, seemingly aspired to fulfil this function by itself. Recalling the earlier section dealing with Russolo's 'noise' music, both Nyman<sup>261</sup> and Scruton have made the point that (like the spectrum of audible pitches) 'the temporal continuum is infinitely divisible'.<sup>262</sup>

In these terms (and although potentially awkward to notate and/or accurately quantify) music may display formations of 'micro-rhythm' as much as it may

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<sup>258</sup> Julian Cowley, 'Soundcheck', *The Wire*, August 2004, p. 67.

<sup>259</sup> Jost, p. 99.

<sup>260</sup> See, for example, John Coltrane. *Kulu Se Mama*. 1967. LP. JAS 51 or *The Olatunji Concert: The Last Live Recording*. 2001. CD. 589 120-2. Apart from the principal drummers – Jones and Ali respectively – on these recordings, each line-up also features a further two percussionists.

<sup>261</sup> Nyman, p. 57.

<sup>262</sup> Scruton, p. 26.



‘microtones’. Ali’s drumming did not approximate African drum patterns in the sense that their overlaid motifs culminated in a single polyrhythmic macro-structure. But, by the skittering and rolling superimposition of up to four (i.e. achieved with all four limbs) drums and/or cymbals phrased with irregular and quasi-melodic fluidity, Ali provided Coltrane with a percussive layer that effectively appeared to be everywhere at once. Coltrane’s melodic lines, by extension, were freed to do likewise, without leaving his accompaniment trailing far behind. In February 1967, Coltrane recorded one of his final albums: a series of duets with Ali, entitled *Interstellar Space*.<sup>263</sup> For several reasons, it remains a fortuitous document. Unadorned with bass, piano, extra horns or percussion – which were typical of Coltrane’s bands at this time – the album presents an intimately detailed portrait of Coltrane and Ali’s individual playing techniques. The duo of just sax and drums also provides an immediate source of comparison with the SME’s *Face To Face*. Of all the group’s available recordings, certain passages from *Face To Face* – which Martin Davidson rightly describes as ‘very austere’<sup>264</sup> – stand as definitive statements of atomistic free improvisation. (See **Appendix One, Example 1.5**)

The SME’s debt (in particular) to Ali’s version of timekeeping is strongly apparent. Both implicitly predicate themselves upon the principle of infinitely divisible time: the micro-rhythmic, or what Hestor describes as the ‘hypermetric’ level.<sup>265</sup> Neither music suggests itself as relating to any quantifiable, metronomic pulse. Or, to put it another way: *against* such a hypothetical pulse, the profusion of notes that the musicians here are playing would fall irregularly and asymmetrically both on and between each pulse, over non-uniform increments of its intervening ‘rest’. With such density of detail, the fundamental swinging pulse of jazz can become

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<sup>263</sup> John Coltrane. *Interstellar Space*. 1991. CD. GRP 11102

<sup>264</sup> Sleeve note, The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Face To Face*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4003

<sup>265</sup> Hestor, p. 119.

obscured. Jazz, though, is also rooted in syncopation and elaboration, and despite the skittish complexity of Ali's drumming, echoes of Jones' rolling patterns – albeit compressed and accelerated – remain audible. Hestor further qualifies Ali's drumming as 'hyperpolyrhythmic',<sup>266</sup> indicating the extent of the shifting emphases, varying rhythmic motifs and their resultant combinations of overlap in his playing. They create the effect of constant movement, and an unstoppable 'tumbling' quality seems to predominate, under the gravitational influence of generic tradition. Whilst Ali's marking of time may not correspond exactly to the beat of a medium jazz swing, the fluidity of his lines, their frequency and cumulative momentum still approximate its overall character. Even if not explicitly referenced, swing appears to act as a qualitative anchor to Ali's phrasing and drive. He moves in and out and around the beat, but neither ever seem to get away from the other. 'This kind of rhythm still gives an impression of tempo, especially in fast motion' notes Jost.<sup>267</sup> (And the same also appears true of Coltrane.) 'Ali makes the rhythm flow' according to Val Wilmer,<sup>268</sup> and as Steve Day notes, moreover, 'the swing *is in* the flow' [my italics].<sup>269</sup> Though his playing is micro-rhythmically constructed, Ali still appears subject to the wider influence of swing: a higher level of conceptual organisation and generic predetermination. *Interstellar Space*, Davidson suggests, 'sound[s] like two people playing solo simultaneously'.<sup>270</sup>

Atomistic improvisation, at Stevens' behest, became defined by a careful aversion to such displays. Evan Parker – at one time in a similar SME sax-drums duo<sup>271</sup> – recalled, in 2004, Stevens' guideline for SME players: that if you cannot hear

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<sup>266</sup> Hestor, p. 151.

<sup>267</sup> Jost, p. 99.

<sup>268</sup> Wilmer, p. 41.

<sup>269</sup> Day, p. 8.

<sup>270</sup> Sleeve note to The Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Face To Face*.

<sup>271</sup> See The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Summer 1967*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4005



the other players, or are not playing with due reference to the others, you may as well be solo.<sup>272</sup> On *Face To Face*, the noted austerity marks this policy as more than simply hypothetical. Once more, Ali's model of hypermetrically incremented time is evidently in effect,<sup>273</sup> though Stevens and Watts divide it up somewhat differently to Ali and Coltrane. *Face To Face* is not wholly stylistically consistent, or not all as extreme in its atomism. The CD re-issue features, for example, two tracks from previous sessions ('*Preface To Face A*' and '*B*') on which Stevens' playing is, in fact, only a little less busy than Ali's, albeit largely executed on cymbals alone. Ironically, it is Watts – who ultimately forsook the SME's atomism for the more conventionally expressive free jazz of Amalgam – that upholds the atomistic ideal most conspicuously on these tracks. Similarly, the first 'official' track of the sessions, '*Face To Face 1*', microcosmically re-enacts the SME's own formative move away from free jazz: the players take several minutes to *lose* the kind of momentum that characterises *Interstellar Space*. Although the dynamics of the interplay fluctuate over the course of the recording, passages such as the middle section of '*Face To Face 1*', '*Face To Face 3*' and '*Face To Face 5*' appear as sparse and mutually sympathetic between the players as any free improvisation of this era.<sup>274</sup>

Stevens and Watts utilise the hypermetric principle to remain below the level of regular pulse. Their phrasing is spasmodic, consisting of short clusters of notes, and their instrumental tones are dry and choked. Each note is of minimal duration. These qualities alone – in contrast to the example of Iskra 1903 – immediately diminish any

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<sup>272</sup> BBC Radio 3. *Lines Burnt In Light. The Music of Evan Parker: Part One*. Broadcast 27 March 2004.

<sup>273</sup> In two recent accounts (Watson, p. 113, and Julian Cowley, 'Spontaneous Combustion', *The Wire*, October 2002) mention is made of Ali recording as part of a 'double trio' with Stevens, Parker, Watts, Dave Holland and Peter Kowald, in 1968. The session has never been released.

<sup>274</sup> Second generation improviser, Steve Beresford, has recently recalled also: 'There was one piece by John [Stevens] where as soon as you played together, the piece ended. In fact I saw a performance of this where they stood for ages in silence, then they played exactly at the same moment. So the first note was the end of the piece'. Quoted in England, Phil, 'Invisible Jukebox', *The Wire*, May 2005.

sense of ongoing propulsive flow. These are disjointed motifs, not lyrical melodies, and are individually isolated as such from a generically repetitive or repeatable continuity. Watts' pitches are also suitably ill defined, and without any conventional tonal movement or suggestion of mode they belie the jazz origins of the music. Stevens tends toward a slightly busier contribution here, but phrases are essentially tossed back and forth. Each one is knowingly incomplete without a reply. It is tempting, in this respect, to acknowledge an analogy with the truncated and abstract dialogue of playwright Samuel Beckett: a figure mentioned often by – and in relation to – the free improvisers.<sup>275</sup> A significant figure of the avant-garde for Stevens' generation, Beckett's most famous works – *Waiting For Godot* and *Endgame* – exemplify many of the qualities that might also be attributed to British free improvisation. Apart from the syntax of their disjointed, apparently incomplete and ostensibly 'uncultured' dialogue, there is also a sparseness of traditional dramatic interaction between Beckett's characters. Though the two plays controversially appeared to lack obvious narrative structures, they nevertheless featured detailed ongoing exchanges: variations on an (existential) theme. In a posthumous tribute to Stevens, (latter-day SME guitarist) Roger Smith cited Beckett as a name 'that figured constantly for 25 years'.<sup>276</sup>

Ultimately, the free jazzers and the atomistic improvisers differ over the use of silence. Ali and Coltrane filled space relentlessly. Their joint embroidery over any gaps inevitably averaged out into cumulative tempo, betraying the generic rhythmic denominator between them. The SME, at its most atomistic, make a virtue of almost introverted restraint in their playing. They allow quiet spaces to form and develop in the unfolding encounter, which in turn make expressive commentary of their own.

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<sup>275</sup> For example, Watson, p. 81; Prévost, *Minute Particulars*, p. 43; Cook & Morton, p. 71.

<sup>276</sup> Smith, Roger, *John Stevens (1940-1994)*. <<http://users.globalnet.co.uk/~rneckmag/stevens.html>> [accessed 20 August 2003].



AMM's music<sup>277</sup> differs notably from that of the SME in several respects, but most fundamentally in its treatment and representation of rhythm. Where the spacious, linear patterns of the SME rapidly darted and rebounded from one another, AMM's textures are dense edifices of layered timbres, which only gradually alter in cumulative character. The component parts shift, diffuse and realign at length, an effect perhaps analogous to that of changing weather. Like the SME, AMM's formative performances belonged to the free jazz genre, and only by the process of obscuring these origins did their mature style evolve. In this respect, both groups drew upon their own Western heritage. Jazz exhibits a percussion-led drive manifested by the rhythm section, derived from African drum music. This quality, though, is markedly less relevant to Western Europe's classical tradition. Rhythmic organisation, naturally, played a vital part in unifying and structuring complex classical arrangements, but – such as in the example of Webern's Serial pieces – audibly it is often understated, or ostensibly absent in the sense that jazz employs it. Notated time signatures and the conductor's gesture de-emphasised the role that, in other genres, bass and drums would make explicit.

The lack of a specifically delineated rhythm section was one consistent feature of British free improvisation, making ambiguous the music's organisational schemes and hierarchies. More so than the SME's approximation of Webern's multi-timbral miniatures, AMM evoked their European line of descent in their move away from free jazz. The impression is created chiefly by the semi-static architecture of their music, in contrast to the SME's skittering debate. Ironically, though, this aspect of AMM's music may still be linked to an innovator of the free jazz genre, one whose

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<sup>277</sup> That is, in its most characteristic form, discounting the line-ups categorised as AMMs II and III. AMM II, especially, corresponded to my description of Ali and Coltrane's partnership (above).

comparable approach to rhythm illustrates the manner in which AMM ultimately left the genre behind.

AMM's music is also of an incremental rhythmic flexibility sufficient to class it as 'hypermetric'. Ali's interpreted this principle by minutely dividing each bar length of time into myriad micro-rhythmic shapes. And by doing so he created the effect of accelerated activity, velocity and passage of time. The basis of AMM's music, however, lay in the contrary interpretation of this idea. Sunny Murray contributed variously to the groups of Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler, as well as those under his own leadership. Like Taylor and Ayler, the drummer developed a powerful but impressionistic style of playing, both of his own and within the context of their respective groups. Jost describes his musicianship, allowing us to make comparison to that of Ali. He notes that 'Murray plays on cymbals with a very live resonance, creating colour rather than accentuations', and also cites Murray's willingness to play minimally, in contrast to the 'non-stop compulsion to drum' that was often evident in free jazz at that time.<sup>278</sup> Contrasts of style immediately become apparent: between Ali's constant barrages of notes and Murray's focus on timbre, and the duelling multiple emphases of the SME against AMM's static textures. Murray's contribution may be more finely pinpointed, too, in terms of his purported technique of 'slow-motion' drumming.<sup>279</sup> The recordings of the era have not always served Murray as well as *Interstellar Space* does Ali; but perhaps the hiss of Murray's cymbals are more of an ensemble voice anyway, less suited to the solo spotlight than Ali's frantic and detailed patterns. Nonetheless, appreciable examples of Murray's playing can be

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<sup>278</sup> Jost, p. 128.

<sup>279</sup> Sleeve note to Sunny Murray. *Sunshine*. 2001. LP. GET 348



heard on Ayler's *Spirits Rejoice*, Dave Burrell's *Echo* and Murray's own *Sunshine* albums.<sup>280</sup>

Ali plays primarily upon his drums. Their tone is dry, producing percussive notes of minimal duration and almost instantaneous decay. His use of cymbals is intermittent, and he leans more towards the hi-hat and ride:<sup>281</sup> playing across their flat surfaces to enunciate concise and clearly rhythmically defined tones. Ali's choice of instrumentation in this case (and as was also true of John Stevens' customised SME kit) both facilitates and designates his personal style. The dryness of tone clearly emphasises the phrasing of each of his beats, enabling ornate and overlapping patterns to be perceived, and allowing him to play busily and expressively at rapid tempos. Yet, with the majority of his notes elapsing in a fraction of a second, he is also obliged to play this many in order to fill space and maintain momentum. Conversely, Murray has been described as effectively 'negating' rhythmic flow,<sup>282</sup> something that he, too, achieved via a focussed use of specific instrumentation. Murray's strategy reverses that of Ali, in that he plays mostly on cymbals with occasional interjections from the drums. Murray, though, plays crash cymbals and the thin edge of the ride cymbal, to mark the passage of time. Not being designed for this purpose or to be played in this manner, however, the crash and (edge of the) ride cymbals do not emit clean, clear, singular notes/beats. Rather, they produce a multi-layered, piercing and shimmering metallic sheen. Played persistently, this cumulates in an undulating continuum of white noise that sounds like escaping steam. These are the sonic 'colours' that Jost alludes to: variable in intensity, pitch and timbre according to how and which cymbal is played. And in their ill-definition as individual pitches and beats,

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<sup>280</sup> Albert Ayler. *Spirits Rejoice*. 2000. CD. ESP CD 1020, and Dave Burrell. *Echo*. 2001. LP. GET 320

<sup>281</sup> Those on a standard drum kit which produce short, distinct notes, used typically to mark individual successive beats: as opposed to 'crash' cymbals (see the Varèse section).

<sup>282</sup> Jost, p. 72, & Sleeve note to Various Artists. *Jazzactuel*. 2001. 3xCD. SNAJ 707 CD

they instead diffuse into a static wash of sound, without obvious propulsive motion or accentuation. Bill Bruford notes of jazz drumming the potential to ‘lengthen and blur the edges of the beat’.<sup>283</sup> This quality – in conjunction with the ‘snapping back into time’ inflection – is the basis on which ‘swing’ functions, around a piece’s basic pulse. Murray’s drumming takes this idea to extremes and avoids marked linear emphasis. Whilst Ali packs the hypermetric space between beats with minutely stressed subdivisions, Murray creates the illusion of extending this space to improbable lengths. He stretches, not compresses, the total duration of the swing, obscuring its structures and mechanisms by creating a disproportionate sense of perspective in the music. Ali’s drumming moves hyperpolyrhythmically in comparison to the jazz going on around him. Jazz, on the other hand, moves hyperpolyrhythmically in comparison to the patterns of Murray’s drumming.

Analogously, then, this too is AMM’s approach to negating (the influence of) predetermined rhythm. It is partially an illusion of perspective that things are happening so slowly as to give the impression of barely happening at all. But it is compounded by the rhythmic irregularity and asymmetry common to British free improvisation. In descending order of rhythmic organisation: Ali opens up, but also organises, the temporal continuum to a miniature scale of emphasis and subdivision; Murray works on the same scale of accentuation, but disguises the linear motion by marking it only over unconventionally large increments; the SME phrase at a hypermetric level, but negotiates momentum one note (and rest) at a time, allowing rhythmic spaces to open and close in a way that precludes any greater repetitive scheme of rhythm; and AMM ultimately imply the deferral of rhythmic movement at all.

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<sup>283</sup> Bruford, p. 110.



They maintain and scrutinise suspended, static soundscapes, which reveal their detail over protracted durations. AMM's music is almost like an abnormally magnified glimpse of a single beat, such is the fine micro-rhythmic scale at which they play. Murray's playing is compromised in this regard, by its usual context alongside a more conventionally active jazz ensemble. His approach to scale and perspective (though still unconventional) is made explicit, and the logic of its construction made clearer. AMM, however, have no such relativising context. They play like Murray collectively, with no more immediate or compact musical structures to throw them into relief. That they improvise in the laminar style also enhances the character of their music. By playing not consecutively, but simultaneously (and slowly), dramatic cumulative shifts of emphasis occur relatively infrequently. In the meantime, AMM avoid giving the impression of adherence to generic rhythms by almost negating the rhythmic flow of music altogether.

## Conclusions

That which we call 'music' (including its many generic subdivisions) bears the influence of physical circumstance, historical refinement and cultural interpretation. And it is comprised of several layers of both conceptual and practical structuring. Musical diversity is created and explored essentially by our perception of, and subsequent approaches to, these organisational strata. Though representing only one possible line of descent, the first generation British free improvisers stand as a revealing and insightful culmination of twentieth century developments in this field. Self-evidently, the relative qualities of composition and improvisation were a key area of concern to those musicians who are the focus of this thesis. And to follow the

evolution of their unique musicality also sheds light upon the nature, construction and conceptual emphases of their subject matter.

The shift from composition to free improvisation illustrates a recognition and re-prioritisation of music's component structures. There is subtle, but complex, interplay and reciprocal influence between meta-, macro- and micro- structures. It is these that, in different permutations, define and decide the various categories of musical activity. At greater levels of pre-determination, the higher (meta- and macro-) levels of organisation take predominance, and musical artefact is valued above the creative process. The advance of improvisation, however, questions the practical and theoretical bases on which the higher institutions are founded; eventually it makes the point that the refined must ultimately be comprised only of the elemental and essential. The testing and recombination of micro-structures is the essence both of composition and improvisation. But that they are most commonly subservient to, and given context by, meta- and macro- organisation often belies the fact. The British free improvisers' attention to this culturally repressed aspect of musicality suggested vital creative, technical and aesthetic innovations in its own right. Perhaps most significantly though, a consideration of their work offers a valuable perspective on the components, structures, characteristics and potential inherent to the wider phenomenon of music. They instigated a paradigm shift with culturally revealing ramifications.



## Chapter Four: *The Inexhaustible Document?*

### Problems with ‘free improvisation’

*‘I cannot say anything original about something in which I am interested’<sup>1</sup>*

I attended a performance by Derek Bailey at The Electric Cinema, Birmingham, on 12 April 2002. As well as playing guitar, he held a Question & Answer session for the audience. ‘Is “non-idiomatic improvisation” still a useful term?’ one spectator asked. The question alluded to Bailey’s *Improvisation*, and specifically to the terminology by which he characterises his own playing. Both question and answer were proffered informally, Bailey acknowledging some personal familiarity. ‘Yes’, he stated simply, before moving on. In this chapter, I will address essentially the same question. Though asked and answered in only the vaguest terms at the Electric Cinema, the question raises issues that encroach upon any long-term consideration of ‘free improvisation’.<sup>2</sup> ‘Non-idiomatic improvisation’ is still a useful term in certain contexts. But as an accurate description of the first generation British free improvisers’ music today, its status is in greater doubt.

Bailey himself – his playing – is perhaps the most distinctive single voice within an already idiosyncratic genre. Scrutiny of his recorded work, however, begins to suggest contradiction in his purportedly ‘free’ or ‘non-idiomatic’ playing. One of the most extensively recorded of the free improvisers, Bailey’s guitar can be heard in a wide variety of performing contexts.<sup>3</sup> His playing, itself, broadly evokes the

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Wolfreys, in *Deconstruction. Derrida* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Either in the sense of an extended study and personal experience of the free improvisation genre (such as this thesis represents), or, more significantly, of the concept of ‘free improvisation’ over an extended duration at all.

<sup>3</sup> In connection with this passage, for instance, I revisited a random selection of his recordings: four of Bailey playing solo; one accompanying singer David Sylvian; in duos with John Butcher, Rhodri Davies and Eddie Prévoist; in two guitar, drums and sax trios (separated by nearly 20 years) with John Stevens and (respectively) Trevor Watts and Frode Gjerstad; with Japanese noise-rock duo The Ruins;

atomistic style. (See Appendix One for various examples of Bailey's playing) Typically it comprises a succession of short, staccato notes, chords and fragments of melody. They are rhythmically asymmetrical in their phrasing and spacing, and harmonically atonal. Bailey's guitar tone is usually 'clean' – i.e. undistorted, or otherwise processed – and the inflections of his playing are clearly defined. He tends toward either a steel-stringed acoustic or amplified semi-acoustic guitar, and when amplified he also sometimes uses a volume pedal to alter the attack and decay of his sound. Although melodically and harmonically removed from the genre, remnants of jazz-style guitar accompaniment can frequently be heard in Bailey's playing. This is also often combined with abrupt phrasing and a metallic chiming tone, lending his playing a bell-like percussive quality.

The CD *Drop Me Off At 96<sup>th</sup>* consists of solo performances from 1986/7, and it documents very clearly the individual nature of Bailey's musicianship.<sup>4</sup> It includes examples of both his acoustic and amplified playing, at a tempo typically somewhere between medium and frenetic (as it is most often heard). Or, for example, the Music Improvisation Company album<sup>5</sup> depicts Bailey slightly differently, at a lower dynamic level more representative of his group work. Here he often blends into the ensemble texture of the group, via a combination of his volume pedal control and the sparseness in his rate of contribution. While the contexts in which he performs vary, however, Bailey's unconventional style tends to reveal him as the protagonist with even a cursory listen. My bibliography catalogues a number of Bailey's live and studio performances, dating from the mid-1960s into the twenty first century. Of these

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in the reformed Joseph Holbrooke in 1998; and late 1960s/early 1970s sessions with the SME, Music Improvisation Company and Iskra 1903. These are all catalogued in the Bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Bailey. *Drop Me Off At 96<sup>th</sup>* 1994. CD. scatter 02:CD

<sup>5</sup> The Music Improvisation Company. *The Music Improvisation Company 1968-1971*. 1976. CD. Incus CD 12



though, I would argue that only one – the CD *String Theory*,<sup>6</sup> a collection of improvisations utilising guitar feedback – displays an obvious departure from Bailey's signature style. Seemingly, he is unrecognisable here but unmistakable everywhere else.

I would also cite the example of John Russell. From British free improvisation's second generation, Russell, too, is a guitarist. His playing can be heard, for example, on the CD *The Second Sky*,<sup>7</sup> and I have seen him perform at three consecutive Freedom of the City festivals.<sup>8</sup> He concentrates largely on the acoustic guitar, and broadly his sound is more scratchy, percussive and choked than Bailey's. Otherwise though, my description of Bailey's playing (above) could apply equally to Russell's. The correlation in styles is by no means exact (and nor am I making any criticism of Russell), but nonetheless it is difficult to hear his playing in an other than 'post-Derek Bailey' context. That Bailey's playing style is so readily a basis of comparison poses a challenge to his status as 'non-idiomatic'. Because of its very distinctiveness and constancy of execution, Bailey's musicality becomes the basis of an idiom in itself: a factor that must be considered of the First Generation as a whole.

The designation of 'non-idiomatic' or 'free' has been used to denote a level of remove from musical conservatism or regulation. 'Freedom' in this sense is the independence from limited and limiting definitions of 'music', whether generically, historically or culturally defined. By avoiding certain conventions of aesthetic and technical precedent, the First Generation attempted what Anne Le Baron calls 'non-referential' improvisation.<sup>9</sup> That is to imply that if each instance of 'music' could be

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Bailey. *String Theory*. 2000. CD. PLE1109-2

<sup>7</sup> John Russell & Roger Turner. *The Second Sky*. 2001. CD. Emanem 4058

<sup>8</sup> In a duo with Evan Parker in 2002, with Stefan Keune in 2003 and as part of the group Quaqua in 2004, at Conway Hall, Holborn, London.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Le Baron, 'Reflections of Surrealism in Postmodern Musics' in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. by Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 36.

spontaneously intuited and shaped (without the determining influence of any extant ‘logical’ criteria), then it would be subject only to the prerogative, responsibility, dexterity and preferences of the musicians involved. Without a tradition to further, or a cliché to rely upon, improvised music might yet be fully participatory, inclusive and self-sufficient for the improviser, both as experience and expressive medium.

Derek Bailey – though he is only one example – has rationalised and honed a very personal musicality, of technique, sensibility and method. This is the context in which he has, to date, explored free improvisation publicly for forty years. The constancy that is apparent in his music, however, also implies constancy in its creation. There are, quite clearly, particular ideas and motifs to which Bailey returns in order to maintain his musical identity. This, though, is also immediately reminiscent of the processes that define and perpetuate idiomatic form such as jazz or the blues. And as such, one must question the long-term consistencies of Bailey (and the others of the First Generation),<sup>10</sup> in relation to what is suggested by terms like ‘non-idiomatic’ or ‘free’ improvisation.

To an extent, the imposition of generic titles upon music is an arbitrary conceit. Though it suggests merely an objective description, a term like ‘free improvisation’ seems more likely the invention of critics rather than musicians. (Recall from Chapter One, for example, the early promotional work of Victor Schonfield). Experience also informs ‘concept’, especially from a perspective of historical or cultural distance. My own precise designation of ‘First Generation British free improvisers’, or Ben Watson’s *Derek Bailey and The Story of Free Improvisation*<sup>11</sup> each impose (from a twenty first century viewpoint) a defined

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<sup>10</sup> Stylistic consistency applies, of course, not only to individuals, but also to groupings with a conspicuous ‘policy’. Because of their longevity and influence, the SME and AMM are most clearly implicated here.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and The Story of Free Improvisation* (London: Verso, 2004).



historical shape and category to past events. Realistically though, it is likely that such concerns had no bearing upon the events as they actually occurred. The concerts documented on *The Crypt* or *Summer 1967*, for example,<sup>12</sup> were presumably intended as musical artefacts, but not long-term historical ones. If free improvisation's terminology was wholly externally attributed, then criticism of the free improvisers based on its merits might be inappropriate. But there are texts and agendas within the free improvisation canon itself that suggest validity for this kind of investigation.

Free improvisation is a music of active participation and response. The improviser functions as audience, in order that an agreeable sense to the developing music can be achieved, and the process is reciprocal (an informal self- or mutual criticism is common amongst musicians and audiences of most genres). Within British free improvisation, this has led to the emergence of several important musician/theorists, whose dual influence is difficult to overlook in any analytical context. In this thesis I have revisited two prime examples time and again: Derek Bailey and Eddie Prévost.

Bailey (the musician) has been cited already as indicative of an inconsistency in 'free improvisation'. Bailey (the theorist), however, heightens this perception by his own discursive treatment of the subject. He listed a number of synonyms to describe his activities and those of his contemporaries, ultimately favouring 'non-idiomatic improvisation' himself. Of the music, he writes that: '[d]iversity is its most consistent characteristic. It has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound'.<sup>13</sup> Prévost has contested Bailey's point, though: 'It's no good Derek saying he doesn't have any rules [...] The very fact that I can recognise

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<sup>12</sup> AMM. *The Crypt – 12<sup>th</sup> June 1968. The Complete Session*. 1992. 2xCD. MRCD05 and *The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. Summer 1967*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4005

<sup>13</sup> Derek Bailey, *Improvisation. Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), p. 83.

his playing from one occasion to another indicates to me that there is a set of rules.<sup>14</sup> Here, again, (and from within the genre) the potential incongruity is noted between concept and experience.

Free improvisation's other most prominent theorist, Prévost, also has a preferred terminology to describe his activities; so-called 'meta-music' is one of the core topics of *No Sound is Innocent*. Prévost does make his case with regard to the matter of stylistic constancy, and I shall return to this in my Epilogue. But, like 'non-idiomatic', 'free' and (to an extent) 'improvisation' itself, the prefix 'meta' is problematic. It, too, implies a remove from, and conscious defiance of, 'ordinary' music-making – (whatever that may be) – which at length becomes difficult to justify or sustain.

Christopher Norris writes that 'there is no language so vigilant or self-aware that it can effectively escape the conditions placed upon its thought by its own prehistory and ruling metaphysic'.<sup>15</sup> The notion of a meta-language (to which Prévost explicitly refers and the synonymous 'free' and 'non-idiomatic' allude) is a problem because of the assumption of an objective perspective from which it functions. It purports to an awareness and control of a given 'original' and authoritative language, one that pre-empts cultural and historical bias or disruption. The 'objective' meta-language, it is suggested, may be used to criticise 'subjective' language, but remains immune itself to the structural or interpretative ambiguity that afflicts the latter. What this assumption overlooks, however, is that a meta-language is a construct of one particular culture and historical perspective as much as the language under scrutiny must be. The meta-language, for all its technical insight, can claim no definitive point

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<sup>14</sup> Interviewed in Richard Scott, *Noises: Free Music, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde; London 1965 to 1990* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1991), p. 301.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction. Theory and Practice* 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 21-22.



of universal authority either. The refinements and standards of the Western tradition may be seen as the meta-language by which Twentieth Century Europeans have categorised their subjective auditory experiences, either as ‘music’ or ‘noise’. Nevertheless, the demonstrable ‘musicality’ of free improvisation and Cage’s 4’33” posed a deconstructive challenge to the ‘objectivity’ of this model and ultimately suggested a disguised subjectivity in its place. In this chapter I will, again, focus upon deconstruction as a strategy of inquiry. Drawing on my conclusions from previous chapters, I will now examine ‘free improvisation’ and the empirical and conceptual implications deriving from it.

## **Improvised or not?**

The term ‘free improvisation’ is neither derived from obscure colloquialism (like ‘jazz’ or ‘rock and roll’) nor social aspiration (like ‘folk’ or ‘classical’). It pertains to a literal and functional description of the musical activity it represents. To rationalise abstract sound – musical or otherwise – in linguistic terms is to employ a meta-language of strictly localised and subjective relevance. It is arguable, however, that ‘free improvisation’ (and also Bailey’s and Prévost’s synonyms for it) aspires to the status of ‘meta-meta-language’. Not only does it function as a self-contained musical genre, it also alludes to an understanding, control and deliberate eschewal of the conventions of other idioms. And it is with specific reference to the latter point, that free improvisation itself is defined. Yet these idioms themselves are already ‘meta’, because of their reorganisation and reassessment of the physical sound world. The free improvisers’ tacit exclusion of the traits of other idioms (from an ostensibly ‘informed’ perspective), however, only serves to illustrate the artificiality of their collective identity. The problem is rooted in what we already know of the free

improvisers' cultural and historical context. The rigidity of the 'free improvisation' concept is compromised, both by what the genre has attempted to exclude and to include.

In Chapter Three, I contrived an incremental unfolding of 'non-idiomatic improvisation' (adding the criterion of 'structuring' to those that Bailey's model had already suggested). What this progression also reveals is the presence of a conceptual binary opposition upon which 'free improvisation' must depend. To recap: from Bailey's 'non-idiomatic' conclusion I inferred a course from 'composition' to 'structured, idiomatic improvisation' to 'non-structured, idiomatic improvisation' to 'structured, non-idiomatic improvisation' to 'non-structured, non-idiomatic (i.e. free) improvisation'. Immediately, this model implies the nature of the binary opposition. At first, 'free improvisation' appears conceptually incompatible only with 'composition', but the ambiguity of the intermediate terms should also be considered as significant. By my extrapolation of Bailey's terminology alone, the progression above seems weighted towards modes of 'improvisation' as increments of musical practice. 'Composition', so it appears, might almost have been called 'non-improvisation'. But the criteria of 'structure' and 'idiom' portray elements of pre-composition themselves. Composition and improvisation are equally evident in the intermediate genres (a fact that would not be conveyed any more clearly by terms such as 'structured, non-idiomatically improvised composition'). The increments, in fact, make the opposition of (free) 'improvisation' and 'composition' more explicit, more ostensibly rigid. In this reading, the assumption of 'free improvisation' must exclude not only *total* composition, but also those hybrid improvisatory forms that are compromised by presuppositions of idiom or structure themselves. Like 'music' and 'noise', improvisation and composition are engaged (in the language of



deconstruction) in a 'supplemental' relationship. One quantity is unintelligible and incomplete without consideration of its mutually exclusive and antagonistic opposite. And by logical analysis of this relationship, it is again possible to challenge the status of either quantity as absolute in itself, or wholly separate from the other.

The expressed tenet of free improvisation is spontaneity: that 'music' may be created by, and from, only those musicians, physical resources and environment chosen for the event. As a meta-meta-language, free improvisation assumes to refer to (whilst also having detached priority over) two subsidiary languages, which it does under the premise of its own impartial authority. By observing and criticising music of conventional structure and idiomatic design, the free improvisers cultivated techniques to circumvent the factors that restrict (or make illegitimate) a wholly personalised 'music'. They and their music aspired to oblige no precedent of form, content or technique, and to resist or ignore any prejudice of a merely cultural origin towards them. Freely improvised music implicitly depends only on the circumstances of the moment in which it is performed. In order both to highlight and enforce this necessity, it displays a marked absence of the patterns of 'logical' succession, coincidence and development that characterise generic musics.

In theory, free improvisation assumes that (musically) nothing need be predetermined – nothing *should* be predetermined – if a 'free' response is to result. This is the supposed point of divergence between improvisation and composition, on which their binary opposition depends. Composed musical materials are extant and available for reference, replication and direction: prior to, and at any point during, the enactment of music. A composition may be entirely pre-written and arranged: effectively a set of instructions to put into practice. Alternatively, it might comprise sparser material – a brief melody or chord sequence, for example – which provides a

harmonic or evocative basis for improvised expansion. Or as little as characteristic rhythm and instrumentation may imply and inform an essential genre-association. Even a piece as potentially musically inclusive as 4'33" is chronologically ordered and performed from prior exposition.

Free improvisation, however, defines itself as the absence of such frameworks. The music that arises from the improvisatory act is determined and determinate only once it has been enacted as an audible phenomenon by the participant improvisers. 'What we're proposing, consciously or otherwise' Prévost suggested to Richard Scott, 'is a form which in essence is completely different in its political and social implications from the form which classical music has perpetuated'.<sup>16</sup> Prévost is implying concerns over inflexible cultural and historical convention, amongst them the esteemed role of the composers themselves. This latter point, in particular, is indicative also of the basic difference in focus between Scott's thesis and my own. As I have already remarked, Scott writes from a primarily sociological perspective. He examines more closely the implicit politics of collective music-making, the cultural hegemony of such figures as the composer, and the responses that the free improvisers have given to these factors. Indeed, he juxtaposes our perspectives in very definite terms:

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. No single thing is free, freedom per se is for philosophers, it means nothing.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interviewed in Scott, p. 302.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, p. 184.



Scott's dismissal is curious. Presumably, his attention was drawn to free improvisation in the first place by the concept underlying the form: i.e. the unconventional distribution of influence, resource, dependence and authority that an apparently collective, egalitarian and spontaneous music implies. From the perspective of the sociologist (not the musicologist), Scott's interest is in the relationships that inform the production of the sounds, not the sounds, forms and techniques themselves. The musicality on display in free improvisation is certainly not conventional by the common terms of our culture. But there is no intrinsic quality to the sensible experience of the genre that definitively marks it as *being* freely improvised. If Webern's fragmentary and multi-timbral *Five Pieces For Orchestra*, or the layered industrial dissonances that fascinated Russolo may be composed, annotated and replicated, then comparable pieces by the SME or AMM might also have been. The specific quality that establishes free improvisation's uniqueness is that it is freely improvised *by intention*; it is not the audible products of the process *per se*. The focal point of Scott's thesis, then, is the *concept* of free improvisation, and its corresponding effects of the kinds of human relationships with which he is dealing. *Experience* of the genre alone does not necessarily presuppose such distinctions. As such, Scott's cursory denouncement of the question of free improvisation's 'unfreedom' seems premature. It is a concern that becomes strongly apparent with the repeated experience and the concept of the genre, and somewhat destabilises the concept upon which his thesis is based.

There are two key points that need to be acknowledged in this analysis. First, it is not sufficient to simply consider 'free improvisation' as a singular entity, as one particular culture's idea of 'music'. Like 'music' and 'noise', 'free improvisation' depends upon an amalgamation of conceptual and empirical meaning. Each one both

exerts influence upon and derives significance from the other. I would suggest that Scott's analysis of the subject began with the concept, and worked towards the experience. My own follows the contrary route. The deconstruction of free improvisation (and the criteria by which I use the term) will – and must – take into account 'free improvisation' both as organisational scheme and resultant musically-perceived sound.

Second, as a meta-meta-language, 'free improvisation' implies strata of meaning, reference and complication that, as Scott asserts, propels any in-depth scrutiny well into the abstract. But as an experience (the music that the free improvisers have made) *and* as a concept (the thought processes that lead them to do this), free improvisation creates contradictions and exposes its own discursive weaknesses. Both the self-professed radicalism of the genre, as well as certain inescapable human contexts in which it exists, play a role in these processes. On several occasions, the free improvisers have suggested an elemental quality to their music, which they illustrate with allusions to pre-history,<sup>18</sup> discovery<sup>19</sup> and nature.<sup>20</sup> And up to a point, as I have explored in previous chapters, the allusions are valid. Equally though (and also in the practitioners' own words), terms such as 'non-idiomatic' and 'meta-music' have presumed a detachment from other musics, and by doing so they effectively make a critique of a critique of the sound world. My analysis and experience of free improvisation have suggested that such claims are difficult to sustain, and deconstruction presents a means to examine this logically problematic phenomenon.

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<sup>18</sup> Bailey, p. 83: 'Historically, it pre-dates any other music [...]'.  
<sup>19</sup> Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, pp. 123-139: Meta-Musical Narratives, part seven, 'Making Music As If For The First Time'.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Rutherford, quoted in Scott, p. 277: '[...] the most natural way of making music'.



‘Improvisation’ has two primary connotations. It suggests spontaneous activity, without prior preparation of the task to be performed. It also denotes the adoption and adaptation of resources only that are immediately available. It does not rely upon those that might be specifically designed or appropriate for that task. A reiteration of Prévost’s proposal (above) also puts free improvisation (the genre) into clearer pragmatic and theoretical contexts: ‘a form [...] different in its political and social implications from the form which classical music has perpetuated’. ‘Socially’, Western tradition promoted expectations of cultural convention, of familiar and partially predictable patterns of pitch, rhythm, melody and harmony. And it is in ‘political’ terms that these conventions are enacted and legitimised: by the prescribed relationship and contrast between composer, performer and audience. ‘Composer’ is the key term of opposition here, metaphorically denying the potential for improvisation. But it need not only represent the individual who writes music for others to perform. ‘A composer’ might broadly be understood as *any* element or factor that imposes composition and precludes improvisation.

Bailey’s designation of ‘idiom’, for example, represents the obligation to reproduce one or more pre-determined musical patterns, in order to be (contextually) ‘correct’. ‘Composition’ connotes both the process and product of creation and arrangement, and the differentiation and order within a composed structure. But it also implies pre-conditions contrary to those that inform improvisation. The latter activity depends upon the absence of a composer or composers (in the broad sense). Interactive improvisation is used to instigate a musical context specific and agreeable to the participating musicians, in which their own interpretations of ‘musicality’ may be evaluated and explored. Composition, however, is not merely a composer in its own right: it also *requires* composers.

‘Composition’ denotes both an act of construction and the internal systems and structures that facilitate the resultant piece. What this implies is the need for extant and suitable musical materials with which the compositional process may be engaged, and from which *a* composition may result. Again, I make the comparison that I used in Chapter Two: that prehistoric humanity, without precedent, was engaged in creating ‘music’ itself from arbitrary sounds. Western tradition works instead from an existing consensus of ‘musical’ principles and standards, whose pre-defined parameters inform and limit any subsequent combination or elaboration.

Free improvisation and composition are divided by presuppositions of presence and absence. Scott’s position is that the questioning of ‘free improvisation’, ‘non-idiomatic improvisation’ or ‘meta-music’ amounts to little more than quibbling over terms. In the final reckoning, though, the sole defining characteristic and intellectual *raison d’être* of ‘free improvisation’ is *free improvisation*. Any instability in the concept therefore poses a severe challenge to any aesthetic that the genre might ostensibly represent. In name, rationale and practice, ‘free [+] improvisation’ opposes itself to composition twice, emphasising its own absence of traditionally composed or composing elements. Bailey’s modification of the term to ‘non-idiomatic’ further stresses the nature of this freedom, and the qualities to which his music is apparently *not* subject. It is an important distinction for Bailey, and a central concern of his book. Improvisation of one shade or another is nearly ubiquitous amongst the majority of musical idioms. A form that purportedly negates this overwhelming tendency, then, would be remarkable and significant. Prévost, too, implies sweeping assumptions about ‘music’ and his own apparent divergence from convention, when he declares a ‘meta’ perspective. Most relevant though, are the implications of the free improvisers’ music itself, and *its* schemes of organisation.



Free improvisation subverted the quasi-definitive Western tradition by adopting contrary and/or extended models of its most fundamental concepts. The free improvisers' 'inaccuracies' of pitch, rhythm, etc, were neither accidental (i.e. the result of technical inability or ignorance) nor wholly random (in the 'aleatory' sense). Indeed, that the free improvisers' playing is persistently and consistently unconventional is the very essence of their 'freedom'. It refers to the absence of prior Western composition in their music, and their self-exclusion from any direct generic reproduction of its forms. At the meta- and macro- structural levels, free improvisation creates the (albeit illusory) impression of chaos, perhaps randomness, and a-musicality. This further suggests free improvisation's proposed departure from pre-determination; subtly, these qualities suggest the difficulty, improbability and undesirability of any attempt to notate, reproduce and/or 'keep' any given passage. In this context, the likelihood and validity of the composer's role appears diminished, and the engagement and vitality of the participant improviser becomes the more significant. By focussing upon sounds and patterns that bear the common Western cultural status of 'noise', the free improvisers have manufactured a distance between familiar, generic musics and their own vision. If their performances do not or cannot rely on the vocabulary of established musical values, it would suggest that the free improvisers are indeed engaged in the spontaneous creation of a non-idiomatic music. But this leads us back to examples such as Derek Bailey, the SME or AMM: 'free' improvisers whose music is nevertheless easily recognisable, even imitable, over the course of decades. It is a serious challenge to the name to conclude that in 'free improvisation', anything apparently *cannot* happen.

## Saying Anything Original

The conceptual implications of ‘free improvisation’ are ultimately too extreme, too rigid in their opposition to a concept of ‘composition’. They simply cannot remain logically – much less *practically* – tenable. Free improvisation is defined by, and subject to, a complex convergence of pragmatic and theoretical considerations. The notion of one human perspective that surveys and understands others (and is in some way immune to the influences and complexities of their respective subjectivities) is deeply suspect. But it is a conceptual fallacy to which free improvisation appears to subscribe. In Chapter Two, I argued for free improvisation’s potential categorisation as ‘music’, in contrast to stated assumptions that it was, in fact, only ‘noise’. And on this basis, I have proposed that ‘free improvisation’ or ‘non-idiomatic improvisation’ or ‘meta-music’ conceivably assumes the position of not just a meta-language, but of a meta-meta-language. In concept and practice, free improvisation implicitly presupposes a level of objectivity towards ‘music’, which it demonstrates by public scrutiny and dissection of (already subjective) Western conventions. We cannot assume, however, that subjectivity may be negated or bypassed merely by illustrating the subjectivity of a competing perspective.

In the influential *Of Grammatology*, Derrida posited what has become a fundamental tenet of deconstruction: ‘There is nothing outside of the text’.<sup>21</sup> He is referring here to the cumulative effect of culture and history upon human communication. The expression of subjectivity, he suggests, is not limited to statements of cultural language alone. What must also be taken into consideration is the system of language itself. Being of inherently human construction, it can no more be objective in structure and mechanism than any personal opinions that it is used to

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected edn. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 158.



convey. The means of communication then, Derrida implies, is as much a product of specific circumstance as that which is being communicated. When analysing a text, therefore, it is inaccurate to regard that particular example of language as merely isolated subjectivity, in an otherwise objective communicative medium. As Nicholas Royle writes, 'more helpfully [Derrida's aphorism] 'may be [...] phrased as "There is nothing outside context"'.<sup>22</sup> The assumption that free improvisation might embody a 'meta-music' – that it may pre-empt or be immune to the conditions that inform other 'music' – appears suspect. Mutual contradictions can be detected within the free improvisers' rationale. There seems to be the suggestion of an informed superiority, awareness and control over other musical forms, but also the allusion to a certain naivety, the innocence of nature, discovery and 'freedom'. Contrary to Prévost's apparent stance, however, music cannot be continually made 'as if for the first time'.

Music – or, specifically, differentiated genres of music – represent and rely upon a three-tiered model of identity and efficacy: sound, process and rationale. These consist, respectively, of the resultant audible component of the music, the physical activities by which that sound is produced, and the rationale that informs the process. In the case of free improvisation, it is the rationale (not only to make 'music', but also to effect an implicit deconstruction of other 'music-making') that crucially defines the genre, whilst also making a problem of its own status. Sound, process and rationale, in this context, are interdependent. Any contradiction in one aspect of the genre will have potential repercussions in the others, which consequently resonate throughout the form as a whole.

Primarily, free improvisation is encountered as a physically sensible phenomenon, as a live or recorded performance. Both of these sources were

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Royle, *After Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 22.

fundamental to my research, and it was in this context, too, that the inherent limitations of 'free' improvisation initially became apparent. Though he is neither a more or less pertinent example, I will illustrate the following arguments with reference to the musicianship of Eddie Prévost. His significance is not merely as one of the founders (and only constant member) of AMM, a gregarious roving collaborator and oft-quoted theoretician of free improvisation. More specifically, of the first generation free improvisers, it is his playing of which I have had the most personal experience. Aside from his numerous recordings, I have witnessed Prévost in live performance on seventeen different occasions<sup>23</sup> in a variety of collaborative contexts. This has allowed me a useful familiarity with the techniques and aesthetics of his playing.

Prévost's performances are broadly split between two musical formats, and are partially distinguished by his choice of instrumentation. Like John Stevens, Tony Oxley, Paul Lytton and Jamie Muir, Prévost's musicality is founded in the techniques of jazz drumming (although he also exhibits techniques reminiscent of certain orchestral or world-music traditions). In some situations, Prévost continues as a species of jazz drummer today. He uses a fairly conventional Westernised drum kit, and performs a fluid, rhythmically and dynamically versatile interpretation of free jazz tradition. Technically, his playing can demonstrate virtuoso ability, but more often it is sparing and considered. This style, with its driving momentum and idiomatic associations, is far removed from the distinctive rhythmic innovations that characterised British free improvisation. It is more consistent with his playing in AMM's anomalous 1970s line-ups (and thus largely beyond the remit of this study), and may be heard more recently, for example, in the context of the Eddie Prévost

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<sup>23</sup> Both recordings and live performances are noted in the Bibliography.



Trio.<sup>24</sup> More frequently though, I have seen Prévost work with the percussion instruments<sup>25</sup> by which he creates the sparse and legato motifs of the typical AMM sound. (See Appendix One, Examples 2.2 – 2.2.g) These instruments are presented in particularly intimate detail on Prévost's two solo CDs.<sup>26</sup> They include a gong and various cymbals, metal bowls, a snare drum and roto-tom, and a converted wine barrel, which is fitted with both drum heads and strings (perhaps from a cello or double bass). As well as the more usual array of sticks and beaters with which to strike these instruments, Prévost also makes frequent use of a violin bow and/or small electric motor to produce sustained tones. His tendency, with this instrumental line-up, is towards an unhurried succession of low volume notes, each of which is allowed to resonate and decay. As in the context of AMM, Prévost solo also presents typically negligible rhythmic propulsion. Instead he favours an examination of timbral qualities and nuances of inflection that are inherent to the instruments themselves. Some of his solo recordings are rhythmically busier than others, but particularly in collaborative situations Prévost can be strikingly economical. His duo CD with laptop operator Mattin is another useful latter-day example of this aspect of Prévost's playing.<sup>27</sup> Like the earlier example of Derek Bailey, despite subtle and specific modification of his phrasing according to the improvising situation, Prévost's techniques are carefully defined and distinctive. His comprises a readily identifiable improvising voice.

The presence of composition within free improvisation is not deeply obscured. From an 'anonymous' listen to the *Ore* CD,<sup>28</sup> for example, any audience familiar with

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<sup>24</sup> For example, the Eddie Prévost Trio's *Touch*. 1997. CD. MRCD34 and *The Blackbird's Whistle*. 2004. CD. MRCD56

<sup>25</sup> As opposed to a formalised 'drum kit'.

<sup>26</sup> Eddie Prévost's *Loci of Change* 1996. CD. MRCD32 and *Material Consequences*. 2002. CD. MRCD48

<sup>27</sup> Sakada. 30 November 2002. 2003. CD. 323 (4). I also witnessed this performance, at London's 'Sound 323' shop.

<sup>28</sup> Derek Bailey & Eddie Prévost. *Ore*. 2001. CD. ARCD001

the genre would have little difficulty identifying Bailey and Prévost. Though, in some ways, this particular pair of improvisers or this specific recording is an arbitrary case in point, they are nevertheless symptomatic of the threat that troubles free improvisation's conceptual integrity. (Perhaps, after all, with their joint musician/theorist roles and ubiquitous longevity on the scene, Bailey and Prévost could not *better* embody the early innovation and later erosion of 'free improvisation'.) I will continue to use *Ore* as an illustrative example. To broadly recap, however: the first and most conspicuous occurrence of Richard Scott's 'unfreedom' is that by the distinctiveness of their playing alone, certain individuals (add perhaps Evan Parker and Keith Rowe in particular to those above) and groupings (especially the SME and AMM) may be formulaically identified.

## Material Consequences

The factors that inevitably 'compose' free improvisation are straightforward in many respects, but nonetheless significant. Bailey or Prévost may 'improvise', but the impetus, style and content of their improvisation ultimately can reflect only the accumulated experience and preferences of their own musical lives. This encompasses generic and stylistic origins, formal musical training, choice of instrument, and so forth. In other cases, attempts have been made to sidestep these potentially limiting factors. It was in this context that Cage performed his aleatory experiments: to negate both the composer's and performers' subjectivity, whether conscious or not; Ornette Coleman sometimes performed on instruments with which he was technically unfamiliar (trumpet and violin), in an otherwise highly virtuosic musical setting; and, in the 1970s, music and performance ensemble The Portsmouth Sinfonia was organised entirely on this premise of instrumental dilettantism. Within the ranks of the



free improvisers, however, there is little evidence of such tactics, with extensive careers based on personally familiar instruments, within often-consistent stylistic areas.

Prévost – and the schism in his playing styles that I have described – again illustrate the genre, in miniature. His musical origins were as a conventional time-keeping trad jazz drummer. From this formative role, two divergent strands of interest and activity have emerged: the frenetic, hyperpolyrhythmic free jazz kit-drummer (of the Eddie Prévost Trio), and the rhythmically sparse, texturally focussed, instrumentally eclectic percussionist (of *Ore*). We can also see here a model of the atomistic and laminar routes by which free improvisation moved away from jazz. And on a finer scale, Prévost's own take on this process (and his role within it) are also suggested. The contrasting improvising styles for which Prévost is now known are also contrasted with those that he cultivated as a fledgling musician. Nevertheless, to describe his mature playing as 'free' from the influence of his formative musicianship (generic associations, education and physical resources) is too extreme a presumption. What we can perhaps observe in his contributions to his trio or to *Ore* are two very specific developments *of* – and/or reactions *to* – the kind of musician that Prévost *was*. In the former case, he has extrapolated his techniques of manual dexterity, physical stamina, fluidity and creativity of phrasing and the superimposition of rhythms over a basic pulse. In the latter, quasi-melodic or harmonic accompaniment, strategic restraint, timbral arrangement and juxtaposition, and subservience to the ensemble. The discipline of Prévost's 'free' playing was not formed in isolation.

In addition to the abilities, proclivities and tendencies of the individual improviser, the physicality of their *chosen* instruments (the 'material consequences', as Prévost would have it) must also conspire against their 'freedom' of approach. In

Chapter Two, I made the point that the sources of musical sound – the physical processes and properties on which acoustic instruments all function – are intrinsically limited. In Prévost's percussion kit (which is a more varied set of resources than his conventional drum kit), his battery of instrumentation includes examples of the idiophone, membranophone and chordophone. These in turn are composed of various woods, metals and plastics. The elemental musical materials that the free improvisers allow themselves do incorporate a degree of interpretative flexibility that the conventions of the Western tradition do not. But the converse perspective is also true. Each tradition – and British free improvisation by now demonstrably *is* and *has* a tradition – has differentiated and refined the tools to facilitate its own area of interest.

Prévost or Bailey's musicianship are more individually specialised than perhaps an orchestral percussionist or a jazz guitarist. This, though, does not discount the fact that they still have only the same basic resources to work from. Whilst a recording such as *Ore* reveals the many nuances of inflection that Bailey and Prévost have cultivated from their instruments, those very same instruments determine many more sounds that are *unavailable* to them. Chiming and grinding metallic tones, for instance, abound on *Ore*, yet the possibility of perhaps a wooden-toned aerophonic texture or motif never arises. It could not have arisen in those circumstances whereby Bailey and Prévost played together, whether or not either one of them had considered it an appropriate improvisational response.

That the free improvisers focus on the most essential of musical materials also suggests the manner in which their playing can become so stylistically familiar, if not *exactly* predictable. The seemingly most a-musical passages of free improvisation still exhibit and manipulate the core concepts of pitch, rhythm, melody, harmony and tonality, as much as any piece created under the auspices of Equal Temperament. But



what the Western tradition does provide, which free improvisation does not, is a mediating aesthetic and technical point of focus to its music. Put very simply, ‘conventional’ music has *tunes* – macro-structures – to which the listener’s attention is drawn. Although Western musicality is rigidly technically defined (so it is readily apparent when it is played ‘incorrectly’), the precision of structure and values in this tradition is effectively disguised. We return again here to Curt Sachs’ distinction of the ‘instrumental impulse’ versus that which shapes vocal melody. The basis of ordered Western tonality is such that patterns of cyclical development and resolution may be effected and perceived in a piece of music. Tunes equate analogously to a teleological structuring of time. They suggest a beginning, middle and end structure, and the apparent ‘logic’ of this intrigues and concentrates audience perception. It detracts attention from the music’s underlying mechanics and construction. And though Equal Temperament is an inherently finite system, its potential combination of pitches, increments, multiples and ratios is nevertheless vast. By both the self-containing developmental logic of Equal Temperament and our culturally established attunement to its variable patterns, there is greater attention-drawing character in a tune, than in the average free improvisation.

A tune can be both immediately appealing and memorable in its concise orderliness, in a way that the fine, sprawling, partially unpredictable detail of Prévost or Bailey’s phrasing is not. In a sense, for example, the half dozen instruments that Prévost uses on *Ore* have less potential for definite and replicable (i.e. memorable) communicative melody than an equally tempered scale of C major. Prévost’s musicality is subtle. It is ambiguous and evocative of *something*, even sometimes *something* (conventionally) *musical*. But he never uses it to express anything as unambiguous, self-contained and complete as even the simplest of consonant

melodies. Free improvisation keeps going because the previous note or phrase never quite suggests that any point of resolution has yet occurred.

On albums such as *Ore*, and especially his solo CDs, Prévost presents the instrumental voices of his percussion set-up in minute detail, and at face value. Musical elements and processes are unmediated in one's perception by tuneful distraction. In lieu of applicable notation or precise calibrations, free improvisation can actually be effectively evoked by literal description. A typical exchange on *Ore*, for instance, might entail Prévost producing a sustained resonance from a bowed hi-hat cymbal, in response to a plucked bass note that Bailey left naturally to decay. This combination of tones perhaps suggests a 'next move' of sorts to those familiar with the syntax and vocabulary of British free improvisation. But in conventional musical terms, there is no more specific or obvious scheme of development implicit in this vignette than there is in my description of it. Again, without reference to the engaging quality of a tune, an unaccustomed audience is unlikely to be led away in any particular conceptual direction by such a readily self-evident – 'non-referential' – source of sound.

Music of the Western tradition is already a 'meta-music'. The tradition has an extant resource of structures, mechanisms, pitches and intervals, which have been culturally designated as 'legitimate' musical materials. It is in the coherence and character of a tune, however, that their relative values and functions are perceived. The selectivity, organisation and aesthetic judgement that a tune represents may be regarded as a meta-commentary upon musical 'matter'. This commentary rationalises and implies informed criticism of its subject, and by doing so creates the impression of distance between them. Prévost may take the time to scrutinise, pursue and develop the musical value inherent to a note produced by a single plucked string. But if that



note is removed from any ongoing continuum (either sensible or intelligible) of comparable notes, then its individual qualitative value is also obscured. It is inherently less of a discrete and memorable phenomenon in itself. In a partisan consideration of free improvisation, one does not (need to) listen to or distinguish the precise value of a pitch, because its uniquely juxtapositioned character does not have the same prescribed significance as it might in an exactly calibrated system.

Free improvisation places an aesthetic emphasis on a different level of musical organisation than that of the Western tradition. But as I will discuss below, it also denies itself access to musical materials that the Western tradition does not. The impression that free improvisation is audibly repetitive (and therefore inconsistent with the genre's underlying rationale) is partially illusory. However, it cannot be definitively dismissed either. *Ore's* discourse is of metallic textural shades and angular lines of melodic punctuation. In lieu of time signatures and formalised scales, Prévost and Bailey converse in increments of micro-rhythm and microtone. The reciprocal exchanges and their cumulative character, however, are not necessarily gauged and actioned at such an intricate level of perception; indeed it is extremely unlikely. Roy Travis' model of tonality implies that Bailey and Prévost's improvisation is consensual, deliberate and broadly representative of their shared musical logic. But it is also necessarily vague, and imprecisely incremented. Free improvisation is essentially impressionistic, both in the musicians' interplay and in overall musical effect. Sonically and chronologically, the inflections of micro-rhythm and microtone *could* be scientifically measured. But with such potential variation of values and progressions at this scale, the probability of any significant repetition of phrasing is greatly reduced. An audience, though, does *not* perceive free improvisation at this miniature level, but at the more general 'impressionistic' level

(without the points of reference that a tune provides). That inflection is often too physically subtle to be perceived may perhaps account for the appearance of stylistic consistency in the free improvisers' playing.

In a kind of perceptual 'grey area', freely improvised music can be too *non-specific* for our aesthetic recognition, but also too *specific* for our literal, physical identification. This is where the illusion of 'unfreedom' is created. Whilst their sensibilities are perhaps more attuned however, it needs to be acknowledged that Bailey and Prévost, etc, can only reasonably function at this *same* level of perception, too. Although the micro-level must also be finite, its approximation to expressive 'freedom' is appreciably closer than that of the impressionistic scale. But whilst functioning *literally* in micro-increments, free improvisation has not been able to disguise its sensible limitations. More to the point, it is at the impressionistic level that the free improvisers tacitly *agree* to play. They forsake the clarity of a tune and allude to the micro-scale; in fact, though, they operate in a consensual intermediate arena, at a consensual perceptive level, which they have made their own. 'Music', as I have discussed, is governed by the play of experience and concept, perception and conception, and defined only by subjective choice. Such choices have been clearly made by the free improvisers, even if they are ostensibly obscure to a non-partisan audience.

The criteria of free improvisation's literal, physical 'unfreedom' are difficult to conclusively prove, but perhaps ultimately they are of questionable relevance. In subjective and conceptual terms, more importantly, the likes of Prévost and Bailey have mapped out a very distinctive and definite setting for their music. It is mutually agreeable, and readily referable and accessible, subject to their own discretion. At this



level of consistency, again, 'freedom' has been in some way compromised by the free improvisers' self-determination and individuality.

For each free improviser then, there are already a variety of contexts that preempt and restrict 'freedom' in his or her sound, process or rationale. Much free improvisation, furthermore, is performed in collaboration: groupings of between two and five being the most common. Up to a point, the collective approach can address some of the restrictions that afflict solo improvisation. Another player brings another instrumental voice, for example, and expands the available musical resources from which to improvise. And the situation may be developed and tempered further still by the combination of contrasting aesthetic and technical styles. To cite Prévost once again, his recent duets with both Bailey and Mattin illustrate the point well. Against Bailey's atomistic melody, Prévost offered laminar textural harmony; and to the electronic sampling and processing of Mattin's laptop, he matched acoustic real-time percussion.

As noted in Chapter One, diversity in musical background is less pronounced amongst the First Generation that it would be for their successors. Formative experiences in modern jazz predominated, with a lesser – though still significant – influence of the classical avant-garde.<sup>29</sup> Seeking further physical and intellectual resources from which to improvise, Bailey has been notably gregarious and has a stylistically diverse range of collaborations to his name.<sup>30</sup> This activity is perhaps indicative of his awareness of the limitations of 'free improvisation'. Even in these varied encounters, as I have discussed, Bailey remains unmistakably Bailey. As much

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<sup>29</sup> Each of these categories though, of course, are expansive in their own right, and for two instrumentalists both to like 'jazz' in no way necessitates identical abilities or proclivities. There will, however, still remain a considerable shared influence of the genre's meta- and micro-structural conventions, at the very least.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Richard Cook & Brian Morton, *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD* 6<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 67-71, though Bailey's available recordings are ever on the increase.

as any personal style may eventually suggest an idiom of its own, so might a collaborative relationship. In the short term, an influx of inspiring and challenging new improvisational material may be made available. In the longer term though, the free improvisers' impressionistic 'averaging out' suggests that resources may be more limited. Even to briefly disregard the issue of personal style, in the very moment of improvisational encounter free improvisation is affected by pre-determination.

As the two long-standing exemplars of atomistic and laminar improvisation, the SME and AMM have been central to my study of this genre. The constancy of (respective) method here is self-evident. Perhaps, like Prévost's mature instrumental personae, these groups' methods were developed and extrapolated from specific defining aspects of their musical origins. But if these two groups may be described as 'atomistic' or 'laminar' at all, then their processes of refinement, experimentation and change must have long since decreased to a point of idiomatic fixity. To subscribe to the communal methods of the SME or AMM represents a kind of 'reticence and suppression [of the individual]' in Ben Watson's words, 'rather than a genuine working through of differences'.<sup>31</sup> And there are deeper manifestations of this trend, still. Beyond the specific stylistic compromises of these groups, there is an implicit etiquette of collective engagement, responsibility and mutual consideration.<sup>32</sup> In a sense, this is the aesthetic rationale by which British free improvisation escaped idiomatic association; primarily, it can be recognised in its negation of generic rhythmic obligation. By eliminating this musical crutch, the emphasis was placed upon the conscious, interpretative response of one improviser to another. Whatever conventions they flaunt, however, atomistic and laminar playing (for example) seem

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<sup>31</sup> Watson, p. 268.

<sup>32</sup> The perceived violation of such ideals, as I have noted before, led to dispute and (Trevor Watts') departure from the SME in the mid 1970s. Keith Rowe's recent departure from AMM has also been characterised in a similar light.



very much to have been the ‘appropriate’ strategy to adopt in certain groupings. And if this kind of obligation is to be fulfilled, then one inescapable physical phenomenon must hold sway over the spectrum of improvisational choice.

I was alerted to this point from two sources. First: for half an hour on Monday 26 March 2001, I attempted to freely improvise (on acoustic guitar) along to the *Joseph Holbrooke* ’98 CD.<sup>33</sup> This was at an early stage of my research, and my familiarity with free improvisation was limited. I was still considering the idea that this music was created by the coincidence of simply ‘random’ playing. Two factors became apparent from my experiment, however. The musicians on the recording *were* engaged in some kind of unified and mutual discourse; by attempting ‘randomness’, my improvised phrases were frequently and blatantly incongruous with those of Bailey, Bryars and Oxley. And while the members of Joseph Holbrooke could clearly influence each other’s playing or *mine*, I was naturally unable to reciprocate this. Second: in the late 1990s, Bailey and Dutch percussionist Han Bennink recorded a pair of duet albums by post. One recorded their improvisation solo, onto which the other would overdub their responses at a later date.<sup>34</sup> ‘Only seasoned listeners will notice anything different’ remarked Cook and Morton, ‘and even then they won’t be sure’.<sup>35</sup> This raises questions about free improvisation’s referencing of personal interactivity and spontaneity.

The simple, irrevocable passage of time puts great pressure upon free improvisation’s rationale and process. This has, as I have discussed, affected free improvisation as a genre. More specifically, it also prejudices each moment of improvisation that self-consciously alludes to being ‘free’. We need to return to Derrida’s assertion that ‘there is nothing outside [of context]’. The *concept* of free

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<sup>33</sup> Joseph Holbrooke. *Joseph Holbrooke* ’98. 2000. CD. Incus CD 39

<sup>34</sup> Derek Bailey & Han Bennink. *Post Improvisation, Volumes One and Two*. 1999. CDs. Incus CD 35

<sup>35</sup> Cook & Morton, p. 70.

improvisation aspires to a condition where there is effectively no past: no musical past, that is, from which another culture's conventions can arbitrarily dictate the nature of an improvisation in the present. Likewise, an *act* of free improvisation that is committed in the present is done so in the wishful assumption that it will not incontrovertibly determine the future. The free improviser wishes neither to reference a culturally idiomatic standard themselves, nor to invoke such an influence that might restrict the 'freedom' of successive responses. The first generation British improvisers achieved a measure of success in this venture by the methods that I describe in Chapter Three, and what Ian Carr has called 'a severe process of questioning and elimination'.<sup>36</sup> They suggested a model by which 'music' could be created anew; not only was the 'old' music stopped in its (cultural and historical) tracks, but the 'new' made it unnecessary to refer back again in order just to proceed.

I am not going to attempt to define the precise date, or even duration, of free improvisation's moment of grace. It certainly would have ceased, however, prior to the arrival of the Second Generation. Conceivably, 'free' improvisation may have ended perhaps as soon as anti-idiomatic methods and ideas first reached maturity. Inevitably though, the *process* (if not necessarily the sound or the rationale) of first generation British free improvisation entered into history; it became a referable *a priori* tradition in its own right. While the free improvisers were able to make 'music' without the necessity of re-quoting other idioms, they *were* compelled to restate the schemes by which they had achieved this independence in the first place. By remaining faithful to their defining innovations, free improvisation became indebted to a culture and history of its own.

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<sup>36</sup> Ian Carr, *Music Outside. Contemporary Jazz in Britain* (London: Latimer New Directions, 1973), p. 39.



Rhythm is the most essential of musical criteria: the concept that 'music' is occurring *now*. Even in this sense though, it is difficult to accept the literal possibility of 'free improvisation' that the phrase has come to imply. Bailey and Bennink's *Post Improvisation* sessions exemplify the point. They demonstrate the irrelevance of whether a musical stimulus occurred 'live' a split-second previously or whether it was recorded two weeks ago and posted from Holland. Once a sound has been made, sensibly and intelligibly it is a non-negotiable fact. It cannot be retracted or altered, but must be dealt with on its own terms. That a 'non-idiomatic' response *is* going to be made, *when* such a response is going to be made,<sup>37</sup> or that *any* kind of response is made at all:- if any such decisions are to be adhered to, then 'freedom' is in some sense lost to 'context'. And the transformation of 'non-idiomatic improvisation' into an idiom only compounded this conceptual problem. If 'free improvisation' is to connote 'freely improvised music', then it is the wider framework of 'music' itself that is its most fundamental element of pre-composition. It is 'music', ironically, that is first generation British free improvisation's definitive problem.

There are two areas of conceptual stress that underlie a literal notion of 'free improvisation', both of which relate to the assumption of its 'meta' status. First, there is the question of free improvisation's supposed relationship to the Western tradition. There are conflicting indications here: that the genre is a technically and aesthetically advanced meta-commentary on Western music, but also that it is elemental and 'natural' enough to pre-empt the formalisation and rigidity that Western tradition implies. In either case, the First Generation fastidiously excised 'classical' pitch, rhythm, melody, harmony and tonality from its vocabulary with no little success. But this becomes conceptually and practically awkward: now there are extensive

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<sup>37</sup> As a 'response', intrinsically it will be made *after* the stimulus.

resources of musical material that are sweepingly disbarred from what is ostensibly ‘free’ improvisation’.

One second-generation group, Alterations,<sup>38</sup> proposed a notable refinement of British free improvisation, and something of a solution to this problem. They were a quartet, which existed from 1977 to 1986, and amongst its members were Steve Beresford, writer David Toop and The People Band’s Terry Day. Brief accounts of the group’s career, music and aesthetics can be found in the sleeve notes to both currently available albums, as well as in *Improvisation*.<sup>39</sup> Toop, in the sleeve note to *Voila Enough*, evokes a useful point of reference by which to consider Alterations’ work:

The music [...] broke quite a few of the unspoken rules and articulated theories associated with free improvisation at that time. [...] An orthodoxy was spreading; a disapproval of any hint of regular beats or chord sequences. [...] The reasons for it were clear enough – [...] a desire to strip music down to its barest essentials, some vestige of jazz practice carried over into a new situation – but Puritanism loomed and I suppose we reacted against it by moving to the opposite extreme.

The Second Generation were clearly conscious of the contradictions that increasingly defined the First. That is not to say that Alterations were incomparable to their predecessors. Musically, they displayed an eclecticism of style(s), influences and instrumentation that recalled variously the ‘Dutch acrobats’<sup>40</sup> and the duo of Parker & Lytton. Particularly like the latter group, Alterations were expansively multi-instrumental, and this influenced the flexibility of their collective musical character

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<sup>38</sup> See Alterations’ *Alterations Live (Live Recordings 1980-83)*. 2000. CD. IRCD 001 and *Voila Enough!*. 2001. CD. UMS/ALP239CD

<sup>39</sup> Bailey, pp. 125-127.

<sup>40</sup> Both Toop and guitarist Peter Cusack cite Bennink, Mengelberg, etc: for example, in the *Voila Enough!* sleeve notes, and in Bailey, p. 126.



also. But more significantly, it was their specific desire to usurp the encroaching ‘Puritanism’ of free improvisation that makes Alterations so relevant here.

Striving towards their own model of ‘the non-idiomatic’ perhaps became a trap for the First Generation. Conversely, pastiche was a key component of Alterations’ improvisation. On ‘*Berlin 2*’ (1981, from *Voila Enough!*) for example, they adhere to – or rather, evoke – a broadly and faithfully atomistic soundscape. (Prior to AMM’s return to the laminar style the following year, this represented what was the archetypal free improvisation of the time.) But though less than two minutes in length, the track also includes notable subversions of the form. There is something of the musical parody and absurdity associated with the Dutch improvisers here. Some of the atomistic dialogue is given a pseudo-zoological character, there are instances of Goons-like percussive slapstick, and a high register piano melody (reminiscent of a musical box) degenerates from delicacy into an increasingly forthright and sprawling line, attempting to dominate the track. More significantly, this final component also indicates Alterations’ basic irreverence for free improvisation’s solidifying traditions. There is sometimes a combative – rather than necessarily collective – interplay apparent amongst the improvisers, for one. But even this is subsumed by a commitment to musical inclusivism, which Alterations demonstrated again and again. Not only does the piano part in ‘*Berlin 2*’ present a recognisably generic musical reference point (a musical box melody, suggestive of a nursery rhyme), but it does so using the standard tonal and rhythmic units of Western musicality.

Alterations were no less partial to microtonal soundscapes than AMM or atonal phrasing than the SME. However, nor were they shy of bringing the technical refinements, meta- and micro-structures, or even specific macro-structural quotations

from extant idioms into their improvisation. Some of their idiomatically-derived passages are more collective and mutually respectful than others, but essentially Alterations still managed to avoid 'non-structured, idiomatic' constraints that defined, for example, free jazz. And neither were their appropriations of musical tradition relentless or gung-ho enough to preclude 'free' playing. The collage-like changeability of their music and the variety of idioms that they referenced helped to achieve this. But the degree of confrontation – as opposed to the First Generation's cooperation – moreover, made much of the difference. For every daintily melodic, 'classical' piano interlude that emerged, an 'accompaniment' of (perhaps) electric guitar, bamboo flute and air being released from balloons would also strike up: to subvert, send up or otherwise derail it. Though without their predecessors' self-imposed purity of vision, it would be difficult nevertheless to describe the music of Alterations as either 'structured' or 'idiomatic'. By *not* imposing a vast canon of 'forbidden' (i.e. conventional Western) resources on their music, they arguably exhibited the greater degree of 'freedom' overall.

There is also tension between the idea of improvising – of 'making music as if for the first time' – and the concept of 'meta-music'. If 'music' comes into being purely as the result of a conceptual leap, it would appear that by citing '*meta-music*' this leap has implicitly been taken already. The improvisers have come together in the first place *to* 'make music', and therefore every sound that they produce whilst improvising will *be* 'music' regardless of the stylistic or material variations that they bring to the event. Improvisation, in this sense, does not lead to the active creation of anything. It is merely a means by which to recite – ('re-cite') – a language that has already been decided upon (or 'composed') by the very act of coming together 'to make music'. Furthermore, if free improvisation is an activity and experience of



engagement, and the conscious extrapolation of musical stimuli (by musicians and audience) is equivalent to ‘tonality’, then free improvisation also inherently demands a sense of ‘compositional logic’. This needs to be the case, if free improvisation is to be separate from the merely ‘random’. By the cultural and historical context in which British free improvisation emerged, this sense of compositional logic is now long since pre-destined, defined and established.

## Conclusions

It is difficult to logically reconcile the first generation British players’ *process* of free improvisation with the tasks that their *rationale* proposes. Even in the broadest terms, the binary opposition of ‘improvisation’ versus ‘composition’ reveals only the intricacy of their interdependence. Once a passage of free improvisation has occurred, it is then ‘set’, inviolate. It cannot be changed. A fully-fledged composition, ironically, can be. Although it is/has been ‘finished’, it may also be reproduced, and therefore be open to subsequent revision. This revision itself may take the form of improvisational reinterpretation – as in most jazz, for example – or may involve more formal re-composition at some length. (The materials of ‘composition’, of course, have to come into being somehow, and from somewhere.)

The free improvisation, meanwhile, is apparently impromptu and a work in progress. Yet by the imprecise and impressionistic nature of the micro- tones and rhythms (which British free improvisation used to define itself), the reproduction of any specific piece would be equivalently difficult and pointless. As such, free improvisation that has already occurred is definitively and irrevocably ‘finished’: *composed*. Free improvisation yet to be performed, conversely, cannot help but become a composition in some sense, because of the deliberate nature of the process

by which it is created. This last concern, especially, has made first generation British free improvisation problematic as a long-term proposition.

For a brief period, perhaps not exceeding the end of the 1960s, British 'free improvisation' was created of a conscientiously 'meta' perspective; for a time, this enabled an approach to music-making that was viably 'non-idiomatic' in relation to that which had come before it. The 1970s brought certain refinements and peaks to the form, in the controlled austerity of the *Face To Face*-era SME, or the eclecticism and confrontation of Parker & Lytton's duo, for example. But the decade also saw carefully cultivated insights consolidated into habit (and AMM revert to a species of free jazz). The conceptual implications of free improvisation, if considered at any length, appear too extreme and unwieldy to control, because of the demands that they place on process and rationale, perception and conception. In the most general terms, the fact that the SME were known to be 'atomistic' and AMM 'laminar' (and the others, 'somewhere in-between') suggests the difficulties that 'free improvisation', the concept, encountered in free improvisation, the experience. Those players that both defined and succumbed to the genre suggested a vital and revealing perspective on modern musical performance and understanding. But by the *a priori* assumptions about 'music' that they implicitly also made, they were unable to finally escape from its influence.



## Epilogue: *A New Distance*

*2005: Hugh Davies died on New Years Day [Addendum: and Derek Bailey, too, on Christmas Day], joining John Stevens and Cornelius Cardew, both long departed. Jamie Muir retired from music at the end of the 1980s.*

In the long term, first generation British free improvisation is a concept at odds with itself. Yet, in practice, it is all the stronger for it. The free improvisers deconstructed the conventions of Western musical tradition by highlighting the elemental materials and relative interpretations upon which it is ultimately based. In doing so, however, they left themselves open to equivalent scrutiny, analysis and criticism. The strategies of deconstruction can provide a useful gauge of cultural and historical influence and implicit interpretative bias. But equally, every deconstructive analysis must exhibit its own subjective viewpoint. And as such, it would be unwise to assume any definitive authority of its own that could not be further deconstructed to merely another provisional and localised 'truth'. Realistically, 'free improvisation' or 'non-idiomatic improvisation' have long since ceased to be accurate descriptions of the First Generation's work, as these players originally defined them. 'Meta music', strictly speaking, never was accurate. For more than three decades, the 'free' interaction of these musicians has adhered rigidly to the innovations that first distinguished them. The same patterns and methods now merely define them.

Ben Watson suggests that the difference between Derek Bailey's guitar-playing and that of 'conventional' virtuoso John McLaughlin is simply harmonic in nature. One is no less technically accomplished or physically capable than the other; but McLaughlin's playing is, in addition, governed by and faithful to a regimented

system of tonality.<sup>1</sup> It is his interpretative facility – whilst remaining correct within the conventions of this format – by which McLaughlin's virtuosity is judged. Watson's observation, though, presents free improvisation in two contrasting lights. On the one hand, he is suggesting that (although unconventional in approach) Bailey is still 'as good as' (i.e. as inherently musical as) McLaughlin, but merely in a different aesthetic context. Yet this idea also implicitly works against the 'free' or 'meta' perspective that British free improvisation has sought to cultivate. Bailey, therefore, is not a 'meta-musician', just an ordinary one (like McLaughlin). Neither, it has become apparent, is Bailey's playing any more 'free' from harmonic context than McLaughlin's. Again, it is merely the *context* that is different. This is the very point over which Bailey and Prévost's protestations of distance from idiom and conventional musicality stumble. Though its vocabulary is phonetically different to that of the Western tradition, free improvisation's communicative (that is, musical) subtext is functionally the same. British free improvisation was defined as an independent and self-contained system, but nevertheless it *is* still self-evidently a system: one of technical conventions and aesthetic standards. However much its gainsayers may disagree, it is a functional and identifiable musical genre, as much as any other.

By definition, free improvisation is a process-driven – and therefore conceptually focussed – music. And (as I have discussed) on such terms, the premise of these particular musicians performing 'free improvisation' today is fundamentally flawed. But there must also come a point when an obsession with the conceptual over the pragmatic becomes misguided, or of dubious usefulness. This is, after all, a study of music, deriving from the *impetus* of music: a physical phenomenon and an

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and The Story of Free Improvisation* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 149.



aesthetic experience. Simply *as* ‘music’, free improvisation is somewhat more of an unqualified achievement.

Like, for example, the atonal compositions of Anton Webern, free improvisation demonstrated a disregard for certain traditional aspects of the musical experience. Instead it placed an emphasis on what had otherwise been considered ‘secondary’ qualities. This called for an aesthetic shift on the audience’s part, both in terms of their expectations and critical perceptions of the music’s areas of focus. These, though, are variable factors to some degree in *any* comparison between musics or art forms. The scope of the free improvisers’ musical self-determination and subsequent self-sufficiency is arguably more significant than that. Dismissing Bailey’s standpoint that there were ‘no rules’ to his own playing, Prévost contrasts AMM’s approach. He suggests that they were ‘much more concerned with developing a common language and trying to make it as rich and expressive as possible’.<sup>2</sup> And while this has compromised free improvisation conceptually, it is also the characteristic that enables the genre to function practically.

Prévost and Scott have both written extensively about the political ramifications of free improvisation, its collective non-hierarchical methods of interaction, and the shift in the balance of power from absentee composer to participant improviser. Its musical ramifications also reflect this. Rather than by reference to an ongoing abstract concept, the activity of music could now instead be defined by immediate and individual experience. From their origins as interpretative musicians (primarily in modern jazz), the nascent free improvisers harnessed and developed the facility that Sachs called the ‘instrumental impulse’. Though rationalised after the event in terms of communal politics, the specialised

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<sup>2</sup> Interviewed in Richard Scott, *Noises: Free Music, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde, London 1965 to 1990* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1991), p. 301.

musicianship of each free improviser also implies a culmination of very definite, individual goals. These goals centre most conspicuously around an enhanced relationship with the instrumental impulse, and a move away from the culturally pre-ordained 'niceties' that vocal or lyrical melody tends toward. British free improvisation, as such, represented a practical – more than theoretical – reinvention of 'music'. It placed the (ostensibly only) 'interpretative' musical vocabulary of rank-and-file musicians on an equal footing with the 'creative' language of the composer, making the culturally unfashionable observation that the resources and opportunities available to every strata of musician are essentially of the same substance and relative expressive value.

The sound of the British free improvisers has sometimes been perceived as 'unmusical', and it is an opinion to which anyone is entitled. But it would be to overlook the systems of organisation, the deliberateness of method and the constancy of aesthetic appreciation that any considered overview of free improvisation so evidently reveals. This is Prévost's 'common language'; British free improvisation functions musically because it corresponds so precisely to the intricately refined human experience and activity of 'music'. The irrevocable passage of culture and history has established a powerful, if largely implicit, opposition to the conventions that free improvisation has used to define itself. But within the 'scene' itself, the subjective consensuses and cooperation that make 'music' work, that makes *any* music work, and that makes 'music' *per se*, are clearly operating.

In recent years (though without public admission of what such activities seem to imply) Derek Bailey has undertaken an extensive programme of cross-genre experimentation, in order to find new musical contexts for his playing. It is amongst two such collaborations that British free improvisation's intrinsic musicality is so



succinctly illustrated. And ironically, in both cases, the musical backdrop to Bailey's playing has been pre-programmed 'machine music': definitely non-negotiating collaborators in the moment of apparently improvised encounter.<sup>3</sup> As of this writing, Bailey's most recent CD release is *The Gospel Record*.<sup>4</sup> Assembled with sequencers, samplers and synthesizers and with new vocal tracks on top, the sound of the album is essentially a post-modern approximation of early blues and gospel songs. Over the top of these, Bailey adds his trademark guitar solos. And while my opinion is only as relative as any other, to my ears *The Gospel Record* does not present an entirely coherent or satisfying musical statement.

The album opens well, with 'Let The Little Sunbeam In'. Bailey's atonal playing nevertheless deftly evokes and develops the expressive pitch bends and slurs that first defined blues technique. More conventionally 'in time' with the vocal and accompaniment than one might expect, he revisits the stylistic territory of Jimi Hendrix's famous 'Star Spangled Banner', and the piece coheres well. But in other instances,<sup>5</sup> the combination of lyrical gospel vocals, rhythmically lumpen and regular backing track, and Bailey's 'free' guitar seems just *too* aesthetically mismatched. The second track, 'Heaven Will Surely Be Worth It All' is the main example. On the one hand, the collage on display does usefully illustrate the relative and contextual value of musical expression: no-one's contribution is any more abstract or ill fitting here than anyone else's. But what is apparent on this track is the sound of three separate contexts occurring simultaneously. The stylistic juxtapositions have too little to do with one another to be aesthetically satisfying. Perhaps it is fairer to suggest that this whole represents another aesthetic entirely, but it does indicate by contrast quite how

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<sup>3</sup> Although, as I discussed in Chapter Four, once any musical statement, improvised or otherwise, has been physically expressed, it is beyond the possibility of being withdrawn.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Bailey/Amy Denio/Dennis Palmer. *The Gospel Record*. 2005. CD. SRR-CD004

<sup>5</sup> The album is only actually a quarter of an hour long.

coherent and ordered the now more familiar British free improvisation is, and can appear to be.

A much more convincing fusion is Bailey's drum 'n' bass album, the frenetic beats programmed by D.J. Ninj.<sup>6</sup> The drum 'n' bass backing tracks are a racing succession of intricate 4:4 percussive patterns and traditionally 'rhythm section' instruments in hybrid melodic/harmonic/rhythmic roles.<sup>7</sup> In effect, what the rhythm tracks recreate is not dissimilar to the kind of hyperpolyrhythmic and atonal musicality that Bailey had explored and helped to define in the SME, nearly thirty years before. In short, the cluttered interplay of drum 'n' bass is far less removed from that of the drums and bass of John Stevens and Dave Holland,<sup>8</sup> than *The Gospel Record's* semi-Westernised, song-dictated structures are.

The music of the first generation British free improvisers constitutes a musical genre of its own. And it is a musically successful and efficient genre, because of its rigorously set idiosyncrasies and values. AMM and the SME (the most obvious examples) functioned, persisted and endured in their 'laminar' or 'atomistic' styles because of the collective interest, interpretative potential and stylistic cohesion that such forms allowed. Even at such laminar/atomistic meeting points as the work of Parker & Lytton or the MIC, musical communication is both possible and readily apparent. It is because the participants are conversing in a shared aesthetic language. It has been said, of later free improviser Keith Tippett,<sup>9</sup> that his playing 'just sounds

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<sup>6</sup> Derek Bailey. *guitar, drums 'n' bass*. 1996. CD. AVAN 060

<sup>7</sup> Bailey has said that, in the studio, some passages of (perhaps more tonally conventional) electric piano were removed, to leave just the rhythm track. Quoted in Lee, Stewart, *Reviews and Writing*. DEREK BAILEY, *Sunday Times*, January 19, 1997

<[http://www.stewartlee.co.uk/writing/writing\\_ba1997.html](http://www.stewartlee.co.uk/writing/writing_ba1997.html)> [accessed 21 August 2005]

<sup>8</sup> On The Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Karyobin*. 1993. CD. CPE2001-2 or "So, what do you think?". 1973. LP. TGS 118

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Howard Riley/John Tilbury/Keith Tippett. *Another Part of the Story*. 2003. CD. Emanem 4088



like a cat walking across a piano'.<sup>10</sup> It doesn't, really; this is just another example of the 'Bailey versus McLaughlin' (or 'Scruton versus Travis') discrepancy over the definition of tonality. Most crucially of all, one should listen to the *rhythm* of free improvisation. Though distended or fragmented from more familiar phrases, a close scrutiny of its inflections, timing, spacing and often physical virtuosity belies the distance between the British free improvisers and the musicians that they first trained to be. Listen to a cat walking across a piano, or, better still, a non-musician gingerly investigating an unfamiliar instrument. They may well approximate 'free improvisation' tonally, but not the precise punctuation and sensibility of its rhythmic schemes. The free improvisers' shared language is of their own refinement. But it is by no means oblique, if that of the pre-eminent cultural tradition is not held to be inviolably sacrosanct. The perhaps unfamiliar sounds of free improvisation require only the aesthetic decision that 'this *is* music' in order to be perceived and appreciated as such. The same is equally true of 'Love Me Do'.

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<sup>10</sup> Attributed to Gordon Haskell, quoted in Sid Smith, *In the Court of King Crimson* (London: Helter Skelter Publishing, 2001), p. 112.

# Bibliography

## Recorded Music – Primary Sources

The following recordings feature the first generation British free improvisers, though sometimes performing in other musical contexts. See also Cook & Morton, the Emanem, Incus or Matchless websites, or the Sound 323 catalogue (for example) for a wider and ever increasing selection of related and comparable material.

Free improvisation's recorded canon includes many re-issued and archive recordings. The dates given here correspond to the publication of each recording, rather than to the original date of performance.

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[Features John Stevens & Trevor Watts]

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[Features Trevor Watts]

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AMM. *Norwich*. 2005. CD. MRCD64

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Derek Bailey. *Drop Me Off At 96<sup>th</sup>*. 1994. CD. scatter 02:CD

Derek Bailey. *Guitar, drums 'n' bass*. 1996. CD. AVAN 060

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[Features John Stevens & Trevor Watts]

Peter Brotzmann Octet. *Machine Gun*. 1990. CD. FMP CD 24  
[Features Evan Parker]

Peter Brotzmann Sextet/Quartet. *Nipples*. 2000. CD. UMS/ALP205CD  
[Features Derek Bailey & Evan Parker]

John Butcher/Derek Bailey/Rhodri Davies. *Vortices and Angels*. 2001. CD. Emanem 4049

Conditions. *A Bright Nowhere*. 2003. CD. MRCD55  
[Features Eddie Prévost]

Hugh Davies. *Warming Up with the Iceman*. 2001. CD. Grob.324

Detail. *Backwards and Forwards*. 1982. LP. IMP 18203  
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Evan Parker & Paul Lytton. *At The Unity Theatre*. 2003. CD. psi 03.01

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## Recorded Music – Secondary Sources

The following helped to establish a wider context to my research. Broadly they share some elements of (aesthetic, technical or stylistic) consistency with the work of the first generation British free improvisers. Crucially, they also illustrate key points of contrast. The first generation's antecedents, contemporaries and descendents are included here, as are some distant cousins. By the differences of their respective musical practices, I was able to define my own subject matter more clearly.

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Freedom of the City 2001, featuring BARK!, Eddie Prévost, Yann Charaoui/John Lely/Seymour Wright, The Eddie Prévost Trio, Romuald Wadych with Sandy Kindness/Ross Lambert/Tim Goldie, Romuald Wadych & Denis Dubovtsev, John Tilbury & Evan Parker: Conway Hall, Holborn, London (7 May 2001)

Paul Hession/Alan Wilkinson/Simon Fell: The Wardrobe, Leeds (27 May 2001)

The Sealed Knot: St Paul's Hall, Huddersfield (27 September 2001)

AMM: The Warehouse, Waterloo, London (31 October 2001)

Sunny Murray/Paul Hession/Alan Wilkinson: The Termite Club, Adelphi Hotel, Leeds (30 November 2001)



Derek Bailey: Electric Cinema, Birmingham (12 April 2002)

Freedom of the City 2002, featuring 'Procession 1'- Sue Lynch/Romuald Wadych/Roberto Filoleta/Sandy Kindness/Anthony Guerra/Ollie Mayne, Matt Davis & Mark Wastell, Maggie Nichols' Gathering, Roger Smith, Birdyak, Chris Burn & Matthew Hutchinson, The Louis Moholo Group, Phil Minton & Roger Turner, Trevor Watts & Vervan Weston, Sylvia Hallett, Evan Parker & John Russell, Responge, Charlotte Hug & Pat Thomas, PIM, Lol Coxhill/Paul Rutherford/Ian Smith, The London Improvisers Orchestra, Anton Lukoszevieve & Eddie Prévost, 'Procession 2' – vocals (un-named)/Mattin/Michael Rodgers/Evan Parker/Ross Lambert/Tim Goldie, Furt, John Tilbury & electronics (un-named), The Marianthi Papalexandri Project, Nathaniel Catchpole/Jamie Coleman/John Edwards/Eddie Prévost: Conway Hall, Holborn, London (3, 4, 5, 6 May 2002)

Matt Davis & Steve Beresford, Anthony Guerra & Joel Stern, Romuald Wadych & Michael Rodgers, Tim Goldie: The Foundry, London (15 June 2002)

Eddie Prévost/Lou Gare/Tom Chant/John Edwards: The Vortex, Stoke Newington, London (9 July 2002)

Eddie Prévost & Tim Goldie, Michael Rodgers: The Foundry, London (3 August 2002)

Eddie Prévost & Derek Bailey, Nathaniel Catchpole/Ross Lambert/John Edwards, Takehiro Nishide/Romuald Wadych/Sandy Kindness: 291 Gallery, London (20 August 2002)

John Butcher & Rhodri Davies: St Paul's Hall, Huddersfield (3 October 2002)

The Very Exciting Trio (Paul Hession/Mick Beck/Matt Wand), Eddie Prévost & Nathaniel Catchpole: The Termite Club, Adelphi Hotel, Leeds (8 November 2002)

Eddie Prévost & Mattin: Sound 323, Highgate, London (30 November 2002)

Derek Bailey & Paul Hession: The Termite Club, Adelphi Hotel, Leeds (21 March 2003)

Freedom of the City 2003, featuring Ian Mitchell/David Ryan/Tania Chen, 9!, Hubbub, Sakada, AMM, Free Jazz Quartet, Lol Coxhill/Lu Edmonds/Knut Aufermann, Milo Fine/Hugh Davies/Paul Shearsmith/Tony Wren, Free Base, IST, Lunge, John Russell & Stefan Keune, Viv Corringham & Angharad Davies, Tony Wren/Larry Stabbins/Howard Riley/Mark Sanders, John Butcher & John Edwards, Alan Tomlinson/Steve Beresford/Roger Turner: Conway Hall, Holborn, London (3 & 5 May 2003)

Chris Cutler & Fred Frith: The Zodiac, Oxford (7 June 2003)

Tetuzi Akiyama/Keith Rowe/Eddie Prévost, Seymour Wright/Nat Catchpole/Jamie Coleman: 291 Gallery, London (15 June 2003)

Broken Consort (Rhodri Davies/Angharad Davies/Ben Drew [?]): St Paul's Hall, Huddersfield (25 March 2004)

Rhodri Davies & Mark Wastell: St Paul's Hall, Huddersfield (26 March 2004)

Freedom of the City 2004, featuring AMM, The World Book, MEV, Quaqua, Alex Ward/Luke Barlow/Simon H Fell/Steve Noble, Roger Smith & Louis Moholo, Clive Bell & Sylvia Hallett, Gail Brand & Morgan Guberman, Chris Burn/John Butcher/Clare Cooper/Jim Denley/Will Guthrie/Matt Hutchinson, Paul Rutherford, Tony Bianco/Paul Dunmall/John Edwards, [different combinations of] Evan Parker/Barry Guy/Paul Lytton/David Stackenas/Sten Sandell: Conway Hall, Holborn, London (1, 2, 3 May 2004)

Evan Parker/Barry Guy/Paul Lytton/Richard Barrett/Paul Obermayer: Lawrence Batley Theatre, Huddersfield (28 November 2004)

## Magazine Articles

*The Wire: Adventures in Modern Music* provides news, features, commentary and reviews of the free improvisation scene each month. The listing below is by no means exhaustive, but is representative and of particular relevance to my research.

Barnes, Mike, 'Invisible Jukebox: Ken Vandermark', *Wire*, March 2005, pp. 20-24

Cowley, Julian, 'Game for a laugh' [Steve Beresford interview], *Wire*, April 2002, pp. 24-29

Cowley, Julian, 'People have the Power' [People Band feature], *Wire*, June 2002, pp. 42-47

Cowley, Julian, 'Spontaneous Combustion' [John Stevens feature], *Wire*, October 2002, pp. 30-35

Cowley, Julian, 'Recharging the Battery' [Eddie Prévost interview], *Wire*, May 2003, pp. 36-41

England, Phil, 'Invisible Jukebox: Steve Beresford', *Wire*, May 2005, pp. 20-24

Keenan, David, 'The Holy Goof' [Derek Bailey interview], *Wire*, September 2004, pp. 42-49

Lachman, Gary, 'Ready to Rumble' [Luigi Russolo feature], *Wire*, December 2003, pp. 30-35

Mandell, Howard, 'Divine Wind', *Wire*, July 2002, pp. 38-43



Marley, Brian, 'The Departure Lounge' [festival review], *Wire*, December 2002, pp. 22-25

Rowe, Keith, 'Rainforest Crunch', *Wire*, February 2002, pp. 24-27

Toop, David, 'Hugh Davies 1943-2005', *Wire*, February 2005, p. 16

Warburton, Dan, 'The Tao of Keith' [Keith Rowe interview], *Wire*, April 2001, pp. 36-41

Warburton, Dan, 'Invisible Jukebox: Joelle Leandre', *Wire*, February 2002, pp. 20-22

Warburton, Dan, 'Be True To Your School' [Alan Silva interview], *Wire*, February 2003, pp. 36-43

## Radio Broadcasts

BBC Radio 3. 'Lines Burnt In Light: the Music of Evan Parker'. *Jazz File*. 27 March, 3 April & 10 April 2004

BBC Radio 3. 'John Stevens Tribute'. *Jazz On 3*. 17 September 2004

## Scores

Brown, Earle, *Available Forms 1* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1961)

Brown, Earle, *Folio and 4 Systems* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, 1961)

Cage, John, *4'33"* (New York: Henmar, 1960)

Cage, John, *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (New York: Henmar, 1960)

Cage, John, *Fontana Mix* (New York: Henmar, 1960)

Cage, John, *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (New York: Henmar, 1960)

Cage, John, *Variations 1* (New York: Henmar, 1960)

Cage, John, *Variations 2* (New York: Henmar, 1961)

Cage, John, *Variations 3* (New York: Henmar, 1963)

Cage, John, *Variations 4* (New York: Henmar, 1963)

Cage, John, *Variations 5* (New York: Henmar, 1965)

- Cage, John, *Variations 6* (New York: Henmar, 1966)
- Cardew, Cornelius, *Four Works* (London: Universal Edition, 1967)
- Cardew, Cornelius, *Treatise* (London: Peters, 1970)
- Cardew, Cornelius, *The Great Learning* (London: Experimental Music Catalogue, 1971)
- Stockhausen, Karlheinz, *Nr. 3 Elektronische Studien. Studie II* (London: Universal Edition, 1956)
- Stockhausen, Karlheinz, *Nr. 14 Plus Minus* (London: Universal Edition, 1963)
- Stockhausen, Karlheinz, *Nr. 26 FROM THE SEVEN DAYS – Aus den sieben Tagen* (London: Universal Edition, 1968)
- Stockhausen, Karlheinz, *NR. 37 YLEM* (Kürten: Stockhausen-Verlag, 1977)
- Varèse, Edgard, *Ionisation* (New York: Colfranc, [n.d.])
- Webern, Anton, *Fünf Stücke für Orchester* (Wien: Universal Edition, 1951)
- Wolff, Christian, *Duo for Pianists II* (New York: Peters, 1962)
- Wolff, Christian, *For 1, 2 or 3 People* (New York: Peters, 1964)
- Wolff, Christian, *Electric Spring 3* (New York: Peters, 1967)
- Wolff, Christian, *Tilbury* (New York: Peters, 1969)
- Wolff, Christian, *Tilbury 2 & 3* (New York: Peters, 1969)

## Thesis

- Scott, Richard, 'Noises: Free Music, Improvisation and the Avant-Garde; London 1965 – 1990' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, London School of Economics, 1991)



## Appendix One: *The Music*

This section serves to describe the free improvisers' music at a length that the main text does not accommodate. Further to their introduction in Chapter One, I have selected recordings from the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, AMM, the Evan Parker & Paul Lytton duo, Iskra 1903, Joseph Holbrooke and the Music Improvisation Company here, for analysis in greater detail. My descriptive approach varies, according to the span of each group's existence, or the style of their music, or their legacy to the genre, though I will give more specific account of my selections and analyses in turn.

With regards to timings, I have used the form '1'00'" to denote duration, but '01:00' to mark the passage of time as registered by the CD player.

### **Example 1:        The Spontaneous Music Ensemble**

I referred earlier to a quote from Michael Nyman about musical process – that such processes 'can be equally well expressed in two minutes or twenty-four hours' – and linked the idea to the process that underlies the SME's music. The SME, in its mature form, concentrated on micro-structural detail: i.e. playing continuous variations of a central motif. Apart from the fact that each improvisation had a beginning and an end and was sometimes given a title, macro-structural distinction is not (broadly) a characteristic of their work. As such, lengthy and linear analysis of a single piece is in some ways only of limited use to assess the SME's *oeuvre*. What I have considered here instead, as suggested by Nyman's comment, is a series of two minute extracts from across the group's recorded career. From their original free jazz incarnation, via

a transitional new music-influenced period, and throughout their atomistic maturity, I have surveyed changes in personnel and instrumentation, and styles of interaction and articulation, to give an overview of the music made under the SME name.

[1.1] '2.B. Ornette' from *Challenge*, recorded March 1966.<sup>1</sup>

Dating from the earliest – and most atypical – phase of the SME's existence, nominally, stylistically and compositionally '2.B. Ornette' is a concise free jazz pastiche. As well as the eponymous Ornette Coleman, bassist Chris Cambridge also cites Eric Dolphy and Albert Ayler in the album's sleeve notes as 'important American influences' of the time. '2.B. Ornette' is listed as a Paul Rutherford composition.

00:00 – 00:07: An opening fanfare: Kenny Wheeler (on flugelhorn) and Trevor Watts (alto sax) play a unison line with an 8/8 feel, with Rutherford (on trombone) harmonising as the last note is (briefly) sustained. Bruce Cale's double bass and John Stevens' ride cymbal provide a generic and functional pulse, and a short roll on the ride links to the next section.

00:08 – 00:25: The metre changes to a half-time, swinging 4/4. The horns lead with a new unison melody, and Cale plays a 'walking' bass pattern. Stevens maintains a straight pulse on the ride, with a few accenting 'splashes' on his hi-hat cymbals in accompaniment to the lead line. Each section of the melody is played once only and, again, the second part ends with sustain from the horns and a roll – this time on snare drum – from Stevens.

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<sup>1</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Challenge*. 2001. CD. Emanem 4053



00:26: Wheeler embarks on an unaccompanied, melodic solo, with Stevens joining in at around 00:35. Between his ride and a tom-tom, Stevens echoes the dynamics and figures of Wheeler's line, creating linear and irregular sub-divisions of the piece's time signature. Shortly after Stevens, Cale enters, bowing a low register, legato harmonic drone to which Rutherford also contributes.

01:07: Watts interjects a short motif, suggesting that he is about to take his solo. This, in fact, does not occur, and he largely removes himself from the action again. Wheeler's solo continues, but Watts perhaps acts as a cue, because the accompaniment subtly changes character. Stevens swaps from a linear expression of the pulse to playing a series of quasi-military figures of increasing complexity. These eventually build, and resolve, into a roll in a triplet rhythm. Rutherford, although not in the foreground of the recording, becomes a more audible participant during this section, providing discreet counter-melodies. A low drone – Cale, playing arco – also emerges.

01:34 – 01:48: Wheeler, Rutherford and Cale continue in a similar vein to the end of Wheeler's solo, and Watts briefly harmonises with him. Stevens changes dynamic again, switching to ride cymbal and hi-hat. He plays a double-time 3/4 pattern, akin to the rhythm of a heartbeat, which then breaks down and ends the solo with a roll on the snare.

01:49 – 02:07: The group reprise the slower 4/4 section of the theme, holding a brief sustain on the final note to end the piece.

[1.2] 'Withdrawal Soundtrack – Part 1A' from *Withdrawal*, recorded September/October 1966.<sup>2</sup>

This comes from a transitional phase in the group's development. It features loose pre-arrangements and the encroaching timbral and rhythmic influence of European classical music; the improvisation is also guided by the stimulus of pre-recorded film footage. The SME comprises an expanded line-up of instrumentalists here, to avail the music of a wider selection of timbres. The *Withdrawal* sessions were performed by Wheeler, Rutherford, Watts and Stevens again, with the addition of Evan Parker and Barry Guy. (Derek Bailey, guitar, features on other *Withdrawal* tracks, but not here). Each player receives multi-instrumental credit on this album – though not necessarily all on the same track – that (with the exception of Guy) includes the non-specific 'percussion'.

00:00 – 00:35: Bowing in the lower register of his double bass, Guy creates a deep, slowly moving, but tonally active drone. It evokes perhaps a recorded human voice, slowed down and played backwards. Very quietly, in the background, a non-metrical *pitter-patter* accompaniment is audible that may be Stevens playing with brushes on the snare drum (?).

00:36 – 02:00: Stevens enters with a slow, simple, five-note tonal melody on glockenspiel. In 3/4 time, one note plays on the downbeat of each successive bar. On the first pass Stevens plays only the first three notes, leaving rests; subsequently the full motif is played three times. From 01:11 onwards Stevens again introduces variation. The motif is repeated continuously, though one repetition is not always in

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<sup>2</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Withdrawal*. 1997. CD. Emanem 4020.



strict time with the last. Notes are sometimes omitted (though silently counted). At other times, segments of the melody are played in double-time against the motif's slow pulse, creating shifting and elaborative rests.

As soon as the glockenspiel enters, so too does Rutherford's trombone. He plays a series of low and fairly quiet single notes of short duration. At some points, these appear to respond rhythmically to the glockenspiel part, suggesting synchronisation and syncopation around a common pulse. Over the course of forty or fifty seconds, Rutherford's notes become longer in duration, forming into more linear phrases. Guy's drone maintains a constant and prominent presence.

01:23: Wheeler now appears (on flugelhorn), with a single, bluesy, note that he sustains until 01:30. He then begins to construct a solo in a similar style, his playing unhurried, melancholic and sometimes touching on the jarring distensions of the blues favoured by saxophonist Albert Ayler. Guy, Stevens and Rutherford continue as they have been.

(The track's total length is 5'18")

**[1.3] 'Listening Together 1'** from *Summer 1967*, recorded 16 August 1967.<sup>3</sup>

The *Summer 1967* CD presents the earliest (commercially available) recording of the mature – that is, atomistic – SME. Though double bass player Peter Kowald guests on a couple of later tracks, here the SME comprises a duo of Stevens and Evan Parker. The former is credited with 'percussion', reflecting his move away from a standard

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<sup>3</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Summer 1967*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4005.

drum kit to a smaller, quieter, modified kit, which was better suited to the intimate dialogue, staccato motifs and timbral variation of the atomistic style. The CD sleeve provides both photographs and written description of Stevens' set-up of the time, with 'a contemporaneous view' from Victor Schonfield. In the photographs, a small bass drum, a snare drum, hi-hat cymbals and three regular cymbals are visible on the left hand side of Steven's kit. To the right, a series of four small cymbals and four bongo-like drums are mounted on a stand apparently built from industrial storage racking. Where the floor tom would usually stand (on the far right of the kit), Stevens has a frame drum of a similar diameter. Schonfield also mentions cowbells, which are less clearly visible, and a gong. Parker plays both soprano and tenor sax on this CD, although only tenor in this excerpt.

This opening passage from *Summer 1967* is not representative of atomistic playing as such, despite the character of the rest of the album. I have chosen it, however, for three reasons. First: stylistically it resembles the *Withdrawal* excerpt discussed above, providing some sense of continuity. Where the earlier piece was at least partially composed, though, the latter is contrastingly of free improvisation. Second: the nature of this SME piece and line-up also provides useful contrast with that from *Face To Face*, which I shall discuss in due course. Third: from hereon in, the remaining excerpts from the SME's canon *are* all of, and present variations of, the common atomistic style.

00:00 onwards: A low, quiet, pulsing drone of ambiguous origin starts up. Most likely it is Stevens, playing with a soft beater on the gong that Schonfield mentions. The



pulse is mid-tempo and regular but with irregular patterns of undulating crescendo and decrescendo, albeit over a very gentle dynamic range.

00:37: With the pulse continuing underneath, Parker enters with a two note phrase: the first, of staccato attack and brief duration; the second lower, and sustained for the length of a long exhalation, up to 01:01. The low-fidelity quality of the recording also leaves an accompanying tape hiss audible in this section, ironically prescient of certain electro-acoustic free improvisation of later decades.

01:02: As Parker's opening phrase ends, Stevens too briefly drops out, leaving a few audible overtones from his gong to decay. Around 01:09, Parker plays a very short two note motif of only perhaps a second's duration. Stevens returns to the throbbing drone, moving this time to a cymbal of slightly higher pitch.

01:25: Another two notes from Parker – each of these phrases, so far, descends – of slightly longer duration and decay, prompts a second break in Stevens' playing. He resumes, returning to the gong, at around 01:31.

01:42: Parker joins Stevens' drone with a low, sustained, breathy tone, which he holds until 01:50. The quality of the recording around this section sheds further light on Stevens' contribution. It suggests, or confirms, that the drone sound *is* probably the gong, although its particular tone distorts slightly on the tape, sometimes suggesting either a very low saxophone note or a cymbal or gong being played with a violin bow.

Up until 02:00: Steven's gong and the tape hiss compete almost equally for attention.

(The track's total length is 4'43")

[1.4] 'Part 1' from *Karyobin*, recorded 18 February 1968.<sup>4</sup>

Several of the SME albums currently available – *Withdrawal* and *Summer 1967* included – are from the archives, issued for the first time decades after their recording. After the free jazz of *Challenge*, *Karyobin* was actually the group's second album. Recorded and released originally in 1968, this was the first published document of the SME's mature, and signature, atomistic style.

On these sessions, Kenny Wheeler plays trumpet and flugelhorn; Evan Parker, soprano sax; Derek Bailey, electric guitar; Dave Holland, double bass, and John Stevens, drums (the cover photo shows a less augmented kit than before, but comprised of frame drums rather than usual kit drums).

There is such a wealth of activity and detail here – five-man atomistic interplay makes for very busy music – that it does not lend itself obviously or usefully to a second-by-second analysis. *Karyobin* exemplifies Nyman's quote about process particularly well. But I will give a sense of each man's ongoing contribution to the collective, the collective's guiding process and the manner in which this process appears effective.

The macro-structural dynamics of *Karyobin*'s 'Part 1' do not fluctuate to any great degree, either in stylistic character, variation of timbre or arrangement, volume, or rate of successive activity. What 'Part 1' does present is an intricate study in micro-

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<sup>4</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Karyobin*. 1968. CD. CPE2001-2



rhythmic and melodic variation, based on a careful, egalitarian scheme of ‘call and response’.

00:00: Stevens and Parker are the first clearly distinguishable participants. In the sleeve notes to the 1993 re-issue of *Karyobin*, Robert Wyatt alludes to Stevens as a ‘cymbalist’, which describes his contribution far more literally than ‘drummer’ in this instance. He plays (using small, but conventional sticks) predominantly on a ride cymbal, or towards the bell (i.e. centre) of other cymbals, to produce notes of short duration and clear rhythmic definition. The patterns that Stevens plays are metrically irregular – strung together from fragments of conventional snare drum rudiments – and often comprised of surprisingly many notes; as I have mentioned elsewhere, *Karyobin* is not the definitive or most austere example of atomistic interplay. Stevens’ rhythmic fluidity and continuity are conspicuous and intrinsically relevant to this. He occasionally slips to a frame drum to break up a phrase, and does not play constantly or with a regular pulse or metre as such. The key is in the SME’s approach to the relative values of both melody and rhythm, and also (as I have suggested) in the group line-up on this occasion. There is almost too much for Stevens to interact with, both melodically and rhythmically. In its historical context, *Karyobin* was certainly a remarkable achievement. It *did* mark the recorded debut of atomistic free improvisation; but, especially in Stevens’ snaking percussion lines, it not a fully realised example of the idea’s potential.

Parker enters with Stevens, playing a short consonant, melodic fill-in: clean toned, fluidly phrased, and reminiscent of birdsong. (*Karyobin* has a sub-title, referring to ‘the imaginary birds said to live in paradise’.) Birdsong is a good point of reference to

evoke much of Parker's (and Wheeler's) sound on this album. He plays in a series of truncated, twittering melodic fragments, usually of around a second in length. Like Stevens', Parker's phrases are rhythmically and melodically asymmetrical, both in themselves and in their spacing.

Wheeler and Holland are audible by about 00:02. Wheeler's first contribution is more spare than Parker's, playing only a few notes (again, with a clean tone). At length, Parker and Wheeler's roles overlap and intertwine, and (alongside Stevens) fill out the greater part of the group sound. Using the 'birdsong' idea as a general brief, the two horn players each contribute chirruping, trills and emphases, and it is difficult to keep up with who is playing what from second to second. Broadly speaking though, Parker and Wheeler provide each other with a form of counterpoint. Sometimes, one or the other will suggest a harmonic role, by sustaining a single note beneath the other's phrase. Wheeler tends to play in a higher register in this capacity, evoking a central thread running through Parker's lines; Parker is more conspicuous playing undulating two-note motifs in his lower register, reminiscent of an arco bass accompaniment.

Holland appears faithful to the conventional role of bass player here, albeit with allowances for the idiom. He plays pizzicato, in figures that reference 'walking' bass lines and common jazz fill-ins. In a manner equivalent to Stevens' phrasing, though, Holland's figures also use rudimentary patterns that are broken up into unfamiliar units. They do not resolve, rhythmically or melodically, as conventional logic and symmetry imply they might.



Bailey plays a clean-toned, amplified guitar with a standard modern jazz timbre, and his tone lies in the middle ground between his treble and bass pick-ups. He is inaudible in the opening seconds of 'Part 1', but is first clearly heard at around 00:12 as he plays a short melodic run high up on his fretboard. Hereafter, his contribution is more plainly apparent. In a sense, Bailey (like Holland) recalls his role as an accompanist in mainstream contexts. He plays a series of single chords (in his middle register) to suggest points of rhythmic emphasis, which he links together with higher register arpeggios, fill-ins and melodic runs. It is the context of free improvisation, specifically the microtonal and/or micro-rhythmic increments of the atomistic style, which separate Bailey (and the others) from their generic origins here.

Describing a different kind of improvisation, Eric Tamm writes that 'it takes many words indeed to describe a musical process that, once one hears it, is immediately and intuitively grasped'.<sup>5</sup> But the idea is equally relevant to the system that the SME were developing on *Karyobin*. There *are* shifts in dynamic character, when one instrumentalist, motif or scheme of organisation temporarily holds greater sway over the music. But, at the same time, a brief reiteration of the above points does usefully evoke what one will actually hear on encountering this album (or its follow-up, '*So, what do you think?*', which features the same line-up).

- The activity on *Karyobin* focuses on minute permutations and variation of melodic and rhythmic phrasing. Common to most first generation British free improvisation, increments and intervals of pitch, tonality and rhythm may be gauged here at an imprecisely defined microtonal and microrhythmic scale.

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Tamm, *Brian Eno. His Music and the Vertical Color [sic] of Sound* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1989), p. 152. He is writing of Eno and Robert Fripp's tape looping and guitar duets.

- Stevens plays chiefly on ride cymbals, with short interjections on frame drums or snare.
- Parker, on soprano sax, and Wheeler on flugelhorn/trumpet, broadly suggest the sound of birdsong.
- Holland and Bailey both retain residual phrasing, timbres and functions from their conventional alter egos (as do the others), but these are tempered by the atomistic context.
- Atomistic phrases are derived essentially from irregular sub-divisions of conventional melodic, tonal and rhythmic figures, in non-repetitive patterns of succession, and separated by likewise irregular and shifting rests.
- The musicians play simultaneously in non-metrical cycles of overlapping call, wait and response.
- These cycles' durations are imprecisely measured, and move out of phase with each other almost instantly. That said, on *Karyobin* each improviser is phrasing in successive lengths of approximately 0.5 – 2.0 seconds, and pausing for an equivalent period of time before playing again.

There is a further characteristic of 'Part 1' that deserves mentioning, which perhaps relates to the relative youth of the atomistic style here, the size and semi-impromptu nature of the ensemble, and the proclivities of its participants. Although the schemes of structure and interaction, and the phrasing of each individual, demonstrate the inherently non-metrical basis of atomistic free improvisation, 'Part 1' nevertheless exhibits a pulse of a different kind. It represents not so much a chronological repetition, as a dynamic one. The activity, as I have characterised it, is based in cycles of 'call' (THE INITIAL PHRASE), 'wait' (REST/FORMULATION OF



RESPONSE) and 'response' (THE ANSWERING PHRASE). What is apparent particularly in the opening thirty seconds of 'Part 1' is something of a 'tidal' ebb-and-flow effect in the playing. At the level of the individual, atomistic irregularity and discontinuity remain. At the level of the whole group, however, there is a marked tendency for clusters of activity to alternate with relative quiet. Effectively, the improvisers fall into a kind of synchronisation with each other, with everyone's call, then wait, then response, being performed at the same time, to create the pulsing effect of this particular improvisation. It is not a noticeable quality elsewhere in the SME's recorded canon.

(The track's total length is 8'05")

**[1.5] 'Face To Face 3'** from *Face To Face*, recorded 6 December 1973.<sup>6</sup>

This version of the SME featured Trevor Watts on soprano sax and Stevens, again, on his modified drum kit. Stevens is also credited with cornet and voice on these sessions, though they do not feature in this excerpt. Partly because of the natural austerity of the duo line-up, but mainly down to deliberate practice, *Face To Face* is the starkest recorded statement of the atomistic method. Again, it does not require even two minutes' listening to discern and grasp the process by which the SME were creating their music. The recording itself is of good quality and the performance is captured in clear and informative detail. *Face To Face* lacks the clutter that, in some ways, made *Karyobin* a less distinctive document.

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<sup>6</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Face To Face*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4003.

*Face To Face* includes material from three separate recording sessions. Within the confines of the duo format, there is variation in the manner and dynamics of the players' interaction. Some of the tracks have a rhythmic continuity and busyness of interplay that make them comparable to *Karyobin*, or even to free jazz. 'Face To Face 3', meanwhile – among several similar passages from the album – attempt to bring certain aspects of collective free improvisation to a logical conclusion.

00:00 – 02:00: In his sleeve note, Martin Davidson suggests that the music of this duo was sometimes 'akin to one person playing two instruments'. With regard to the current excerpt, this idea evokes two particular associations for me. The musicians' style of phrasing is fragmentary, spasmodic, curtailed and fleeting on 'Face To Face 3', even by the standards of atomistic playing. Each motif is usually restricted to, at *most*, three or four notes, and rhythmic execution is simplistic sometimes to the point of apparent clumsiness. What I would suggest, bearing in mind Davidson's quote, is that this does often sound like instruments being played 'one handed', i.e. with consciously restricted technique (if not literally just by the one person). The patterns of call and response also evoke the influence of percussion technique, by which Stevens rationalised and realised the atomistic style in the first place. Specifically, this music recalls something of the 'single stroke roll': one of the most basic snare drum rudiments, where each beat is played with equal inflection and rhythmic value between alternating left and right hands. By the terms of the atomistic brief, Stevens and Watts do not alternate with the metrical regularity of a properly executed single stroke roll. But what they do do is respond to one another in very rapid succession and each with minimal duration, constantly curtailing their own phrases to shift emphasis back to the other player's response.



In effect, Stevens and Watts attempt *not* to play at the same time as one another. The average length of phrase for each player is 0.5 seconds with roughly equal rests in between, though in practice these durations are still audibly irregular. Watts' saxophone revisits the bird-like qualities of Parker and Wheeler's playing on *Karyobin*, albeit in even more abbreviated form. Stevens uses the very driest timbres from his kit, those with the most rapid attack and decay envelope. The ride cymbals that he uses on *Karyobin* allow rhythmic definition, certainly, but also create lingering overtones, and an attendant sense of fluidity. These are more sparingly in evidence here.

Arbitrarily, but not without purpose, I will briefly describe each player's first ten contributions to 'Face To Face 3', in order to suggest the character of the whole.

- John Stevens #1: A single, choked cymbal note, which sounds like the hi-hat being closed with the foot.
- Trevor Watts #1: A rapid, descending, three note flourish, in his middle register.
- [Rest]
- TW #2: A similar, three-note phrase.
- JS #2: One note, with a strong attack, on the flat surface of a cymbal. The timing of a second note is staggered and abrupt. It is played more gently and is slightly higher in pitch (played perhaps nearer to the bell of the same cymbal).
- TW #3: A single higher pitch, of minimal duration, as Stevens' second note decays. The briefest of rests, then an ascending three note twitter of 'birdsong'.

- JS #3: Intercepting the end of Watts' phrase, a four note roll in straight quavers on the ride cymbal.
- TW #4: Two pitches – the first low, the second a little higher – that evoke the sound in one's own ears when swallowing. Another ghost note coincides with...
- JS #4: A single, dry toned percussive tap of almost instantaneous attack and decay. It is possibly on a cymbal that is being choked with the other hand or, more likely, across the rim of the snare or frame drum.
- [Rest]
- JS #5: One beat on the ride cymbal, the overtones audibly damped by hand.
- TW #5: A low-high-low triplet phrase, the third note sustained slightly without vibrato.
- JS #6: Like the earlier phrase on the ride cymbal, two beats on the snare drum of staggered rhythm and an audible ascent in pitch, indicating the move away from the middle of the drum head out towards the (tensioned) rim.
- TW #6: Partially synchronised with Stevens, a brief series of single notes of the very slightest emphasis. Again, they show immediate attack and decay, and are produced seemingly by breathing through the instrument rather than blowing.
- JS #7: A longer phrase, moving from ride cymbal (two beats) to rimshot (one beat), to a rimshot on a different drum (two beats), back to a rimshot on the first (one beat). Stevens' staccato emphases can be counted in crotchets, just about: 1+2+3+4, with each beat coinciding with the first strike on a new surface. One note on the ride cymbal follows (with the overtones allowed), then another, which is choked.



- TW #7: His single note coincides with Stevens' last one.
  - JS #8: A single tap of the ride cymbal, with overtones left to decay.
  - TW #8: Another single note of short duration.
  - JS #9: A rapid seven-note phrase, running across various cymbal surfaces.
- Despite the metallic timbre, these notes display little or no resonance, indicating the use of closed hi-hats or, again, choking of the cymbals with the hand.
- TW #9: Meeting Stevens' phrase half way through, Watts joins in with a descending four-note flourish that synchronises with the percussion, and both players resolve their phrase – for once – with the same inflection, at the same time.
  - [Rest]
  - JS #10: Alternating strikes between a rimshot and two cymbal surfaces.
  - TW #10: Simultaneously, more muted and curtailed single-note squeaks of birdsong.

The excerpt that I describe here lasts from 00:00 to 00:20.

(The track's total length is 3'57")

**[1.6] 'Kitless With Elbow' from *Low Profile*, recorded 9 October 1988.<sup>7</sup>**

This SME track is distinguished for two reasons in the current analysis. Featuring John Stevens once again, on this occasion he is heard playing cornet rather than percussion. (The track's title – given when *Low Profile* was retrospectively compiled,

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<sup>7</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *Low Profile*. 1999. CD. Emanem 4031

not at the time of performance – makes reference to this fact, and the medical reason for it.) This later phase of the SME's career was also marked by a shift in group instrumentation. Moving away from the jazz associations of earlier line-ups, the SME that spanned the 1980s more closely recalled chamber music. On *Low Profile*, for example,<sup>8</sup> Stevens is joined by Nigel Coombes on violin, Colin Wood on cello and Roger Smith on guitar. Wood, however, does not feature on 'Kitless With Elbow'. This period of the group's activities suggests Steven's more conscious acknowledgement of Webern's influence on his music. (*Low Profile* also includes a track called 'The Only Geezer An American Soldier Shot Was Anton Webern', a reference to the composer's accidental demise towards the end of World War Two.)

00:00 onwards: Coombes' violin is the prominent voice. Playing arco, his rhythmic figures combine the fragmented walking bass of Dave Holland on *Karyobin*, with sustained single note drones and slightly longer, often dissonant, melodic motifs. Though lacking the backdrop of conventional tonality against which to measure it, Coombes even gives a hint of tonal influence, in a passage of essentially fluid and consonant melody (between 00:21 and 00:30) of notable contrast to standard SME practice. His 'walking' notes meanwhile, whilst characteristically staccato in rhythm, are individually legato in articulation, due to the use of the bow. This latter feature contrasts again with more typical SME inflection: Derek Bailey's choked chords and fills, for example, or Trevor Watts' minimal attack and decay on *Face To Face*. But Coombes (his consonant interlude aside) does echo Bailey (particularly) in his choice of atonal, and sometimes microtonal, pitches and progressions the majority of the time.

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<sup>8</sup> The 'chamber' SME may also be heard on *Biosystem*. 1977. LP. Incus 24, and *Hot and Cold Heroes*. CD. Emanem 4008.



Stevens is relatively restrained on cornet. He mixes staccato tones of minimal duration, which suggest that he is spitting through his instrument, with lip-smacking sounds as he appears to suck through it. Sometimes he seems to disappear from the improvisation, although careful listening reveals a series of quiet, sustained exhalations of breath (through the cornet).

Smith uses an acoustic guitar with nylon strings. I have seen Smith perform live on several occasions, playing in a flamenco or classically-influenced finger picking style, and that appears to be the case here, too. His predecessor, Bailey, played with a plectrum: a strongly voiced, metallic toned and jazz-derived vocabulary of chords, lead lines and fills. Smith's tone is muted and wooden. There is a fluid succession and continuity to Smith's notes and runs that contrasts with Bailey's angular phrasing. Overall, he extrapolates a snaking line of softly rippling arpeggios linked by unpredictable progressions of single notes. Here, again, the effect is reminiscent of flamenco or classical guitar, rather than jazz accompaniment. True to Bailey's vision of atomistic guitar style, however, Smith plays a discordant, micro-rhythmic and atonal<sup>9</sup> approximation of these influences. He creates microtonal effects as well (to a lesser extent), playing with a percussive rather than melodic quality. He scrapes, scratches and squeaks on the strings, for example, or sometimes frets notes improperly with his right hand,<sup>10</sup> either too lightly for them to resonate, or directly over (rather than between) the frets. He also employs the technique more common to 'slap bass' playing: pulling sharply at a string to make it sound, but instantaneously damping it again, to produce a short, harsh, percussive tone.

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<sup>9</sup> I distinguish 'atonal' from 'microtonal' specifically here. Both Smith and Bailey, after all, play conventionally tuned and fretted instruments. In contrast, for example, Coombes' unfretted violin immediately lends itself to microtonal increments and inflection.

<sup>10</sup> A photo from the *A New Distance* CD shows Smith to be a left-handed guitarist, i.e. fingering with his left hand and fretting with his right.

‘Kitless With Elbow’ also demonstrates the process at the centre of the SME’s music – essentially micro-rhythmic and microtonal counterpoint – and the problems of usefully describing this music in any linear fashion. Coombes’ legato phrasing and the absence of Stevens’ episodic percussion<sup>11</sup> create a continuum of constant process, rather than clear increments of event. That said, even in this short excerpt there are moments that illustrate this line-up’s particular character:

- Coombes’ quasi-tonal melody, between 00:21 and 00:30
- Stevens and Coombes each sustain a single unison note, without vibrato, beginning at 00:40. Stevens’ breath lasts until 00:55; Coombes continues until 01:00. They repeat this between 01:02 and 01:15, Coombes twice varying his note this time. On both occasions, Smith continues to ruminatively pick away in the background.
- From around 01:25 to 01:45, Smith comes closer to the fore. He sustains a series of rhythmically constant arpeggios that explicitly recall elements of flamenco guitar style.

(The track’s total length is 11’26’)

[1.7] ‘Stig’ from *A New Distance*, recorded 28 May 1994.<sup>12</sup>

Recorded four months before Stevens’ death, ‘Stig’ is the last commercially available recording of the SME,<sup>13</sup> and documents another shift in line-up. Alongside Stevens and Roger Smith, John Butcher plays tenor and soprano saxes.

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<sup>11</sup> Later on during this track, beyond the scope of my analysis, Stevens does return to the drum kit.

<sup>12</sup> The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *A New Distance*. 1995. CD. ACTA 8

<sup>13</sup> *A New Distance* also features four live improvisations from earlier in the year, and a 2005 re-issue adds previously unreleased studio sessions from the same period.



Stevens' kit – photographed on the CD's sleeve – is more minimal than ever. There is an undersized snare drum, a small tom-tom and a frame drum. Cymbals are not clear in the picture, except for a second hi-hat stand (with miniature, perhaps six-inch cymbals) in place of a bass drum. The recording makes it apparent that they are present, however.

Butcher plays tenor on this excerpt.

00:00 onwards: There is little of the restraint of 'Face To Face 3' here. From the beginning Stevens plays a constantly active percussion line, predominantly of dry, choked metallic timbres, with an occasional beat or two on a drum skin. Naturally, his line is metrically and tonally atomistic: near-continuous, but audibly still a procession of separate, angular rhythmic motifs. The way that Stevens rattles and taps around the metal surfaces – with its constant momentum, delicate accuracy and stamina of execution – indicates something of the physical virtuosity that British free improvisation has tended to disguise. Though Stevens' performance is captured in detail, this is more to do with judicious recording practice than any harshness of volume that a 'cymbal solo' might suggest. The characteristic impact-sound of Stevens' beats suggests that he is using brushes or some very lightweight stick.

Smith is initially in scant evidence. He is first heard around the 00:30 mark, plucking a few isolated bass notes on his Spanish guitar. The occasional note or flourish is audible over the next half minute, but only at 01:01 does Smith stand out on the recording, with a single strongly accented, but immediately damped, note high up on his fretboard (which sounds like a piano). He repeats a couple of further notes with

similar vigour between 01:05 and 01:10, seemingly about to take a more strident role in the proceedings. He does not, though, and Smith is barely apparent for the remainder of this excerpt.

This passage, then, appears chiefly a duet between Stevens and Butcher. I have noted that certain SME members retain discernible generic influences to their playing – classical guitar for Roger Smith, for example; jazz guitar for Derek Bailey; – yet which has been modified by the terms of Stevens’ atomistic method. This is true also of Butcher. For him, the playing of John Coltrane seems a useful reference point, not to mention his SME predecessors, Parker and Watts. Butcher opens – simultaneously to Stevens – with a low, slowly moving and gently legato series of notes. Various, he sustains and emphasises them with a trill. Towards the end of the first minute, he makes a few short, sharp stabs into his higher register via occasional squawking tones, which interject into his otherwise ruminative bass part. Between approximately 01:05 and 01:30, Butcher starts to amalgamate these two motifs. He alternates more rapidly between them, and pitches his lower, meandering line and trills higher (that is, closer to the ‘squawks’). Stevens works up and maintains a near constant momentum of metallic clattering between 01:15 and 01:35. He concludes with a strongly articulated, crashing (but, of course, rhythmically fragmented) flourish and decrescendo, between 01:35 and 01:46. Butcher’s line changes character along with Stevens’. He matches Stevens’ constancy of motion with a low, sustained trill, which briefly changes to a triplet rhythm before moving into a short melodic triplet fill in his higher register. This peters out, and Butcher then adopts something of the ‘birdsong’ style, akin to Watts’ *Face To Face* performance. Around the point of Stevens’ decrescendo, Butcher is playing single notes and strings of single notes. Like Watts’, these figures



are of instantaneous attack and decay and the most minimal duration, but they are often in a low register beneath the reaches of Watts' soprano. For the remainder of this excerpt, Butcher recalls the slightly longer birdsong motifs that Parker played on *Karyobin*, although (again) transformed by the tenor range of his instrument.

(The track's total length is 26'21")

## Example 2. AMM

Like the SME, there is a process at the centre of AMM's music that manifests as a recurrent signature style. In contrast, where the SME worked with continuous rapid variations of a given motif, AMM's interplay is based on the long-form development and investigation of a cumulative group sound. Because of this, AMM's improvisations may be more readily described at length, in terms of distinctive and changing structural units. The second-to-second detail, however, becomes quickly a less relevant concern; at least, it becomes less useful for illustrating the character of the whole.

While the 'laminar' method continues to define AMM's sound, there has been refinement, too, of how their music is presented over the years. Ignoring here the unrepresentative mid-period of the group's life (AMMs II and III, as I have discussed elsewhere), I will describe one 'earlier' and one 'later' performance of AMM's laminar improvisation. The former is documented on the CD *The Crypt*,<sup>14</sup> the latter on *Fine*.<sup>15</sup> Both are 'live', i.e. concert recordings.

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<sup>14</sup> AMM. *The Crypt – 12<sup>th</sup> June 1968: The Complete Session*. 1992. 2xCD. MRCD05

<sup>15</sup> AMM. *Fine*. 2001. CD. MRCD46

[2.1] *The Crypt*, recorded 12 June 1968.

The CD is divided into three tracks: ‘Like a Cloud Hanging in the Sky?’ (45’21”); ‘Coffin nor Shelf’ (45’36”); and ‘Neither Bill nor Axe would Shorten its Existence’, (18’08”). These sub-divisions are in fact imposed upon what was one single piece, in performance. It became necessary because, as Eddie Prévost writes in the sleeve notes, at certain points ‘the tapes ran out’. Short sections of the music have therefore been lost, while the reels were being changed: hence the fade-outs here, ‘between’ tracks.

Nominally, the CD notes assign instrumental credits: Cornelius Cardew, piano and cello; Lou Gare, saxophone and violin; Christopher Hobbs, percussion; Eddie Prévost, percussion; and Keith Rowe, guitar and electronics. But, as I have written before, AMM made unconventional uses – physical and functional – of their respective instruments. A statement from Cardew (reprinted with the CD) adds context and detail both to these credits and the following analysis, and is worth quoting at length:

‘In 1966, I and another member of the group invested [...] in a second amplifier system to balance the volume of sound produced by the electric guitar. [...] With the new equipment we began to explore the range of small sounds made available by using contact microphones on all kinds of materials – glass, metal, wood, etc – and a variety of gadgets from drumsticks to battery-operated cocktail mixers. At the same time the percussionist was expanding in the direction of pitched instruments such as xylophone and concertina, and the saxophonist began to double on violin and flute as well as a stringed instrument of his own design. In addition, two cellos were wired to the new equipment and the guitarist was developing a predilection for coffee tins and cans of all kinds. 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.’

The CD timings given in this instance are approximate, according to the staggered, less precise succession of events in AMM’s music.

### [2.1.a] ‘Like a Cloud Hanging in the Sky?’

00:00 – 31:00: The opening section of *The Crypt* is a prolonged drone piece. It is uniformly loud in what seems like a confined space, and the overall texture is thickened by natural acoustic reverb, as well (perhaps) as artificial reverb from the group’s amplifiers. The drone exemplifies AMM’s laminar approach: a dense structure of cumulatively constant dynamics, but with detailed and shifting activity apparent within. Exaggerating the effect of the SME’s busier passages, the interplay between AMM’s musicians leaves no audible rests here. They fill musical space not only by overlapping irregular phrases and accents, but also by the use of longer individual motifs, legato inflection and extremes of volume. No musician is necessarily *always* playing; but the number of participants (and their ambiguous and versatile roles within the ensemble) means that even if one stops, or changes his manner of playing, another will compensate, seeking to fill the space in their own way. In this fashion, the interior motion of AMM’s drone is constantly renewed, whilst its greater structure maintains the semblance of constancy.

It is worth stating again the inadequacy of the instrumental credits on this album to really evoke what one hears, and the relevance of the quote from Cardew. What are *not* apparent in this piece are five distinct and quantifiable individual performances. In effect, the AMM drone here is a composite timbre of its own, with each player representing, in analogy, certain of its determining harmonics. I will describe the

creative processes of this music where they are discernible, offer suppositions where they suggest themselves, and make allusion to comparable sounds when there is little else to be done. It is necessary to understand, however, that this improvisation is a continuum of changing and merging events. There is a constant procession of the kinds of sounds I will describe below in subtly different combinations. It is like a flow of thick fluid, with contrasting flotsam periodically pushed to the surface.

The greater drone contains episodic layers of micro-structural motifs, including many lesser drones and whines. There is much use of legato phrasing and glissandi, of varying durations and spectrums of pitch. Traditionally ‘non-musical’ analogies best evoke the soundscape: one ‘hears’ jet aircraft passing by overhead; the slow, sustained attack, crescendo, then decay of air raid sirens; minutely amplified water draining into a plughole, and wind howling between buildings and trees; collapsing and rending metal structures; and (in short, sporadic bursts) the sound of a power drill against a hard surface. These timbres suggest the use of electronic feedback, controlled white noise, sine waves and close amplification of acoustic sources, such as gongs and cymbals. Common to much British free improvisation, these motifs are of microtonal and micro-rhythmic increment, and (in this passage) are dissonant and loud enough to justify the description ‘cacophony’.

Also microtonal and micro-rhythmic, there are two other generic types of sound within the AMM drone. These are shorter staccato figures, more typical of atomistic phraseology, and are either *percussive* or *non-percussive* in character. Acoustic drums, though present, are not obvious or prominent. The most distinctive percussive voice is of clattering, non-(or only lightly) resonant metal surfaces. Intermittently, but



repeatedly and frequently, these are heard in either rapid and irregular flurries or in simpler, pounding, repetitive figures. ‘Hammering’ alludes both to the apparent performance practice and the real world associations that the timbre evokes. Again, although the phrasing is atomistic in some senses, the interaction between players is not of ‘call and response’, but of simultaneous and cumulative layering. The audible rests in the SME’s sound are absent here. Cymbals, broadly speaking, are not used for their common ‘crash’ function, although isolated examples may be heard at around 24:30 and 28:45.

Much more commonly, cymbals are played with violin bows (and other treatments, such as Cardew’s ‘battery-operated cocktail mixers’). Whilst being idiophones – and thus *literally* ‘percussive’ – in this context I will align cymbals with AMM’s non-percussive sounds. Bowed cymbals produce high pitched and resonant screeching tones of variable duration, according to the rapidity and duration of the bowing. These kinds of squealing sounds are prevalent on *The Crypt*. As Cardew suggests, various amplified materials provided many key AMM timbres, and bowed glass and metal are the likely sources of a number of similar sounds here.

There are also, within the drone, many atomistic-style shorter notes, phrases, glissandi, etc, which may be more certainly attributed to the violin, cello and sax. Each of these instruments may be heard playing a mixture of low, slow moving, linear motifs, rapid high-pitched squeals and trills, and sustained high-pitched whines.

There is little audible evidence of ‘piano playing’ in any conventional sense. More likely, Cardew uses the body and interior of the piano as a percussive instrument and

resonating box, incorporating numerous preparations, effects and the ‘gadgets’ that he mentions.

**FURTHER DETAIL OF THE OPENING SECTION: 00:00 – 10:00:** Rowe’s electric guitar is immediately prominent. There is no bass instrument as such in this AMM line-up, but Rowe plays in his lower register here, creating much of the body – of the ‘thick fluid’ – of the drone. He plays slow, microtonal patterns of notes and chords, and uses the electric guitar (and amplifier)’s capacity for sustain and feedback to fill out the group sound. There is also an audible solo voice that moves throughout much of this passage. It is a line consisting of slow motifs and sustained tones, which sometimes appear to break into feedback. The line has a deep, hollow timbre and a slow, controlled attack and decay, but also a melodic versatility that suggests that it is either the cello or a restrained performance from Gare, in his sax’s lower register. The feedback and ambiguity of timbre suggest that this instrument is being amplified and sometimes artificially distorted.

10:00 – 17:00: Rowe’s major contribution (and the bass-end of the drone generally) drops away. What is left exposed is a high-pitched and primarily percussive interlude. A dense layer of clattering, rattling, scraped and hammered metal predominates. There is also much high pitched and oscillating squealing, as cymbals, glass, the violin, etc, are bowed. Gare’s sax adds (possibly) to this, with frenetic, high register wailing and over-blowing that references the more piercing extremes of free jazz. Rowe remains in evidence, however, now creating quiet, high-pitched and sustained sine wave tones that hover above the metallic banging.



17:00 – 30:00: By 17:00, the earlier drone has resumed. Around the mid-point of this reprise (approximately 21:30 – 24:00) is a section where – assisted by the natural echo of the performance space – massed metallic percussion seems to dominate. It creates a dense, rippling sound that is reminiscent of flowing water, and in the foreground, someone solos on what appears to be a power drill.

29:00 – 31:00: The drone gradually disperses again. The volume decreases, phrases become more tentative and the participant improvisers drop out in turn. The sound creates the impression, literally and figuratively, of a train grinding to a halt. Rowe's playing here is the most incongruous, at least in terms of his own favoured style. Rhythmically, his phrasing adopts the 'slowing train' model too. Unusually though, he moves to the middle and higher reaches of the fretboard and begins playing with something like ordinary guitar technique. He has a thick, slightly distorted tone of a rock guitarist; Jimi Hendrix or Pink Floyd's Syd Barrett, for example, might contemporaneously have sounded similar. Fretting individual notes, Rowe plays a series of undulating two-note figures and quasi-tonal cyclical figures. He also uses the electric guitarist's common vocabulary of string bends, vibrato and sustain.

31:00 – 45:00: The group now enter a passage of 'small' sounds. The instrumental resources, techniques and roles here are not wholly different from those of the prior section, but the sparseness, volume and, often, timbre of the phrasing *is*. In a space such as '*The Crypt*' suggests, the volume of the first section appears to have been all-pervasive, perhaps overbearingly loud and grating. By contrast – as far as one can tell from a recording – it would seem possible to talk over this following section.

The drone element is confined to higher frequencies: more of a 'whine', which (although undulating gently in pitch frequencies, timbral content and volume) persists throughout this section. At this point, it combines acoustic sound sources – bowed cymbals, other metals and glass; the violin; the concertina, perhaps, that Cardew mentions – all of which merge with soft-toned washes of feedback and sine waves.

Against this backdrop, the other instruments' phrases are muted and short, and sparingly scattered. Metallic percussion remains a feature, although isolated chimes and scrapes now replace prolonged clattering; to use the analogy again, the water is now dripping away. Wooden-toned percussion also appears, in similarly short, quiet figures. The knocking suggests woodblocks, and also perhaps what Cardew is doing with the (body of the) piano.

The gently changing whine and the sporadic percussion form the greatest part of this section. As before, certain sounds come and go in the mix. Sometimes it is briefly the cello, the violin or the sax; sometimes it is not clear what one is hearing. There is the occasional crackle of an electrical jack plug being connected and withdrawn.

Rowe makes a few distinct contributions. He knocks on the body of his guitar once or twice, making the strings vibrate without direct contact. Very occasionally, he touches individual strings. Although not conventionally 'playing' the guitar, the timbre is clean and clear enough to be recognisable for what it is. Later, there is the amplified sound of some object meeting the serrations of a hacksaw blade: a technique which Rowe is known to use.



Past the 37:30 mark, the whine briefly increases in intensity and becomes piercing. This quality does not persist, but what does soon become apparent is that the whine is now mainly electronic. It is a constant whistle – quiet, but high pitched and ever present, like tinnitus – of white noise static and soft feedback.

After 43:00, some finger cymbals chime once and the note is allowed to die away, just over a dozen times.

At around 45:00, the tapes run out.

### **[2.1.b] ‘Coffin nor Shelf’**

00:00 – 09:00: It is not clear how much of the improvisation was missed whilst the tapes were being changed, but ‘Coffin nor Shelf’ resumes in a similar style. What is different is that the background whine has now stopped. Only an almost subliminal electric bass hum remains.

The timbres, articulation and volume of this section are generally very soft, and the unfolding rhythms slow. There is more gentle bowing and squeaking, the delicate scouring of metal and stroking of piano and violin strings. Around 03:00, there is a slow, deep, quiet tone from a bowed cello or gong.

At about 08:00, someone – Cardew or Rowe – begins to agitate the metal ridges of wound metal strings, a mixture of fast scrapes and then long sustained tones effected by some kind of preparation. Past 09:00, this is joined (and ultimately superseded by) another line, of a similar bass timbre. This line is more smoothly articulated and

melodically active, however, and lacking the distinctive percussive scrape of the ridged strings. Most likely, this is the cello. The overall texture of this interlude now begins to thicken again, with soft waves of feedback and the most restrained bowing of cymbals in the background.

From 11:00, the sax comes to prominence. Initially Gare plays short, slow melodic figures in his lower register, but gradually moves higher, bending notes and producing a buzzing of oscillating intensity that evokes a trapped insect. He then shifts to some high register free jazz-style squealing (albeit at a slow tempo), whilst around him white noise and feedback is rising in volume. By 15:00, sax and cello are duetting, almost unaccompanied. They play undulating bass lines and figures reminiscent of cows lowing. The cello now assumes the central line, while the sax embellishes it with more (restrained) free jazz twittering and squawking. By 17:00, the duet is submerging in feedback and overtones again and the earlier high-pitched whine is returning. For several minutes Gare is conspicuous, playing variations on his own previous material, until he drops out around 22:00.

22:00 – 26:00: An interlude of mostly soft, mid-to-high frequency feedback and bowing, which comes in gradual, staggered waves. At 26:00, everything has (more or less) come to a quiet stop.

At 26:30, a very long, sustained note from Gare leads to another ‘small sounds’ section. Though lacking a greater drone or whine element, Gare does periodically repeat similar droning motifs. Spacious, bowed and/or percussive figures continue to add the detail. Gare drops out again by 33:30.



After 34:00, against the quiet, metal backdrop, there are a couple of short bursts of loud and deep electric sound, suggesting an amplifier being turned back on and needing rapid adjustment. Gare's long sax notes return around 35:00 and he is joined by a scraped glissando on ridged metal strings. These strings are then scratched and agitated in further atomistic patterns, which increase in volume. Albeit more sparingly, Rowe is reintroducing the kinds of textures with which he opened 'Like a Cloud Hanging in the Sky?'. Rowe performs a very sparse, quiet and almost unaccompanied solo of string scrapes. By 39:00, he is surrounded by a constant whine of high-pitched feedback, and the whine/drone again becomes the collective focus of attention.

Around 41:00, the field of sound comprises Rowe scratching his strings, a hum of feedback that is increasing in intensity and volume, and constant rustling of what sounds like many tiny metal bells. Rowe and the feedback reach a brief crescendo around 42:00, then their sound levels decrease once more. In quieter moments, the 'tiny bells' sound more like closely-amplified polishing of metal or glass.

Rowe – (although one should allow for the possibility that it has been Cardew on the piano's stings all along) – concludes the track, with largely unaccompanied, and sometimes loud and harsh, string scrapes. As the tapes run out for the second time, an imposed fade-out is audible around 45:30.

### [2.1.c] 'Neither Bill nor Axe would Shorten its Existence'

Again, it is uncertain how much intervening music has been lost. The 'sudden' shift in style, however, the shorter duration of this track, and the fact that it is the closing track of *The Crypt*, gives 'Neither Bill nor Axe [...]' the feel of an encore.

00:00: There is the loud, regular pulse of an amplified electric motor, or the motor – Cardew's 'cocktail mixers' again? – being used to grind against another amplified surface. By 00:15, the pulse of the motor is being imitated by some harsh, grating, 'sawing' percussion, which forces itself to the centre of attention. Beneath this, something else is being forcefully hammered upon.

Scraping metal, especially ridged metal strings, are the dominant timbre here, and this new section is overall both loud and harsh. Stylistically it reprises the opening thirty minutes of 'Like a Cloud Hanging in the Sky?', although the cumulative sound is less dense, and there is not the unifying drone. Some of the players appear to be remaining tacet this time round. By 06:00, the activity is temporarily reduced to only the quiet scraping of single strings. After this point, the improvisation plays out as a restrained duet, or possibly sometimes trio, between the scraped string and some high, sustained wafts of gentle feedback and/or bowed metal tones.

At 13:00, a fire engine is heard passing by outside, and what residual activity there is seems to peter out by 14:30. Only a quiet hiss of white noise remains and – apart from the occasional sound of more traffic – nothing else occurs for more than two minutes. Initially, I assumed the white noise to be hiss on the master tape, until (around 16:30)



the hiss suddenly ceases, but the recording continues. Only after this point do we begin to hear the now disengaged movements and activity of players and audience.

[2.2] *Fine*, recorded 24 May 2001.

The line-up that recorded *Fine* comprised AMM's post-1980 core trio of Prévost on percussion, Rowe on guitar and electronics, and John Tilbury on piano.

Like *The Crypt*, the *Fine* album also represents a single, uninterrupted improvisation that has nevertheless been divided up into 'tracks': Parts One to Seven, in this case. On *Fine*, however, this does not signify any physical disruption in the music (which, in total, lasts 58'49"). It does acknowledge the convenience of the compact disc format for the purposes of selective listening. What Parts One to Seven represent are self-contained sub-sections of the piece, and as such are useful descriptive reference points. But, again, they should be understood in the context of an actually continuous improvisation.

'Tilbury's piano playing is more conventionally expressive than Cardew's', suggest Cook & Morton<sup>16</sup>: a statement that resonates, also, in broader comparison of AMM's earlier and later music. Though Prévost, Rowe and Tilbury are not (stylistically) 'normal' players, neither – in AMM's later music – are they subject to the kinds of timbral (and, to some extent, tonal) ambiguity that defined the group's earlier phase. Latterly, each instrumentalist has a more individually defined and identifiable improvising voice, both individually and within the AMM collective. Any seemingly electronic or amplified sound, for example, we may now assume to be Rowe.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Cook & Brian Morton, *The Penguin Guide to Jazz on CD* 6<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 37.

Although using certain avant-garde techniques and preparations, Tilbury *sounds* like he is playing a piano, and (unlike Cardew) does not play through an amplifier. Prévost creates the remainder. Using the instrumentation that I describe in Chapter Four, he sometimes creates sounds that might be either Tilbury or Rowe,<sup>17</sup> but generally his bowing, scraping and tapping of acoustic percussion is recognisable as such. With less participant members (and each one occupying their own distinct musical territory), there is simply less clutter to later AMM. There is a lesser density of sound, and this reveals more of the detail within.

And to return briefly to Tilbury's piano playing: his is one of the rare voices in British free improvisation that references Western tonality in any conspicuous way. (See also the section on Iskra 1903, below.) Though given unusual context by Rowe and Prévost's microtonal accompaniment, Tilbury regularly colours AMM's improvisation with understated, consonant chords and slow, impressionistic – but nonetheless melodic – motifs.

### [2.2.a] 'Part One' - 8'42"

A common feature of later AMM music, the drone continuum here is the backdrop of silence. 'Part One', especially, displays this; motifs are voiced, then subside, with several seconds of 'nothing' in between. The different sections of *Fine* are played out in a tentative and episodic manner, but each combining and varying their own distinctive textures and dynamic patterns.

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<sup>17</sup> Prévost often plays resonant, chiming pitches that imitate the higher reaches of the piano keyboard, for example, or sustained washes of gong overtones that resemble white noise static or gentle feedback.



Against the opening quiet, a gentle and occasional rattling or jangling of small metal items can be heard. Then there is friction, between small (and again, metal) surfaces, and a sound like a spinning coin coming to a stop.

With a soft, sharp crackle, an electrical contact is made. Shortly afterwards, fingers start to slip in short and muted glissandi along amplified guitar strings. A high, sustained metallic tone also begins – most likely electronic – and a slight (artificial, amplifier) echo is audible from the scratched strings.

Around 01:30, Tilbury plays one high and one low piano note, softly, and Prévost replies with a ringing metal chime.

Then, amidst continuing scrapes of his strings, Rowe also appears to be blowing or brushing across a contact microphone.

Prévost moves to his customised barrel, fitted with drum heads and cello strings, plucking some low notes.

Tilbury plays a single, middle register piano note, instantly damping it.

Past 03:00, Rowe is getting louder and his notes longer in duration. There is now a repetitive, rapidly buzzing or oscillating pulse apparent in the drone note he is playing. It is either electronically controlled or produced by the contact of some motorised preparation.

Prévost occasionally repeats his chiming, using small, resonant metal bowls and various beaters.

Around 03:30, there is a low and muted piano note: the instrument's string perhaps plucked by hand. A series of similarly voiced chords follow. They have a gentle attack and a soft tone, suggesting the use of a soft beater within the piano's body.

After 04:00, Rowe becomes more active and more prominent again. First he drums a finger – as if impatient – on a single amplified string. At about 04:20 there is the loud, sudden 'crack' of a jack plug being connected, then several seconds of feedback. This is moderated to a fizzing electronic crackle (of low volume, but still the loudest voice here). It grows in volume and intensity around 05:00, until two separate layers are audible in the drone: the higher crackle, and a bass note with a 'stuttering motor' pulse.

Prévost jangles during this time, dragging or brushing some small pieces of metal from side to side and round and round on a flat surface. Rowe's bass note subsides, around 05:45, though the crackle continues. At 06:15, there is a swell of low feedback for five seconds, which is capped by a single low piano note of rapid, staccato attack that is allowed to decay naturally. The crackle becomes intermittent, and Tilbury plays a single, high, muted note.

Rowe's guitar and electronics reaffirm their presence, in volume and in prominence. There is a low sine wave tone, which undergoes occasional and gradual bends of pitch, and a higher, rapidly repeating arpeggio-like effect on what sounds like strings.



The effect is probably electronic, but may suggest Rowe's use of another motorised preparation on his strings, a technique that Prévost also uses; Rowe sometimes uses a small electric fan motor, with a thread attached instead of the fan blades. Gently, but rapidly, the thread flails the strings. Alternatively, this sound may be Prévost after all, using the same technique on a cymbal or gong. Certainly Rowe is also conspicuously active elsewhere. To the fore of the drone sounds, he plays louder 'pops', 'thumps', scratches and crackles, more obviously on his amplified strings. There is also more of the 'blowing across a microphone' effect.

There are a couple of very deep and quiet tones, from the striking of a large acoustic drum.

Rowe's motorised drone descends in pitch (and the pulse, in speed) between 08:00 and 08:25. It remains the loudest source of sound, however. Rowe then plays a single chord. The strings are tapped, perhaps with open fingers, rather than plucked. They are allowed to resonate and ring for a few seconds before – via electronic volume control – their sound is curtailed.

#### **[2.2.b] 'Part Two' – 6'35"**

As the guitar chord disappears, a gentle, sustained wash of gong tones is revealed.

Rowe adds some soft glissandi of a similar timbre. He then reintroduces his drone, which again has a deeper rumbling part and a higher grating buzz. Both of these gradually oscillate in their respective pitches, internal pulses and volumes.

More lightly resonant metal jangles sound amongst this.

Near 02:00, Tilbury plays a couple of high, slightly jarring chords piano chords with a sprightly inflection. This begins a procession of single notes, chords and short runs, softly voiced in his higher range. They create the effect not uncommonly used to evoke the gentle dripping and splashing of water. Presently he moves to a series of bass notes and chords that rumble, then are allowed to die away.

Rowe continues to provide a unifying drone to the piece, adding detail with short, high-pitched notes of feedback. Around 03:45, Prévost begins to imitate these with the violin bow on his cymbals. By 04:30, Rowe is providing just a quiet, underlying hum, like an electric razor. More isolated piano notes are heard from Tilbury.

The overall volume is decreasing. Rowe's equipment produces a few squawks and crackles: something very quiet, obscured and distorted that might be human voices coming through a detuned transistor radio.

By 06:00, one can hear some dry-toned acoustic percussion. It is perhaps Prévost bowing or brushing across the rim of the barrel drum; the resonance of a wooden sound box is audible. All else has stopped.

### **[2.2.c] 'Part Three' – 4'29"**

This section opens with some brief, high whistling notes that could be either bowed metal or electronically generated.



Simultaneously, a high piano chord sounds and repeats (in a staccato rhythm) and is allowed to decay, every few seconds. The chord varies, albeit subtly, as the rhythmic pattern continues.

The changes and occurrences of Rowe's static crackle become more active: almost a solo, of sorts. We hear more contact between fingers and strings and friction against the microphone.

There is also a rapid, but indistinct wooden tapping, and still the occasional piano note.

A loud bass note from the guitar is allowed to turn to feedback and is faded out, and then back in again. The whirring whine of the 'drill' moves through further gear changes.

#### **[2.2.e] 'Part Five' – 12'05"**

Prévost plays some long chiming metallic tones and glancing blows to a high-pitched cymbal. Piano notes are damped, and the fizzing electronic hum persists. There is a bell, and some deep single notes from a large drum.

A metallic interlude from Prévost: First, chimes again from the small metal bowls, and a gentle rattling against the surface of a cymbal. Then a high jingling sound takes the foreground. Tilbury adds some high, damped piano notes, and the timbres compliment each other and merge.

With Rowe's 'drill' still sounding, Tilbury begins a series of slow, descending progressions of single, resonant notes. By 04:00, this motif becomes cyclical, played two-handed; while one run is still descending, another is following it from the upper end of the keyboard.

After some percussive squawking and scraping effects from Rowe, and some distant-sounding rumbling figures on gong drum and more metallic chiming and tapping from Prévost, Tilbury embarks again on an extended piano line. This time it is a mournful, middle register chord progression. His phrasing is staccato, but with a gentle attack, and each chord is allowed to decay over about five seconds. A wave of low feedback briefly swells behind this. Eventually Tilbury shifts to a pattern that alternates deep reverberating notes with higher register chords.

Around 08:00, Prévost bows sharply at his cymbals, which screech somewhat like a bird of prey. The remainder of 'Part Five' plays out in reprises of characteristic earlier motifs: Tilbury interjects a few delicate high chords and other single notes very sparingly, and Prévost buzzes and scrapes across the face of the gong and on cymbal edges. As well as maintaining his drone functions, Rowe is also percussive. He grates against the ridges of his guitar strings and, later, plucks short, sharp staccato notes that cut straight to the centre of attention.

The track slowly diminishes to a quiet feedback whine, with the occasional crackle of static or lone note from the piano.



### [2.2.f] 'Part Six' – 8'26"

Early on, Tilbury plays some high-pitched and delicate quasi-Oriental figures. Each note has a brisk, precise attack and almost instantaneous decay. The piano's timbre is reminiscent of a koto, or sometimes a harpsichord.

Later, there is tentative and sparse wooden scraping, scratching and tapping. The sounds are quiet and heard very briefly, making them difficult to identify. At length, against a largely silent backdrop, the tones become more readily discernible. They now appear to be Prévost at the barrel drum again, this time plucking at the tensioned extremities of its stings.

Rowe's static crackling comes and goes throughout this track.

Tilbury plays another longer piano interlude. The progression of notes and chords is atonal and – accordingly – slightly dissonant, but nonetheless still delicately articulated, evoking both atmospheric and musical uncertainty and tension. Around 05:30, he moves to a high, more rapid, percussive tapping motif.

Unusually, we hear what appears to be Rowe unamplified. There is, again, the characteristic sound of friction on ridged metal strings. Tilbury is otherwise occupied though, and these strings do not suggest the innards of a piano. Their tone is dry and exposed, lacking the ambient resonance of the piano's sound box. Prévost is also bowing at something else, and this kind of sound is not characteristic of his usual style. Most likely, Rowe is playing on his electric guitar, but with the guitar's

amplifier turned off; what we are hearing is an acoustic signal (the unamplified strings) captured by a separate ambient microphone.

The final section of this track primarily features Prévost. Amongst various tapping and scraping of wood, there are a few gentle strikes of the gong. He then moves to a large acoustic drum, with a deep, resonant tone, and plays a succession of isolated strokes and rim shots. Though the drum is potentially very loud, and is *relatively* loud in this context, it is in fact played here with some delicacy. Prévost executes some relaxed and controlled drum rudiments – triplet figures, ruffs, short rolls – that resound away into silence.

The musicians are tacet for fifteen seconds at the end of the track.

#### **[2.2.g] ‘Part Seven’ – 10’37”**

Rowe’s droning feedback and percussive scrapes are restrained but present, and very slowly increasing in volume and intensity as the track proceeds.

Prévost begins with short metallic scrapes and an abrasive rubbing of some flat surface, sounding like brushes on the gong drum. He plays some more short rolls, too, on the gong drum, stopping around 02:15.

From 02:40, Tilbury plays a series of slowly ascending arpeggios. Isolated gong drum beats and motifs persist during this time, and so does mid-range feedback. From 04:30, some concentrated bowing of a cymbal merges with the feedback to form a greater drone.



Around 05:45, there is a deep rumbling from the lowest piano keys, augmented by tones from the gong. By 06:00 the group's sound is as dense and loud as it has been, though not uncomfortably so: not, as far as one can tell from the recording, as potentially overbearing as some of the *Crypt* material, for example. A 'swishing' sound – that could be either metallic percussion or electronically produced – is a further new timbre here.

By 08:00, the volume and intensity of the music is decreasing. There is still some piercing, high-pitched cymbal bowing, low piano and electronic sound, though by 08:45 the music is audibly being faded out. The musicians, that is, are playing ever more sparingly and quietly, and the quiet ambience of the performance space is becoming apparent; it is not *the recording* that is fading out.

From 09:15 onwards, there is only the very quietest sound of friction upon metal and electronic static. Within the static, detail is provided by what could be an almost inaudibly fuzzy radio broadcast. Both of these sound sources are gone by 10:00.

There is tacet silence to the end of the recording, after 10:30.

### **Example 3.      Evan Parker & Paul Lytton**

The Parker & Lytton duo were distinguished by an eclectic and inclusive approach to the materials of British free improvisation. They made a policy of rapid shifts in instrumentation and playing style, and could approximate the acoustic atomism of the

SME as readily as the electro-acoustic, laminar sound of AMM. It is something of this quality that I will describe here.

The CD *Three Other Stories*<sup>18</sup> comprises recordings made between 1971 and 1974, and the musicians' instrumental credits on the sleeve are indicative in themselves. Parker is listed as playing soprano and tenor saxophones, shêng, lyttonophone, dopplerphone, ocarina, voice & voice tube, and cassettes of prior performances. Martin Davidson's sleeve note sheds further light on these. The shêng is a 'Chinese mouth organ'; the lyttonophone ('made by Lytton but played by Parker') 'best described as a slide contrabass clarinet'; and the Dopplerphone, 'a length of soft rubber tubing (activated by a saxophone mouthpiece and manipulated to alter the rate of airflow) attached to a longer length of clear plastic tubing (whirled around the head whilst being played) ending in a plastic funnel.' The CD sleeve includes photographs of each of these instruments in action. Recordings of the duo's own performances were used to create a denser group sound with extra simultaneous timbres, which gave each player the chance to effectively duet with himself.

Lytton is credited with percussion, live electronics, air horns, dog whistles, harmonium and klaxon. The latter items are self-explanatory, and I will discuss 'electronics' later, in relation to Hugh Davies' playing in the MIC. Lytton's percussion, however – also pictured – is worthy of further description. (The photos, notes Davidson, '[only] show glimpses of the kit, which completely surrounded [Lytton]'. Our point of view is just above ground level, viewing the kit from the front.) From a standard drum kit, Lytton has a bass drum and a snare drum, in

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<sup>18</sup> Evan Parker & Paul Lytton. *Three Other Stories (1971-1974)*. 1995. CD. Emanem 4002



standard positions. A medium sized tom-tom is mounted – unusually high – on his front right, and a larger (floor) tom – again, suspended – to his front left. Two large crash and/or ride cymbals also stand towards the front, one on each side. Lytton’s kit is held together by a frame of bolted-together industrial racking, to which further instruments are attached. Immediately in front of him, there are three small splash cymbals and what appears to be the ‘custom built [...] contrabass cowbell’ that Davidson mentions. There is also a mounted frame drum, and a couple of smaller, apparently round pieces that may be drums, or part of Lytton’s electronics array. On Lytton’s far right, we can see a mounted djembe-like drum, another traditional African drum (tensioned with rope), and – hanging above everything else – what looks like a saucepan. (Davidson also recalls Lytton’s instruments as comprising ‘many items whose original purpose had not been sonic’.) On his immediate left, there is a set of (at least) three long, narrow drums – of perhaps six inches in diameter – of different lengths, made from industrial plastic piping. In the gaps between these instruments, we can also glimpse others that cannot be identified from the angle of the photograph. If Davidson’s description is accurate, then there are as many instruments again behind Lytton, out of sight. Davidson does make mention of Lytton’s electronics, and he describes ‘a contact miked frame to which were attached various items to be hit, plucked or bowed’. It is unlikely that the credited harmonium could be a regular part of this kit. Presumably it was simply available when these (studio) recordings were made.

I will describe the opening, and earliest, piece from *Three Other Stories* in order to convey an impression of its changeability: as a procession of disparate elements under a unifying influence. The instrumentation (and often the treatment of that

instrumentation) used by the Parker & Lytton duo is unconventional, without an obvious generic reference point (in the way that the SME resembled either a modern jazz or chamber music group, for example). Inevitably, the saxophones are the prominent feature of Parker's playing, and Lytton makes repeated use of rattling metal percussion and sustained electronic tones. To avoid undue repetition, I will describe each 'episode' of this music only on its first appearance, as some motifs and textures do repeat. But, in order of their appearance, I will catalogue newly introduced instrumentation, timbres, motifs and styles of interaction that illustrate Parker & Lytton's full use of the innovations that British free improvisation espoused.

For the most part, I have not included accurate timings of the following events on the CD. It is more the stylistic character and raw materials of the improvisation that I wish to demonstrate. Broadly speaking, however, the episodes that I describe below vary between a few seconds' and up to about a minute's duration.

**[3.1] 'But for the mist (For Eric Ziarko)', recorded 27 June 1971.**

- **[3.1.a]** The opening minutes of this piece – and much of the duo's music – display a broadly laminar style of interplay. Voices and timbres are used often simultaneously – sometimes alternately – to produce contrasting but complimentary vignettes of activity. Although many of the motifs themselves are rhythmically fragmentary and disjointed in the atomistic style, the atomistic method of collective, second-to-second, call and response is not always apparent.
- **[3.1.b]** To begin, Lytton manipulates a quiet, wavering, but sustained electronic drone. There are two brief pauses, approximately twenty seconds



apart, before the drone resumes at a different pitch. There is some electronic bending of the pitch.

- [3.1.c] Lytton also introduces some quiet metallic percussion: an intermittent dragging and scraping sound that suggests the manhandling of chains and items of cutlery. There is also the occasional blow to a more resonant metal surface.
- [3.1.d] Parker starts briefly with some low register, droning throat singing.
- [3.1.e] Lytton's electronics continue more sporadically, producing deep, grating and rumbling tones. These display a legato attack and decay, suggesting that some surface is being played with a violin bow and greatly amplified. The sound is reminiscent of the straining and creaking of a large metal structure.
- [3.1.f] Parker plays a few short bursts of soprano saxophone in the kind of throttled birdsong motifs characteristic of his SME work.
- [3.1.g] Lytton punctuates with some high-pitched, resonant chimes.
- [3.1.h] Parker moves to tenor sax, playing a continuous line of rhythmic variation but only limited tonal movement, and with great use of trilling. He also plays some longer sustained tones and brief higher register screeches, before returning to the rhythmic variation (in which triplet figures are prominent).
- [3.1.i] Between 02:41 and 02:48, particularly, Parker plays loudly and close to the microphone, producing a timbre from his sax like harsh electronic feedback.
- [3.1.j] Lytton moves wholly to acoustic percussion. He plays frenetically and atomistically, rattling, scraping and hitting various small metal items. He also

makes occasional use of medium-to-high pitched drums, possibly the djembe and frame drum.

- [3.1.k] Lytton plays isolated beats on a large acoustic drum of some description, and interjects some single ringing blows from cymbal bells or a large triangle.
- [3.1.l] Between about 04:20 and 05:20, Parker and Lytton play a loud and densely-filled duet, with a headlong momentum and aggression that references the ‘fire music’ end of free jazz. At this point, the duo displays a conspicuous shift towards atomistic interaction, of frantic – but mutually acknowledged – call and response. Parker is still on tenor sax, and initially maintains an oscillating two note figure in his lower register. He begins to vary this, and gradually his phrasing becomes busier, moving into his higher register to effect a rhythmically cluttered and frenzied squeaking and twittering. Lytton’s playing is similarly exponentially active. He plays mostly on lightly damped cowbells and other metal surfaces, and on his larger, deeper tom-toms.
- [3.1.m] There is also an electronic screeching early in this passage. It *could* be Lytton, but it is impossible to tell the precise manner of its production from the recording, and it also occurs whilst both players seem busily occupied elsewhere. This raises the possibility that it is a recorded excerpt from one of the duo’s prior performances.
- [3.1.n] For the next minute or so, a much quieter atomistic passage plays out. Parker is still on tenor, mostly playing short SME-style phrases, and Lytton returns to discreet metal rattlings and a brief, piercing scraping of metal against metal. The roughness of this timbre suggests that the saucepan (or



something similar) is involved; it does not evoke the smoothly finished, purpose-oriented surface of a cymbal.

- [3.1.o] Lytton, presumably – Parker is still, to begin with, audible on sax – releases air through the stretched neck of a balloon. Alternatively, this might be some specially prepared use of the air horns with which he is credited.
- [3.1.p] Parker joins him, with a similar timbre: high reedy tones, presumably the shêng (although the sleeve notes do not credit its use on this track). It might, then, be the ocarina.
- [3.1.q] Parker returns to the tenor sax, briefly unaccompanied. Lytton counters with a few blasts on what sounds *more* like an air horn, before swapping to his dog whistles. He blows more than one – sometimes simultaneously – in sustained, high pitched bursts.
- [3.1.r] With Parker playing more rhythmic variations, this time on soprano, Lytton makes a sound like a bicycle wheel going round.
- [3.1.s] Parker now wails slowly and deeply, back on tenor, and Lytton contributes what could be a quiet, high pitched, electronically produced static hiss, or a metal surface being very gently abraded.
- [3.1.t] Parker plays a high register whining note, with a slow, inflected pulse every couple of seconds.
- [3.1.u] Lytton creates a very loud, deep, electronic tone of slow attack and decay. Again, it may be a surface being played arco and heavily amplified. At its loudest, the volume is such that this timbre occupies and fills the vast majority of the field of sound. It fades after a short interlude, returning briefly in short bursts of short duration. As this happens, the former static hiss/abraded metal sound returns to prominence.

- [3.1.v] A more explicit use of electronics: Lytton taps, strokes and scrapes more closely-amplified metal surfaces. The most distinctive of these are tensioned strings of some kind, which he plucks sharply. They produce high pitches, like a harp or the top strings and frets of a guitar.
- [3.1.w] There follows an unusual, high pitched, rapidly twittering sound. It starts and stops repeatedly and moves towards and away from the microphone for about a minute, before the tape runs out and the track ends. It, at first, suggests some electronic effect, but then seems more likely to be a wind instrument of some description. From the CD's credits, one must assume that this is the 'Dopplerphone'.

(The track's total length is 12'26")

Though containing further stylistic diversions of their own, the remaining tracks on *Three Other Stories* ('The Theatre of the World and Photic Diversions', recorded 6 June 1973, and 'The Night The Ariel Left Harwich and Other Synchronicities', recorded 19 July 1974) also feature much of the same kind of material detailed above. Both of these latter tracks are more than twice the length of 'But for the mist [...]', however: 27'53" and 29'07" respectively. Accordingly, perhaps, the rate of episodic succession is noticeably slower – that is, each episode is on average longer – than on the opening track.



## Example 4. Iskra 1903

There are qualities to Iskra 1903's music that do not make it easy to summarise in writing. Elsewhere I have described the group as being 'post SME': the essence of which is in their adoption and adaptation of the atomistic method, that central process which governed and distinguished the SME's music. The principles that defined atomistic playing – and subsequently, atomistic music – are, however, quite elemental and repetitive once in action. It is for this reason that (in this appendix) I approached the analysis of the SME's work as I did. The procession of 'start, stop' rhythms and arbitrary tonality on the *Karyobin* album did not need to be transcribed and followed for its entire fifty minutes in order to understand how the music is being made. The case of the SME, however, suggested other solutions to the problem of describing their work. There are definite incremental shifts in the SME's creative process to be accounted for, and the documentary evidence is available to show this. The group also consisted not only of a regularly changing personnel, but also changes in instrumentation – one sax player, for example, did not automatically replace another – and in the number of participants. And (partially) related to these factors, the SME also strongly referenced certain extant musical genres at different points in their career,<sup>19</sup> which further refined and distinguished particular aspects of their playing. All these factors add detail to an understanding of their work.

Iskra 1903, likewise, may be said to work from and with a process: a modification of the SME's atomism, as I shall describe. But again, once this process is grasped, reiterative linear description would be possible, though not necessarily useful or

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<sup>19</sup> The group's collective sound made reference, alternately, to free jazz (circa *Challenge*), chamber music (circa *Withdrawal*), then free jazz again into the mid-1970s, and chamber music again in the *Low Profile* years.

desirable. Iskra 1903, however, do not share all those characteristics that add colour and context to discussion of the SME's music. The primary source of evidence of Iskra 1903's activities is the *Chapter One* CD box set.<sup>20</sup> While, for listening purposes, the recorded music lacks nothing in quantity or quality, for the current purpose it demonstrates a problematic constancy of anecdotal and technical detail.

The group's working method and collective sound are *basically* established on the earliest recordings. The line-up of musicians does not change, though there is slight variation in instrumentation. Iskra 1903 pieces do not always display clearly delineated structure either. With the exception of a couple of longer tracks, they lack the episodic dynamics of AMM's or Parker & Lytton's improvisations, for example; neither are they always distinguished by the use of particularly unusual timbres or combinations of timbres, such as the MIC were. (The three 'Offcuts' included on *Chapter One* are a case in point. Though they are known to be excerpts of longer pieces, their lack of greater stylistic and structural character has made it very difficult (according to Martin Davidson's sleeve note) 'to ascertain exactly where [they] were cut off from'.) And while Iskra 1903's music does reference other genres – indeed, it appears amongst the most 'conventionally musical' of British free improvisation – these references tend to be impressionistic rather than literal recreations. Though often recalling conventional music in some respects, Iskra 1903's version of the atomistic method – of free improvisation's deliberate arbitrariness – at the same time compromises the use of standard musical notation, ordering and terminology to effectively evoke it.

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<sup>20</sup> Iskra 1903. *Chapter One 1970-1972*. 2000. 3xCD. Emanem 4301.



With these considerations in mind, I will make a series of individual statements about the methods and audible characteristics of Iskra 1903's music. I will present marked reference points to this group's music, rather than narrative investigation.

- [4.1] *Chapter One* is an anthology of recordings made between 1970 and 1972. There is a mixture of live and studio tracks, the shortest being 1'40" in duration, the longest 25'20". Of these, some are complete performances, some have been edited,<sup>21</sup> and a few are credited as the 'Offcuts' of this editing process. Precise details of dates and locations are included with the CD, and are credited to '[Barry] Guy's meticulous diary keeping'. Improvisations '0' to '4' and Offcuts '1' to '3' are concert performances from September 1970; Improvisations '5' to 11' are studio recordings from May 1972; Extras '1' to '3' are studio recordings from 1971; the live 'On Tour' tracks, '1' to '3', are from late 1972.
- [4.2] Iskra 1903 was the trio of Paul Rutherford, who played trombone and piano, Derek Bailey on steel-stringed guitar and Barry Guy on double bass.
- [4.3] The atomistic style, as defined by the SME, centred on a process of melodic, rhythmic and timbral variation over increments of microtonal and micro-rhythmic value. In order to emphasise and utilise these micro-increments, SME phraseology tended towards staccato, percussive inflection over very short durations. What Iskra 1903 did was to take atomistic style itself as the basis for dynamic variation. There is moderation in Iskra 1903's use of atomism: an acknowledgement of the SME's insights as an opportunity, but not an obligation. It could be said, too, that they reference 'conventional

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<sup>21</sup> This is principally due to the space restrictions of the LP format, on which a lot of this material was first released.

music’ in a similar way. Iskra 1903 phraseology allows itself use of the full microtonal and micro-rhythmic spectrum. However, this material is executed and structured *dynamically* with an inclusive and flexible approach. Its phrasing may be either brutally staccato or relaxed and legato, or any point or combination in between. The music is often arbitrarily microtonal, but is also conventionally tonal in certain places (as I will describe); and likewise, its rhythms are broadly *micro*-rhythms and irregular, but there are so many motifs – and even passages – that seem tantalizingly of a regular tempo. Iskra 1903 show a far less single-minded attitude towards free improvisation than (for obvious example) the policies of the SME dictated. (Bailey, saying that, is perhaps a demonstrable exception to this). Conceptually and practically, Iskra 1903’s is an amalgamation and *balance* of the expressive and technical aspects of both British free improvisation and the mainstream of Western music. To characterise Iskra 1903’s fundamental, most recurrent, style, it is tempting to evoke the idea of ‘slow’ or ‘measured’ atomism. Their playing contains the activity and detail of the SME’s, but embraces a sense of variable and dramatic timing, melodic and harmonic character, and textural nuance that places it far closer to what is commonly called ‘musical’ than that of their contemporaries. (Like the *Withdrawal* era SME, Iskra 1903’s potential for creating delicate, subtly dissonant, eerie atmospheres in their music also lead to them recording a film soundtrack.)<sup>22</sup>

- [4.4] Both Bailey and Guy used amplification with their instruments, not only to control volume but also their characteristic timbres and attack and decay envelopes. Although it refers specifically to one London recording

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<sup>22</sup> Iskra 1903. *Buzz Soundtrack*. 1971. CD. Emanem 4066



session on *Chapter One*'s third CD, Martin Davidson's sleeve note adds technical insight of some general relevance: '[...] all three musicians can be heard both acoustically and amplified. As usual, the two string players used volume control pedals to alternate between the two modes. Uniquely on this occasion, the trombone was alternately played into two mikes, one of which went directly to the mixing desk, the other which went to an amplifier and speaker which was in turn recorded using another mike.'

- [4.5] Rutherford plays his trombone in basic accordance with the atomistic style: in asymmetrical phrases and rests of micro-rhythmic increment, and atonal and/or microtonal pitch values and progressions. His style, though, and that of Iskra 1903 as a group, make departures from the SME sound that may not have fitted (or been allowed) into John Steven's austere vision of collective playing. Though they *are* part of his sound, Rutherford does not limit himself either to the brevity of phrasing or the etiquette of alternating call and response that defined the SME. He is another of the free improvisers whose formative influences – modern jazz, here – remain strongly apparent despite the 'free' context. Uncommonly in British free improvisation, there is conspicuous virtuosity in Rutherford's playing. Although not abandoning atomistic inflection, there are certain passages (for example, on 'Improvisation 8' from 1972) where he is distinct enough from the group sound and rhythmically and melodically active at such a dynamic level that he performs a soloist's role. Rutherford's phrases vary in length. Particularly as they grow longer, however, there is a fluidity – in asymmetrical bursts, naturally – and busyness of melody and rhythm that sometimes suggests a bebop influence. And generally, there are understated but characteristic hints of jazz tonality

and phrasing as Rutherford plays. These are often only fragmentary, and are obscured by Rutherford's own unpredictable tonal and rhythmic lines. His tone is often muffled, and he articulates notes often with the most minimal attack and decay envelope; cumulatively this makes even his longer phrases seem compressed and angular. And though Rutherford's melodies imply the use of typical jazz and blues progressions and intervals, their common expressive currency is further displaced by the otherwise atonal or microtonal context here. Rutherford makes extensive use of a mute to control the qualities of his tone and articulation, in a manner similar to Bailey's use of the volume pedal. His tone is usually soft and breathy, rather than brassy and hard, but Rutherford does articulate over a wide dynamic range. As well as his atomistic melodies, Rutherford also sometimes creates 'sound effects'. These, for example, include 'slurping' and 'wheezing' sounds reminiscent of amplified bodily functions, or a timbre somewhat like Eddie Prévost's bowed cymbals. This is a metallic 'friction' tone: a short, but definite, swelling attack; the harsher, piercing tone itself, recalling the polishing or chafing of a large metal surface; and an almost instantaneous decay into silence. With this sound effect, one can effectively hear the breath being forced into, and then through, the instrument, before being cut precisely short.

- [4.6] Guy makes use of the double bass's full tonal and timbral range, and for much of the time appears to be the key presence in Iskra 1903's music. He does not dominate the improvisation or the collective sound as such, or even take a lead soloist's role as Rutherford sometimes does. But he is the most consistently active and audible participant of the three (though see also my note on Bailey, below), and – in accordance with the bassist's common



function – he seems to create much of the structure of this music. He establishes both motifs and stylistic frameworks on which the others build, and also provides lines and textures that unify otherwise disparate elements into cohesive patterns. As such, Guy contributes markedly to the sense of a relatively conventional musicality in Iskra 1903's playing. His bass technique derives from a background in both classical music and jazz; like Rutherford (and Bailey), however, these formative influences have again been diffused and refocused by the idea of atomistic 'freedom'. As I have suggested, it is difficult to convey every aspect or detail of even one player's contribution to this kind of music, but there are common motifs and styles to which Guy returns again and again. Predominantly he plays his bass arco. He mixes the very short duration, microtonal, staccato figures that one associates with SME music with more elaborate, legato lines and phrases. Like Rutherford, he plays over a wide dynamic range. Sometimes one will hear a gently pulsing bass figure of regular rhythm; sometimes meandering, atonal cello-like lines; or at others there are flurries of convoluted rhythm and melody that are strongly articulated but of intricate, virtuosic syncopation reminiscent of free jazz. Often Guy can be heard bowing repeatedly at a single note. Even this may vary in effect, according to the rate and strength of bowing, the use of vibrato or damping, and the tonal or microtonal inflection of pitch, etc. A deep, slowly throbbing, drone occasionally results; much more frequently, he appears to scrub harshly and percussively on a string, as if sawing a piece of wood. Common to the atomistic free players, in the course of an improvisation Guy may use all of these techniques, or any combination of them, or none of them,

in rapid episodic succession and with a constant variation of dynamic inflection.

- [4.7] Part of any growing familiarity with British free improvisation will include an awareness of Derek Bailey's guitar style. I will not reiterate the details of that style here; I have discussed his playing in the main body of my thesis (as an example of atomistic playing), and he also features in this appendix as a part of the music of the SME, Joseph Holbrooke and the MIC. Bailey's playing, though, becomes especially familiar from the prolific solo and ad-hoc small group work that characterises so much of his later career, often where Bailey is – as it were – the 'star attraction'. ('[Iskra 1903] was, perhaps, the last long-term fixed-personnel group that Bailey worked in', Davidson notes). As such, it comes as something of a surprise when revisiting these earlier group recordings – *Karyobin* is another – to hear Bailey's contributions so understated and under-recorded, so submerged in the group texture and only intermittently breaking the surface. In the current context, and with regard to Bailey and Guy's use of amplification to affect their respective sounds, it is possible that some of the playing that might be attributed to Guy is, in fact, Bailey. But even if this is true, of the three it is still Bailey who appears the most restrained, the most sparsely heard contributor to the Iskra 1903 material. Predominantly Bailey plays with a smooth tone, the amplification lightly apparent. He adds, according to dynamic context, his usual commentary of brittle, fragmentary phrases, atonal note progressions and microtonal effects. In particular, Bailey often seems to suggest the role of a very reserved percussionist, playing (very sparsely) staccato 'unpitched' scrapes, 'clicks' and damped metallic chimes in response to Rutherford and



Guy's busier and more conventionally expressive parts. The group display a subtle maturation, and Bailey is slightly more prominent in its later recordings. I will briefly describe some individual moments from Bailey's Iskra 1903 playing. Though these do not necessarily typify this group's music as a whole, they do nonetheless add detail to one's sense of what Iskra 1903 sometimes sounded like (and this is true also of Bailey's wider body of work). Early in 'Improvisation 1', for example, one can hear an isolated use of artificial reverb in Bailey's guitar tone; on the same track, as well as on 'Improvisation 3' and 'Improvisation 7', Bailey makes use of the volume pedal to fade chords in and out; on 'Improvisation 3', 'Improvisation 0' and 'Improvisation 10' he creates a percussive effect – a high pitched, non-resonant 'pinging' sound – by picking and scratching at the highly-tensioned ends of his strings (beyond the guitar's bridge); during 'Improvisation 0', he mimics the characteristic timbre and attack of the double bass by controlling either low, gentle feedback or a single ringing bass string with his volume pedal; on the same track, Bailey plays chords with a harsh percussive attack and rapid decay, and a timbre somewhere between a mandolin and a saucepan being struck; at the beginning of 'Offcut 2', he plays some damped, percussive, atonal arpeggios with a rhythmic constancy, which evoke the sound of a damaged musical box; on both 'Offcut 2' and 'Improvisation 9' Bailey uses a fully 'electric' tone, and on 'Improvisation 5' and 'On Tour 3' he may be heard wholly acoustically.

- [4.8] Rutherford's piano playing seems restricted to the group's earlier phase, 'something he was experimenting with at the time' as Davidson, again, describes. It appears on three tracks: 'Improvisation 1' (on which Rutherford alternates between piano and trombone), and 'Improvisation 0' and 'Offcut 2'

(both of which feature him on piano alone). In some instances though, where Rutherford's pianism attempts to become frenetic, it is uncertain how successful an experiment this is. Around 02:30 on 'Improvisation 1', and 05:45 and 07:30 on 'Offcut 2', he attempts a style comparable to American free jazz pioneer Cecil Taylor. Essentially, Rutherford is faithful *rhythmically* to various familiar piano motifs here, such as percussive comping and flourished melodic fill-ins. *Tonally*, however, his 'choices' of notes, chords and progressions appear arbitrarily dependent on where his flailing fingers fall. In a sense, as I suggest in the Epilogue, it is the quality of precise rhythmic execution that ultimately reveals the (albeit disguised) formal musicality of the British free improvisers. But there is precision also audible in the tonal choices that they<sup>23</sup> make, whether one listens to Bailey, Rowe or Parker, for example (or Rutherford on trombone for that matter). They have already deliberated over and refined their vocabulary. In the Iskra 1903 examples above, however, there is the suggestion of derivativeness and pastiche in Rutherford's Taylor impersonations: the impression that perhaps the desired effect wasn't as easy to replicate as it looked. The younger British improviser Keith Tippett was subsequently to make this 'right rhythm/ "wrong" notes' style both more convincing and more convincingly his own.<sup>24</sup> Rutherford also demonstrates a second distinctive piano style on these recordings – more spacious and reminiscent of John Tilbury's playing – but I will discuss this separately, below.

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<sup>23</sup> And Cecil Taylor, too.

<sup>24</sup> The most widely available example of Tippett's playing – which is emphasised in effect by the conventional rock rhythms and tonality surrounding it – is his work with King Crimson on the track 'Cat Food': King Crimson. *In The Wake of Poseidon*. 1970. LP. ILPS 9127



I will conclude my discussion of Iskra 1903 with some examples of distinctive and self-contained passages from *Chapter One*. Again, they do not necessarily characterise the bulk of the group's style or recorded material. But they are all to be heard on the anthology and are therefore representative of some portion of the music that Iskra 1903 made together, and of some of the musical potential that their version of the atomistic method offered.

- [4.9] In the opening seconds of 'Improvisation 1', the group recreate standard SME-style atomism, with Guy in his highest register, Bailey very lightly amplified, and Rutherford adding high, tinkling flourishes of piano. But around 00:20, Rutherford announces a change of direction with a bold, strongly accented bass chord. He plays a few linking notes, then another chord, then – more slowly, but fluidly – more notes leading to another chord. This short motif is unusual and significant in British free improvisation of the era not just because of its self-consciously 'dramatic' inflection, but more because of its unambiguously consonant and tonal progression. In melodic, harmonic and rhythmic terms (and, by extension, culturally associative, evocative and emotive ones) Rutherford references – *uses* – standard ideas, techniques and effects of Western music here. For the next few minutes, Iskra 1903 improvise what is essentially atonal chamber music. After a brief pause, Rutherford plays a dissonant chord (with changing bass notes) for about ten seconds, with a regular staccato pulse. From this, Guy takes up a slow-moving, gently-bowed bass line. Again, it is remarkable (in the current context) because it shows both conventional tonal and rhythmic relationship to Rutherford's cue, and progresses consonantly and in constant tempo itself.

Rutherford stands aside temporarily, as Guy continues. Towards the 01:00 mark, Bailey approaches from entirely his own angle; he counters with isolated picked notes and strummed chords of very fast attack and instantly damped decay. More typical of atomistic free improvisation, he makes a percussive and timbral contribution. Rutherford returns, and it is in this section (for example) that his pianism can be heard to resemble that of AMM's John Tilbury. Albeit in a more active melodic and rhythmic style (and more overtly suggestive sense) than Tilbury, Rutherford's piano implies *structure* and the *unfolding* of structure. By tapping into (our) culturally ingrained sense and expectations of developmental tonality and rhythm, both men instigate motifs, patterns and points of emphasis that seem part of an as-yet unresolved greater whole. This, if it need be restated, is precisely what the vast majority of British free improvisation does *not* do. Again, Rutherford plays a chord with dramatic, seemingly structuring accentuation, and keeps the implied momentum going with 'leading', high, consonant fill-ins in its wake. Around 01:45, Bailey tries to disrupt all this conventionality with some damped, atomistic arpeggios, and Guy joins him for a while. Later, for around a minute, Rutherford moves to his Cecil Taylor impersonation, and Bailey and Guy contribute too to a frenetic interlude. As a whole – not just for Rutherford – there is something of a sense of pastiche, or an immature group style here. This section is brief, but still incongruent, and the musicians themselves soon appear to dismiss this as a direction worth following. Bailey, already a sparse contributor thus far, is barely heard again in this excerpt. Around 04:00, Rutherford begins to play, very gently, a single bass chord with a slow, regular pulse and decay. He also adds linking arpeggios and fills at the keyboard's



upper end, as and when. And once more, Guy responds ‘conventionally’ with a slow, ruminative line of consonant accompaniment. I have described this as ‘atonal’ because, although there is consonant tonal relationship between the piano and double bass parts, there is no macro-structural harmonic development obviously going on. At length, Guy plays an increasingly dissonant solo line in his higher register, though it is still fluid, rather than atomistic, in its phrasing. Rutherford and Guy’s duet lasts until around 06:30. The second half of ‘Improvisation 0’ provides another example of Iskra 1903’s improvised classical music.

- [4.10] During the opening minutes of ‘Improvisation 0’, meanwhile, the group imply – rather than actually play – *jazz*. It is the spacious, impressionistic, modal jazz of Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue* period that Iskra 1903 recall here. And again, it is largely Rutherford’s piano that suggests the sense of genre and structure: with sustained single chords, high melodic fills, and (later) some lower, chordal rhythmic comping. The jazz is slow and seems slightly out-of-tune, but Guy, too, assists the effect with a pizzicato, ‘walking’ (though atonal) bass line. This is a style of playing that Guy is rarely heard to use in the Iskra 1903 context.
- [4.11] For around five minutes – the second quarter of ‘Improvisation 1’ – the group enters a very SME-like phase, of dry tone, high-pitched, short, irregular, staccato phrasing at a brisk tempo. Initially, Guy and Bailey duet; Rutherford rejoins them (now on trombone) later on. Even here, though, Guy and (especially) Rutherford sometimes intersperse much longer melodic lines than typified the earlier group’s style.

- [4.12] With four minutes to go of 'Improvisation 1', Guy starts bowing a single note in his middle register with a regular staccato pulse for about fifteen seconds. The group are then tacet for an equivalent time before Guy resumes. Again he plays a single note, this time with a more complex rhythm: almost a time signature (although his timing is not always strict). Approximately, he plays a two-beat figure with a one-beat rest. Rutherford accompanies with short, mournful two-note figures from the trombone. Bailey adds percussive effects; his steel strings are highly amplified here, and he plays a series of short, slow scrapes against them with little more than the briefest physical contact. Guy now changes to a softly undulating, see-sawing, two-note figure. He plays some subtle variations on this line, and the pulse gradually slows as the variations become more elaborate. The track appears to fade out, with only Guy and Rutherford left audible at the end.
- [4.13] 'Improvisation 3' includes an AMM-style break of twenty second's tacet silence. Some uncertain activity may be heard on the recording if the volume is turned up, but it does not resemble the group 'playing' as such.
- [4.14] In the second half (of just over three minutes) of 'Improvisation 8', Guy and Bailey make notable departure from their instruments' traditional roles. Rutherford, on trombone, tends to cluster melodic fill-ins together. Within each cluster, the fills themselves are fluidly articulated, but are staccato and atomistic in their spacing and attack and decay. Though atomistically disjointed, Rutherford's fill-ins, and his energetic momentum and thick, liquid tone recall the influence of trad jazz, and he works up to what is essentially a lead solo. The track now assumes the character of (AMM's) laminar style. Beneath Rutherford's acrobatic lines, Guy and Bailey create a layer, and a



texture, that could be evoked as a ‘wire mesh’ of percussion. Like the clattering metal interludes on *The Crypt*, the percussion layer here is created and maintained by the quick succession of overlapping, irregular phrases. Guy and Bailey’s effect differs in the delicacy of the timbres that they use, however. These are mainly created by light, but jagged, picking and scraping at their instruments’ finer strings and higher frets, often only glancing blows that sound but do not resonate. There are also various other ‘knocking’ or plucked sounds – quiet, though of percussive attack – that suggest the use of preparations inserted between strings and tapping on the instruments’ wooden bodies. Though this forms a lamina in the AMM sense, it is also, in analogy, a *translucent* one, because the atomistic lightness of touch allows spaces to be apparent within it. The dynamic intensity of the percussion fluctuates because of this, to which Rutherford responds in his playing. Similar interludes and textures may also be heard on Improvisations ‘5’, ‘7’ and ‘9’. At different times, either Bailey or Guy is revealed as the main protagonist, as the other reverts to sounds more obviously characteristic of their instruments.

- [4.15] In ‘Extra 1’, there is a slow drone section. Guy contributes to this with some low bowing, but the most distinctive timbre is Rutherford’s ‘electric’ trombone (see above). It resembles controlled guitar feedback, although Bailey is to be heard separately, percussively scratching at his strings. Rutherford’s drone note has an electronic timbre, and rises and falls in both pitch and intensity.
- [4.16] Towards the end of ‘Extra 1’, Rutherford’s trombone (now unamplified again) duets with some gentle clattering/scraping/tinkling ‘kitchenware’-type percussion, familiar from Paul Lytton and Jamie Muir’s

playing (see the ‘Parker and Lytton’ and ‘MIC’ sections). It is unclear quite how Bailey and/or Guy are achieving the effect here.

- [4.17] On ‘Extra 3’, Bailey plays some fuzzed, sustained, feedback tones against a descending, droning bass glissando from Guy.
- [4.18] The live ‘On Tour’ tracks (from Germany, Autumn 1972), ‘1’, ‘2’ and ‘3’, are each similar in length. They were tailored to a vacant fifteen-minute slot on the bill of a London Jazz Composers’ Orchestra tour, which allowed smaller sub-groups of its musicians to perform together. Barry Guy was the founder and leader of the LJCO.<sup>25</sup>

## **Example 5.        Joseph Holbrooke**

As I discuss earlier in my thesis, the analysis of Joseph Holbrooke’s contribution to British free improvisation is hampered by the shortage of extant documentary evidence. In the current context, however, the recording of the group’s pre-mature music, on *Joseph Holbrooke ’65*,<sup>26</sup> provides a useful contrast to the other material in this appendix. It displays a transitory music for the players – a modal-influenced free jazz – that illustrates qualities of both the jazz from which it was descended and the free improvisation that it would spawn. As a more formally structured piece, too, ‘Miles Mode’ (the only available track from this period) lends itself to linear description and explanation more effectively than most of those detailed in this section.

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<sup>25</sup> See Cook & Morton, pp. 926-927.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Holbrooke. *Joseph Holbrooke ’65*. 1999. CD. Incus CD Single 01



**[5.1] ‘Miles Mode’, recorded 1965.**

**[5.1.a] 00:00 – 00:59:** *The stuff of musicians’ rehearsals.* Derek Bailey is playing an amplified guitar with a clean jazz tone. Gavin Bryars is on double bass. Tony Oxley plays a conventional drum kit. The players are heard warming up at their instruments, interspersed with audible, but mostly unclear, conversation between them.

Bailey’s guitar is heard most prominently and frequently here. He descends a scale; momentarily, Bryars ascends one. Oxley caps Bryars’ line with a four note ‘call and response’ on snare drum, and tom-tom and hi-hat cymbals.

More muffled conversation, and isolated phrases and fragments of scales from Bailey.

From 00:38 to 00:48, Bailey runs through the ‘Miles Mode’ theme, unaccompanied and not in strict time. Bryars’ bass is heard briefly again, followed by the only discernible dialogue:

**Bailey:** Are you playing the melody?

**Bryars:** There’s no E natural in it.

**Bailey:** Yes, there is. It finishes and starts on it. That’s the last note.

More slowly, Bailey demonstrates the theme again, during which the tape recording cuts out.

**[5.1.b] 01:09:** After an inaudible count-in (presumably), the group members enter together on the opening section of the ‘Miles Mode’ melody. Bailey plays the

consonant, jazzy lead line. Bryars and Oxley provide a conventionally 'swinging' harmonic and percussive accompaniment.

[5.1.c] 01:14: A silent break, of ambiguous length. Bailey picks up the pulse again and leads back in with the second section of the melody. As Bailey holds the last note, Oxley fills in with a brief snare roll to complete the 'swing'.

[5.1.d] 01:19: The group re-enters to perform the third part of the theme. Again, Bryars and Oxley comprise the 'rhythm section' in a familiar jazz sense. Bailey's part is more rhythmic too, here. He comps chords in unison with Bryars and Oxley's emphases, before playing a brief single-string fill-in and the theme's resolving chord.

[5.1.e] 01:25: Before the chord dies away, an additional note from Bailey creates dissonance, tipping the group into an improvised passage.

[5.1.f] 01:26: - 01:47: The improvisation maintains the basic 4/4 pulse of the theme, but it is implied more than precisely stated. Oxley plays non-repetitive patterns between his ride cymbal and snare drum, with some accentuations on the bass drum. These are of the type developed especially by John Coltrane's drummer, Elvin Jones, and to which the development of free jazz owed such a debt. The patterns show a rhythmic fluidity, continuity and consistency of tempo, but are elaborately syncopated against the fundamental pulse. By combining and extrapolating various rudiments of jazz drumming, they create various kinds of rhythmic tension-and-release around the 'swing': for example, by super-imposing the accents of a contrasting (but complimentary) time signature over the original metre.



Bryars, too, demonstrates an expanded role in this section. He moves beyond the rhythmically and harmonically supportive 'walking' bass line of the theme into the eponymous Mode itself. Bryars tends toward the higher register of his instrument in this passage. In conjunction with Oxley's percussion, he plays more complex lines, improvising a solo of melodic and rhythmic variation that obscures, without abandoning, the modal and metrical basis of the piece.

Bailey is the most understated of the three in this section. With Bryars as the 'solo' voice, he plays sparingly, interjecting a series of chords of primarily rhythmic support. Stylistically, the legacy of Bailey's career as a modern jazz accompanist is very apparent here.

[5.1.g] 01:47: Bailey leads the group back to another break, by re-stating the opening section of the theme. The second and third sections are also reprised (as above, at 01:14 to 01:25), leading into the second passage of improvisation.

[5.1.h] 02:03: Oxley and Bryars continue their intricate re-shaping of the pulse from the prior improvised section. This time, however, Bailey takes a solo of single-string lines. It is ruminative, melodic and consonant, in the 'cool jazz' idiom.

[5.1.i] 02:50: A fill-in on Oxley's tom-tom marks the beginning of a shift in the improvisation's character. It becomes gradually busier and more densely layered: less in the character of 'a soloist plus a rhythm section'. Oxley starts to make greater use of his tom-toms and bass drum, while Bailey and Bryars' interplay becomes less rhythmically and melodically fluid, and more discordant. Between approximately

03:17 and 03:37, the group move into a passage of pronounced collective syncopation, Oxley playing quavers on his ride cymbal against the 4:4 metre with accents on his hi-hat and tom-tom. Bailey shares his accents in the second half of this section, playing a series of simple embellishing figures around a central, slightly dissonant, note.

[5.1.j] 03:37: Bailey's line suddenly changes character, with a brief melodic fill in the character of the main theme. Bailey's solo continues, as does Oxley's wider use of his kit. Bryars is briefly less in evidence.

[5.1.k] 04:10: Bryars re-enters with some bowed tones from the lower register of his bass. He plays a long, slow, undulating line, and the group moves into more spacious and musically abstract territory, albeit maintaining a continuity of momentum. Partly, one suspects, due to the recording technology of the time, Bryars remains largely in the background, bowing (occasionally in his higher register). The main focus of attention becomes Oxley, whose movement around his kit is now frenetic. (One tom-tom noticeably causes distortion on the recording.) Bailey acts as rhythmic and timbral counterpoint to Oxley, playing very fragmentarily in short, muted notes and phrases. At 05:08, Bailey refers again to the 'Miles Mode' 'head', before he and Oxley draw to a halt.

[5.1.l] 05:17: Bryars performs a short unaccompanied bass solo. Playing pizzicato again, he returns to the kind of exploratory modal runs and melodic lines of the earlier improvised sections. Around 05:30, Oxley starts a quiet and restrained accompaniment, joined by occasional single notes from Bailey after 05:50. Bryars'



solo lines become more rhythmically and melodically convoluted, while Oxley makes his way, too, back to the centre of attention; though still intricately phrased, his playing here returns predominantly to the 'ride and snare' patterns of the earlier improvised sections. Bailey remains a very sparse contributor. With Oxley now carrying what is effectively a duet, Bryars' instead becomes the accompanist, playing short, spacious sequences of notes. Some sense of the original 4/4 swing becomes apparent, particularly in these exchanges. At 06:48, he returns briefly to arco playing, and between approximately 07:00 and 07:30, Bryars re-asserts himself in the soloist's role. Bailey begins to interject very tentative and minimal commentary once more, but it is Bryars and Oxley, chiefly, who carry the improvisation to the 08:51 mark.

[5.1.m]08:51: From (again, presumably) a visual cue, Bryars and Bailey drop out altogether, while Oxley performs a drum solo. (Bailey strikes a lone note at 09:09). For a few seconds, the delayed, dragging timing of Oxley's entry – on snare, bass and ride – suggest the kind of extended, or distended, rhythmic patterns that came to exemplify atomistic free improvisation. In fact, alongside his and Bryars' swinging accompaniment to the 'Miles Mode' theme, and Bailey's solo *proper*, Oxley's drum feature is basically conventional and faithful to modern jazz style. Like the section from 03:17 to 03:37, it is based in the syncopation of quavers over the anticipated 4/4 feel. He begins briefly on the bass drum, with rim-shot and snare accents. Oxley then sustains a series of rolls on, and between, snare and tom-toms, accenting them with the bass drum and punctuating with strikes of the ride and hi-hat cymbals. The rhythmic continuity of his solo makes it possible to count 'Miles Mode's 4/4 swing underneath it. And by doing so, Oxley's displacement of accents and sub-divisions of metre become clear and recognisably of their idiom. From 09:24, Oxley plays a

repeated figure between the (still distorting) tom-tom, bass drum and snare, which acts as a cue for Bailey...

[5.1.n] 09:31: Another complete reprise of the 'head', and another passage of group improvisation, from 09:45 onwards. Oxley restrains himself mostly to quiet ride and hi-hat work, and Bailey offers sparingly executed chords, with Bryars taking the most pronounced solo lines.

[5.1.o] 10:06 – 10:22: A final repeat of the 'Miles Mode' theme. The tape is stopped before the last note has decayed.

## **Example 6.        The Music Improvisation Company**

[6.1]    'Pointing', recorded 4 July 1969

The one available MIC album<sup>27</sup> is an anthology, of tracks from 1969 and 1970. The album's title is more an epitaph for the group that made it, than a reference to the scope of its contents. 'Pointing' is the opening track; it serves, as such, as a summary of intent. I have written of the MIC as a group that consolidated the defining traits of British free improvisation and so – by way of a final overview – I shall give a literal, functional and linear analysis of the chosen piece here.

Of the line-up documented on this album, Jamie Muir is credited with 'percussion'; Hugh Davies with 'live electronics & organ'; Evan Parker 'soprano saxophone & amplified auto-harp'; and Derek Bailey 'guitar'.

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<sup>27</sup> The Music Improvisation Company. *The Music Improvisation Company 1968 -1971*. 1976. CD. Incus CD12



Apart from Muir's contribution, there is an element of ambiguity to the timbres that the MIC used, as to *who* exactly is providing *what, when*: the same question that the dense, early AMM sound raised. Parker, for example, plays drones on this sax that *could* be either Davies' electronics or feedback from Bailey. Davies picks, scrapes and scratches at tiny amplified surfaces, which equally might be Bailey playing on damped strings. Bailey sustains electrically distorted chords that could be Davies on organ. I will describe what I believe to be the most likely candidate in each case, under the proviso of uncertainty on certain occasions.

[6.1.a] 00:00: The first sound we hear suggests Davies' electronics, but under closer scrutiny is revealed as Parker's soprano. For just over a minute, Parker plays a succession of high-pitched drone notes. Each one is sustained for perhaps eight seconds or so, with a pause of four or five seconds between them. (This apparent stop for breath<sup>28</sup> is one factor that suggests Parker as the instrumentalist here; there is also a characteristic reediness to the tone in places, and, later on, a voice more likely to be Davies is also heard, simultaneously.) These miniature drones display motion and development too, by shifting between notes, or sometimes by the protracted bending of a note.

The other immediately apparent contributor is Muir. Typically of the free improvising percussionist, he plays sporadically and spasmodically, with emphasis on timbre and counterpoint rather than pulse and punctuation. Though sometimes in quick succession, Muir plays essentially distinct single notes to begin with, as opposed to phrases. We hear several cymbals – playing short, defined notes (not 'crashes'); a

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<sup>28</sup> Parker developed the use of circular breathing techniques, to sustain long and continuous lines, later in his career.

glancing blow on a small cowbell; various taps and scrapes on unidentified metal and wooden surfaces; a loosely tuned tom-tom; and the prolonged, staggered clicking of what sounds like a ratchet being turned. With a few short rolls, around 00:38 – 00:40, Muir moves primarily to his tom-toms – still playing sparingly – for about twenty seconds.

In the midst of Muir's performance, Davies *is*, in fact, revealed after a time, and (on repeated listenings) can be traced back to the very beginning of the improvisation. One of the best resources for understanding the nature of Davies' 'electronics' is his later solo CD, *Warming Up With The Iceman*.<sup>29</sup> Essentially though, it combines two aspects: the generation and analogue manipulation of purely electronic tones, and the close amplification and 'playing' of minute acoustic sound sources.<sup>30</sup> The latter effectively makes musical instruments out of what is commonly inaudible. Amongst the chimes and knocks of Muir's percussion, the sound of metal being scraped against metal (sometimes with a suggested circular motion) is gently audible. The obvious conclusion is that it, too, can be attributed to Muir. But during the first minute, Davies becomes the more likely candidate. Though not impossible for Muir to achieve, there are points where the metal-friction sounds occur whilst Muir is conspicuously engaged elsewhere. More telling, however, is the timbre of the scraping itself; its volume increases, and, as it does so, the quality of it being an *artificial* sound becomes apparent. Specifically, there is a characteristic and recognisable sheen produced when a microphone, an amplifier and a speaker are intermediary between an acoustic sound and our perception of that sound. It is caused by the extraneous

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<sup>29</sup> Hugh Davies. *Warming Up With The Iceman*. 2001. CD. Grob.324

<sup>30</sup> The former is an example of definitively 'electronic' electronics, the latter of 'electro-acoustic' technique. The (electric) organ, with which Davies is also credited on the MIC album, would be an example of the 'electro-mechanical'.



localised sounds that are made audible in addition to those that are intended, and it is this quality – of seeming artificial amplification – that helps to reveal Davies' presence here.

[6.1.b] At around 01:05, Parker and Davies drop out. Muir continues tentatively, sounding like someone picking carefully through a drawer of cutlery. (The analogy is justified by the array of sound sources that Muir used in his later tenure with rock band King Crimson, as well as those known to be used, for example, by Paul Lytton.)

[6.1.c] Parker returns at 01:17, again sustaining a single note, but this time in a lower register more easily identifiable as a saxophone. He plays louder here, too, and his clarion call prompts an increase in volume from Muir, who moves back to his tomtoms. Davies also resumes his metallic rubbing and scratching, although relatively quietly once more. At 01:27, Parker's drone stops for breath, and almost immediately Bailey makes his first contribution. He is playing an amplified or electric guitar with, for him, an uncharacteristic rock-like fuzz tone. Bailey strikes a single note, with a strong attack, which decays over four or five seconds. Rapidly in its wake, a second sound is heard: a lingering high pitched drone that decays over the course of ten seconds. It resembles some ghostly wail, and the note bends slightly as it fades away. What is not certain is its source. It is likely to be some controlled feedback from Bailey, but might also be a harmony from Parker. After some lower-pitched, mournful cow noises, Parker returns again to his high, sustained drone, and Davies and Muir continue as they have been. Bailey apparently disappears again. Past the two minute mark, Parker's lone note is very clear, and a slight vibrato is audible.

[6.1.d] Around 02:20, Muir becomes suddenly very demonstrative, with two particularly heavy accents on snare drum and hi-hat cymbals. He begins to play a series of short, violent rolls between his drums and hi-hat now, also incorporating various crashing cymbals (of rapid attack and decay) and other metal surfaces, including perhaps a saucepan (?). The track becomes primarily a Muir solo for about fifteen seconds, before the improvisation as a whole moves into more obviously atomistic territory. Muir returns, more discreetly now, to his 'cutlery drawer' instruments (i.e. moving away from the drums), and Davies continues in the background, worrying at a small piece of metal in short bursts and occasionally plucking at what might be a small, tensioned spring. He remains ever present, but seldom a conspicuous player. Towards the end of Muir's 'solo', Parker performs briefly in the 'birdsong' style – that he and Trevor Watts explored with the SME – of short and choked, but melodic, notes and phrases.

It is in this section, too, that Bailey begins to contribute more actively. He appears to be using a volume pedal to control his guitar sound: not just the volume itself, but – by manipulating its controls incrementally – the attack and decay envelope of his phrases as well. Bailey's first chords seem to emerge and detach themselves from Parker's drone. They are clean-toned, with a restrained attack and short decay, low in volume, and somewhat resemble feedback. Typically for Bailey, his chords comprise notes that combine dissonantly, as do his single-string notes and motifs. While Parker plays birdsong, Bailey's timbre – again, aided by the setting of the volume pedal – becomes more conventionally that of a guitar. He does, however, regularly alter his sound between 'clean feedback', 'clean guitar' and 'fuzzier guitar', and also uses varying shades of staccato and legato attack. In fact, Bailey is uncharacteristically



very restrained in the procession of this piece. The improvisation continues on its way with only sparing comment from him, Muir on his kitchen utensils and occasional drums, Parker's sustained tones and short twitters, and Davies' gradually more familiar and audible scraping.

[6.1.e] Around 04:10, the improvisation takes on a different character. Just after 04:00, a couple of short rolls on Muir's snare drum instigate a dynamic shift towards greater volume and harsher timbres. The implied build-up of tension (to 04:10), though, is actually completed by Davies. For a couple of seconds, his agitation of amplified metal surfaces is unusually prominent in the field of sound, and at the last moment he is (perhaps) joined by Bailey, too, making similar sounds. From 04:10, until it peters out by 05:20, there is a notable increase not only in volume and harshness of texture, but also density of event and activity. Like busier SME moments, the irregular succession of accents here – each no more *individually* elaborate – overlap and obscure any intervening rests exponentially with only the slightest increase in their rate of occurrence. Parker's birdsong is louder now. Muir makes frenetic contribution on cymbals and metal instruments, but, again, is most noticeably active on drums. He plays several extended rolls and phrases on his tomtoms, an extended reprise of his earlier 'solo' showcase. Bailey, however, is the most distinctive voice in this passage, due to his choice of timbre. There are one or two uses of the volume pedal to create a delayed attack, but primarily he articulates with a staccato attack and a short decay. At a medium tempo, he plays a sequence of dissonant chords and fills that thicken and distinguish the sound throughout this section. Bailey's guitar tone is slightly distorted or fuzzy, and as such it is distinctive within the realms of the British free improvisation of this era. To a genre most

obviously indebted to modern jazz and chamber music, Bailey introduces an uncharacteristically 'rock' voice, albeit – once more – one tempered by 'atomism'.<sup>31</sup> The other free improvising electric guitarist, AMM's Keith Rowe, uses his instrument in a very different style, largely dispensing with conventional guitar technique in favour of a drone-based 'electronics' approach akin to Davies' playing. 'Pointing', at just over seven minutes in length, is of average duration for an MIC improvisation (judging by those that are collected on their CD); an AMM track tends towards the one hour mark or more. The MIC and AMM share many electro-acoustic timbres and motifs in their respective musics, but differ in their styles of delivery. Broadly, an MIC track covers similar musical ground to AMM, but over a compressed duration: greatly accelerating the rate of successive call and response.

[6.1.f] The remaining two minutes of 'Pointing' essentially reprise earlier sections. From around 05:20 to 06:20, the spacious and quieter – more SME-like – MIC return, with Muir back in the cutlery drawer and Parker alternating twitters with sustained tones. Bailey plays sparingly again in very short phrases, often just of single staccato notes, instantly damped. His timbre here is more typical of his SME playing also, approximating either an acoustic or clean-toned amplified jazz guitar. Though Bailey is more active than in some earlier sections, it is Davies who introduces new timbres at this point. At 05:18, we hear a grating tone of middle frequency static for about four seconds, as Davies' approach changes from close amplification to electronic tone generation. Within ten seconds – as the improvisation has quietened again – a sine wave tone becomes audible, which is sustained for thirty seconds (although its

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<sup>31</sup> This passage certainly suggests a model for King Crimson's 'free rock' style, in which Muir participated, during the early 1970s. Though a rock rhythm section provides a different foundation and emphasis to the music, parts of 'Larks' Tongues in Aspic, Part One', for example, strongly recall the timbres and style of interplay of Muir's earlier group. See King Crimson. *Larks' Tongues in Aspic*. 2004. CD. DGM0505



volume fluctuates during this time, sometimes to near silence). The sine wave also fluctuates in pitch in a series of glissandos – rather than definite increments – every one or two seconds, as Davies manipulates the voltage running through his analogue equipment. The overall effect is of a large fly, buzzing towards and away from the microphone, and sometimes hovering in the background.

[6.1.g] Just past the six minute mark, there is a brief interlude when Davies returns to his amplified metallic scraping, and is joined similarly by both Bailey and Muir. Muir then concentrates on metal surfaces, some resonant – bells or saucepans again, as well as cymbals – and some damped, for the final minute of the piece. There are also flurries on the drums when the volume briefly increases. Bailey comes to the fore, with a clean toned electric guitar timbre, played mostly in its bass register. He tends almost exclusively towards single notes, or two or three note motifs (rather than chords) here, albeit played sequentially in a long, unfolding atomistic line. There are a very few gentle uses of the volume pedal to modify his attack, but essentially Bailey maintains the sound of simply an amplified guitar, played with a plectrum. Although occasionally heard, in his lower register, imitating, synchronising with, and merging into Bailey's line, Parker appears to sit out the later section of this track.

[6.1.h] By 07:00, Muir and Davies are duetting quietly on ride cymbals and amplified scraping, ever more spaciouly, before petering out suddenly at 07:13. This end passage does not quite seem to run its course, and the anthology status of the album leads one to suspect that the track has been edited for release.

## **Appendix Two: *The Players***

### **The First Generation British Free Improvisers**

**(and some representative recorded performances)**

**Derek Bailey:** (Born 1930, Died 2005) *Guitar*

Bailey was one of the most widely collaborative of the free improvisers, as well as a prolific solo performer. He had been a member of Joseph Holbrooke, the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Iskra 1903 and the Music Improvisation Company. He organised and played at the Company events, ran the Incus record label and was the author of *Improvisation. Its Nature and Practice in Music*.

See Derek Bailey's *Drop Me Off At 96<sup>th</sup>*, Derek Bailey & Eddie Prévost's *Ore*, Iskra 1903's *Chapter One*, Derek Bailey & John Stevens' *Gig*

**Cornelius Cardew:** (Born 1936, Died 1981) *Piano, cello, transistor radio*  
Cardew worked with avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, before joining AMM in 1966. He left the group in 1972, rejoining briefly in 1976.

See AMM's *AMM Music 1966*, *The Crypt* and *Laminal*

**Hugh Davies:** (Born 1943, Died 2005) *Electronics, organ*

Like Cardew, Davies' background was in the classical avant-garde, and he also worked with Stockhausen. Davies was a core member of the Music Improvisation Company.

See the Music Improvisation Company's *The Music Improvisation Company 1968-1971*, Hugh Davies' *Warming Up With The Ice Man*

**Leslie (Lou) Gare:** (Born 1939) *Tenor saxophone, violin*

A founder member of AMM, Gare remained for the first 1970s duo line-up and returned temporarily in the early 1990s.

See AMM's *The Crypt*, *To Hear and Back Again* and *The Nameless Uncarved Block*

**Barry Guy:** (Born 1947) *Double bass*

Guy has played with the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Amalgam, Iskra 1903 and, later, the Parker/Guy/Lytton trio. He is a composer, as well as improviser, in both jazz and classical idioms.



See the Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Withdrawal*, Amalgam's *Prayer For Peace*, Iskra 1903's *Chapter One*, Parker/Guy/Lytton's *At The Vortex*

**Paul Lytton:** (Born 1947) *Drums, percussion, electronics*

Known especially for his work in both the 1970s Parker & Lytton duo and the subsequent Parker/Guy/Lytton trio.

See Evan Parker & Paul Lytton's *Three Other Stories* and *Live At The Unity Theatre*, Paul Lytton/John Stevens/Frank Perry/Eddie Prévost/Trevor Taylor's *Improvising Percussionist*, Evan Parker/Barry Guy/Paul Lytton's *At The Vortex*

**Jamie Muir:** *Drums, percussion*

Recordings of Muir are few and far between. A member of rock group King Crimson in the early 1970s, after a sporadic performing career Muir had retired from music by 1990.

See the Music Improvisation Company's *The Music Improvisation Company 1968-1971*, King Crimson's *Larks' Tongues In Aspic*, Derek Bailey & Jamie Muir's *Dart Drug*, Evan Parker/Jamie Muir/Paul Rogers/Mark Sanders/Wolter Wierbos' *The Ayes Have It*

**Tony Oxley:** (Born 1938) *Drums, percussion, electronics*

Oxley has been a member of both Joseph Holbrooke and the Howard Riley Trio, as well as a leader of his own groups. He is also a composer, and a virtuoso in more conventional jazz settings.

See John McLaughlin's *Extrapolation*, the Tony Oxley Quintet's *The Baptised Traveller*, the Howard Riley Trio's *Synopsis*, Joseph Holbrooke's *Joseph Holbrooke '98*

**Evan Parker:** (Born 1944) *Tenor & soprano saxophones*

Like Bailey, Parker is one of the 'big names' and eclectic collaborators of free improvisation. He has been a member of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, the Music Improvisation Company, the Parker & Lytton duo and the Parker/Guy/Lytton trio.

See the Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Summer 1967*, Evan Parker & Paul Lytton's *Three Other Stories*, Evan Parker's *Monoceros*, Evan Parker/Barry Guy/Paul Lytton's *At The Vortex*, Evan Parker & Eddie Prévost's *Imponderable Evidence*

**Eddie Prévost:** (Born 1942) *Drums, percussion*

Prévost is a founder, and the only constant member, of AMM. He also lectures on and teaches improvisation, runs Matchless Recordings, and is the author of *No Sound is Innocent* and *Minute Particulars*.

See AMM's *AMMMusic 1966*, *To Hear and Back Again*, and *Norwich*, Eddie Prévost's *Loci of Change* and *Material Consequences*, the Eddie Prévost Trio's *The Blackbird's Whistle*, Derek Bailey & Eddie Prévost's *Ore*

**Keith Rowe:** (Born 1940) *Table-top electric guitar, electronics, transistor radio*

A member of AMM from 1965 to 1972, and 1976 to 2004, Rowe is perhaps the most influential of the First Generation upon later electro-acoustic and electronic improvisers. Rowe also played in Amalgam in the late 1970s.

See AMM's *AMMMusic 1966*, *It had been an ordinary enough day in Pueblo, Colorado* and *Fine*, Keith Rowe's *A Dimension of Perfectly Ordinary Reality* and *Harsh*, Keith Rowe & Toshimaru Nakamura's *Weather Sky*

**Paul Rutherford:** (Born 1940) *Trombone, piano*

Rutherford was a founder member of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, Amalgam and Iskra 1903. He has also revived the 'Iskra' name for several subsequent improvising or semi-composed projects.

See the Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Challenge* and *Withdrawal*, Iskra 1903's *Chapter One*, Paul Rutherford's *The Gentle Harm of the Bourgeoisie*

**John Stevens:** (Born 1940, Died 1994) *Drums, percussion, cornet/bugle*

Stevens led the Spontaneous Music Ensemble (as well as various idiomatically-associated groups) up until his death. He was a keen practitioner of workshop-based music education, for which he wrote the *Search and Reflect* manual.

See the Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Karyobin*, *Face To Face*, *Low Profile* and *A New Distance*, Amalgam's *Prayer For Peace*, Paul Lytton/John Stevens/Frank Perry/Eddie Prévost/Trevor Taylor's *Improvising Percussionist*, Evan Parker & John Stevens' *Corner To Corner*

**John Tilbury:** *Piano*

Featuring in early line-ups of the Music Improvisation Company, Tilbury is long-established on the classical avant-garde scene. After various guest appearances, he debuted as a member of AMM in 1982, and remains in 2005.



See AMM's *Laminal* and *Norwich*, Howard Riley/John Tilbury/Keith Tippett's *Another Part of the Story*, John Tilbury & Eddie Prévost's *Discrete Moments*, MIMEO & John Tilbury's *The Hands of Caravaggio*

**Trevor Watts:** (Born 1939) *Alto & soprano saxophones*

Watts was a co-founder of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble, leaving the group in the mid 1970s. His free jazz group Amalgam is better representative of his later work.

See the Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Challenge* and *Face To Face*, Amalgam's *Prayer For Peace* and *Innovation*

## **Also:**

**Gavin Bryars:** Double bass

See Joseph Holbrooke's *Joseph Holbrooke '65*, *Joseph Holbrooke '98*

**Christopher Hobbs:** Percussion

See AMM's *The Crypt*, *Laminal*

**Dave Holland:** Double bass

See the Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Karyobin* and "So, what do you think?"

**Christine Jeffrey:** Vocals

There are no extant recordings of her work with the Music Improvisation Company.

**Howard Riley:** Piano

See the Howard Riley Trio's *Synopsis* and *Overground*

**Lawrence Sheaff:** Cello, accordion, clarinet, transistor radio

See AMM's *AMMMusic 1966*

**Kenny Wheeler:** Trumpet, flugelhorn

See the Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Challenge*, *Karyobin* and "So, what do you think?"

See Paul Wilson's *Territories of the Mind* website for an extensive (though potentially still not complete) list of SME personnel.

Christian Wolff (on bass guitar), Rohan de Saram (cello) and Ian Mitchell (clarinet) have also performed with various versions of AMM, as has Evan Parker on occasion.

A later version of Iskra 1903 replaced Derek Bailey with violinist Phil Wachsmann.