

Improvisation: Before, During and After

Improvisers' reflections on their thought processes

By Dominic Lash

Mystery is an essential part of improvisation. This is as true of improvisation in ‘conventional’ jazz, for example, as it is of so-called ‘free’ improvisation. Nevertheless, there are processes, structures and understandings which underlie the more magical, inexplicable moments that most improvisers seem to relish. In conventional jazz, much time and money has been spent on explaining some of these structures, at least in terms of scales, chords, and other such musical tools. Books can be found on these topics with regard to other improvisational traditions as well, notably including Hindustani classical music. This type of explanation has been conspicuously absent in regard to free improvisation. In part this is due to the nature of the materials employed – they are fluid and malleable, adapting to the situation and dependent on the musical background and personal explorations of each individual improviser. Analysis would risk being specious and subjective, not getting one any closer to an understanding of the music. Nonetheless, when armed with several pinches of salt, it is possible to venture into this territory. There are different stories to be told, of course, but there are also understandings and perceptions of how their art works that are common among many free improvisers. That is why this study concentrates on material from interviews with improvisers – its focus is on the musicians’ own understanding of how their art works.

BEFORE

It may be as well to begin by countering some frequently held assumptions about free improvisation. One is that it is a cerebral, distant music. Certainly it can allow for a great intellectual engagement. But this is not primary for most musicians. Percussionist Tony Oxley speaks about the process of developing a free improvisational language he went through in the group Joseph Holbrooke with guitarist Derek Bailey and bassist Gavin Bryars: “During the whole of that time I don’t think I ever made any intellectual decision to limit myself. The exclusion of the jazz vocabulary was an emotional act of feeling. . . . When you’re wearing chains you don’t become aware of them through intellectual processes. You can feel them.”¹ In some ways the opposite misconception of the music is that it is simple chaos, that musicians give themselves up to flail away at their instruments and accept whatever comes out. This might be an interesting approach, but it is contrary to the practice of the vast majority of improvisers. Another percussionist, Günter Müller, indicates this in speaking about his practice. “At the moment I often play with just a snare on my left, a floor tom on my right, and a cymbal between them. I change the acoustic elements regularly [he also employs electronics] so that I’m forced to learn new ways to play, and this gives me new ideas. It enables me to avoid automatic movements.”²

Müller’s comment points to the question of preparation for improvising freely. This seems paradoxical to some people – if the improvisation is free, they ask, how can one prepare for it? There is a logic behind this position, but it comes from a misunderstanding of, or an excessive focus on, the word ‘free’. ‘Free improvisation’ has become the name of an approach to music and, compared to most other forms of music, it is indeed very free. It has other aspects as well, however, and musicians’ attitudes towards them can be seen in the varying ways they prepare for their performances. Bassist Barry Guy: “A lot of the way we interact in this type of music has to be intuitive but, at the same time, it has to have a huge background knowledge to make the thing work. If you go on stage and let it all hang out, that’s sloppy discipline, like talking to your therapist or something.”³ Dramatisation of the processes at work in it is not the music’s only purpose, fascinating as these processes are. Derek Bailey describes a fairly conventional practice regime, involving ‘basic technical practise’, ‘exercises worked out to deal specifically with the manipulative demands made by new material’, and ‘woodshedding’⁴. He recognises the conflict of this approach with a certain understanding of ‘freedom’, but dryly points out: “[Some improvisers] might subscribe to an approach which prefers an abrupt confrontation with whatever is offered by each performing situation. . . . The aesthetic is faultless and perhaps leads to the ultimate ideal of improvising once and never again. Which is another

¹ Quoted in Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (The British Library National Sound Library, 1992), p. 89

² Interview with Julian Cowley, *The Wire* April 2000, p. 17

³ Interview with Michael Denan, *The Irish Times* November 13th 1997, read at www.barryguy.com

⁴ Bailey, p. 110

reason why I favour the other, the practising, approach.”⁵ Pianist Alex von Schlippenbach seems to concur with Bailey’s view: “Of course, I practise certain techniques, things I have worked out. 12-tone chords and scales. But I don’t have a prefixed way to use them.”⁶ The freedom of the improvisational process seems paramount to these musicians. They are prepared to practice and develop particular approaches to their instruments so that, when interacting with other musicians, they are free to react as quickly as possible. Musicians who subscribe to an opposite approach do, of course, exist. Guitarist Keith Rowe, who has improvised with the group AMM for over thirty years, as well as in numerous other situations, has said: “I don’t rehearse. I never practice. . . . I can honestly say that after 40 years I still look at the guitar with absolute terror. . . . I still view it as something quite empty.”⁷

DURING

What ‘actually’ goes through an improvisers mind while they improvise is of course a matter for cognitive science, not informal interviews. Nonetheless, musicians’ own analysis of and reflections on what they think about can give us valuable insight into how they approach their art, how they understand its mechanics. Barry Guy described the way hearing works during an improvisation as being engaged in “a decoding of the ongoing musical argument”⁸. This is a fascinating phrase, implying many things about the process of improvisation. For one thing, it implies the transmission of information, but that this information requires active interpretation (‘de-coding’). It also implies logic – necessary for an argument. Thus, without implying the presence of right or wrong answers (the way every improviser decodes the argument will be different), Guy nevertheless pre-emptively claims that improvisation is an entirely subjective process. Subjectivity and objectivity engage in a fluid dialogue during an improvisation, remaining constantly present but elusive, shifting their positions – boundaries are blurred.

Speed is something that improvisers often mention. Here we find, in a sense, an objective category. It must be emphasised that the speed referred to is usually not a speed of action (that is, playing very fast), though this can be crucial, but more usually a speed of response. As Barry Guy puts it, when I asked him how he interpreted the idea of ‘accuracy of hearing’, “ ‘Accuracy’ implies a speedy and accurate appraisal of the situation which of course is subjective.”⁹ The exact nature of the appraisal, Guy seems to be saying, is subjective, but the need to make such an appraisal speedily is a crucial, and more objective, measure of an effective improviser.

Structure is another area often thrown at improvisers; the music has not infrequently been accused of being chaotic or formless. The attitudes that improvisers show towards musical structure are very interesting. Barry Guy’s list of the tools required during the improvisational process includes “a combination of history (relationships), anticipation, analysis and implementation of response”¹⁰. All this implies a strong, if highly fluid, sense of structure – if the history of a piece or a particular playing relationship can be analysed, and combined with anticipation of what may come next, there must surely be a sense of structure present. What there is not is a *determinate* structure. As Derek Bailey writes: “Rather in the way that memory works, perhaps, a piece can be criss-crossed with connections and correspondences which govern the selection and re-selection of events as well as guiding the overall pacing of the piece. Simultaneously, events remembered and events anticipated can act on the present moment.”¹¹ John Edwards talks about deliberately aiming to give structural tension to an improvisation: “probably the majority of things that I do – not rhythm things, but the majority of open, free music – seem to me to require a kind of pushing or a pulling”¹². Not that this is the only way to play! Saxophonist John Butcher gives a description of a rather different way of improvising: “I’m not so interested in planning where things will go, because apart from very broad

⁵ Bailey, pp. 110-111

⁶ Interview with Richard Cook, *The Wire* August 1986, p. 10

⁷ Interview with Dan Warburton, *The Wire* April 2001, p. 40

⁸ Interview with Dominic Lash, conducted by email, February 2003

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Bailey, p. 111

¹² Interview with Dominic Lash, conducted at the Barbican, March 21st 2003

brushstrokes, you can't do that. . . . I think I am an 'in-the-moment' player, and I'm very sympathetic to the sort of music that feels so delicately balanced that any participant could change its direction at any moment. Of course, if everybody's working like that, nothing might actually happen!"¹³.

Certain structural markers are more absolute. One that saxophonist Evan Parker refers to is the sense of an ending: "Something I need to have pretty much down with people that I play with, is that people know when a piece is finished. I hate it if they don't."¹⁴ Speaking personally, this was an area of playing that puzzled me greatly before becoming involved in improvising. After being involved for a while, it is now something fairly clear to me. It can vary with different musicians, but there is some combination of duration, musical logic and perhaps some more mysterious factors that means I rarely have disagreements about endings with the musicians I play with. One could not quite say that the criteria are entirely objective, but they can be shared enough by musicians for groups to reach a consensus. Evan Parker takes it further: "if there's a sense of ending – working back in a kind of reverse logic – it must be because there's a sense of form"¹⁵.

This form does not have to arrive unbidden as a result of the improvisational process. Improvisers can decide, to an extent, how audible to make their interaction. A call-and-response type of playing, where the relationships between the actions of the different players is crystal clear, is relatively easy to achieve but can also quickly become wearily predictable. Evan Parker again: "It may be interesting for the listener to be able to see why everything happens; that the process be listenable has a use. But I think that what is even more interesting is when the process is *lost* and things happen that are clearly the basis for an understanding, but the understanding is no longer worked through at the overt, explicit level. That's an important qualitative transition in improvised music."¹⁶

Listening is of primary importance while improvising. Indeed, guitarist Fred Frith once described the London improvising scene as being one of "virtuoso listening"! John Edwards describes the kind of concentration required to play this music: "I'm usually really thinking quite a lot. I do a lot of – it's really listening, listening, listening, listening. Maybe I do a lot more of listening and letting the stuff come through my hands than I realise. . . . But having said that I'm still very aware that I think about what I'm going to play, and what's going on and how I can sort of fit in with that, or complement it, or pull it in another direction, or try and push it this way . . ." ¹⁷ To listen, one clearly needs to be able to hear – what jazz musicians call "good ears". The ears required in free improvisation are not quite the same as those tested by aural exams in music school. They encompass those kinds of hearing, but are also broader. Having analysed an improvisation by Barry Guy and pianist Marilyn Crispell¹⁸, I asked Guy about it. I had observed that for much of the track Crispell uses a C Mixolydian mode in her improvising (changing to more of a C Dorian at some point). Guy sometimes relates to this tonality, at other times plays at a tangent to it. When I asked him about this, his response was; "Your note concerning "Warp" and the Parker/Guy/Lytton trio is interesting in the sense that you have obviously analysed the music in some detail. I refer back to "history" allied with our accumulated mechanisms to read the musical landscape."¹⁹ I take the implication of this reply to be that the type of analysis that a musicologist might engage in is not quite the same as that undertaken while improvising. Guy was clearly aware of the pitch content of Crispell's playing during the improvisation, but he was not separating it from the other elements of her performance – he was reading

¹³ Interview with Dan Warburton interview, March 13th 2001 (read at the European Free Improvisation web site – www.shef.ac.uk/misc/rec/ps/efi). Note that these approaches are in no way incompatible – John Butcher and John Edwards have in fact just released a duo CD. One of the fascinations of improvisation is that differences and contradictions between musicians need not derail the music, but can in fact provide material for the improvisation to grapple with.

¹⁴ Interview with Martin Davidson, *Opprobrium 4* (available on the European Free Improvisation web site)

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ John Corbett, *Extended Play: Sounding off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Duke University Press 1994), p. 204

¹⁷ Barbican interview; note that there are differences of opinion among improvisers even about this seemingly fundamental factor – pianist Alex von Schlippenbach has said "I don't know if you could call it *thinking*, when I play. It's more a feeling of balance, not thinking at all. When I get the feeling it's not working, then I think about what I could do to make it better." (Cook interview, p. 10)

¹⁸ "Warp", from *After Appleby* by Parker/Guy/Lytton and Marilyn Crispell, Leo Records 2000

¹⁹ email interview

the musical landscape using accumulated mechanisms of which response to pitch was only one. John Edwards emphasises the amount of musical information that an improviser ideally needs to take in: “The main thing is being able to hear the whole thing, so that you can hear, you know, if there’s a rhythmic thing, if someone does hit that top 9th or something, OK you hear that, and you can – you’ve got options about what you do, that’s training, but you can also hear the rhythmic thing within that, and maybe you can hear the attack of that note, and maybe you can hear the slightly different timbre at the end . . . you know, the real details.”²⁰ Anything is fair game as material to respond to in an improvisational situation, and so the improviser wants to be aware of as much as possible, both in his playing and that of his partners.

Of course, this abundance of information and possible areas that each musician is concentrating on in a given moment hardly makes things simple for the audience. This is a positive situation, however. Following on from Evan Parker’s remark above, the audience member can engage in a process not that dissimilar to that engaged in by the musicians themselves. As bassist/composer Simon Fell puts it: “Audiences will hear things that aren’t there. That doesn’t mean they’re mistaken; the act of listening synthesizes relationships, anticipations and responses in the music that aren’t literally there. But they are there if you hear them.”²¹

After listening to and analysing the situation, the musician next needs to respond. For most improvisers, the most important difference that leads to different responses in different situations are the different musicians one is playing with. Evan Parker: “I need to play differently in each of the two groups [the Parker/Guy/Lytton trio and the Parker/Russell/Edwards/Sanders quartet], but I feel totally that I can do whatever I want. Now that’s very strange, because the results are partly determined by what the collective need of that specific constellation of personalities suggests. But at the same time I have the feeling that I’m equally free in both situations. But there obviously are constraints, but they’re not constraints that register at a conscious level.”²² John Edwards agreed with Parker, when I put the above quote to him, and expressed the idea in terms of a conversational metaphor: “That’s as much to say that if you sit down and talk with these three people, and if you sit down and talk with these five people, who are different, or maybe two of them are the same, you talk or say whatever you want, and you are who you are; you probably end up talking about different things – that’s all really – that’s what the music is too really.”²³ This seems to be a common attitude among free improvisers – different groups develop different identities more through the process of playing rather than by the musicians deliberately deciding to restrict their playing to give the music a specific character (though this does happen not infrequently). As Derek Bailey puts it: “In this music, that’s almost part of your material, what other people play.”²⁴

Physicality is an absolutely crucial aspect of improvising. Ears, of course, are part of the body and so hearing and listening are physical processes, though we may not usually conceive of them as such. This is yet another common division that improvisation blurs. Improvisers do not, as a rule, think rigidly in terms of, say, harmony, melody and rhythm as separate factors. When I asked bassist John Edwards if he did, he replied: “It’s not split up like that, no.”²⁵ Similarly, Barry Guy referred to an improviser’s responses giving rise to “the desired pitch areas (or sounds or whatever)”²⁶, implying no particular hierarchy. The physicality of playing an instrument is made part of the musical process in such a way that improvisers can approach the sounds that they and their musical partners produce as totalities, perhaps focussing on different aspects at different times but not effecting a rigid compartmentalization of the musical information.

There is a moment 1’12” into “Rough Diamond – Harry”, the improvisation I analyse in the appendix, when guitarist John Russell plays a high F to F# motif that is instantly replicated, a fraction of a second later, by John Edwards. I put it to him that this response was not the kind of thing one could consciously control. His response was: “ ‘Bang bang’, those reactions that are too quick to think about, like you say, and they’re too subtle to have really been able to tell, but our ears, perhaps, and our hands, or something are

²⁰ Barbican interview

²¹ Interview with Julian Cowley, *The Wire* August 2000, p. 23

²² Davidson interview

²³ Barbican interview

²⁴ Corbett, p. 231

²⁵ Interview with Dominic Lash, conducted at the Barbican, March 21st 2003

²⁶ email interview

working – lips – are working on another level, that we don't access in normal life."²⁷ The fact that an improviser can hear something and respond to it without needing to consciously process that decision has fascinating implications about the way our bodies, senses and minds work. Barry Guy has coined the phrase "osteophonic hearing" to describe how our bones might be able to transmit vibrations to our brains before our ears pick them up. "Osteophonic hearing is of course an ideal situation where the body and skeleton act as a scanner."²⁸ Ideal it may be, but the idea is intriguing and seems to me to merit further study.

By far the best description I have come across for the way aurality and physicality operate in improvisation comes from the flautist Jim Denley, quoted in Derek Bailey's *Improvisation*. The quote is lengthy but so apposite it is worth reproducing in full: "For the improviser the physicality of producing sound (the hardware) is not a separate activity to the thoughts and ideas in music (software). In the act of creation there is a constant loop between the hierarchy of factors involved in the process. My lungs, lips, fingers, voice box and their working together with the potentials of sound are dialoguing with other levels which I might call mind and perception. The thoughts and decisions are sustained and modified by my physical potentials and vice versa but as soon as I try and define these separately I run into problems. It is a meaningless enterprise for it is the very entanglement of levels of perception, awareness and physicality that makes improvisation."²⁹

This 'entanglement' often results, among improvisers, in an attitude to instrumental technique and virtuosity different to that found in many other musics. Derek Bailey expresses this best: "to speak of 'mastering' the instrument in improvisation is misleading. The instrument is not just a tool but an ally. It is not only a means to an end, it is a source of material, and technique for the improviser is often an exploitation of the natural resources of the instrument."³⁰ Just as any part of the musical information produced by one's fellow players can be the focus of an improviser's responses, so any part of the sounds available from one's instrument can be put to musical use in improvisation. The squeaks, rustlings and inconsistencies that traditional musical education tries to iron out can be shown, in improvisation, to be full of musical potential. This is not to say that there is no room for the virtuoso in free improvisation, on the contrary, there are a great many of them in the music. But they have, perhaps, a different relationship to the desire to be in control of their instruments than we find elsewhere. John Edwards: "It's a funny thing that, about being in control of it, because it's such a disciplined thing, with an instrument, because you don't just let go and let anything happen, because you'd drop the instrument, if it's a bass! . . . You're not aware of yourself with these sort of magical things, and you're doing some big gesture, but . . . your hands are doing stuff that's disciplined, and they're working on that kind of practise level, from doing it hours and hours and hours."³¹ It is thus possible to train oneself, so that one can be more free.

I was very interested in Barry Guy's attitude to this issue, because he has spoken of wanting to play the bass with the immediacy and flexibility of the human voice.³² This puzzled me because Guy's improvisational vocabulary includes the use of a great many 'preparations', such as object threaded between the strings, and so on. Surely he could not be in control of all the resulting sounds when wedging a drumstick between his strings? It seems, however, that what Guy objects to is any sense of fighting with the instrument. This is profitable for some improvisers³³, but while Guy clearly uses the instrument as a resource, he wishes to play using "a free flow of ideas unconstrained by the baggage of 'struggle'."³⁴ This does not mean he cannot use

²⁷ Barbican interview

²⁸ email interview

²⁹ Bailey, p. 108, originally from 'Improvisation: the entanglement of awareness and physicality' by Denley, published in *Sounds Australian Summer 1991*

³⁰ *ibid*, p. 99

³¹ Barbican interview

³² "I find that improvisation allows me to treat the bass as a voice, instead of an object to be bowed or plucked." Interview with Joanne Talbot, *Double Bassist* Spring/Summer '96, read at www.barryguy.com

³³ While not actively seeking out such situations, Simon Fell has pointed out that highly energetic playing situations that drain one's stamina can, in improvisation, have musically beneficial effects: "In real terms, you sometimes get to a point where you have to start doing things you would never have thought of doing if you had the normal range of options, simply because other things are cut off from you." Cowley interview, p. 24.

³⁴ email interview

gestures whose every outcome he is not in control of: “For me the ‘event’ can take the form of skilfully judged articulations as well as looser affiliations to random gestures that possess a lesser degree of control.”³⁵

The development of improvisational techniques is often a highly personal affair. As in jazz and other improvisational musics, much can come from imitation of favourite players. But a great deal also comes from the improviser’s personal explorations, and their attitude towards the unexpected and accidental. John Edwards gives a vivid example of both methods: “I remember the first time I heard the Mingus record [*Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*], and there’s a duet with [Eric] Dolphy [“What Love”] . . . I’d just started playing bass and I couldn’t figure out what was going on – ‘How does he do that sound – This is incredible! – This is fantastic! . . . And lo and behold . . . some time after that, just playing away and my hand sort of slipped with the string off the edge – wvmph! – ‘What happened there?’ . . . And then I realised, - ‘Oh crikey, that’s that sound, that Mingus thing!’ I then found out that there’s other ways of doing it, and then that’s a whole new thing – ‘Oh right, you can use that in other ways as well as that sort of vocal sounding thing.’ [The duet in question is famous for sounding like a conversation.] So then that can lead on to a whole range of other things and other avenues to explore.”³⁶

We have already seen in a number of places the issue of how conscious improvisers are when playing, and that even when they are highly aware they admit that there may be more going on in their heads than they are consciously aware of (see the John Edwards quotation at the bottom of page four, for example). Moments in the music that cannot be reached by conscious analysis and decision seem to be of great importance to many improvisers. Evan Parker has talked about it thus: “Once more than a certain number of events per second are being generated by the group or by individuals, how those streams of events interact to form a sense of a whole – you know, a group music as opposed to just some people doing something at the same time – is very mysterious.”³⁷ He we return to mystery, the idea we opened this essay with. Speaking about his trio with Barry Guy and Paul Lytton, Evan Parker has said that “the whole thing seems to be operating at a level that involves . . . certainly intuition, and maybe faculties of a more paranormal nature.”³⁸ Such seemingly extreme statements are not uncommon. Synthesiser player Thomas Lehn has described it thus: “For me the most satisfying music occurs when you get into that kind of state when you can’t play otherwise than you do. . . . In those moments of inspiration there’s a kind of touching, where each listener is at the same time connected to that magical thing happening between the sounds and their structure’s complexity, and to the depths of their mind and soul as well.”³⁹ Even the usually wry and rational Derek Bailey refers to “a whole side to improvisation, the more exciting, the more magical side, which can only be discovered by people playing together. The essence of improvisation, its intuitive, telepathic foundation, is best explored in a group situation.”⁴⁰

So the musicians themselves, it seems, ultimately reach a point when words do not help matters much. I hope I have shown that, while the topic is certainly riddled with confusion, and there is nothing like consensus among improvising musicians, there are nevertheless things which can be said about how musicians approach free improvisation and what they think about when engaged in it that may help the outsider better to understand how this music works. Nevertheless, this can only take us so far. If words could explain it all, there would be no need for the music. As it is, words can help us part of the way but the final leap – for both musician and audience – is for every individual to take during their own encounters with the music.

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ Barbican interview

³⁷ Davidson interview

³⁸ Corbett, p. 203

³⁹ Interview with Julian Cowley, *The Wire* January 2001, p. 12

⁴⁰ Bailey, p. 112

AFTER

There is a saying that a musician is only as good as their last concert. In a sense, the only thing to do after one improvisation is to begin another. However, I wish to use this brief section as an introduction to the appendix, and also to make a few comments on the long view in improvising. As free improvisers are constantly in search for the fresh and malleable in music, one might expect this to mean that they are shy of long standing playing relationships, preferring the shock of the new. Some players indeed do take this approach. Derek Bailey: “Having no group loyalties to offend and having solo playing as an ultimate resource, it is possible to play with other musicians, of whatever persuasion, as often as one wishes without having to enter into a permanent commitment to any stylistic or aesthetic position. This might be, I think, the ideal situation for an improviser.”⁴¹ Many musicians seem not to agree with this perspective. Many improvising groups have decades-long histories, albeit usually with somewhat shifting membership. Eddie Prévost, who has been percussionist with the group AMM for all of its nearly 40 year history, reflects on this in the context of a duo performance he did with Bailey: “He has expressed an interest in what happens before musicians gain some sort of a common language. I feel the audience have to be incredibly creative in the combination of materials in that situation.”⁴² The developing of a group identity need not lead to staleness, it can lead to music unimaginable by any other method. Evan Parker: “What’s happening with the trio [with Alex van Schlippenbach and Paul Lovens] on this last tour is I’ve seen a phenomenon I’ve never been conscious about before, which is that we can cross-fade from area to area, sending signals ahead about what’s coming up to one another. . . . You can’t do that with people you’ve only just met.”⁴³ In practise, most improvisers retain some playing relationships of relative stability, while continuing to make music with entirely new people as the opportunities arise.

⁴¹ Bailey, p. 112

⁴² Interview with Julian Cowley, *The Wire* May 2003, p. 41

⁴³ Interview with Richard Cook, *Jazz Review* March 2001, p. 24