

BEFORE THE DRIVERLESS CAR, THERE WAS IMPROVISATION

(PRIMA DELL'AUTOMOBILE SENZA CONDUCENTE, C'ERA L'IMPROVVISAZIONE)

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Some fleeting thoughts on 50 years of making unpopular music.

“La Musica è niente, ma è nostra” (“music is nothing but it’s ours” Giuseppe Chiari)

The history and lore of free improvisation, the contemporary practice of making spontaneous music, may lie in the remote beginnings of human music making - pegged by anthropologists at about 40,000 BC. But more certainly today’s well documented and well codified free-music practices are rooted in Afro-American culture, particularly in the evolution of Jazz - when in the middle-late 1950’s during the first stirrings of the modern civil rights movement atonality, atemporality, modular orchestration and graphic notation, entered naturally into the languages of some prominent jazz musicians; and likewise when the non-notated improvisations of Jazz and post dodecaphonic musics entered into practices of classically oriented composers and performers.

Then came the 1960’s, when powerful movements for equality and social justice combined with a growing world-wide cultural liberation movement among the youth; the intellectual and aesthetic attractions of postmodernism and its consequential mixing of so-called high and low cultures were then, all universal signs that a moment of grand liberation was in view. Obtainable forms of musical liberation distinguished by a challenge to all forms of authority, including conventional musical rules, behavior and critical agreement.

The earliest forms of freely improvised music took place in small groups of like-minded players who were often a mix of composers, skilled new music instrumentalists or former jazz musicians. From these experiences, many individuals developed personal improvisatory languages as solo performers; some instrumentalists incorporated electronic amplification, analogue and digital processing and synthesizers – as these means were then in rapid development.

The distance between composers and improvisers is not as great as one might imagine. Iannis Xenakis, Ornette Coleman, and Charles Mingus all explored a new architecture in sound. John Cage played with Sun Ra. Anthony Braxton studied Karlheinz Stockhausen. From David Tudor’s electronic boxes came breathtaking nonstop invention that matched the mad improvisational power of Cecil Taylor and George Lewis’ quests for man-machine parity. AMM’s Cornelius

Cardew and MEV (my own Musica Elettronica Viva Group) were primarily classically trained composers. Larry Austin, Earl Browne – a jazz trumpeter - and the Chicago Arts Ensemble all share cabins in the vast spaces of American experimentalism.

What linked all of these artists and groups is that they embraced pure experimentation and assumed the full responsibility of not always being able to know the outcome of any given musical proposition. In the 1960's the above named, were composers, experimentalists and/or dedicated improvisers who shared a common goal: to radically liberate themselves from current musical tradition by renouncing all forms of authority : ie. the written score, the need for a conductor or leader, the exclusive use of traditional western instruments, traditional venues, and even acceptably standardized musical durations. Some went as far as to encourage amateurs' participation or invite the general public to join in the fray. All of these tendencies were, then, part of an enhanced democratization of musical life and its self-exploration of the physical and creative limits of making organized sound. In some cases these acts were revolutionary and utopian, in others they were mere forms of Buddhist "being in the moment"; finally, some were acts of pure play or provocation. As a challenge to institutionalized contemporary music composition or to more traditional composed jazz creations, spontaneous music making appeared - in its hey-day, to be an cutting-edge attraction, full of spunk and promise as it was full of inherent dangers. It was always viewed with suspect by the classical-contemporary world, who generally considered free-improvisation a kind of vice, a cheating lie and ultimately as a threat to established well-behaved history.