

## Hierarchies of creative interaction – the political aspects of collaboration between composer and improvising musicians in *Against Oblivion, Part 3*

By **Jeremy Peyton Jones** for the CONFERENCE: COMPOSITIONAL AESTHETICS AND THE POLITICAL, 20-22 Feb 2015

Last year I undertook a residency at the Cantieri Culturali alla Zisa in Palermo, Sicily and made a new piece of work in collaboration with the Sicilian Improvisers Orchestra, a group of improvising musicians based in Palermo. We rehearsed over a period of 4 weeks and presented two public performances of the piece “*Against Oblivion Part 3*”, first at the Cantieri and then at the Teatro Garibaldi in the city.

Working with improvising musicians is something I don’t normally do – in fact in all my composition of the last 30 years, except for a recent project called *Endings* in 2013 in which I collaborated with the improvising electronic composer Kaffe Matthews, I had consciously avoided all but the smallest amount of improvisation in my work. However I’d come to realize that this had cut me off from a whole area of potentially fruitful creative practice. And so I had become very keen to work with a group *specialising* in improvisation.

Today I want to consider two hierarchies: the relationship between myself as composer and the musicians, and from that, the hierarchies inherent in various forms of improvisatory practice, and the hierarchies of musical style and genre.

The SIO is a collective of professional musicians based in Palermo, and for the purposes of this consideration of their roles, and the focus on those actually involved in the devising and performance of the piece, it is worth introducing the 11 members who participated in this project:

		
Beppe Viola – reeds	Tiziana Maionica – voice Benedetto Basile – flute Eva Geraci – flute Marcello Cina – tenor sax	Alessandra Pipitone – piano Lelio Giannetto - bass

		
<p>Mezz Gacano – el. guitar Giuseppe Greco - guitar</p>	<p>Gandolfo Pagano – prepared guitar</p>	<p>Alessandro Libro - violin</p>

The fact that this project also involved a British composer of mainly non-improvised music (who speaks little Italian) travelling to a very different part of Europe to collaborate with these musicians is also significant. I was something of an outsider both culturally and musically and I felt somewhat apprehensive about how our working relationship would develop. I didn't want to impose myself and my way of working on them and at the same time I wanted us to be able to work fruitfully together to create something unique and distinctive. It was also significant that when I started working with them the orchestra had just finished a project focusing on the music and ideology of the legendary jazz saxophonist/composer Albert Ayler called *la Musica e La Rivolta*. That experience for the players, and for me on seeing their performances had an effect on the way we worked together. I very much appreciate Ayler's combination of lyricism and riotousness and was struck by the way the players interpreted the material.

Clearly in many areas of collective musical and performing arts practice, hierarchies exist either implicitly or explicitly, in the relationships of those involved. Some of these are clearly defined:

- conductor and orchestra members;
- musical director and band;
- director and actors;
- choreographer and dancers.

In devised work, involving the creative input of the performers, such hierarchies are also often still explicit, involving a distinction between the creative team (composer/choreographer/director) and the performers.

With improvised music these hierarchies may be less obvious and indeed many musicians are drawn to this way of working specifically because they wish to work more collectively, expressing a desire to avoid the 'tyranny' of the score and the 'tyranny' of being directed.

Before going to Sicily I re-read Derek Bailey's book *Improvisation Its nature and Practice in Music* in which his antipathy to the score, and the notion of being directed, comes across very clearly. Besides Bailey's comments such as 'the stranglehold of notation' I was struck by a couple of quotes, one from John Zorn:

*“I was really fascinated with....finding a way to harness these improvisers’ talents in a compositional framework without actually hindering what they did best – which is improvising”*

This tallied with my own aims: instead of asking players to perform fixed pre-determined pieces, I wanted to draw on their skill and creativity to produce something far richer and more varied than I could conceive or produce on my own. What I wasn’t so clear about was Zorn’s assertion which followed:

*“An improviser wants to have the freedom to do **anything at any time**. For a composer to give an improviser a piece of music which said ‘play these melodies – then improvise – then play with this guy – then improvise – then play this figure – then improvise’ to me that was defeating the purpose of what these people had developed, which was a very particular way of relating to their instruments and to each other”*

I was also struck by the comment by Evan Parker about scores:

*Leaving aside the score as the embodiment of an ideal performance, a score can also be considered a recipe for **possible** performance.*

Unlike Zorn I particularly wanted to combine improvisation with pre-composed fixed material – I felt this would give the piece a far more identifiable and concrete dramaturgical structure and be potentially more communicative for the audience than an equivalent period of largely free improvisation. I also liked Evan Parker’s notion of a kind of halfway house where, like many indeterminate pieces, the score allows for an amount of freedom of interpretation.

At the start of rehearsals I had several sections of music planned - some involving free improvisation, some involving performer choice and ‘possible’ interpretations of a score, some involving improvisation over pre-existing material, but also some fully scored for the ensemble, with the notion that we would explore all this material in rehearsal and between us devise an overall structure for the finished piece. I was mindful of Zorn’s assertions and was fully aware of the hostility of many improvisers to the score and the “stranglehold of notation” as Derek Bailey had so eloquently put it, so didn’t know how the players would take to the more structured material and was particularly nervous about the fully scored sections, not knowing how open or hostile the players would be to this.

What I experienced was that we engaged in a kind of dance, negotiating different levels of improvisation vs score reading from section to section, but that creatively all seemed happy with including the whole range, from fully improvised to fully scored. In the event we used very little completely free improvisation. We tried it, and I had assumed that because the players knew each other and already had this as the main focus of their work that they would think it important to include at least some of this complete freedom for themselves. It turned out in rehearsal that they felt the freely improvised sections worked better when directed. At first I felt they might be deferring to me as the creative instigator of the piece, but I think it was more pragmatic than that – with a small group of three or four improvisers it’s perfectly possible (and probably preferable) to allow the performers to interact freely, but with 11

players the material can simply become too dense and amorphous in its shaping if no structure is imposed, either through pre-arranged plan or through live direction.

I want to play you come examples from the live performance, but before that I'll give a bit of background to *Against Oblivion*:

This piece is the third part of an ongoing series of music/theatre productions all called *Against Oblivion*. Each part of this series is self-contained and represents a new, separate and independent output of my research. The research element focuses on the role of narrative in music-based theatre especially regarding the move away from naturalistic narrative in favour of an equal expression through physical action, image, sound, text etc, and new collaborative devising processes as an effective alternative to conventional roles played by composer, director, choreographer and performer.

The subject matter of the series as a whole concerns the importance of memory, either as a facet of our cultural legacy, or as a vital necessity in the face of the extremes of human experience. Part 1 (made in 2007), concerned the legacy of violence and conflict, Part 2 (made in 2009) concerned a more personal contemplation of our individual legacies with references to celebrity culture pitching its vacuous extremes alongside allusions to the genuinely creative and pioneering. Part 3 is about the legacy of music itself, in particular Western art music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and through this, about a consideration of what music *is* and what it *can be* (which I felt had been very significant questions for 20<sup>th</sup> C composers). I've always loved Berio's *Sinfonia* and had an idea of doing something which acknowledged the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a similar way in which *Sinfonia* includes a homage to, and acknowledgement of the music of the 19th. In its extensive quotation and re-presentation of Mahler, *Sinfonia* also presents a powerful challenge to musical hierarchies – the status of the masterwork and the notion that such things are not to be tampered with or defiled.

In *Sinfonia*, Berio made a tribute to the music of Mahler whose work, as Berio put it in 1968 'seems to bear the weight of the entire history of music of the last two centuries'. In the 3rd movement, the Scherzo from Mahler's 2nd Symphony runs through the work 'like a river flowing through a constantly changing landscape'. There are parallels with my approach in *Against Oblivion* Part 3. For Berio the Mahler movement is treated 'like a generator - and also as a container - within whose framework a large number of musical characters and references is proliferated'. So *Against Oblivion* 3 looks back at the ideas and music of the 20th Century and the legacy this has left for composers, musicians and audiences today. As well as improvisation there's a lot of sampling, quotation, reworking and rescoring of pre-composed music, as well as spoken texts in English or in Italian translation, from several sources about what music *is* and what it *can be*. These draw in particular on the music of Webern and the ideas of John Cage (who, as did Mahler for Berio, between them represent to me two composers who 'bear the weight' of 20<sup>th</sup> Century western music), but also the music of Hanns Eisler, Igor Stravinsky, Bela Bartok, and Morton Feldman. Into this mix is also thrown music based on material by Purcell, and an anonymous 13<sup>th</sup>-century French motet. This inclusion and re-presentation of such a wide range of musical styles was an important aspect of the piece as a whole.

The Cage texts are all writings from Silence and concern what music can be and how we perceive it. I purposefully wanted to combine these ideas with music which incorporated a mixture of noise, extended instrumental techniques and more conventional harmonic and melodic structures.

Before we listen to the examples here's a list the Types of Improvisation used in the piece:

1. **Free improvisation** - completely ad lib, of an approximate time length ended by a prearranged signal to move to the next section.
2. **Directed free improvisation** – directed only in terms of which instruments are to play and/or remain silent – otherwise entirely free
3. **idiomatic improvisation** over fixed material – with pre-arranged agreement as to which instruments should improvise when
4. **non-idiomatic** improvisation over fixed material – ditto  
NB idiomatic and non-idiomatic are the terms used by Bailey, alternative terms might be **structured** or **non-structured**, or as Beppe Viola put it improvising '**inside**' the material or '**outside**' it
5. **Indeterminacy involving improvisation** where the score allows for performer choice and includes instruction to improvise on certain given material

As I've made clear we did not start this devised collaboration from a completely clean slate – starting to create a piece collectively from scratch – it would of course have been very different if we had. I came up with the concept and much of the pre-composed material. However it's very obvious that the improvised elements are a major part of the finished work and the creative input of the performers transformed it completely beyond anything I could have created on my own.

In all the directions given to them I didn't mind how freely they were interpreted. More to the point I didn't think it was my place to mind..

I'd like to play you three examples from the performance:

1. **directed free improv** leading into scored section (Eisler chords from *Über den Selbstmord* – about the suicide), with speech then idiomatic improvisation (Tutti-Tutti furioso into Eisler 2) "Is it high? Is it low? Is it in the middle? Is it soft? Is it loud? Etc from Silence Composition as Process III Communication. John Cage  
'I begin to hear the old sounds - the ones I had thought worn out, worn out by intellectualization - I begin to hear the old sounds as though they are not worn out. Silence, like music, is non-existent. There are always sounds. That is to say if one is alive to hear them. Obviously they are not. Whether I make them or not there are always sounds to be heard and all of them are excellent."  
John Cage
2. **Indeterminate score or open score**: Webern (*Bagatelle*) treatment of material from *Bagatelles for String Quartet No 1* with samples from Webern
3. **Idiomatic and non-idiomatic improve over fixed material**: *Je Languis* 13<sup>th</sup> Century French chanson *Je Languis-Pucelete-Domino*

## BAGATELLES

For between 4 and 12 melody instruments and sampler  
Performance directions

Choose four or five of the fragments which are playable on your instrument. If possible play at the given pitch, but otherwise fragments can be transposed by 1 octave.

Play these chosen fragments in any order, and with as many repetitions as you like. Play at the given tempo but start when you choose. At first play each fragment matching the notation as closely as possible, and carefully observing the articulation, dynamic and expression marks\*. Play with great attention to detail and with delicate expressivity.

Once you become familiar with the fragments start to vary them, creating subtle changes or elaborations as you feel appropriate.

On a given signal, play two more fragments in your own time, then stop playing.

Always listen carefully to the other players. Perform as an ensemble

### NOTES:

If the indication is not performable on your instrument, play in a manner which matches the given timbre/articulation as closely as possible.

Harmonics are to be played as a harmonic if possible, otherwise straight. (The sounding pitch is given in brackets)

The sampler plays suitable sampled recording of a Webern work (B2 = at pitch, B3 = at octave)

**BAGATELLES**

Jeremy Peyton Jones (after Anton Webern)

1.  $\text{♩} = 60$

1.  $\text{pp}$  2.  $p$

1.  $\text{pp}$  2.  $\text{pp}$

1.  $\text{pp}$  2.  $\text{pp}$

1.  $\text{pp}$  2.  $\text{pp}$

sampler

1.  $\text{pp}$  2.  $p$  3.  $p$  4.  $\text{pp}$

1.  $\text{pp}$  2.  $\text{pp}$  3.  $\text{rit.}$  4.  $\text{pp}$

1.  $\text{pp}$  2.  $\text{pp}$  3.  $\text{pp}$  4.  $\text{pp}$

sampler

1

5.  $f$  6.  $ff$

5.  $ff$  6.  $fz$  7.  $sf$

5.  $ff$  6.  $sf$  7.  $f$

5.  $f$  6.  $f$

sampler

7.  $p$  8.  $\text{pppp}$

7.  $f$  8.  $\text{pppp}$

7.  $p$  8.  $\text{pppp}$

7.  $sf$  8.  $\text{pppp}$

sampler

2