
1 Editorial: The sonic and the electronic in improvisation

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3 Electroacoustic practices have held a special place in
4 the improvisation scene for a number of decades.
5 From the amplified sound masses of AMM and the
6 sonic experiments of Musica Elettronica Viva in the
7 1960s, to George Lewis's Voyager system in the
8 1980s, to the Evan Parker ElectroAcoustic Ensemble
9 in the 1990s and onwards, improvisors have deployed
10 electronic tools and a broad range of sonic resources –
11 sometimes in an effort to expand the available palette
12 of sonic materials, sometimes in search of new means
13 of developing or facilitating the process of spontane-
14 ous music-making (as, for example, with Lewis's
15 Voyager (Lewis 2000)).

16 But this is not the same as to say that improvisation
17 has equally been a proudly recognised pillar of electro-
18 acoustic music over this same period. It could be
19 argued that electroacoustic improvisation has been
20 sidelined somewhat, in favour of studio composition
21 practices in the first instance, then later as a kind of
22 lesser sibling of mixed music paradigms; a distant
23 cousin to be eyed with some suspicion, as a minor dis-
24 traction from the sanctioned primacy of compositional
25 practices. Even as advances in real-time digital tech-
26 nologies made onstage electroacoustic performance
27 practices more feasible and more practical, the focus
28 tended to remain firmly fixed on mixed music compo-
29 sition rather than on the expanding possibilities that
30 these technologies offered for improvisation practices.
31 This is perhaps strange, since no musical practice is as
32 closely linked with the 'real-time' as improvisation,
33 with its focus on the 'now', on the immediate and
34 the ephemeral, on the passing moment.

35 A closer inspection, however, perhaps reveals a
36 slightly different story: of a rich, albeit somewhat
37 obscured, undercurrent of improvisation practices
38 running through electroacoustic music. Scratch
39 beneath the surface and one finds that inside quite a
40 number of electroacoustic composers there is an
41 enthusiastic improviser eager for an opportunity to
42 step into the light; and, there are many who are per-
43 haps more broadly recognised in the electroacoustic
44 community for their compositional output, who are
45 also active onstage as electroacoustic improvisors.
46 Why, then, is improvisation not afforded the same
47 pride of place as more compositionally oriented
48 practices?

49 One possible answer is that significantly less atten-
50 tion has been paid to improvisation in electroacoustic
51 theory, writing and literature than is paid to the broad
52 range of electroacoustic compositional practices. This
53 might seem odd, since quite a lot of published litera-
54 ture on electroacoustic music comes from the
55 practitioners themselves. If improvisation is an impor-
56 tant part of the community's practice, why has the
57 community historically shied away somewhat from
58 improvisation in its publications and research?

59 One possibility stems from the fundamentally intan-
60 gible nature of improvisation. To begin with,
61 compositional practices leave a clearer 'trace', a 'neu-
62 tral level' object that might seem more susceptible to
63 objective examination and analysis. This might be
64 deceptive, however. A recorded improvisation also
65 leaves a trace; it is perhaps spurious to assume some
66 kind of absolute, de facto ontological difference
67 between this and, for example, a studio composition.
68 Both are available for listening; both are open to anal-
69 ysis; and, although this might be deemed controversial
70 by both improvisors and composers, these might not
71 be as easily distinguishable in 'blind' listening as is
72 commonly assumed.

73 This points us back to the fact that a significant
74 percentage of the theoretical and analytical writing
75 in electroacoustic music studies comes from the prac-
76 titioners themselves, a situation that risks confounding
77 the aesthetic with the poietic, that is, that risks the
78 unquestioned assumption that the priorities of an
79 object's creation are inextricably determinant of the
80 nature and understanding of that object. The develop-
81 ment of a composition often involves a process of
82 explicit and deliberate construction, conscious deci-
83 sion-making and a long string of structural choices;
84 these aspects of the work are therefore very clear to
85 the composer, as a result of which it is arguably natu-
86 ral for a composer to write about these aspects of the
87 work (which in turn makes it natural for students of
88 electroacoustic music who encounter the work
89 through such writing to assume that these aspects of
90 the work are what defines the field).

91 This contrasts dramatically with improvisation,
92 both as a process and as an object of study. In impro-
93 visation, the real-time flow of creative decision-
94 making engages a very different cognitive process;
95 all decisions are made 'on the fly', at a speed far

96 greater than the logical deliberation of the conscious
97 mind. To expound upon this in writing therefore first
98 requires a potentially painful process of uncovering
99 and discovering one's own processes, before they
100 can be analysed or discussed. In other words, because
101 improvisation is typically a much less conscious, less
102 deliberate, less explicit process than composition, it
103 is a much more difficult and slippery subject for exam-
104 ination and exegesis.

105 One is also easily led to the assumption that, because
106 the process of composition tends to explicitly and con-
107 sciously foreground questions of form and structure
108 and their construction, these are therefore significantly
109 more present, more sophisticated, than in improvised
110 musics, in which form and structure are imagined
111 and constructed in real time, often in an organic and
112 unconscious, or only partially conscious, manner.
113 However, this is perhaps a remnant of a modernist bias
114 that is increasingly open to question and is slowly being
115 set aside. The quality, depth, or sophistication of musi-
116 cal structure is not automatically linked to its
117 germination process; there is no one-to-one relationship
118 between the length of time that it takes to develop and
119 refine a piece of music, and the quality of that music.
120 Although composers may sometimes wish to deny this,
121 composers are if anything more aware of this fact than
122 anyone. It is often the most intuitive aspects of a com-
123 position that are the most satisfying, the most
124 successful. This is no less true of structure than it is
125 of any other aspect of music: regardless of whether
126 or not structure has been carefully pre-determined,
127 structure will nevertheless emerge, no matter how
128 extemporaneous its manner of production. It is a mis-
129 take to assume that extemporaneous structure is
130 necessarily or automatically inferior in its reception
131 to structure that has been painstakingly thought
132 through and carefully crafted beforehand.

133 There is also, I suspect, a possibly unrecognised fear
134 of 'jinxing' the somewhat mysterious and magical
135 aspects of the process of improvisation. Because the
136 'in the moment' experience of improvising is uncon-
137 scious and intuitive, there is an unspoken worry
138 that, by pulling this process into the open and exposing
139 it to the harsh light of analysis, one might lose access
140 to the unthinking 'flow state' that is commonly
141 reported as ideal for improvisation, and that, once
142 examined and picked apart consciously, one might
143 no longer have access to the unconscious and some-
144 what mystical qualities that buoy and propel a
145 performer in the finer moments of improvisation.
146 One sometimes encounters similar misgivings around
147 the idea of teaching improvisation: that because it is in
148 many ways an instinctive, intuitive and unconscious
149 process, it is not something that can be taught.
150 While these concerns cannot be definitively disproven,
151 one might counter that it is perhaps worth the risk.

152 There is much to be learned from examining and
153 uncovering the musical processes of improvisation –
154 not just about improvisation itself but also about
155 music more generally, about the creative process
156 and about even broader territories of cognition, deci-
157 sion-making, experience and much more. Thus, while
158 one may perhaps be running the risk of handicapping
159 one's process by isolating and examining it, I would
160 argue that this is a risk worth taking.

161 In recent years, the comparative silence in the aca-
162 demic study of improvisation has begun to dissipate, a
163 process to which this issue of *Organised Sound* hopes
164 to contribute by offering a platform for improvisors
165 and musicologists to examine improvisation from a
166 perspective that explicitly foregrounds electroacoustic
167 practices. The contributions here offer an exciting
168 range of perspectives, from the philosophical, to the
169 technological, to the artistic, and beyond. There are
170 a number of thematic threads that weave in and out
171 of the articles in this issue. Articles by Alistair
172 MacDonald, Seth Thorn, and Sam Gillies and
173 Maria Sappho Donohue explore the 'performer plus'
174 paradigm in improvisation, in which software tools
175 are used to supplement, enhance, accompany or duet
176 with live instrumentalists. Articles by Seth Thorn and
177 Adam Pultz Melbye describe the electric, electronic
178 and digital extension of acoustic instruments for elec-
179 troacoustic improvisation. Articles by Paul Stapleton
180 and Tom Davis and by Otso Lähdeoja and Alejandro
181 Montes de Oca are linked through ideas around net-
182 worked communication in group improvisation.
183 There are ideas and theorists that pop up across a
184 number of articles, including George Lewis's dichot-
185 omy of the 'Afrological' and the 'Eurological' in
186 improvisation (Lewis 1996); the idea of the instrument
187 or the system as 'co-performer'; MacDonald's refer-
188 ence to the instrument and its electronic 'other',
189 which also surfaces to some extent in Seth Thorn's
190 article; ideas around 'agents' and 'environments';
191 and a number of references to ecological psychology
192 and semiotics. There are also, of course, multiple con-
193 nections and common threads regarding the
194 opportunities, challenges and idiosyncrasies of improv-
195 ising with electroacoustic tools, including synthesis,
196 coding, extended instruments and more.

197 The issue begins with Otso Lähdeoja and Alejandro
198 Montes de Oca's article 'Co-Sounding: Fostering inter-
199 subjectivity in electronic music improvisation', an
200 exposition on a practice-based examination of intersub-
201 jective communication in electroacoustic improvisation.
202 How do improvisers communicate non-verbally through
203 the music, and do electroacoustic resources offer unique
204 possibilities for the facilitation of this communication?
205 The article draws on a well-conceived and rigorously
206 executed portfolio exploring a range of duo improvisa-
207 tion scenarios to examine these questions of

208 ‘intersubjectivity’ and mediation between performers in
209 group improvisation.

210 In Adam Pultz Melbye’s article ‘Resistance,
211 Mastery, Agency: Improvising with the feedback-actu-
212 ated augmented bass’, practice is firmly and rigorously
213 rooted in theory for a presentation of an intriguing
214 example of the ‘extended instrument’ paradigm. It
215 draws simultaneously on acoustic, electric and digital
216 resources; acoustic feedback and digital signal process-
217 ing (DSP) work in tandem to grant the performer access
218 to a significantly expanded instrumental world, reposi-
219 tioned as a ‘performance ecosystem’.

220 Erik Nyström’s ‘Strange Post-human Attractors:
221 Algorithmic improvisation as acousmatic *poiēsis*’
222 offers a post-humanist approach to electroacoustic
223 composition and software-based improvisation. The
224 author couples two of his own code-based perform-
225 ance works with a philosophical examination of
226 the ‘post-human’, with roots in N. Katherine
227 Hayles’s concept of ‘cognitive assemblages’ and
228 Karen Barad’s idea of ‘intra-action’; theory informs
229 practice, and practice reflects on theory. The article
230 also wraps together topics such as AI, machine learn-
231 ing, feedback systems, and spatialisation in the
232 author’s practical application, and reflects on the gaps
233 between acousmatic music and improvisation in a
234 manner that proves illuminating as we face a post-
235 acousmatic horizon.

236 Alistair MacDonald’s article “‘Making Life
237 Lively’”: Co-estrangement in live electroacoustic
238 improvisation’ places clear emphasis on the perform-
239 er’s perspective to provide a welcome window into the
240 experience of improvising, specifically in duo contexts
241 involving the paradigm of instrumentalist/vocalist plus
242 ‘live electronic manipulation of sound’. MacDonald
243 offers a presentation of the historical context for this
244 area of improvisation practice, then draws on his long
245 experience within this practice to propose ‘estrangem-
246 ent’ as a term to describe the instrumental or
247 vocal performer’s experience of their transformed
248 ‘other’, and ‘co-estrangement’ to describe the relation-
249 ship between the two performers in this scenario.

250 Paul Stapleton and Tom Davis’s article ‘Ambiguous
251 Devices: Improvisation, agency, touch and feed-
252 through in distributed music performance’ examines
253 networked communication in improvisation through
254 the lens of their ‘distributed musical instrument’.
255 The article brings together a number of aesthetic
256 and creative interests and priorities, including perform-
257 ance ecosystems, human–machine improvisation
258 and distributed agency. One of the many points of
259 interest here lies in the broad range of artists that
260 are drawn upon to contextualise their work, from
261 Ikue Mori and Michael Waisvisz to Sun Ra and
262 Einstürzende Neubauten.

Seth Thorn’s contribution, ‘Flows of Inhomogeneous
Matter: Improvising an actuated augmented violin’,
pairs well with Melbye’s article on the augmented bass.
Thorn presents his extended violin design, which incor-
porates voice coils, actuators, a sensor glove and
MaxMSP, in a carefully conceived and designed digital
musical instrument. Thorn’s design process, firmly
rooted in materialist philosophy, is contextualised,
extending the history of the violin through to its expan-
sion using DSP, with a view of the instrument as a
‘system’. Intriguingly, the author argues that improvisa-
tion is incorporated in the instrument’s design and
development as much as in its performance, and in a very
similar manner.

Christos Michalakos’s article ‘Designing Musical
Games for Electroacoustic Improvisation’ brings a
unique angle on the theme of this issue. The author
proposes video game structure as a way to ‘organise’
improvisation, and as a means of enhancing audience
outreach and experience. Topics including game struc-
tures, musical expression and the use of controllers are
explored with reference to two of the author’s ‘electro-
acoustic game-pieces’ – game-based audiovisual
performances that are controlled via augmented
drum-kit. Questions of authorship are considered
from a unique perspective that brings together the
musical identities of composer and performer with
the video game roles of game designer and player,
as well as the potential for improvisation to disrupt
these roles.

Christophe Lengelé offers us ‘*Live 4 Life: A spatial
performance tool to play the ephemeral and improvise
with space and playback speeds*’, presenting the
author’s own SuperCollider-based spatial performance
and improvisation instrument that, interestingly, is cen-
tered on the manipulation of playback speed to control
spatial, spectral and rhythmic qualities, articulation
and texture. This is used as the launchpad for a discus-
sion of broader questions such as the relationship
between composition and improvisation, human–com-
puter interaction, and the role of controllers, as well as a
consideration of more specific techniques for improvi-
sation using live processing and synthesis, with a
particular focus throughout on spatial qualities.

One of the more philosophically focused articles in
this issue is Kristin Kuldkepp’s ‘Free Improvisation as
Experience: A pragmatic insight into improvisational
gesture’. Kuldkepp brings the perspectives of two
pragmatist philosophers, John Dewey and Giovanni
Maddalena, to bear on the concept and practice of free
improvisation. Key ideas here are Dewey’s ‘an experi-
ence’ and ‘the expressive object’, and Giovanni
Maddalena’s ‘complete gesture’, which are applied
to the musical concepts of experience, expressive
object, and gesture.

Jonathan Higgins's contribution, 'More Than an Instrument: Improvising with failing playback media', examines the question of the 'non-human improviser' through the use of playback media as an instrument in improvisation. As these devices and media are pushed to their limits and beyond, they struggle and begin to fail, producing sonic outputs whose unpredictability makes them desirable improvisation partners: controllable only to a limited degree, predictable only to a limited degree, and thereby potentially offering an ideal balance between performability and the production of surprising and inspiring new materials. Higgins draws a powerful connection between the usefulness of 'failure' in these devices and the much broader importance of 'failure' in improvisation more generally – an important and fascinating topic that has yet to receive as much attention as it is due.

Jimmy Eadie offers us 'Improvisational Listening: *Audiowalk – St Enda's Park*', another of the unique perspectives in this issue, which argues for the improvisational aspects of an *in situ* geolocative installation. The author describes the work as 'a responsive, interactive and improvisational site-specific audiowalk'; the article considers a number of aspects of the work and its implications, including the idea of soundwalking as an improvisational act and a discussion of 'improvisational listening', as well as questions of place, memory and history, and how these impact upon our experience of soundscape.

Sam Gillies and Maria Sappho Donohue's article 'Donohue+: Developing performer-specific electronic improvisatory accompaniment for instrumental improvisation' offers a close examination of a 'performer plus' case study, which transforms a Disklavier into a capable improvisation partner. The focus is on the techniques for analysis and decision-making, with a particular focus on the analysis of both language and style and the incorporation of both in the system's musical responses. The project is contextualised through comparison with previous systems and an examination of its potential in a number of free improvisation contexts.

The final two articles in this issue are off-theme contributions. Nicolas Marty's article, 'François-Bernard Mâche's "Sacred" Music', presents some of Mâche's works – principally 2016's *Alcyone* – with a focus on what the word 'sacred' means in this musical context, both for the composer and for the listener. The article throws welcome light onto several aspects of Mâche's work, including his use of space, spatial presentation, techniques such as 'surmodelage', and the music's relationship with the world.

Richard Cross's article 'Towards a Practice of Palimpsestic Listening' proposes the concept of the palimpsest as a model of listening to works that engage multiple layers of technology, aesthetics and sound. This, together with an examination of the analog vs the digital and the physical vs the sonic, is examined in action through a presentation of the author's sound installation *D/ta Ro} – A Dialectical Trash Heap*.

A final word: as this issue recruited a significant number of publishable articles, for the third time in the journal's history it has been decided to dedicate a large portion of a follow-up issue to the subject, specifically issue 27/2. As a number of the articles that will appear in this issue will be ready for publication long before the issue is printed, we shall be utilising Cambridge University Press's FirstView system whereby the articles will appear online with their associated media examples where relevant once the copy-editing phase has been completed. Perhaps this indicates that the subject of improvisation in electro-acoustic music was not, in the end, as marginal as suggested at the beginning of this editorial.

James Andean AQ1 2
(james.andean@dmu.ac.uk) AQ2 3
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Not only has James Andean taken on the guest editorship of this issue on improvisation very successfully, I would also like to welcome him as the journal's new Associate Editor commencing with this issue 26/1. I have decided to work in close association with James as the journal enters its second quarter century. His enthusiasm and openness will be of great importance to *Organised Sound* as it moves forward. There will be more news to come regarding new advances related to the journal in future issues. 403
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Leigh Landy, *Organised Sound* Editor 413
(llandy@dmu.ac.uk) 414