



Improvisation versus Composition

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Improvisation versus Composition

Lukas Foss founded his Improvisation Chamber Ensemble in 1957, with himself pianist, Richard Dufallo clarinet, and Charles DeLancey percussion; Howard Colf, cello, joined the group in 1959. On October 11 they take part in a BBC Thursday Invitation Concert broadcast from Newcastle, and on October 13 at 6.30 play at the American Embassy Theatre, Grosvenor Square (for tickets apply to the Cultural Section of the Embassy, with a stamped return envelope). The programme includes Foss's Time Cycle, a song cycle with improvised interludes. Mr Foss's article below appeared earlier this year in Musical America, and is reprinted by courtesy of its Editor.

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Improvisation is not composition. It relates to composition much in the way a sketch relates to the finished work of art. But is not the very element of incompleteness, of the merely intimated, the momentarily beheld, the barely experienced what attracts us in the sketch? It is work in progress. And so is improvisation as we practise it; it is a spontaneous, sketch-like and—incidentally—unrepeatable expression, full of surprises for the listener and for the performer as well. It is a music in which even the choices of pitch and duration are part of the act of performance. It is performers' music. Viewed in terms of a composed piece, improvised music remains 'on the way', a mere hint, raw-material—'exposed' rather than 'composed'. And so it should be. That is the virtue and that is the limitation of improvisation.

Recently there have been efforts at blurring the dividing line between composition and improvisation. I would rather emphasize it. In our concerts I like to present the composed and the improvised

side by side (but not mixed). The juxtaposition is revealing: composition can be said to be successful to the extent that it gives forth a sense of inevitability, of fate. In improvisation, even the most successful, it is not fate, but chance, hazard that reigns, but a hazard kept within boundaries by the performer's will, a chance intelligently and alertly exploited; for talented, practised musicians learn to mould chance as if it were clay.

I confess that chance *per se* holds little interest for me (for the musician in me). Karlheinz Stockhausen challenged me on this once: 'Do not underestimate chance,' he said, 'for chance is human and therefore it is also interesting.' Certainly it is human, but bad music, likewise, is human and perhaps of interest to some (psychologists, philosophers?), but scarcely to the composer. Not everything interesting is of interest to the composer. Chance, in my opinion, becomes musically interesting only when it rubs against the will, when musical selectivity enters into the picture *correcting* the chance formations.

In order to make improvised chamber music feasible, I have endeavoured to evolve a system and technique in such a manner as to make quick control and correction of the chance element possible. To expound the elaborate basis for our improvisation technique here would be an imposition on the reader. Suffice it to clarify some fundamental principles.

In our improvised chamber music, system and chance act as partners: a musical vision (texture and formal development) is conceived and recorded on paper; not, however, in notes, rhythms, *etc.*, but in the form of directions to the players, symbols, letters, numbers. One can call this a score, but it is actually a mere blueprint, a type of instruction sheet, an order. Instructions, free choices for the performer are nothing new. They are accepted

procedure for all 'aleatory' music. But to me, the 'performer-freedoms' usually made available in this music seem naive and far too easily executed (they need be so, of necessity: our virtuosi, though masters of their instrument, hardly possess the knowledge for inventive manipulation within the music itself). It has been my experience that musicians find no cause for rejoicing in these morsels of free choice, distributed high-handedly, as to a child: 'Here, you may do this or that (because it matters little one way or the other).' It would appear to be more far-sighted to subject the musician to a methodical study from which he emerges trained and practised to function creatively. A performer wishes to be more than a mere instrument in the hand of chance. If one desires a gratifying task for him, one must let him have a measure of power. He must be helped to develop initiative on his instrument. A talented instrumentalist, even though lacking the gift of composition, can achieve a certain 'inventive technique' on his instrument. (This we know from jazz.) Indeed, improvisation is opening up a whole new field of study here, one which has its challenges and of course its limitations.

My three partners have worked with me toward this goal. Our improvisations are the result of collective planning and experimentation. Though we take advantage of the element of chance, we do not expect chance to throw interesting music into our laps, as it were. Nor do we expect our order, our *pre-planning*, to make all chance formations fall into place. System and chance are the basis, but the players hold the reins—no passive carrying out of instructions here. The player listens critically to his fellow players and to himself. His task is to find the correct note, phrasing, dynamics and register

on his instrument at a moment's notice.

Usually we record not only our concerts but also our rehearsals. Then we listen to ourselves and decide where certain results are worthy of remembrance and where we ought to proceed in a different manner. Often we alter the basic plan, the blueprint.

One may ask: How do the successive improvisations on one and the same structure differ? Well, between the second and third attempt there may not be too much dissimilarity (excepting detail) but between the second and thirty-second version a new piece will have emerged, and one in which the first attempt may barely be recognizable. In short the piece finds its *Gestalt* through the process of improvisation. If after many attempts we begin to lapse into clichés and memory begins to displace all invention, then we lose interest in the piece, and it is, as it were, dropped from the repertory.

One can readily understand that musicians steeped in this type of music-making are—as far as the mastery of our complex new music is concerned—in a superior position. The performer thus trained can become again what he has not been for a long, long time: the *confidant* of the composer.

To the long conflict between composer and performer—partners who, ideally speaking, should complement one another in a relationship built on mutual need (and who are separated today by the widest gulf)—electronic music offers one solution: divorces. Ensemble improvisation offers another: it brings musical invention together with performance. (In fact, the two become an indistinguishable process. Good therapy for a distinct marital problem.) We propose this not in lieu of composition but in addition to it, as a serious, spirited form of music-making which, among other things, may exert a fertilizing influence on composition.

Amateurs' Exchange

Musicians interested in forming a contemporary chamber-music ensemble write to Geoffrey Sentinella, 582 Forest Road, Walthamstow, London E17

Hammersmith Philharmonic Orchestra continues rehearsals on Sunday mornings. New members welcome. Joseph Pilbery, COL 2091

New Venture Opera Group needs new members. Holst's *Perfect Fool* and *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Auditions, COL 2091 and SPE 4977

Music lover (16) wishes to correspond with people liking classical music and ballet. Pauline Isle, 5A Marmion Road, Southsea, Portsmouth, Hants

New Sheffield symphony orchestra, rehearsing Friday evenings in Sheffield, requires advanced players keen to work to high symphonic standard—all strings, bassoons, horns, trumpets, trombones, tuba, percussion, harp. Hon Secretary, Mrs. L. Peters, Farfields, Hathersage, nr Sheffield (Hathersage 206)

Streatham Philharmonic Society has vacancies for all voices and some orchestral players. 15 Heybridge Avenue, SW16 (POL 5494, after 7 pm)

Violinist, moderate ability, wishes to meet accompanist for practice. R.R., 21 St John's Avenue, Putney, SW15

North Harrow Orchestra rehearses at Vaughan Road School (adjoining W. Harrow Station) at 8.0. Vacancies for all instruments. Reginald Mullett, 48 New River Crescent, Palmers Green, N13 (PAL 8214)

Lady pianist wishes to meet singer requiring accompanist for practice. S.E., Musical Times

City Opera Club has vacancies for all voices. Rehearsals, Wednesdays, 7.15 at Central London Institute, Bolt Court, Fleet Street. Secretary, 8 Wisley Road, SW11

Catford & Lewisham Orchestra and Catford Senior Choir welcome new members in all sections. Rehearsals (orchestra, Mondays; choir, Fridays) at 7.30 at Catford School, Brownhill Road, SE6. Michael Walker, 17 Margaret Road, Bexley, Kent

Eltham, SE9. A few vacancies for advanced string players (especially violins) in Eltham String Orchestra. Rehearsals, Thursdays, 7.30-9.30 at Eltham Hill School, SE9. Chamber music ensemble classes at Haimo Road School on Tuesday afternoons and evenings. String players (intermediate and advanced) required, keen on playing chamber music. Library of all standard quartets. Principal, Eltham Institute, Haimo Road, Eltham, SE9

Bassoonist (26) wishes to join chamber-music group. Oxford area. Also recorder player (descant and tenor) and experienced madrigal and motet singer (bass). 27 York Road, Headington, Oxford

Bristol area. Orchestral instrumentalists (particularly woodwind) interested in participating in the musical activities of a well-known boys' boarding school should contact the Director of Music, Colston's School, Stapleton, Bristol

Glasgow Orchestral Society, rehearsing Thursday evenings in St Andrew's Hall, has vacancies for all instrumentalists. Hon Secretary, 54 Belmont Street, Glasgow W2

Elderly cripple lady wishes to practise with experienced lady pianist. N. London district.—C.Y., Musical Times