

Music 39

Improvised Music: Spectrum, Theory, and Practice

Amherst College • Fall 2009

Tuesday/Thursday • 2-3:20pm • Arms Music Center 7

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Office hours: Tuesday/Thursday, 1-2pm; Wednesday 2-4pm; and by appointment

Course description:

This course is a hybrid seminar/performance workshop exploring the theory and practice of musical improvisation. Rather than focus on one specific style, we will define “improvised music” in an inclusive way that draws equally from American and European experimental musics, various approaches to post-1959 jazz improvisation, and several musical traditions from around the world that prominently use improvisation. Our investigation will span two broad regions: 1) the use of improvisation as a “real-time” musical device and 2) a field of music making whose central focus is improvisation. Historically and aesthetically interrelated, these regions offer insights into the prominent role that improvisation occupies in modern music making and illustrates how improvisation itself has become an important and primary musical methodology for certain communities of musicians. The radicalization of improvisation—using improvisation as both method and goal of performance—goes under a number of common names: improvised music, free improvisation, open improvisation, creative music, and others that we will learn about throughout the course. Each of these names reflects complicated aesthetic and philosophical viewpoints illuminating specific historical threads in the development of musical experimentalism.

Several themes will structure the course: improvisation as a mode of critical thinking, the role of improvisation in American experimental music, the historical emergence of a self-reflexive field of music making called “improvised music,” the relationship between improvised music and social, cultural, racial, and gender identities, and, in a very general sense, the dialogic relationship between theory and practice. In its essence, this course is focused on *thinking about* and *thinking through* improvisation.

You will be encouraged to develop new performance practices drawn from and in conversation with the diverse musical traditions we will learn about. Reading, listening, and video assignments will familiarize us with the burgeoning field of improvised music studies and will serve to guide class discussions. Coursework includes several short essays and culminates with a personalized research project.

Structure of the course:

This course functions as both formal seminar *and* performance workshop. We will strive to implement theoretical concepts from readings and discussions in strategies for improvisation. At least one class meeting per week will be a performance workshop, frequently, though not always, featuring guest artists related to the Faultlines festival (www.amherst.edu/faultlines). In addition, there are three listening “units” incorporated into the course. The listening/video examples illustrate a wide range of improvised music making and will offer many practical points of departures for discussions and workshops. **IMPORTANT:** The course schedule lists the format of each class meeting, including the meetings that are performance workshops. Please review the schedule regularly and bring the necessary equipment on performance days.

Course materials:

All course materials are available through E-reserves on the course website, on Amherst College's streaming video service, or on reserve at the Music Library. It is not necessary to purchase textbooks or a course reader.

Reading – The assigned reading is an eclectic assortment of articles, book chapters, and websites related to improvisation. Many of these readings embody the emergent field of “improvised music studies.” The majority of these are available on E-reserves through the course website; others are on reserve at the Music Library.

Listening – The course listening is divided into three “units” and is available through E-reserves on the course website. The examples encompass a wide range of music making related to improvised music and should catalyze further listening based on student interest. When you encounter an example that is particularly compelling, you are encouraged to seek out similar examples not included in the course listening.

Videos – You are asked to view several full-length documentaries and an assortment of video excerpts on improvisation. These are available through E-reserves on the course website or through Amherst's streaming video service.

Intellectual Responsibility and Respect for Persons:

This course will abide by the Amherst College guidelines found in the Statement of Intellectual Responsibility, the Statement of Respect for Persons, the Statement of Freedom of Expression and Dissent, and the Honor Code. By enrolling in the course, you agree to uphold the principles set forth in these guidelines. Students are encouraged to review these college policies.

Research Project:

The principle document that you will produce in this course is a multi-stage research project. This may take several forms—composition or performance piece, historical research, ethnographic study, and more—and will result in a document that is submitted at the conclusion of the course. There are four stages to your project: idea approval, project proposal, class presentation, and final document.

Additional Assignments:

Social bookmarking – This assignment asks that you create a delicious account and make a minimum of five bookmarks each week. You are also asked to write a two to four sentence description of the link in the notes field of the bookmark. Choose your tags carefully—tags are key organizing elements in social bookmarking. See the Assignments link on the course website for detailed instructions.

Reading response essays – There are two reading response essays, each at least three pages in length, which pose specific questions regarding assigned course readings.

Listening response essays - There are three listening response essays, each at least two pages in length, which correspond to the three listening “units” of the course. Other than length minimums, there are no guidelines for these essays; you are asked to formulate a response to the assigned listening in relation to the course topics and your personal reflections.

Composition project – Based on discussions, listening, and performance workshops, you are asked to develop brief pieces—vehicles for improvisation—that will be performed during class.

Grade Breakdown:

Attendance and participation	30%
(Includes composition project, social bookmarking, and other web 2.0 elements of the course)	
Research project	50%
Response essays (4% each)	20%

Course Schedule:

9/8-9/13 Theorizing Improvised Music

Thursday 9/10: course introduction

Readings:

Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*.

Philip Alperson. *On Musical Improvisation*.

Derek Bailey. Various chapters from *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*.

Listening: Unit 1

9/14-9/20 Historicizing Improvised Music

Tuesday 9/15: discussion

Thursday 9/17: instruments

Reading response essay 1 due by 8pm 9/17

Readings:

Ben Bechtel. *Improvisation in Early Music*.

Forum – *Improvisation*

George E. Lewis. *Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives*.

Robin Moore. *The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change*.

Listening: Unit 1

9/21-9/27 Structures for Improvisation: solo

Tuesday 9/22: discussion

Thursday 9/24: Evan Parker/Ned Rothenberg workshop (instruments)

Research project proposal due by 8pm 9/24

Faultlines concert: Peter Evans, Sat 9/26

Readings:

David Locke. *Improvisation in West African Musics*.

Bruno Nettl. *Introduction: An Art Neglected in Scholarship*.

John Oswald. *Plunderstanding Ecophonemics*.

Listening: Unit 1

9/28-10/4 Composition and Improvisation

Tuesday 9/29: discussion

Thursday 10/1: instruments

Listening response essay (unit 1) due by 8pm 9/29

Parallels concert: Eva Bittova, Fri 10/2

Faultlines concert and talk: Steve Lehman Trio, Sun 10/4 (4pm)

Readings:

Jacques Attali. Composition.

Bruce Ellis Benson. Between Composition and Performance.

Lukas Foss. Improvisation versus Composition.

Marilyn Crispell. Elements of Improvisation.

Listening: Unit 1

10/5-10/11 Structures for Improvisation: duos and trios

Tuesday 10/6: discussion

Thursday 10/8: instruments

Comments on project proposals due by 8pm 10/8

Readings:

Ingrid Monson. Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation: Irony, Parody, and Ethnomusicology.

Matthew Sansome. Improvisation and Identity: A Qualitative Study.

Ed Sarath. Improvisation for Global Musicianship.

Larry Ochs. Devices and Strategies for Structured Improvisation.

Listening: Unit 2

10/12-10/18 Structures for Improvisation: larger ensembles

Tuesday 10/13: discussion

Thursday 10/15: Adam Rudolph workshop (instruments)

Reading response essay 2 due by 8pm 10/13

Readings:

David Borgo. The Sound and Science of Surprise and The Edge of Chaos from Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age.

Jared B. Burrows. Musical Archetypes and Collective Consciousness: Cognitive Distribution and Free Improvisation.

R. Keith Sawyer. Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Collingwood, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity.

Listening: Unit 2

10/19-10/25 Gender and Improvised Music

Tuesday 10/20: discussion

Thursday 10/22: instruments

Readings:

Erin Wehr-Flowers. Differences Between Male and Female Students' Confidence, Anxiety, and Attitude Toward Learning Jazz Improvisation.

Pauline Oliveros. Harmonic Anatomy: Women in Improvisation.

Julie Dawn Smith. Playing Like a Girl: The Queer Laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group.

Miya Masaoka. Notes from a Trans-cultural Diary.

Listening: Unit 2

10/26-11/1 Indeterminacy, Improvisation, and Agency

Tuesday 10/27: discussion

Thursday 10/29: instruments

Composition project due in class 10/27

Readings:

Matthew Sansom. Imagining Music: Abstract Expressionism and Free Improvisation.

Johannes Völz. Improvisation, Correlation, and Vibration: An Interview with Steve Coleman.

Virginia Wright Wexman. The Rhetoric of Cinematic Improvisation.

Listening: Unit 2

11/2-11/8 Improvisation in the 1950s: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Tuesday 11/3: HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE panel discussion, info TBA

Thursday 11/5: instruments

Faultlines concert: Lisle Ellis, Bob Weiner, and Jason Robinson, Sun 11/8

Readings:

TBA

Listening: Unit 2

11/9-11/15 Computers and Improvisation: from electro-acoustic processing to artificial intelligence

Tuesday 11/10: discussion

Thursday 11/12: instruments

Listening response essay (unit 2) due by 8pm 11/10

Readings:

Bob Ostertag. Human Bodies, Computer Music.

John Bischoff. Software as Sculpture: Creating Music from the Ground Up.

Roger Dean. Various chapters from Hyperimprovisation: Computer-Interactive Sound Improvisation.

George E. Lewis. Too Many Notes: Computers, Complexity and Culture in “Voyager.”

Tom Nunn. Electroacoustic Percussion Boards: Sculptured Musical Instruments for Improvisation.

Pauline Oliveros. Tripping on Wires: The Wireless Body – Who is Improvising?

Listening: Unit 3

11/16-11/22 Cultural Identity and Improvised Music: emergent experimentalisms and the politics of exclusion

Tuesday 11/17: discussion

Thursday 11/19: Tyshawn Sorey workshop (instruments)

Readings:

Anthony Braxton. Creative Music from the Black Aesthetic.

Vijay Iyer. Sangha: Collaborative Improvisations on Community.

George E. Lewis. Getting’ to Know Y’all: Improvised Music, Interculturalism, and the Racial Imagination.

Wong. Asian American Improvisation in Chicago: Tatsu Aoki and the ‘New’ Japanese American Taiko.

Listening: Unit 3

11/23-11/29 Thanksgiving Vacation – No Class

11/30-12/6 Improvised Music and Social Activism

Tuesday 12/1: discussion

Thursday 12/3: instruments

Readings:

David Borgo. Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music.

Eddie Prévost. AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention.

George E. Lewis. Afterword to “Improvised Music After 1950”: The Changing Same.

Listening: Unit 3

12/7-12/13 Project Presentations

Tuesday 12/8: presentations

Thursday 12/10: presentations

Listening response essay (unit 3) due by 8pm 12/8

Listening: Unit 3

12/14-12/15 Project Presentations

Tuesday 12/15: research project presentations

Listening: Unit 3

RESEARCH PROJECT DUE DATE – via email no later than 5pm on Tuesday December 22