

Editorial: The sonic and the electronic in improvisation, part 2

This is the second issue on the topic ‘The sonic and the electronic in improvisation’, the first – *Organised Sound* 26(1) – having appeared in April 2021. The articles in that first volume coalesced around some interesting themes, including networked communication in electroacoustic improvisation, the electroacoustic extension of acoustic instruments, the ‘performer plus’ paradigm, the instrument as co-performer, and the electronic ‘other’. Interestingly, there is a different set of threads running between the articles in this second issue, giving it a rather different flavour than its predecessor. Prime among the themes found here is the analysis of improvisation, which is explicitly tackled in Pierre Couprie’s article but also plays an important role in articles by Lauri Hyvärinen, Alex White, Drake Andersen and James Andean. Articles by Luigi Marino and Lauri Hyvärinen examine and compare different improvisation communities, displaced and/or connected both geographically and aesthetically. While practitioner perspectives were included in the first issue, most clearly in Alistair MacDonald’s article on ‘Co-estrangement in live electroacoustic improvisation’, this thread is taken up again in this second issue in articles by John Richards and Tim Shaw, Matthew James Noone, Luigi Marino and James Andean. All of this, I think, gives the two issues rather different ‘flavours’: where issue one covered a variety of substantially different contexts for improvisation, in terms of both technical approaches and philosophy, issue two is a bit more musicological and, to some extent, more explicitly people centred.

The first article, my own contribution ‘Group Performance Paradigms in Free Improvisation’, discusses differences in performer perspective in small-ensemble free improvisation, and groups these into four key paradigms, followed by analysis of key examples drawn from the broader field of sonic and electroacoustic improvisation.

This is followed by Pierre Couprie’s ‘Analytical Approaches to Electroacoustic Music Improvisation’, which proposes techniques for using visualisation tools for the analysis of free improvisation, within the broader context of electroacoustic analysis. Couprie constructs a framework based on three pillars: acoustic analysis, music analysis and the design of graphic representations. This framework is

demonstrated by applying it to extracts of electroacoustic improvisations performed by Les Phonogénistes, of which Couprie is himself a member.

In ‘New Technologies, Old Behaviours: Electronic media and electronic music improvisors in Europe at the turn of the millennium’, Luigi Marino compares and contrasts two key geographic centres of the European scene: *Echtzeitmusik* in Berlin and the New London Silence in London. Marino includes detailed interview material with key improvisors in each of these scenes to illuminate their approaches to electronics, and the possible relationship(s) between these and their broader performance styles and aesthetics.

In their article ‘Improvisation through Performance-installation’, John Richards and Tim Shaw present their idea of ‘performance-installation’ as an art form, and relationships to improvisation (among other things). The article demonstrates these ideas in action with a fascinating tour through a series of conceptual and situated performances by the authors, some in collaboration with Japanese performance artist Tetsuya Umeda. (There are some interesting links here with several articles in the previous issue on this theme, including articles by Jonathan Higgins – ideas of ‘failure’ in performance; Paul Stapleton and Tom Davis – including shared links with ecological psychology; Adam Pultz Melbye’s ‘agents and environments’; and possibly also with Jimmy Eadie’s ideas on ‘attendance’.)

Like Luigi Marino’s article, Lauri Hyvärinen’s ‘Gesture and Texture in the Electroacoustic Improvised Music of Jin Sangtae, Hong Chulki and Tetuzi Akiyama’ also examines the music of two improvisation scenes: Seoul’s ‘Dotolim’ scene and Tokyo’s *onkyō* scene. Hyvärinen, however, offers an analysis-based approach, focusing specifically on the performers’ uses of gesture and texture, and their use of these materials to ‘bridge’ the two approaches. The article expands on this to propose gesture and texture as the keys to understanding improvised performance.

This is followed by Drake Andersen’s ‘Spaces for People: Technology, improvisation, and social interaction in the music of Pauline Oliveros’. Andersen delves into Oliveros’s work through its focus on ‘social interaction and community-building’, drawing attention to the role that technology can play in ‘facilitating social

interaction in improvisatory contexts' (with possible connections here with articles from the earlier issue on this theme, such as those by Otso Lähdeoja and Alejandro Montes De Oca and by Paul Stapleton and Tom Davis).

Matthew James Noone offers his perspective on 'Electroacoustic Improvisation and the Metaphysical Imaginary', discussing improvisation from 'diachronic and synchronic' perspectives – that is, across cultures and across time – while focusing on Tomlinson's concept of the *metaphysical imaginary* as a useful angle on improvisation. Interestingly, Noone explains the inspiration he draws from neolithic and other prehistoric cultures for contemporary improvisation practice.

In 'Unstable Structure: The improvising modular synthesiser', Alex White explores the design of modular synths and their use in improvisation – including a discussion of the importance of both modular synthesis and improvisation in the development and composition of Morton Subotnick's seminal work 'Silver Apples of the Moon', drawing on material from a fascinating interview White conducted with Subotnick for this purpose. White also discusses his own album *Transductions*, including his pairing of modular synthesizers with the Disklavier (thereby suggesting a connection with the article by Sam Gillies and Maria Sappho Donohue in the previous issue on this theme).

The issue continues with a number of off-theme contributions, beginning with an article by Filipa Magalhães titled 'Material Sources, Lack of Notation and the Presence of Collaborators: The case of *Double* by Constança Capdeville'. Capdeville (1937–92) was a Portuguese composer whose output includes a number of music theatre works; Magalhães brings together the somewhat scattershot existing documentation of these works, with a particular focus on *Double* (1982), to attempt a systematic approach to this body of work. This is based on careful analysis and examination, and hopes to allow for a more robust preservation of this area of Capdeville's output.

In 'Crafting the Language of Robotic Agents: A vision for electroacoustic music in human–robot interaction', Frederic Anthony Robinson, Mari Velonaki and Oliver Bown argue that there is substantial potential for a close connection between electroacoustic music and 'sonic human–robot interactions'. Drawing on Robinson's work on the interactive robotic artwork *Diamandini*, the article discusses and illustrates relationships between design, composition, interaction and process.

Mark Dyer offers us 'Neural Synthesis as a Methodology for Art-Anthropology in Contemporary Music', in which the author draws on filmmaker-ethnographer Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of 'speaking nearby' and Tim Ingold's conception of anthropology to explore

the creative potential of collaboration between the human and the non-human. These ideas are explored and demonstrated within the context of works by Sam Salem and Jennifer Walshe.

This is followed by 'Experiencing Sound Installations: A conceptual framework', in which Valérian Fraise, Nicola Giannini, Catherine Guastavino and Guillaume Boutard propose a taxonomy for categorising sound installations from the perspective of the visitor. Based on an extensive review of both the research literature and the repertoire of sound installation works, the proposed typology focuses on four key characteristics: sound sources, sound design approaches, visiting modalities and visual aspects, which are then illustrated via application to four representative sound installation artworks.

In the final article in this issue, 'Material Media Sonification, Sounding the visibly present artefact', Paul Dunham, Mo H. Zareei, Dugal McKinnon and Dale Carnegie bring together the fields of media archaeology and data sonification to propose 'a novel approach to the creation of media archaeologically informed sound-based art'. More specifically, the authors propose a framework for 'utilising data sonification to facilitate the organisation of sound within the lens of media archaeology inquiry'; this is then illustrated with reference to the authors' original sound installation *Click::TWEET*.

On a very different note: this editorial also offers an opportunity to reflect on the time that has passed since the first issue on this theme, work on which primarily took place during the pandemic lockdown of summer 2020. While the calendar tells us that this was not so long ago, it feels like an age has passed, with a long, strange time in between, and in some ways, those feel like more innocent times.

My editorial for the first issue – *Organised Sound* 26(1) – focused primarily on a discussion of the ways in which improvisation has been under-represented in electroacoustic writing, theory and research, and argued that it was time for this to change. I find that my perspective now, writing this editorial for the second issue, is no longer quite the same, in that the above no longer seems like the important goal it appeared to be at the time.

I have always loved recorded sound. I love the materiality of it, but I also love the *idea* of recorded sound: that I can 'collect' sound, that I can store it, keep it, that it can be mine and that I can have it with me forever. I was drawn to acousmatic music, to soundscape composition and to other 'fixed' forms for that reason, with that as my fundamental motivation and inspiration.

The last few years have been challenging for many – and, perhaps, transformative. Certainly, they have offered the opportunity for self-reflection, and perhaps

for reinvention. I have come to mistrust this compulsion in me: the drive to hold on to things, to surround myself with things I have collected or made, to keep things with me. I have come to recognise this as an attempt to counter the cold, hard fact that nothing lasts, nothing survives forever. Everything we have, everything we are, is temporary.

But, rather than reflecting grief and loss, in fact this is a wonderful thing. Everything is ephemeral, and everything is beautiful; and, in fact, it is this very ephemerality that grants this beauty. Nowhere is this so clear as in musical improvisation; more than this, it is improvisation's entire focus – or, better yet, this is the very *material* of musical improvisation, it is its *subject* and its *matter*. If improvisation can be said to be 'about' anything, it is a study, and a celebration, of ephemerality.

Through this lens, I would like to reorient my rallying cry in my previous editorial for improvisation to

take a prouder place within electroacoustic music studies. This argument was predicated on the idea of a 'canon', of being anointed and entering the ivory tower. The value of being included in the canon is a sense not just of acceptance, but of achieving permanence; but this permanence is an illusion, and so too, therefore, is the canon itself. I should know better, because improvisation knows better: there is nothing to be gained by fighting against impermanence, it is tilting at windmills. Improvisation simply '*is*', in ways that the canon or the repertoire '*is not*'; improvisation has nothing to prove, nothing to establish and nothing to assert.

We must celebrate the ephemeral. It is all we really have.

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