

Garrett List

Improvisation as a tool for discovery of personal and cultural identities and their exchange

Stupid White Man

In this age of global conflict, solutions to the myriad and bewildering problems facing humanity are rare. Most of us are even wary of anyone who would dare claim to have found any thing resembling such a solution. We have been so often duped that cynicism reigns in our hearts and minds.

Towering among the promulgators of the worlds woes is western man, so aptly called in Michael Moore's eye-opening book "Stupid White Man." From the time of colonialism to the present, Western Culture (European culture, and its modern day brother in arms, American culture) has continually pillaged and otherwise raped our planet. From the Middle East to Africa, from the Far East to the Americas a pattern of destruction based on greed and avarice has been established.

It would be naive, of course, to think that the "Stupid White Man" is the source of ALL of our problems, but the proof is overwhelming. He/we/I has-have been a major cause of the alarming level of planetary destruction and the accompanying monumental confusion about any real possibility of finding solutions.

Bearing this in mind, I would like to offer a solution to the problem of communication between musicians of different countries and cultures which could be seen as a microcosm or model of the same phenomenon on a higher level.

Sometimes We Get It Right - Free Jazz and Free Improvisation

From the late 50's to the late 60's a new idea in music arrived in our beloved Western Culture. The concept was formed upon the notion that musical form did not need preconceived structures to permit creative action. One could simply start playing (making sound) and use whatever came up as a starting point for spontaneous composition. This practice seems to have started in the United States. In this particularly rigidly and segregated society where African-American and white musicians were rarely permitted to play together, it seems to have started almost simultaneously. With rare exceptions like Cecil Taylor's group composed of both white and African-Americans, the music sprung up in disparate urban centers from L.A. to New York, Chicago to Austin (Texas). At first, using some known forms (songs, for instance) as jumping off points and finally abandoning structure all together.

These ideas, of course, spread rapidly to the great European urban centers: London, Paris, Berlin, Rome and by the late 60's free improvised music was being played everywhere.

Burned out but not dead

As often happens with these kinds of movements, free music seemed to lose its impetus by the mid 70's. The energy was no longer there. As the music became institutionalized, that is, more and more widely accepted with, for example, free music festivals sprouting up all over, record labels dedicated solely to free improvised music, in Europe governmental subsidies becoming increasingly available, etc., the music lost its necessity, its urgency.

But, at the beginning of the 70's in Woodstock, New York, Karl Berger, a noted pianist, vibraphonist and composer founded the Creative Music Studio, a school dedicated to studying the new music. I was asked by Karl to participate as a teacher. It was here that it became clear that improvisation, free improvisation, could be used as a learning tool for musicians.

No Style, All Style, Real Style

The fact that in Free Improvisation the musician starts from (so called) nowhere; that he is invited to "just play..." leads the musician into a state of mind that permits him to gradually perceive the subtle relations between what his imagination hears and what he is actually hearing when he is playing. This is the greatest difficulty of all improvisors, trying to play what he hears in his imagination. Slowly but surely, after having conquered the fear, the internal judgments, the little ego, he begins to create a sonic picture of his unique artistic identity.

This happens in any musical style whatsoever. The discovery of this identity can be couched in any kind of music because it is a question of "deep listening." The profound nature of each artist will automatically appear. Based on, of course, the artists individual life path, and life situation.

This experience is not limited to young musicians or those still searching for their voices. This is an ongoing process that will reveal things even to an experienced musician.

The Massarat Master-class

*As a Tool for Cross Cultural Exchange:
The Massarat Connection*

With the many problems facing mankind today, communication is an extremely important element. It is a key to unlock the closed doors that separate us and prevent us from finding real solutions. And it is not the digital revolution or telecommunications or the portable telephone that will teach us how to communicate. This is where culture can play a role. And music, the most social of all the arts, can lead the way. Musicians from different backgrounds, playing and creating together becomes a model of cooperation for other levels of society. Among my first experiences with free jazz or free improvisations are recollections of concerts

at which musicians from diverse cultural backgrounds met and played together. Indian, Turkish, Black-American, White-American, African, Chinese, Japanese musicians on the same stage improvising together, creating a music that does not belong to any one of them but belongs to all of them.

These early experiments could be called the precursors of what we now know as “World Music”. This is completely logical: the absence of stylistic concerns, inherent in “Free Improvisation”, allows the musician to enter into deep listening. This, in turn, allows the musician to become immediately aware of the other and, without prejudice, begin to create a dialogue with “foreign elements”. One becomes free to relate to other sounds in a way that only “free improvisation” can offer.

This is why the Massarat Workshop is so important. We will create something that belongs not to “me”, or to “you”, or to “them”, but something that belongs to each one of us – ourselves. This will be a unique experience; the music we make will never exist again.

The Process

From solo to collective composition

Getting to know one another:

The first day will be devoted to solo playing as a way of exchanging “cartes de visite”. The solo also serves as a way beginning the study of the process of “deep listening”. This is where listening becomes as important as playing. Listening becomes active instead of passive. The “cartes de visites” is an expression of the musicians personal language within his or hers individual stylistic choice.

Creating ensembles:

Next we will examine ensemble playing from the point of the trio. The trio is the first large ensemble. In terms of sound the trio is exponentially more complex than the duo and challenges musicians to establish to establish their independence.

This is followed by orchestral improvisation; that is, the entire ensemble playing together. The difficulties are self evident, but the challenge is remarkable. This is the first step toward collective composition.

These first steps are all accomplished in free improvisation. We do not discuss harmony, rhythm, scales, etc., we “just play.” We just start to make sound.

At this point we will have come to know one another on neutral territory where style and tradition are put aside momentarily to allow the process of deep listening take charge of our basic motives for making sound. Now we can begin to discuss structure.

Collective Composition:

We will try to find our structures from within our improvisations. Based on our experience of

the first few days we should be able to find new ways to put our sounds together. We will use our differences to create forms that resound with all of our music, making something unique to the time we have spent together. Having started with a deep awareness of the individual and the genius inherent in each one of us we will be able to find the “collective genius” in which “ the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”

The Collective Genius:

This is the most important aspect of what free improvisation has taught me: the possibilities of the “collective genius” in music lead us to the upper realms of beauty and joy. This has been proven to me time and time again. The “collective genius” is by far more profound than the individual genius.

To my future friends in music

As the leader of this workshop, it will be a great joy to share my experiences with you. I really believe that we can learn from one another. Not on the level of intellectual exchanges but on the level of sound exchanging and the sensitivity and sensibility that arise from the process of deep listening.

Respectfully

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