

Spirit(s) Improvise

December 6th, 2013

Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, Ontario

Spirit(s) Improvise brings together distinguished scholars, musicians and spiritual practitioners to explore the relationship between improvisation and spirituality. How can improvisation and spirituality, broadly defined as frameworks through which people imagine and enact alternative ways of being in the world, contribute to our understandings of imagination and creativity, community and space, and transcendence and hope? Join us for an animated discussion and performance on these topics!

Keynote: Improvisation as an Act of Faith

“Improvisation as an act of faith” – It is not uncommon for jazz musicians to speak of collective group improvisation as involving risk and requiring trust; in this sense as being an act of faith. For jazz legend John Coltrane, musical improvisation was also an expression of his spiritual quest and of his religious faith in a God of whom he wrote, “God breathes through us so completely...so gently we hardly feel it... yet, it is our everything.” Using two of Coltrane’s pieces—his reinvention of “My Favorite Things,” from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical “The Sound of Music,” and the highly controversial extended group improvisation “Ascension”—this address will demonstrate how one musician used the risk of improvisation to express his own spiritual longing, and in doing so created a music of great power and deep insight.



Jamie Howison is a priest of the Anglican Church of Canada, and author of “God’s Mind in that Music: Theological Explorations Through the Music of John Coltrane”, published in 2012 by Cascade Books. He was awarded a study grant from the Louisville Institute to fund his research, and was named a Burke Library scholar-in-residence at New York’s Union Theological Seminary for the winter of 2011. The theologian Brian J. Walsh called the book, “a beautiful and profound piece of theological engagement with Coltrane’s art,” while Cornel West commented that Howison’s “understanding and love of Coltrane are amazing.” He is currently working on a book exploring the tradition of blues music, and how it might enlighten our reading of the biblical psalms.

Panel: Improvisation as Spirituality: Sound, Community, and Space

Interplanetary Music: Sun Ra and Improvisation

Michael Kaler (Ethnomusicology, York University)

Between the late 1950s and the mid-1960s, the practice of radical, extended improvisational music-making became prominent within jazz, rock and classical musical scenes. This development has been widely noted; what has been less widely noted is the degree to which the musicians involved in this approach to music saw their work as responding to religious or spiritual concerns. Although not all musicians of the period were religiously-minded, many were, including such figures as John and Alice Coltrane, the Grateful Dead, Albert Ayler, Pharoah Sanders, and the enigmatic pianist, bandleader and composer, Sun Ra.

While all of these people were inspired by religious concerns, they varied significantly with regard to the ways in which they understood their improvisational activity as relating to their spiritual aspirations. In past work I have discussed the religious meaning that improvisational playing had for Albert Ayler and the Grateful Dead; in this paper, I will turn the focus to Sun Ra, and discuss the spiritual significance of improvisation for him.

Michael Kaler is a Toronto-based musician and scholar. He received a doctorate in Religious Studies from Laval University in 2006, working with Louis Painchaud, and went on to do post-doctoral work at McMaster University with Annette Yoshiko Reed, focusing on the Nag Hammadi collection of ancient Christian writings, gnosticism, and early Christian heterodoxy more generally. In 2008 he began doctoral work in ethnomusicology with Rob Bowman, and will defend his thesis ("Ensemble Stuff: The Grateful Dead's development of rock-based improvisational practice and its religious inspiration") in early 2014.

Kaler is a prolific author and has published his work in *Studies in Religion*, the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, the *Globe and Mail*, and *Vigiliae Christianae*, among other journals; his most recent book, *Flora Tells a Story: The Contexts of the Apocalypse of Paul*, was published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press in 2010.

As a musician, Kaler has worked extensively in the pop and rock music scenes for several decades, most notably as bassist with Ron Hawkins in the Rusty Nails and the Leisure Demons in the 1990s; in the past decade he has been heavily involved in world and experimental music, playing with the Horables (klezmer) and founding the Friends of Markos (Greek rebetiko), Alaniaris (free jazz/surf/rock), and the Starfires (psychedelic folk), as well as serving on the board of directors for Somewhere There, a musician-run experimental music venue in Toronto.



Beyond Traditions: Yogic Chant and Shakuhachi in Contemporary Improvisation

Dr. Gerard Yun (Wilfrid Laurier University, Conrad Grebel University College, York University) and Luke Burton (Wilfrid Laurier University)

Musical improvisation is becoming increasingly prominent across diverse contexts, such as jazz and classical musical performance, extended vocal techniques, and even concert choirs. Yes, there is an acknowledged divide between vocal and instrumental improvisation. Some practitioners feel that the voice is unwelcome and perhaps even inappropriate to the contemporary, improvisational medium.

Within the context of spiritual practice the voice holds special status as an ideal medium through which to explore and attain spiritual awareness. The many traditions of chant across belief systems and religious/spiritual cultures attest to the ubiquitous nature of the voice in relation to spirituality. What are the markers of the spiritual voice and how do these translate into contemporary improvisational practices in instrumental mediums?

Yogic chant leader, Luke Barton, and shakuhachi virtuoso, Gerard Yun, explore the linkages between vocal chant and the Zen Buddhist Shakuhachi (Japanese vertical bamboo flute) both in traditional and contemporary settings of spiritual practice. Points of exploration include improvisation across religious genres with an awareness of cross-cultural and transcultural ethics, the importance of the voice as a model of instrumental style, and the notion that the act of shared improvisation is a spiritual act in itself, an extension of Lee Higgins' notion of community music as "hospitality."¹ Concepts of musical empathy akin to Pauline Oliveros' "Deep Listening" also figure prominently in this discussion.²



Conductor, Composer, Global Music Performer and Scholar, **Dr. Gerard Yun** is interested in cross-cultural interactions and large choral improvisation. As a professional shakuhachi player and teacher he explores the instrument's numerous links to spirituality. His areas of performance research include cross-cultural ethics, large choral improvisation and cross-cultural improvisation. In addition to conducting choral ensembles at the University of Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier University, Dr. Yun teaches courses in Music and Meaning, Music and Its Contexts, Encountering Global Musics, and Music of the Soul: Global Sacred Musics. He currently juggles postings between Wilfrid Laurier University, where he teaches in the new graduate program in Community Music, the University of Waterloo, and York University. In addition to his work as a university educator, Dr. Yun is in demand as a workshop facilitator, guest conductor, adjudicator, and soloist across North America. He is a

¹ Lee Higgins. *Community Music: in Theory and Practice*. Oxford University Press. 2012

² William Osborne. *Sounding the Abyss of Otherness: Pauline Oliveros' Deep Listening and the Sonic Meditations*.
<http://www.osborne-conant.org/oliveros.htm>

shakuhachi student of Yodo Kurahashi II (meian), David Wheeler (sankyoku / kinko), and Michael Chikuzen Gould (dokyoku). He also serves as artistic director for the University of Waterloo's East-West Concert Series where he directs Dark Horse, East-West's resident music ensemble.

Luke Burton is currently a masters of music therapy student at Wilfrid Laurier University working on a major research paper called, *In Search of the Source: A Music Therapist's Journey Towards Music as a Spiritual Reality*. He lived primarily at Yasodhara Ashram through his early 20's and immersed himself in the yogic practices taught there, including mantra yoga and devotional Indian music styles, bhajan and kirtan. Seminal experiences of the unity and infinity of self-life-music-spirit came while studying with Karamjit Singh Mann in Vancouver in 2005 and served as the genesis of his current research. His undergraduate studies were completed at York University, studying piano improvisation with Casey Sokol and having the great blessing of studying South Indian rhythm with Trichy Sankaran. He studied experiential transpersonal psychotherapy with Brent Mitton and Moira Canes in the time between his undergrad and masters degree, linking the "perennial wisdom" of the world's traditions to western depth psychotherapy. The meeting of his life partner, Margo at that time, has helped him ground and continually real-ize what it is to be a full human.

Panel: Spirituality as Improvisation: Creativity, Imagination, and Consciousness

Improvisation, Creativity, and the Imagination

Ron East (School of English and Theatre Studies, University of Guelph)

The imagination has been referred to classically as the study of aesthetics and the pursuit of beauty in art and religion. Anne Sheppard, from the University of London, in her book 'Aesthetics: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Art' states that: "Enriching our aesthetic experience goes together with developing our powers of imagination and understanding." Richard Viladesau, in 'Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art' along with philosophers from Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther to Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth talk about the relationship between imagination and faith. The imagination has been referred to by traditional psychology as fantasy, as in conscious daydreaming, and subconscious phantasy, spelled with a ph, as in phantoms. To Freud it was a defence mechanism, something we indulge in to protect ourselves from the vicissitudes of reality.

Today, since about 2009 neuroscience has recognized the imagination as brain function. Arnold H. Modell, in 'Imagination and the Meaningful Brain' states that the imagination can be defined as "patterns of possibilities". This is a functional definition. In my own research I have taken this further and define the imagination as 'patterns and possibilities'. As patterns it is associative pattern processing, all of the patterns we develop as neural networks, including associative patterns in the senses, dreaming and non-conscious volition, to patterns of advanced mathematics, physics, and artistic creativity and innovation in business. As possibilities it is the alternatives necessary in any choice, from the genetic, through physical actions of every sort, to memory, the senses, and consciousness. In fact, it can now be asserted that we imagine our reality...



Ron East is a PhD Candidate in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph, Guelph, ON. Ron is also an award winning teacher, artist and researcher with extensive education and theatre experience in Canada and Europe. He has published widely as an academic and as a playwright. For twenty-five years, he worked as Director with the School of Physical Theatre in Toronto and London, England. His doctoral research explores the intersections between neuroscience, the imagination and creative practice.

Protest Music Performances as Methodological Frameworks for Re-envisioning Engaged Spirituality: Implications for Improvisation

Lauren Michelle Levesque (Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice)

This paper seeks to integrate insights from Lauren Michelle Levesque's doctoral and postdoctoral research. The first section outlines the key components of the panelist's dissertation, which explored the role protest music performances play as sources of insight into the delegitimizing of violence and as methodological frameworks for re-envisioning a socially engaged and nonviolent spirituality. The second section discusses resonances between this research and her current work examining the relationship between improvisation, creativity, and conflict transformation in local settings. These resonances include ideas around vision, action, and hope.



Lauren Michelle Levesque is an interdisciplinary scholar with a background in music, theology, religious studies and spirituality. She completed her doctoral work in the Faculty of Theology at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Ontario. As a postdoctoral fellow with the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) project, Lauren's research examines the ways improvised music-making builds a community's creative capacity to engage with violence and social healing. A particular focus is the work of scholar and conflict transformation practitioner, John Paul Lederach. Her principal teaching and research interests include violence, conflict transformation, arts-based research and spiritually-motivated activism for nonviolent social change.

Time, Sound, and Transcendence: An Integral View of the Improvisation-Spirituality Relationship

Ed Sarath (Music, University of Michigan)

As outlined in my recent book, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness: Jazz as Integral Template for Music, Education, and Society* (SUNY/Albany 2013), jazz and improvised music research make frequent mention of the spiritual horizons associated with this musical terrain, but rare is systematic investigation of the inner mechanics that underlie this connection. In other words, what is it about the improvisation process that elicits transcendent experience and corresponding spiritual awareness? This talk highlights the realm of temporal cognition and its relationship to consciousness as central to this kind of investigation, in so doing illuminating new criteria for defining improvisation and spirituality. I propose that improvisation is rooted in a nonlinear form of temporal experience that, as distinguished from the linear time of music composition, promotes heightened interactivity and other facets central to an improvised music

aesthetics, an argument that is strengthened when situated within a spirituality-based context.



Ed Sarath is Professor of Music in the Department in Jazz and Contemporary Improvisation, of which he was the founding faculty member and chair (1987-2007), at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance. He is also active also as performer, composer, recording artist, and author, and has spearheaded a number of initiatives related to creativity and educational reform. He is Director of U-M's

Program in Creativity and Consciousness Studies, an interdisciplinary network of colleagues interested in the inner workings of creativity and its foundations in consciousness. He founded and serves as President of the International Society for Improvised Music (www.isimprov.org), an organization devoted to promoting awareness of the importance of improvisational studies in musical training and improvised music in today's diverse world. Recent books include *Music Theory Through Improvisation: A New Approach to Musicianship Training* (Routledge 2010), which presents an innovative framework for core curriculum musicianship studies based in a class he has designed and taught at Michigan for 20 years; and *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness: Jazz as an Integral Template for Music, Education, and Society* (State University of New York/Albany) presents the first appropriation to music of an emergent, consciousness-based worldview called Integral Theory. He is co-editor of a forthcoming volume of essays called *Contemplative Approaches to Learning and Inquiry* (SUNY/Albany, 2014). His most recent CD is *New Beginnings*, which features the London Jazz Orchestra performing his large ensemble compositions. He is a member of the College Music Society's Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major, and a fellow of the National Center for Institutional Diversity, American Council of Learned Societies, Ford Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts.

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