

Teaching the Ethics of Free Improvisation

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The factors that motivate some players of free improvisation to teach include the music's profound ethical dimensions, the ideal that egalitarianism should be a core principle in music-making, and the belief that free improvisation enables the musician's individuality to flower. This essay uses an ethnographic approach to argue that pedagogies, as cultural systems, encompass ambiguity, so that free improvisers' ideals work incompletely in an educational setting. As a case study this essay describes the MECA improvisation ensemble, a group for middle and high school students in Houston, Texas. The group was a voluntary organization that attracted members from a variety of backgrounds. Its facilitator utilized traditional teaching dynamics, but the alternative arts setting and the premises of free improvisation changed how the students crossed barriers within the city and between each other.

Communicating the ideals of freely improvised music has some inherent contradictions.¹ Cornelius Cardew outlined this central tension in his 1971 essay "Towards an Ethic of Improvisation." There he argued that musical education is problematic, because players will just reproduce the sounds they have accumulated in memory, whereas "innocents," those without a formal music education, "play music to the full capacity of their beings" (xviii). Eminent avant-gardists such as Pauline Oliveros align with Cardew's radical opposition to instruction. Yet many improvisers feel a strong impulse to teach. Investigating this impulse, the 2007 pedagogy issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation* asked how the teaching of freely improvised music resists the dominant system of inculcating knowledge, thereby fostering inclusiveness and creative responses to change. In "Free Jazz in the Classroom," David Borgo argues that as teachers, free improvisers can replace "inscribed forms of knowledge" with embodied experience (66-67). Yet, even as the "outside" status of free improvisation has helped it represent freedom for such varied performers and audience members as jazz players, audiences for jazz, and avant-gardists, the abstract thought in much academic authorship and the fact that much instruction takes place in complex institutions act to reformatize free improvisation.

This essay examines the dichotomy between ideals and practice in teaching free improvisation with a case study of the MECA Improvisation Ensemble, a student group in Houston, Texas devoted to the study of freely improvised music. (MECA is the acronym of Multicultural Education and Counseling for the Arts, the community arts center that provided the ensemble with rehearsal and performing space.) Musical ethnographers have viewed dichotomies between theory and practice as a rich field of human understanding. A case study of the MECA Improvisation Ensemble provides potent material for reflection on these dichotomies because the group's purpose exemplifies the values of freely improvised music, yet, at the same time, the ensemble's process involves specifically pedagogical activities, led by its facilitator in a setting structured like a class. Here I use the ethnographic methods of participant-observation and interviews, and I focus on ordinary rather than famous musicians. In this I follow ethnomusicological work that has examined people who participate in small scenes, have a small amount of formal musical schooling, or who play and listen to popular music. Their activities create unexpected community structures.² My interest in mapping the social-change visions of freely improvised music onto everyday practice and ordinary urban space has led to this study, focusing on the ways in which one free improvisation ensemble both exemplifies and contradicts the visions of key theorists. Between 2002 and 2005 I studied the MECA ensemble, conducting interviews with the group's students and teachers, observing recruitment trips in the public schools, doing participant-observation in freely improvised music classes during the summer, and doing participant-observation in other improvised music sessions and performances not related to education. From 1997 through 2005, the MECA Ensemble was comprised primarily of middle and high school students, and after 2005 the group included a greater proportion of college students and other musicians in their twenties.³

As a locale for this ethnography, Houston accentuates the focus on everyday practice and urban space. Although this city is in the American southeast and is close to New Orleans, Houston historically did not have much involvement with free jazz, notwithstanding its vibrant history of blues and rap.⁴ A cohort of musicians in their twenties generated an active free improvisation scene in Houston during the 1990s. These players brought a new surge of energy and ideas from punk and indie rock into freely improvised music. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Houston was unusual for its time in adding an instructional component to the record and concert production, networking, and interdisciplinary collaboration that characterizes young free improvisation scenes. Between 2003 and 2006, other young players of free improvisation on the east coast of the U.S. inaugurated education programs.⁵ Like other free improvisers before them, many such players in Houston define themselves not only according to an aesthetic stance, but also according to principled action.⁶ This belief that freely improvised music has a profound ethical dimension has generated some basic practices like the formation of performance collectives,⁷ and it has inspired a few of the musicians to try teaching. Here I mean two senses of the word "teach" as defined in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*: "to impart knowledge" of something and "to accustom to some action or attitude." The teaching of free

improvisation imparted exactly unusual sonic standards to Houston students, and it socialized them in egalitarianism and artistic autonomy.

The MECA Ensemble and the Houston Public Schools

A composer working at MECA, Robert Avalon, first incorporated improvisation into the teaching of piano and composition as a way to vary students' approaches to classical music. In 1997 David Dove succeeded Avalon at MECA and amalgamated these students into an ensemble focused on free improvisation. Having started to play the trombone in public school bands, Dove had been a member of *Sprawl*, a punk-funk band that toured the U.S. and was popular in Houston and Austin in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After the group disbanded, Dove began to play freely improvised music. Dove affiliated the MECA ensemble with the Deep Listening Institute—Houston, an organization he had started under the loose sponsorship of Pauline Oliveros to stage free improvisation concerts and workshops. The MECA ensemble welcomed students with pop, classical, and jazz backgrounds. As well as singing, they played many sorts of instruments—winds, strings, synthesizers, turntables, drums, and electric guitars. The group fluctuated between six and ten members.

The MECA ensemble provided one of the few institutional contexts for young musicians to improvise. Most of Houston's school jazz programs, like many others in North America, teach a tightly synchronized style of ensemble playing with written arrangements. This is a weakness decried not only by Roger Mantie in his essay "Schooling the Future," but also by Robert Wilson, a local jazz instructor at one of Houston's community colleges.⁸ Oliveros, an icon for many improvisers in their twenties and a Houston native, recalls that in the 1940s and 1950s, Houston schools were not hospitable towards unusual music-making.⁹ Most of Houston's school programs continue to avoid avant-garde music, but some encourage classical composition by sponsoring student composition clubs. Other ways of fostering young people's interest in improvisation—households with adult jazz musicians, youthful jazz groups formed through voluntary association, and small churches—have historically been important in neighboring cities like New Orleans or in rural Texas, but not as much in Houston; two other improvisatory genres, freestyling and gospel music are prevalent in the city, but are localized in neighborhoods and homes. Some students in the MECA ensemble had studied classical music. Others had played in high school jazz bands; yet others had formed garage bands with their friends before joining the MECA group. Their genders, ethnicities, ages, and class backgrounds varied, sampling from the city's demographic mix of Latino, Black, Asian, and Caucasian, as well as individuals from a variety of class backgrounds.¹⁰

As a voluntary organization, the MECA ensemble gained its members through recruitment; membership was constantly in flux as older members graduated and moved away. Friends or relatives brought in about one third of the members. Other members found out about the group by seeing posters at local record stores or through KTRU, the radio station of Rice University with weekly programs of free jazz and other improvised music.¹¹ Between 2000 and 2004, Dove teamed up with several local improvisers to create what he called the "Houston tour," a set of recruiting trips to approximately fifteen public schools over a two-week period each May. On these trips, the improvisers performed, answered questions, and invited students to play with them. Between ten and fifteen students from the recruited high schools came to initial meetings of a semester or summer session of the ensemble, but subsequent enrollment could fall by as much as 60 percent. At times, parents reacted negatively to the dissonant and outwardly chaotic sounds of the music or to the bare-bones environment at the arts center where the ensemble convened. The membership decline affected the ethnic and class makeup of the ensemble. Dove wrote in 2003 that his improvised-music organization served "students from Houston's inner city schools," with the implication that these are poor, ethnic minority students, and at that time the MECA ensemble had a sliding fee scale. Peer recruitment, not school demonstrations, were ultimately the major tool to maintain the MECA ensemble. During the early 2000s, since the students who consistently persuaded their friends to join the group were from one of the city's elite public high schools, the proportion of low-income students varied considerably from semester to semester, whereas the number of students from upper-class backgrounds remained consistent.¹²

The Teaching of Free Improvisation

To learn a genre of music is to become conversant in a cultural system; as defined by Clifford Geertz, this includes all of the aspects of human thought and behavior that surround an expressive domain. The facets of culture, as habitus, are vague and inchoate as well as objective; they comprise a customary way of seeing the world and acting in it.¹³ In their editorial to the *Critical Studies* pedagogy issue, Ajay Heble and Ellen Waterman envision a remolded culture when they state that improvising can lead to "a widening of the scope of community, and to new relations of trust and social obligation." I argue that the cultural systems of musical learning, whether traditional or nontraditional, exemplify a contradictory mixture of ideals and practice. Henry Kingsbury illustrates such a dichotomy in *Music, Talent, and Performance*. This ethnographic study of a music conservatory demonstrates that just as Western art music teaching

marshals an elevated theoretical and pedagogical language, students and teachers are preoccupied with talent, a quality they can identify, but see as mysterious and hard to describe. Present-day punk also enculturates a contrast. Linda Andes has described in “Growing up Punk” how trajectories of involvement, or careers, in punk, begin with acquiring knowledge about how dress, demeanor, language, and music confront the dominant society. Once punks have internalized this knowledge, they can assert authenticity by rejecting these symbols. Free improvisers with whom I have spoken indicate that they are hyper-aware that their perceptions and their actions create culture; they intend that culture to be egalitarian and for each participant to exercise autonomy within it. Yet those free improvisers whose teaching I have observed and from whom I have studied can use teaching practices that contradict such ideals.

Some local improvising musicians, upon perceiving such contrasts, treat instruction as antithetical to the principles of spontaneity and chance convergence. In the early 2000s, with the exception of Dove, Houston’s adult performers did not teach free improvisation. They did introduce their peers to the genre by playing recordings for them and inviting them to play in sessions and performances. One set of musicians provides a graduated approach to free improvisation by first inviting friends to play in a funk-style jam band that plays covers of well-known free jazz recordings. These musicians express frustration about how these friends from punk and indie rock bands tend to play fast, loudly, with little variation in timbre, and with little inclination to rest and thus provide textural variations. Other free improvisers simply affiliate with other highly experienced fellow players.

Local teachers of improvisation state that the major purpose of teaching is to engage the whole person. Robert Avalon taught his piano students to improvise in order to improve their overall musicianship. John Edward Ross, a Houston musician and until the late 2000s leader of the jazz-rock group The Rosta Jazz Avengers, makes his living primarily by teaching guitar. He objects to the standard styles of instruction as a “typewriter method” based on tablature that teaches riffs, but not pitch or dynamics. He believes that his students tend not to be committed to learning many aspects of music because, in Ross’s view, Houston has few settings that nurture individual creativity in music:

They don’t come from any environment that teaches them what to do with a musical interest . . . [I] try to teach my students that the world of music is much broader than that . . . there’s no concept that [you] actually can be committed to this thing. Because I don’t think most people come from a culture, especially in this town, where there’s [any] thing like that . . . they have no paradigm for being like—passionately committed to something—[that] yes, this is worth working at, because everything is so comfortable for them.

Ross teaches riff-based guitar to those of his students who don’t practice and who in his view can’t yet conceive of having an individual creative vision. But with other students, he envisions that his teaching will mitigate the predominant trend towards passivity. Dove used a more radical approach with the MECA ensemble, abandoning traditional repertoires entirely. Dove made no written plans, regarding such preparations as antithetical to the improviser’s approach. My observations, categorizations, and analyses of Dove’s teaching techniques from summer 2003 demonstrate that Dove was successful in inculcating one basic value of free improvisation as he saw it—that each individual must make a unique musical contribution. But the ensemble did not always establish collectivity—another critical ethic of freely improvised music.

Introducing Free Improvisation Practices to the MECA Ensemble

Dove viewed attention and silence as fundamental. He directed students to start most episodes of playing with silence. He often conducted exercises of single sounds or gestures, and pointed out that there is space between these gestures. Students became extremely aware of the sounds they create. “Susan,” a 16-year-old pianist, commented that it was challenging to “think of silence as being like a musical instrument in a way, kind of like a sound.” A related practice is deliberateness, what Dove termed “intention . . . being able to be very specific. When you’re going to do something, how you’re going to do it, within that there may be all kinds of variables about how deliberate or how chance-oriented that sound is.” Before, during, and after the MECA sessions, students often played favorite musical riffs; Dove objected to this as “just jamming.” On the introductory day of summer class in 2003, as Dove was talking, several students were plucking their guitars and basses. Saying “I want you to *play* your instrument,” Dove told the students only to touch their instruments when the group was doing a musical exercise; “instead of physical need, we’re going to make it into intention.” Dove’s tactic may seem severe, and in fact one of the bassists that Dove interrupted did not come to subsequent classes. Dove taught from what he considered to be the most important models of improvisation: blues, jazz, sound meditation, and the most recent stylistic trends in the music of avant-garde players from Japan, the U.S. east coast, and Europe.

The sonic meditations of Pauline Oliveros, with their introductions of a variety of ways to attend to, cooperate in, and produce musical sound, have inspired many teachers, Dove among them.¹⁴ Dove incorporated into the MECA class many elements of Oliveros's meditations. Between 2000 and 2006, Dove affiliated the MECA group loosely with Oliveros.¹⁵ He did not aim to spread the meditation techniques that Oliveros has developed, but he valued the independence and the inclusiveness that Oliveros finds crucial in music-making.¹⁶ Dove asserts that his teaching strategies predate his exposure to specific musical ideas of Oliveros, but he did draw on his study of and recent experience with Oliveros's music. For example, the third movement of Oliveros's *Four Meditations for Orchestra* directs musicians to play short sounds, with no dynamic specified, and react as quickly as possible to each others' sounds. Dove combined these procedures with the evocative metaphor for intricate narrow-range motifs played by such musicians as John Butcher and Evan Parker. Without mentioning Oliveros's composition or these musicians, Dove suggested that the MECA students play "insect music." He had them react as quickly as possible to each others' sounds, adding the requirement that they play as softly as possible.

As a musician and concert promoter, Dove keeps up with current developments in free improvisation. Dove saw the "insect music" exercise as following the aesthetic in the early 2000s of sparse, quiet music: "the less you play, the greater weight every gesture you make has. . . we understand that if we make a sound, that that sound really has a great effect. And I think it's really great for the ears too. You know, it really. . . encourages you to listen to detail, to listen to microscopic sounds." Dove did not incorporate all current practices in free improvisation. He did not emphasize extended techniques, the ways of producing non-bel canto sounds on one's instrument, except by example. In fact, the students felt that some of these recent techniques interfered with their concentration. A touring improviser gave a workshop for the MECA group and taught a current technique of initiating musical gestures kinesically and without any conscious intent. Students felt disoriented and several commented later that they got a "bad vibe" from the exercise. A joint performance with the guest was more successful, and there the students were intrigued by how this musician wired his acoustic instrument with short-circuited effects pedals.

Dove introduced many practices from African-American jazz, a direction that came out of his reverence for this genre. Like many other young improvisers, Dove had studied the recordings of African-American free jazz icons, but he was less interested in the educational experiments by such groups as the AACM.¹⁷ Therefore, he taught jazz practices, but did not use educational methods coming out of the experimental jazz movements. Dove taught some constituent elements of jazz in a standard way; he introduced modal scales and had students practice them in arpeggiation, varied contours, and in transposition. At other times, Dove blended pedagogies and genres. During one class session, Dove had the MECA group play single notes for an hour. Like a Texas band teacher, he had the group play with a metronome and then turned off the metronome to see if the students had kept the beat steady. Then he switched to an improviser's point of view, commenting that he had started to listen to the silence between the notes. At the end of the class, Dove said "this is swing," explaining that swing meant relaxation and keeping the beat steady. Whereas jazz musicians might associate the "swing" feeling with a smooth quadruple pulse or playing at the back of the beat envelope, Dove's comments revealed that he was not introducing these concepts. The idiosyncratic reformulation of these ideas makes some Houston jazz players criticize the improvisers as musical ignoramuses, but it is consistent with the approaches of the recent generation of free improvisers. From a free improvisation standpoint, dispensing with a crucial element like a regular beat simply means that the improviser has internalized aspects of the jazz idiom and views the beat as an optional aesthetic component.

Dove utilized several piece-development practices from jazz. He regularly organizes workshops by free-jazz players. At these workshops, the players do a style of arranging. They create a head composition on the spot, group players together, and then outline sections for set sounds and for improvisation. Because he admires how Duke Ellington's compositions deliberately challenged each musician technically, and sees in this a model, Dove chose not to use head compositions with the MECA students; rather, he focused on promoting individual player development by suggesting particular instrumental combinations. Dove started one class by having students play long tones without melodies. Then he had the students insert melodic sections of their own choosing, and then he assigned solos for all the students. In an indication of pedagogical purpose, Dove did not ask two guest participants, me and a college student, to solo. Dove commented that his goal was "to pick a combination that will make them play outside of their comfort zone. . . or to play very much inside their comfort zone. . . that's a certain dynamic, a certain dichotomy. . . sometimes the combinations are an end and sometimes the combinations are a means to an end."

Paradoxes of Egalitarianism in the MECA Improvisation Ensemble

In live performance, in the recording studio, and with ensemble names like the Hawthorne Improvisation Collective, after a house where several players lived, many Houston improvisers stress that every participant contributes equally and that there are no conductors or directors. They follow the major trend for free improvisers to structure themselves in an egalitarian fashion. It seems logical that improvisers would apply this ethic to the teaching of freely improvised

music, and that such an approach would differ radically from standard educational practices. The major proponent of egalitarianism in education, Paulo Freire, identified such an opposition in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In the banking model of education, the teacher or some other authority determines what is to be taught. Students are passive and the teacher deposits this knowledge into the student (71-78). In contrast, with the dialogic model, or “problem-posing education,” students determine subjects and how they want to study them; the teacher provides resources, and becomes a “teacher-student.” Freire argues that in the banking model, knowledge is an object outside the student, whereas the dialogic model necessitates that students be “reflecting on themselves and on the world” (82). In Freire’s view, this enacts a transformation whereby students are no longer passive recipients of anything initiated by authority.

Freire’s model parallels jazz learning as reported by Paul Berliner in *Thinking in Jazz*. Berliner describes how many players learned from neighborhood musicians in an informal though intense process of showing each other playing techniques, rhythms, and instrument maintenance (37-39). After leaving home, musicians “develop apprenticeships with jazz veterans” where they learn about practical career matters as well as further subtleties of musical style (40). There is an “atmosphere” of “the exchange of knowledge” (41) that players can then apply in jam sessions and in a succession of bands. The ultimate goal of musical study in jazz is “personal responsibility” and “self-reliance . . . [musicians] select their own models for excellence” (59).¹⁸

Freire’s model is not congruent with all of the teaching practices of the free improvisers whom I have observed, although it is congruent with the educational ideals that they have expressed to me and to the participants in workshops I have attended. Every member of a free improvisation group could conceivably initiate learning. Pauline Oliveros describes such processes in the San Francisco Tape Music Center of the 1950s, and in the first sonic meditation workshops she led at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) in the 1970s. But many improvisers have such deep convictions that they act autocratically. For example, as John Szwed reports, Sun Ra legendarily required arduous rehearsals, dictating instrumentation and riffs, and even enforcing communal living arrangements. In a current workshop practice, many eminent improvising musicians present their ideas to groups in a one-way direction. In the early 2000s, Dove organized a series of workshops for adult Houston musicians that also followed this pattern. Such diverse performers as Keith Rowe, members of The Ex, John Butcher, and William Parker presented improvisation philosophies and techniques to the group of attendees, who often faced the leader in a half-circle formation and absorbed the information silently. These workshops replicated the banking model as attendees took short turns trying the presented techniques. In another variant, the eminent performer would devise and set a piece for the whole group.

The MECA ensemble embodied this paradox. Dove’s teaching style resembled the banking model, but his purpose was to inculcate egalitarianism. Dove took charge of seating by arranging the MECA students in a circle and dispersing groups of friends and couples among other students; he stated, “we all have different relationships, but like here, it’s like we have the relationship to the group.” A class consisted of a single exercise that Dove dictated verbally. He directed different small configurations of students to do the exercises, developed variations and expansions of that exercise, and concluded with a fairly unscripted improvisation. Although this was a one-way process, Dove intended for some of his arrangements and instrumental combinations to bring about collectivity and to cause the students to reflect:

Sometimes it’s starting with everyone plays a solo and then you group them up in duos, and then you group them up into quartets or trios, and you build larger and larger groups and it gives them an opportunity to listen to what everyone else is doing without playing, to hear where everyone is in the room. You start to sense the space, you start to sense what other people are playing like, then you play with someone else in a duo or trio and you have to sort of find how you fit together, or what kind of dialogue you have in that group, or...how the sounds work together.

Dove did incorporate a dialogic model by playing with students, initiating discussions, reserving time for free playing, and occasionally inviting students to work up ideas for compositions in a free-jazz style. In the clearest example of generating reflection, Dove incorporated a common practice of local free improvisers whereby they evaluate an episode of music-making that they have just finished. There, Dove adopted a neutral tone, simply observing the details of what just happened musically. Dove began one class session by asking the students to create a series of unique sounds. When he asked what they thought, one student said the sounds reminded her of a horror movie. Dove commented, “cool,” and then identified some of the techniques that had created screeching and grating noises. Students responded enthusiastically to this discourse style, and to the fundamental tenet it reflects—that unusual sounds are accepted and welcomed. The student and pianist Susan said, “I think from the improv you get a lot of confidence. Like I’ve always thought it was very therapeutic, which is one thing—that’s why I keep coming. ‘Cause there’s no way to make a mistake. And you just kind of get a positive vibe afterwards. You know, because it’s like whoa, you know I can do—it’s *everything’s* accepted.”

Autonomy, Responsibility, and the MECA Ensemble

Even though the MECA class only emulated Freire's model in part, its results approached Freire's vision. He believed that through his model of problem-posing education, students would come to realize that economic stratification and political oppression had created their condition—in Freire's case, the Latin American peasantry (38). In a Marxian, even Maoist style of reflection, the subjects would then become aware of things in the world that they previously considered "inconspicuous." When free, the oppressed gain "autonomy and responsibility" and in Freire's utopian formulation become more fully human, psychologically authentic rather than divided within themselves (47-48). Even though they were directed by Dove and not initiated by the students, the MECA class procedures stimulated musical autonomy and responsibility. MECA students reflected on power relations among themselves, teachers, other students, and the general urban population. The class did effect social change, forging new relationships between students and altering both their awareness and their use of the urban space.

Students were already reflecting on musical power relations before they joined the MECA ensemble. Before they joined, they had been frustrated about what they saw as the controlling terms of most of their musical activities. Susan commented, "I used to be in jazz band, so I did a lot of jazz. But it was a little too stressful for me because a lot of people had more training than I did." Students even found garage bands to be quite restrictive, although in a different way. Ryan, an 18-year old singer, performed avant-garde vocalizations, classical choral music, and rock, keeping all the activities separate. He felt frustrated about trying to coordinate a band that he and his friends had formed, commenting affectionately, "my horrible little group isn't nearly good enough to even think about doing something nonstandard. It's gotta be straightforward." "Bob," a 17-year old drummer, said that as a member of a punk band he felt pressure to use standard rhythms. A friend of his had introduced him to punk and later to the MECA ensemble.

I . . . worried about what other people thought more than what I actually liked. . . so when I ended up coming to MECA, I remember [my friend] was telling me on the way over, I wanted to just get out of the car. He was like, 'yeah, we play like no time signature.' Right away I just stopped listening to him and he just went on and on about what else we do, and I was like, man, no time signature! You know I was just thinking. . . that's what I've been trying to avoid, it's like I'm trying to play on time, you know, so I could be cool or whatever.

The MECA ensemble fostered artistic autonomy by removing this hypercritical atmosphere. When I asked her if the MECA class was different from school band, Susan commented, "you don't get lectured if you play a wrong note, you might get praised if you play a wrong note." Bob said, "it reinvented music for me. . . I really admired Dave's teaching style. He didn't tell me you know this was good, this was bad, work on this. . . [it was] through example that he taught mostly. If I played something and I knew it didn't work out, he might suggest something, but it was always just a suggestion. He wasn't. . . the dictator of the classroom or something." The students thrived from chances to play solo or duo. One 17-year-old student, "Cathy," came from a working-class background without previous private lessons, and was determined to play even though her parents felt that music was not a worthwhile activity. She said that she felt shy in marching band, but the small-group setting of the MECA class made her feel more confident.

The MECA ensemble introduced students to a new sense of the urban space. Many students were afraid at first of the run-down Houston neighborhoods, with Latino, Black, and especially poor residents, where avant-garde artists and arts organizations find footholds. The MECA building exemplifies such a locale. It is the Dow school, a century-old grammar school building located in one of the oldest and most run-down parts of the city. From this building MECA runs arts programs of all kinds, largely targeted at Latino youth (one of its primary activities is the MECA mariachi band). Sections of the building are painted with murals in the style of Diego Rivera and of 1960s Chicano art. Student art commemorating Mexican holidays is prominently displayed, and the sounds of guitars, singing, and trumpets echo in the hallways.

The MECA improvisation ensemble did not spring out of neighborhood activity the way that the AACM was linked with Chicago's South Side; instead, it gathered students from far-flung parts of the city. Houston has a weak downtown; miles of freeways link its many suburbs, and this structure literally inhibits students and their parents through fear.¹⁹ Many students move in a fairly narrow orbit, not venturing far from the routes between school and home. Susan had trouble persuading her parents that MECA's neighborhood was safe and also said that it was difficult to give driving directions to her friends: "It's just such a kind of hard neighborhood to get into, like—the directions and everything, so it was kind of hard to give people directions. . . it's just too far away from us." But Bob felt that MECA's location was part of its life-enhancing quality.

This isn't one of those fancy yuppie centers, you know, like people do stuff here and it's not for money. . . I could relate right away. . . it seems friendly and safe, but it also is like not—it's not for show at all. . . there's

something about this place, where you can come, and you can totally do your own thing, but at the same time you're taking things seriously. You know, you're not just goofing around. Like there's little kids giggling, playing basketball, but I can be like totally intent and focused.

The students also performed at alternative arts locations. In 2003, Club Superhappy Funland (SHFL), run by a visual artist and a head-shop owner in their twenties, hosted MECA improvisation performances. A bungalow decorated with used furniture, board games, a disco ball, and macabre wall paintings, it was located in a neighborhood of other bungalows near a freeway and a factory. The parents of the MECA students reacted negatively to this atmosphere, but the students' comments indicate that playing at SHFL was a highlight, because of how active they could be in their own performances. Susan commented that a MECA group performance at SHFL was the first time she had ever performed for an audience that wasn't required to attend. Bob stated that with his punk band,

You have to win over a crowd. People don't look for. . . what they like in it. You have to take them there, you have to impress them. But [at] Superhappy Funland. . . I wasn't nervous at all. In fact I was in one of the best moods I've been in, in a super long time. I was just sitting there like really happy. And then when we played the show, I was sort of relaxed. And you noticed I've been playing very loose, light sounds. Big comfortable sounds.

The MECA class did not directly facilitate sociality between students, because it was so highly structured. The adult free improvisers I know in Houston connect by rigorously critiquing recordings and performances, working out artistic visions, practicing together, or organizing events. At the MECA sessions, it was Dove and not the students who invited feedback, and the students were tentative in their evaluations. They made almost no comment about combinations or acoustics; they talked about the general musical process stimulated by the musical exercise. Dove did not ask individual students what they thought about specific musical episodes or about their attempts to execute a musical task—something I observed him periodically discussing with improvising peers. The students occasionally voiced their opinions to each other during class. On one occasion an alumnus of the MECA group asked Dove if there were any conflicts in that summer's class. This question startled me, because I had observed most classes and had not detected any tension myself. Dove replied that there was not any conflict, but he then described how two students had differed in their conceptualizations of an episode of free improvisation. One pictured a narrative of people fighting and then making peace, but another student said that she simply heard a series of sounds that differed from each other and that not all music had to tell a story. Differences in musical ability (and possibly age, since younger ensemble members were less skilled on their instruments) produced some overt tension, especially if some students were learning pitches and fingerings more slowly than others. It was outside of music-making, before and after classes and performances, that students demonstrated a bond. They became relaxed about class, age, and ethnic differences. The students often proposed going out to eat after class. Just as often, some refused, stating without embarrassment that they didn't have enough money. The Latino class members were relaxed about referring to favorite Spanish-language musical groups, countries of origin, foodways, and holidays. Friendships in the MECA group spanned a range of 4-5 years, quite wide for adolescents.

Conclusion

Participating in the MECA improvisation ensemble changed students' musical practices, their senses of themselves, their understandings of power relations, and their experiences of the city in which they lived. As might be expected for an avant-garde genre, the MECA ensemble had an unusual makeup. Ethnic, class and age mixture was broad, although membership from the lower-income spectrum fluctuated more than the other components. The extreme self-awareness and self-reflection of free improvisers, especially as exemplified by David Dove, the leader of the MECA ensemble during the time I studied it, applied strongly to the group's musical aesthetics and performance practice. The students learned free improvisation's core aesthetics of silence and concentration, and they applied musical principles from several subgenres of the avant-garde. Free improvisation's ethics of collectivity and egalitarianism were incompletely transmitted, and the class followed the traditional teacher-to-student model. Nevertheless, students stated that they felt more self-confident, and their comments showed that they were re-evaluating the dynamics in their other musical activities. Participation in the MECA ensemble familiarized students with Houston's low-income neighborhoods, making it easier for them and their friends to leave their customary enclaves, explore the varied areas of the city where avant-garde performances are staged, and visit their fellow ensemble members from contrasting income and ethnic groups. By participating in the MECA improvisation ensemble, students focused their artistic attention, found authenticity, and felt free to follow unorthodox musical directions. They crossed barriers to establish new types of relationships among themselves, and they reconceived the urban space, thereby approaching the full humanness and the inner change that Freire, Heble and Waterman, and Cardew envision. However, the pedagogical methods of the MECA ensemble were mostly traditional, and only paralleled Freire's problem-posing education in a few respects.

This case study demonstrates that some ideals can be realized when they are applied to the teaching of freely improvised music. The improvising students of the MECA ensemble, although they were not new to music, felt more authentic and grounded in their own music-making, in relating to their fellow artists, and in connecting with an audience. These students indicated, with their own individual ways of explanation, that they found it possible to play “to the full capacity of their beings” in the MECA ensemble, whereas it was very difficult to do so in their public school ensembles and even in their garage-band efforts. By broadening their musical geography, the students began to identify with nature in the sense of the full urban space. The MECA ensemble members, now young adults, have followed diverse artistic trajectories. Their career paths include music therapy, architecture, the visual arts, audio production, and fashion. Some are teachers; they work within and outside of the public school system. Some have made music their primary path, and others play part-time, freestyling, playing jazz, rock, classical, noise, and other improvised music. Dove continues to promote freely improvised music and has expanded the variety of his classes to include young children, special-needs students, refugee children, and homeless children.²⁰ A free improviser’s ethic, applied to this educational project in Houston, has expanded the city’s artistic life in unexpected directions.

Notes

¹ This essay will use the term “free improvisation.” Free improvisers in Houston frequently use the terms “free improvisation,” “creative music,” and “improvisation” interchangeably. They use specific terms such as freestyling, free jazz, or playing standards to indicate other types of improvisation that are not the subject of this essay.

² See Finnegan; Berger; and Crafts, Cavicchi, and Keil.

³ Quotations here are from interviews and recorded observations. I am grateful to Alice Valdez, the staff of MECA, and the MECA Improvisation Ensemble for allowing me to observe and participate in their activities. Pseudonymous interviewees were under age 18.

⁴ See Wood for recent accounts of Houston’s blues tradition and its involvement in zydeco.

⁵ Models of music scenes presented by Bennett, Straw, and others do not include teaching, thus illustrating that this component is considered external to many popular music subcultures.

⁶ See Szwed 113-114.

⁷ The Hawthorne Improvisation Collective was a driving force in Houston from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s. Members shared houses, worked at a local record store, formed free jazz, rock, cabaret, and other bands with intersecting memberships, and held weekly jam sessions.

⁸ Personal communication, Houston, 2005. Wilson stated that jazz instructors at other community colleges in the area shared his concerns.

⁹ See Von Gunden 5-6, Duckworth 164-165. German and central European cultural heritage is reflected in the arts programs of Houston’s public schools; they emphasize orchestra, choir, concert band, and marching band. Houston has two arts magnet high schools; both have sent a few young players on to major jazz careers.

¹⁰ See Klineberg.

¹¹ Rice University sold KTRU’s analog frequency in 2011; KTRU now operates as an Internet station on ktru.org and on one of Houston’s Pacifica radio HD channels.

¹² There has also been a consistent stream of students from one high school with a predominantly Latino and low-income population, especially in the late 2000s.

¹³ See Bourdieu 72-76, 82-83.

¹⁴ See also Schlicht.

¹⁵ In 2006, with the blessings of Oliveros, Dove made his concert promotion and educational activities into a free-standing organization and titled it Nameless Sound. At that time, the MECA ensemble added a second name, the Nameless Sound Youth Ensemble.

¹⁶ See Oliveros 1984 (1978). Although Oliveros held and holds positions at academic institutions, she has encouraged at least two musicians of my acquaintance to consider independent freelance careers instead of academic positions.

¹⁷ See Lewis 2008.

¹⁸ Recent efforts in formalized music education see Freire's ideas as providing a way to bridge the divide between repertoires that students learn in the classroom and what they experience musically at home. Frank Abrahams envisions that a critical music pedagogy on Freire's model "empowers children to be musicians" and enables students to "music the world" (230, 234). Taking British Isles Community Music efforts and the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project as inspirations, in *Free to Be Musical*, Lee Higgins and Patricia Shehan Campbell develop a set of formal lesson plans in structured improvisation, with specific articulation of how these plans achieve the National Standards for Music Education as established in the 1990s by the Music Educators National Conference/National Association for Music Education in the U.S..

¹⁹ See Kling, and Lange for an application of music to the model of the disaggregated city.

²⁰ By the late 2000s, Dove had given several presentations on his educational philosophy and in 2010 wrote an exposition for *Intransitive Recordings* that finds equivalence between his role as a teacher and himself as an improviser. There he emphasizes that he responds to students in the moment, and asserts that his method connects to the students' realities: "free improvisation is a living practice. It's a context where students can immediately respond to the world that they are in."

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