

“I Feel My True Colors Began to Show”¹: Designing and Teaching a Course on Improvisation

Ursel Schlicht, Ramapo College

At Ramapo College of New Jersey, I designed a course entitled “Improvisation in Music,” an integrated course of musical practice in multiple styles and in the history/theory of improvisation, open to all disciplines within Ramapo’s School of Contemporary Arts: Communication Arts, Contemporary Arts, Music, Theater, and Visual Arts. The School of Contemporary Arts is interdisciplinary in its structure, emphasizes the interconnectedness of the arts in contemporary society, and encourages students to develop and communicate ideas in multiple media.

As academic courses in improvisation are still a relative rarity in today’s evaluation-driven academic environment, I was thrilled to be invited by the music department to design a course within a context that already emphasizes interdisciplinary, intercultural, and experiential learning. To focus my experience as an improviser traveling through the intersections of jazz, European improvised music, the field of free improvisation influenced by American free jazz and then avant-garde jazz of the 1960s, the many expressions of the vibrant downtown New York music scene, and my extensive history of intercultural collaborations, into a course I wish I could have taken as a student, was indeed an exciting prospect.²

However, even in an interdisciplinary liberal arts program, academic regulations can pose challenges to creative work settings. How can truly creative environments be provided, relatively free from concerns such as evaluation and grading? What could be criteria to evaluate or judge an improvisation, and what should the “goals and objectives” be for such a course?

In my view, the key is to balance specific, structured guidance towards musicianship and communication skills with providing ample space for open-ended creative practice. This article first discusses fundamental considerations on improvisation and a variety of pedagogical considerations and factors that influenced the course design. After a synopsis of the core elements and topics, each course meeting is described as it occurred. The article concludes with a final analysis of the overall process.

Fundamental Considerations

Improvisation is not only a vast, multi-faceted musical realm, but also a complex social activity with almost limitless potential to foster creative and social growth. While much of music education focuses on the development of individual skills and techniques, a course on improvisation offers the additional and distinctly different potential for collective growth. Looking at the creative evolution over one semester, the collective process itself had a strong impact on each individual. This interplay of the individual and the collective significantly added to the overall effectiveness of the course.

Core elements of improvising include opening oneself to the unexpected and unpredictable, freeing the mind from preconceived ideas, and learning to take chances. This requires a pedagogical approach where:

rather than existing on a prescribed plan and controlled environment for learning, instructors must focus on creative ways to facilitate learning in a dynamic context that is shaped and negotiated by all of the participants. Instead of creating a situation in which there is a predetermined outcome and the sum of the parts is already known, instructors must be comfortable presenting unpredictable situations and exploring open-ended possibilities. (Borgo 173)

One of the challenges of teaching improvisation is that the majority of students do not realize advanced improvisational skills require a set of technical abilities quite different from those practiced in notation-based music education. Improvisers need a range of communication skills largely underdeveloped in musical training that focuses on Western classical music. Even in theory-centered jazz education, the importance of such communication skills is often overlooked.³ As early as 1973, Derek Bailey opens his groundbreaking book, *Improvisation—Its Nature and Practice in Music*, stating:

Improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least understood. While it is today present in almost every area of music, there is an almost total absence of information about it. (ix)

Bailey explains improvisation is frequently regarded as “something without preparation and without consideration, a completely ad-hoc activity, frivolous and inconsequential, lacking in design or method,” even though “no musical activity requires more skill, dedication, preparation, training and commitment” (xii).

Improvising requires as serious a focus as jazz or classical training. In order to have students fully understand this, it is necessary to show them how to develop a directed practice and how to be comfortable and fluent with musical elements, techniques, and creative ideas. In an interview with David Borgo about teaching improvisation, bassist Mark Dresser points out, “The bottom line is musicianship. The ability to perceive pitch and time can never be too fine. The more we teach our musicians to develop ears and skills, the better equipped they will be to work in an ever-changing environment” (Borgo 175).

Another common expectation of students is a focus on jazz, since “jazz” is frequently assumed to equal “improvisation.” Ramapo College does not offer jazz ensemble or jazz theory courses. In this context, and as a musician strongly rooted in jazz, I find it important to incorporate jazz but *not* to begin with it. The complexity of jazz theory and the challenge of keeping form tend to get in the way of the directness and spontaneity, which are so important to beginner improvisers.

I attended a number of jazz workshops as a student and almost all focused on theory and harmony. While I loved studying those aspects of jazz, it seemed that the theory served as a means to avoid, rather than encourage, emotional expression. For this course at Ramapo College, especially during the first half of the semester, the idea was to create an atmosphere where improvisations could be developed without criteria such as improvising within a form or proficiency in theory.

To help students develop originality, it is important for instructors to assist students in discovering and shaping the music from within. An observation shared by musicians who teach classically trained students how to improvise is that many cannot free their minds from preconceived standards and instead try to fulfill some expectation from the outside.⁴ For motivated musicians, this imposed block can indeed be surmounted, even if it seems virtually impossible at first. Improviser Connie Crothers, a child prodigy and concert pianist in her teenage years, moved to New York in 1962 to study jazz improvisation with Lennie Tristano. She shares how profound the shift to becoming an improviser was:

When I decided that I wanted to be a jazz musician, I knew that it was about improvising. I could really play by then, I was a good player, I was a very highly trained player, and I could play big works. I could sit at the piano and a lot of music could come out of the piano, and all that was wonderful, I appreciated it, but this was my moment of truth: I sat down at my piano with the desire to improvise, and I sat there for, oh, twenty minutes, a half hour. I could not improvise one note. And in that moment, I became angry. I realized that as much as I had given, and as much as people had given to me to learn, that this dimensional thing had been left out, and I was totally blocked. I was facing a wall, and I felt like I had been so deeply deprived of something that was so important. Not that anybody did that to me. It's in the classical music culture—it wasn't always like that, those great composers could improvise! (Interview with author, Schlicht 148)

The focus on external factors is, of course, reinforced if the music is determined externally, if one reads a score or tries to play the “correct” notes over chord changes. Steps on the journey towards original, personal expression include developing a high level of awareness and the ability to listen and communicate, extending an understanding and interpretation of musical practice, and motivating the imagination. Over time, perhaps most importantly, a sense of the potential and broader meanings of improvisation might emerge.

On a personal level, improvising music will have an impact on each musician's own growth. Improvising musicians across genres and styles often describe the purpose of improvising as a path to connect with one's real life experiences and with other musicians on the deepest possible levels. This connection creates a kind of trust that opens the door to an extensive exchange of ideas about ways and philosophies of life. In 1918, Thomas Mann described the connection between real-life experience and art: “The important thing for

me, then, is not the 'work,' but my life. Life is not the means for the achievement of an aesthetic ideal of perfection; on the contrary, the work is an ethical symbol of life" (Mann).

In class, it quickly became evident that listening and responding to others was far more important than displaying or depending on instrumental technique. Similarly, finding one's lyrical, harmonic or rhythmic part to add to the group sound was far more important than a virtuosic individual statement. These relationships between the collective and the individual revealed to students how each person has a different set of skills and how at any skill level, one remains on an ongoing musical journey. Furthermore, it became evident how the parameters that make one feel "successful" also depended on the collective context.⁵ Socially, these are critical realizations that point towards the larger values of improvised music making. An ethical dimension of improvisation lies in the shared experience of flexibility, mutual respect, and acceptance of difference that can be modeled by adding improvisation to the music curriculum.

Politically, jazz, in particular, has been a symbol of the liberating aspect of music making, to voice resistance against hierarchies and repressive structures, to stress individual and free expression, to take chances and face risks, and to overcome oppressive circumstances. This is evident in the extensive and well-documented discourse of recordings and statements by musicians Louis Armstrong, Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, Archie Shepp, the AACM, Charles Mingus, Nina Simone, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, and many others. Similarly, these issues are addressed in literature ranging from works by Amiri Baraka and Ralph Ellison to contemporary critical examinations such as *Sounding Off! Music as Subversion/Resistance/Revolution*⁶ and *Rebel Musics: Human Rights, Resistant Sounds, and the Politics of Music Making*.⁷

Musicians, today, work more than ever across genres and styles. For a group of students coming from multiple disciplines, this makes the choice to examine multiple genres all the more obvious. Exploring a range of stylistic expressions—in terms of how each specific use of musical parameters can lead to specific sounds—also provides students with a rich palette of musical tools and ideas. Building an extensive multi-style vocabulary, beyond the stylistic strengths or preferences of the participants will, in turn, demystify the art of improvising, make a range of styles more accessible and—at least superficially—easier to replicate and experiment with.

By investigating musical elements in a variety of styles, each student, hopefully, will be inspired to find areas where she or he feels comfortable expressing authentic emotion directly. Similarly, even the most advanced students should eventually find themselves challenged to delve into unfamiliar and possibly uncomfortable territory, another core experience for every improviser. While initially emphasizing strategies that make it easy to begin improvising, I also stressed that to improvise means to take chances, to let go, to step out of the comfort zone, and I strongly encouraged the students to go for such experiences.

It is astounding how much anxiety can be generated by improvisation, regardless of prior musical experience. For advanced players, especially the classically trained, it is important to point out that advanced instrumental technique may not translate instantly into improvisational skills. When Connie Crothers immersed herself in studying improvisation with Lennie Tristano, she worked up to fourteen hours a day on her music, yet it took her several years to feel ready to give improvised performances. While classical training does not have to impede development as an improviser, strategies need to be found to transfer some of the prior knowledge into an entirely new context. For beginners and intermediate players, learning how to play is sometimes charged with anxiety as well; however, a first free and uninhibited experimentation with sound sometimes comes more easily to students with less musical training since they tend to have less of a self-imposed standard of excellence.

The anxiety associated with improvising is often associated with discouragement of self-expression that may happen early in one's musical life. Over the past ten years, I have taught workshops in improvisation and have frequently encountered stories about early music experiences characterized by private lessons with a narrow concept of "right" and "wrong" playing, coupled with consequential frustration and anxiety—issues that need to be addressed if the improviser is to become creatively free.

While such experiences are reported across gender, they are particularly prominent in the early experiences of girls. Numerous studies have shown that girls' musical self-expression has frequently been discouraged, sometimes even suppressed.⁸ Even today, the musical education available to girls is generally dominated by re-creating written music, and a choice of instruments that does not include particularly physical or loud instruments such as drums, bass, electric guitar, or brass instruments. In jazz, rock, and related styles, women on these instruments are still a small minority. To counteract these tendencies, I encourage women

students to first take the important step of enrolling in an improvisation course, and I make sure to encourage them to try out the entire range of instruments available. In this first run of the course, ten male and two female students attended. Since then, the percentage of female students has increased every year.

My choice of material was also designed to help counteract gendered imbalances in the field. We studied music by Pauline Oliveros, Marilyn Crispell, Myra Melford, and read texts by Oliveros, Crispell, Melford, Susan McClary, Joanne Brackeen, and Terri Lyne Carrington. Rather than engage in a discussion about gender, I presented the music and texts by women musicians as an integral part of improvisation, as important proponents of the field. Through the combination of choice of material, ensuring the women students appropriate space, and the fact that I was by far the most experienced improviser—and certainly felt accepted as such, not just in my function as instructor—I hope to have found a model of teaching that might undermine dominant ideologies around gender.

Students from ethnic minorities, on the contrary, were often able to use their musical heritage as an asset. The class at Ramapo College was fascinated by the er-hu playing of one international student from Taiwan. One of the women students, from Cuba, felt most comfortable when the clave or other elements of Latin music were addressed. Throughout the years of my teaching improvisation, I always felt that for students who could draw on a musical language of their culture (whether from ethnic minorities or not) this functioned as a strength. In terms of the course material, it is critical to balance topics, ideas, readings, and listening examples in a way that offers a culturally and ethnically diverse range.

To summarize, the intent with this course is to encourage and strengthen artistic expression and skills of musical communication, both individually and in the context of a group. Through improvisation, I hope to help students to intensify and deepen their relationship with music, their way of listening, practicing, thinking, and musically interacting and communicating.

Class Setting

The class met once a week for three hours and fifteen minutes, offering enough time for warm-ups, focus on a main topic, continuation of or revisiting a previous topic, and periods of reflection. The syllabus served as a guide, leaving plenty of room for the unknown with options to delve deeper into any areas where the creative process might take us.

Musically, the fourteen-week course consisted of four phases:

- 1) The first four meetings centered around collective improvisation, listening, and establishing a group feel. To be on equal terms acoustically, each session included collective warm-up practice with voice and body, and/or a drum circle—both techniques are quite common in both “world” music and theater pedagogy. Starting in the second week, I added conducted improvisation, playing with the entire range of instruments available. Gradually, we added playing open group improvisations.
- 2) During the second phase of two meetings, we examined ways of building a vocabulary in improvisational practice. As the participants came from a variety of disciplines and their previous musical education differed widely, the level of familiarity with basic music elements was very uneven. After four weeks of focusing primarily on rhythmic, vocal and timbral elements, we revisited (or, in some cases, introduced) basic harmonic-melodic musical elements such as intervals, chords, and scales, and discussed ways of practicing and using them.
- 3) Covering four meetings, the third phase was about how to create music; how to invent, shape, and develop musical phrases; and how to improvise within a form.
- 4) The fourth phase, which took place during the last four weeks of the semester, was completely open and centered around students’ own creative projects.

In addition to playing, class meetings included reflections on our improvisations, listening to relevant musical examples, and discussions of readings. Students kept a journal documenting personal experiences and feelings to serve as an aid to memory. The students were also assigned two concerts of improvised music

(to attend) and submit a report on each. In the second half of the semester, students would work on their final projects.

The readings assigned served as supporting materials for each topic. Texts included: *Arcana: Musicians on Music*, a compilation edited by John Zorn; *Jazz Improvisation: Advice from the Masters*, a collection of short essays by jazz musicians about fundamental issues of improvising, edited by Jimi Durso and Karla Harby; and *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, an extensive reader edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner. For example, a session on Pauline Oliveros' concept of "Deep Listening" was accompanied by a text on listening by Oliveros (from Cox and Warner). Some sessions focused on one reading, such as Myra Melford's "Aural Architecture: the Confluence of Freedom" in *Arcana: Musicians on Music*. When looking at improvisation in classical music, I included texts by John Cage on indeterminacy. On the topic of minimal music, students read several texts on minimalism edited by Cox and Warner. While the class worked on a jazz/Latin standard, we read several short essays by Joanne Brackeen, Terry Lyne Carrington, Mark Helias, Steve Coleman, Jeremy Pelt, and Hal Galper (from Durso and Harby, eds.).

Overview: Ongoing Core Elements of the Course

To offer a multifaceted course (while avoiding taking a superficial glimpse at a multitude of styles), I made sure each class session built on previous experiences and prepared students for steps to come. At the same time, we quickly moved through a variety of topics.

The following are core elements of the course that were practiced on an ongoing basis:

1) Weekly Rhythmic Group Warm-ups
Tools: the body, voice, hand percussion, or a drum circle
The warm-ups were good for the training of musicianship skills and establishing a group feel. Body, voice, and percussion needed to be coordinated by each individual. In addition, everyone had to be in sync with everyone else. Shifting attention to primary musical elements and away from instrumental concerns freed up preconceptions about "right" and "wrong." For most people, hitting buckets with dowels while in a group is very liberating. Over time, the warm-ups became multi-layered and polyrhythmic, with more complex interaction.
2) Open Group Improvisation
The first group improvisations were extensions of the warm-ups, with each player being an equal part of the aesthetic process of creating sound together. Frequently, an idea or directive was given. After the improvisation came to an end, we discussed feelings about the sound created and determined the directive for the following improvisation.
3) Reflecting on the Creative Process (class discussions and journal writing)
Improvisation is the most ephemeral musical expression—it goes by and the memory of it fades quickly. Keeping a journal helped students to reflect on each class, to remember feelings and observations, and to take note of specific musical information. Class discussions and journals added an element of analysis to the creative flow.
4) Creating a Personal Project
During the last phase of the semester, everyone developed a final project to be realized in the group. These could draw on any experience throughout the semester: using acoustic and electronic music; improvisation in theater, dance, or multimedia contexts. The purpose was to learn how to define parameters, to think about the connections between more defined/composed and open/improvised elements, and to create something truly personal.

5) Getting to Know Contemporary Improvising Artists and Attending Live Concerts

The vast and vibrant community of cutting-edge improvising artists—in avant-jazz, avant-rock, free improvised music, live electronics, multi-media art—is largely unfamiliar to college musicians. Especially in the current cultural climate where many students discover music through downloads instead of experiencing it live, I placed much importance on introducing approaches of improvising artists that students could hear in concert during the term.

The Course Meetings throughout the Semester

Phase 1: Getting a Feel for Improvising (Sessions 1-4)

1. First Meeting

The class took place on the stage of a large theater space at Ramapo College. We began, standing in a circle, with a rhythmic name game and learned each other’s names in a call-and-response fashion. One by one, students would rhythmically call their name, and the group imitated the name in response. Next, we called out the whole round of names, each one in its rhythm. We discussed the importance of feeling the rhythms in the body, of synchronizing feet and voice, of being in tune with the group, and about the increased ability in memorizing all the names by adding rhythms to them.

In the following round, we called rhythmic motifs, again in a call-and-response manner. By dividing the group into sections and assigning each section a motif, layers of rhythms emerged. We then switched to a drum circle with buckets and dowels, trading ideas in call-and-response, gradually becoming more improvisatory and adventurous. After playing, we discussed the idea of the course, the syllabus, and everyone’s motivation to attend. Students’ journal entries give a good impression of their thoughts and concerns: “I was very happy to see the buckets and sticks. There really isn’t anything intimidating about playing a bucket,” comments Jill. “I signed up for this class because I want to learn the art of improvisation. It is very interesting to me as a musician. I have played classical music for over fifteen years and music is finally interesting to me because I found ‘freedom’ in music performance,” writes Jack (violin, er-hu).

Jeff notes:

I am interested to see how this class will be taught. In my opinion, one must possess some innate musical skill and listening ability to improvise. Listening is the most important aspect. Not only must one listen to what others are doing, but careful attention must be paid to how all of the instruments (including myself) are reacting to each other and in what direction they are moving. If a bunch of people get together and just start playing, chances are that it will be a collection of random thoughts and noises, sometimes disassociated from one another and sometimes coming together as a unit. I don’t see how we can have successful improvisations without some type of song structure or a plan.

Within this group, Jeff was frequently the one who emphasized the importance of listening. He made sensitive observations about listening and group dynamics throughout the semester. A few weeks later, once we had practiced conduction and “deep listening,” his preconception about a previous plan being necessary for a successful improvisation changed considerably.

Towards the end of the first class meeting, we reviewed the musical terms of the day: pulse, rhythm, groove, and call-and-response as musical elements used in many cultures.

2. Conduction

“Conduction” is the term for Lawrence “Butch” Morris’ personal approach to conducted improvisations, which he describes as follows:

Conduction (conducted improvisation/interpretation) is a vocabulary of ideographic signs and gestures activated to modify or construct a real-time musical arrangement or composition. Each sign and gesture transmits generative information for interpretation by the individual and the collective, to provide instantaneous possibilities for altering or initiating harmony, melody, rhythm, articulation, phrasing, or form. (1)

The beginning of the semester coincided with “Black February 2005,” a celebration of the twentieth anniversary of conduction. Through the entire month, Morris conducted a different ensemble each day in venues throughout New York City. With Morris’ permission, I introduced his conduction signals in class. Here, we used the entire range of instruments: voices, violin/er-hu, trumpet, several guitars, bass, piano, hand percussion, and drum set. The focus was on a collective result rather than showing off instrumental skills. We practiced *Down Beat*, *Sustain*, *Repeat*, *Dynamics*, and *Memory*.⁹

The “memory” sign is defined by Morris as, “Whatever the musician is playing when the memory designation is given is what the musician recalls and returns to when that designation is repeated with a downbeat” (4). Realizing this “memory” signal is excellent ear training and a good instant composition exercise, since it requires one to play a clear motif that can be recalled later. Students raised the issue of how to choose their pitches, not knowing what the other players would do. Some were more comfortable than others in allowing dissonance, hearing textures and atmosphere rather than hearing harmonically.

When the students attended one of the twenty-eight concerts Morris conducted in February 2005, they were able to recognize the relations between conduction signals and sounds created in concert. Opinions varied widely on whether the musicians’ and/or Morris’ aesthetic choices were successful. Here are excerpts of two student reports. Each student attended one performance of the Sound Infusion Orchestra. Mike comments:

Morris heard a motif played by the clarinet player and then, with razor sharp precision, conducted all the other instruments to emulate this in their own way, while still allowing for their own interpretation as, from the hand signals that I recall from my experimentation with such methods as “Memory 1,” and this would be the theme for the remainder of this piece. Morris’ ability to mold the improvisation into something that seemed uniform out of the eminent chaos of the first thirty seconds of the piece impressed me more than anything. [. . .] This music is something that I feel transcends what the human mind could conjure in the more classic “written” sense and, at least in my experience and studies of the history of music, could only be created out of one’s particular feeling at a specific moment, on that specific day and could never be reproduced in any way. To me, this is the most unique form of musical expression, breaking barriers of classic theory, harmonic structures, and conformity on all planes, and to see it first-hand was exciting.

Dave, on the contrary, notes: “Musicians who participate in conduction help push the boundaries of art and music in theory, but in practice the result can be unpleasant and somewhat lacking in any emotional or intellectual response.” In Dave’s opinion, Morris was too authoritarian: “there were brief flashes of originality and beauty, which were all promptly shut down by Morris with a dismissive wave of his hand. These dismissals [. . .] caused me to wish that the man would simply step off the stage and let the people play.” Dave feels that, “the theory of conduction greatly intrigued me and when the proficiency of the musicians became clear, I was expecting something special and different.”

Both students were very interested in the concept of conduction. Dave had looked forward to the concert and came with high expectations. He felt a strong discrepancy between the musical possibilities he heard in the ensemble (he came early and had heard the musicians warm up) and Morris’ choices to shape the sound. The issue he raised, that the conductor limits the expressive possibilities of the musicians, is a topic frequently discussed among improvisers who participated in Morris’ ensembles—or, for that reason, chose not to. As it happened, Dave attended the concert the ensemble felt was least successful, while Mike came to a quite inspired performance.¹⁰ These opposing views led to further reflections on whether or not, or to what degree, conduction counts as improvisation, on questions of boundaries, on the tangible nature of a performance of improvised music, and how much of an impact the energy of a particular set can have. From an instructor’s point of view, I find conduction a very useful tool, especially in the earlier part of the semester. In addition to stimulating the above thoughts and discussions, the practice of conduction heightens the focus, intensifies the group feel, and is excellent training in musicianship.

3. Percussion with Wole Alade

Three weeks into the course, we were fortunate to have percussionist Wole Alade, in residence at Ramapo College for a week, as a guest in class. A master percussionist from the Yoruba culture, Alade is a world percussionist and offered to work with a drum circle. He taught the group *clave* rhythms using words to help internalize and remember the patterns. The warm-ups with voice and rhythm had been good preparation. We began with a 2-3 *clave*, one hand at a time, and with the help of words and/or numbers, were able to play the *clave* two-handed, embedded in a pulse. Alade had us improvise with him one at a time in duet, coming back into the *clave* unison after each round of improvisation. He later introduced a more complex 6/8 bell pattern. Everyone was impressed by how complex a pattern we were able to learn with the help of language and vocalization. Albeit a very different approach from Morris, I emphasized the benefit of remembering ideas, patterns, and structures by learning them by ear, without the help of notation, (in this case, using syllables, words, even sentences to internalize a pattern). Both Morris' concept and the workshop with Alade demonstrated ways to first learn musical vocabulary and then apply it in improvisation. Both focused on the group sound rather than highlighting individual soloing, thus, keeping potential anxiety and self-consciousness at a very low level. Students also highlighted Alade's virtuosity and his help with keeping time. Many emphasized how much they enjoyed working with him.

4. "Deep Listening"—Pauline Oliveros

Listening—more specifically, Pauline Oliveros and her concept of "deep listening"—was the focus of this session. We warmed up with a series of meditative exercises by Oliveros and then listened to *Lear*, a twenty-four minute improvisation by Oliveros on accordion and vocals, Stuart Dempster on trombone and didgeridoo, and Panaiotis on vocals and various objects. Recorded in a cistern at Fort Warden in Washington State (a huge one hundred and eighty-six foot diameter cavern that once held two million gallons of water) the musicians play fourteen feet underground. They use the unique reverb of the space, which could last as long as forty-five seconds. The cistern has a very smooth frequency response and no echoes. The amplitude of the reverberation appears to begin at the same decibel level as the source, making it impossible to tell where the performer stops and the reverberation takes over.

As the class took place in a large dark theater space, the room lent itself to evoking a feeling of the cave where the music was recorded. We turned the lights down to the lowest level, and everyone was free to seek a listening position anywhere in the room, sitting or lying down. Introducing the piece, I pointed out that listening for such a long time might be a challenge, compared to the usual one to three minute excerpts offered in college classes. Once the piece ended, we quietly came together without exchanging any words and began a group improvisation.

This turned out to be the most focused and concise playing thus far. Students expressed they had felt comfortable playing, and in many journals, this was highlighted as one of the most successful improvisational experiences.

Tim writes:

The music was very unique and put me into a zone. We heard a brief sample of it the week before, but during this class we listened to the entire twenty minute piece. The musical piece was definitely fascinating, however, a little too long for my complete liking. However, this music did help guide us into our own little encounter with improvisation. [. . .] This was our best 'performance' yet in my opinion and I felt that we really opened up.

Jeff states:

Today we listened to Pauline Oliveros. I thought this was the most interesting music we have created thus far. After listening to Oliveros' piece, we were all paying close attention and listening to what was happening as a group and not just listening to what an individual was doing. We stayed away from developing a theme that prevents the music from progressing. Sometimes a certain idea will be good, but it will not easily allow change and different textures to develop. I believe that it is mostly a rhythmic issue. Everyone normally seems tentative to play something that does not, in the traditional sense, fit rhythmically. The piece by Pauline Oliveros did not have a constant rhythm or pulse throughout the

entire song. I think the state of mind we were in after listening to this allowed us to stay away from the norm.

Everyone, however, felt challenged when listening through such a long piece with seemingly little change. Some described their minds wandering to other places. One student found himself upset at pondering personal issues instead of staying with the piece, feeling time “wasted.” When asked: “Would you have gotten to this emotional space without this listening experience?” he perceived the listening experience in an entirely different light. We discussed the purposes of this kind of music and listening, and the influence of the listening on our subsequent playing.

What makes an improvisation satisfying or successful? However contrary the aesthetic points of view expressed in discussions, journals, or project reports, it was clear from our class discussions whether or not any of our improvisations was satisfying. With rare exceptions, each player had the same opinion. The energy and level of communication in each improvisation was felt by everyone, independent of each student’s musical taste and feelings about individual contributions. This connection, regardless of the musical achievement, proves that it is possible to communicate with each other, independent of signal, sign, or instruction.

Students found fascinating ways to describe this energy, as in this statement by Dave:

The power of mood is also apparent in communication between musicians and between people in general because it provides a solid ground on which communication can proceed rather than trying to build a common ground through dialogue.

Phase 2: Building a Vocabulary (Sessions 5, 6)

5. Foundations of Harmony and Theory

The first four sessions purposely required very little music theory and no knowledge of harmony. In the fifth session, we began to examine intervals, scales, chords, and tonality. We watched excerpts of a video by Marilyn Crispell entitled *A Pianist’s Guide to Free Improvisation: Keys to Unlocking Your Creativity*, and read a text by her on improvisation. The video frequently features a view from above the piano, which makes it easy to visualize the information while watching Crispell’s fingers touch the keys. Step by step, she explains intervals and how she uses them to create an improvisation, using a fifth in the left hand and improvising with an interval or chord over it, for example. In another example, she shows how she uses a folk melody as a springboard for improvising. The musical elements are simple and not limited to a particular style. However, the level of familiarity with such basic musical elements varied widely within the class. In addition, only a few students had tonal instruments, others were limited to percussion instruments. I made recommendations on how to practice basic musical elements, addressing the question on different levels. Since the setting did not lend itself to a satisfying group practice of the information Crispell demonstrates, we ended instead with a series of open group improvisations. Of course, students had the option to freely make use of intervals, scales, or chords.

6. Improvisation in Classical Music

Classical music, more specifically, the use of improvisation in Western classical music, was the topic of session six. The reason behind incorporating this topic into the course was to introduce the idea of improvisation as a part of daily life for musicians in previous eras; many composers in the baroque and classical eras were improvisers. In the absence of recordings of improvisation in earlier centuries, I chose J. S. Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* as a listening example to show the sheer variety of ideas Bach generated. We discussed to what extent a variation sounded improvisatory or like a written-down improvisation. Having reviewed some basic musical terms in the Crispell video, the class now improvised with triads and consonant intervals. Students unfamiliar with classical music and harmony, were now able to distinguish consonance from dissonance, tension from resolution, and basic tonal harmonic movement.

Phase 3. Putting the Vocabulary into Contexts (Sessions 7-10)

7. Connecting Improvisation and Composition: Creating Music from Small Cells

This phase marked the beginning of the second half of the semester, with its focus on how to create one's own ideas in improvisatory contexts. An excellent example of creating music from small cells and how to connect the composed and improvised parts of a piece of music is Myra Melford's text, "Aural Architecture: The Confluence of Freedom." Students read the text prior to class, and the class spent a lot of time discussing and understanding the ideas and listening to one of the examples.

Melford likens her approach to composition to the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. She grew up in a house designed by Wright and being profoundly familiar with his work, his architecture inspired several of her pieces. "The wall as the wall is vanishing," Wright wrote, "—interior space should be fluid, and in turn should flow out and blend into the surrounding landscape" (qtd. in Melford 119). Melford takes this notion of fluidity and describes her goal to "create a space that is not only structurally and aesthetically satisfying but that also allows for the individual listener or player within to have her own experience" (119-120).

As Wright does in his architecture, Melford works from a motif developed into building blocks for a larger and more complex structure. The motif is examined for its intervals, its inversion, retrograde, and harmonic possibilities. Harmony is derived by looking at the phrase vertically. Melford further employs Varèse's techniques of rotation, projection, expansion and contraction, as well as crystallization, a technique in which an internal structure is expanded and split into different shapes or groups of sound constantly changing shape, direction, and speed (Melford 123). Out of this thorough process of examining the cell or motif, a theme or a structure will eventually emerge. Melford also applies these techniques to rhythm: "expanding and contracting the units—a group of four sixteenth notes becomes a group of four quarters and evolves into a walking bass line for Part II of the piece with an even more temporally spread out melody floating on top of it" (126).

This allows for sonic contrasts that are inherently linked. Melford's pieces play with the balance of composed and improvised material by exploring sound and texture within free and structured improvisations. She draws from the languages of jazz, classical music, folk, blues, and gospel. However, instead of just transferring these vocabularies into an improvisation within (for example, a section in one of her pieces), she encourages the players to use the actual thematic, motivic, and rhythmic material of her compositions as a basis for improvisational ideas.

The class experimented with this idea and listened to Melford's piece, "Even the Sounds Shine" (one of the centerpieces of her article), trying to understand her process of composing. "The idea of a place having an effect on the composition of a piece of music is interesting," Jill comments in her journal. "I had never really thought much about the techniques involved with composition before, so it was something new to think about the process of writing music, rather than complete pieces magically appearing in one's head out of nowhere."

8. Improvising with Patterns, Motifs, Rhythms

Minimal music is another good example of the wealth of possibilities that lie in small cells and patterns—a good segue from Melford's piece and fun rhythmic training. A welcome variation to our rhythmic warm-ups, we played Steve Reich's "Clapping Music," a work that demands intense focus. While the first group holds the basic pattern, the second group drops one beat every eight times (in our version), until the shifting pattern falls into rhythmic unison again. The basic pattern seemed easy, however, students were surprised how it became more difficult to keep the pattern once the shifting process began. We practiced the piece over a period of three weeks, until most students had tried both roles.

The class was ready for improvisations within a form and a harmonic context. In open improvisational situations, the group tended to fall quite frequently into medium-tempo grooves, often with a blues flavor. We discussed the pros and cons, such as the comfort of a groove, with its inherent sense of unity. On the other hand, a real problem with a groove is its potential domination over subtle sounds and its stubbornness. We reflected on approaches for improvising without a groove, as in the "deep listening" session and some of our conduction work, versus including a groove. The main focus became *how, as a group, to get out of a groove once it is established* and the challenges faced when deciding *not* to go with it as a player. This group did not have enough experience to play fast or slow tempo, or to use advanced rhythmic devices such as double-time or metric modulation. Thus, it seemed difficult to avoid this bluesy medium-tempo. When it

emerged, the group found itself “stuck.” Several students were anxious to address this issue and to be “allowed” to play pieces with a groove. The previous week, someone had quoted the theme of the Latin standard “Blue Bossa.” It prompted us to examine the rich combination of blues, jazz, and Latin elements this tune has to offer, serving as a platform for a multitude of improvisational ideas in terms of melody, harmony, and rhythmic approaches.

9 and 10. Blues and Jazz

Here, notated music was introduced for the first time. To demonstrate how notation can imply a lot of freedom of interpretation, we looked at a variety of examples of graphic notation. We then examined the lead sheet of “Blue Bossa” for the possibilities this one page offers in terms of rhythm, form, harmony, and soloing. For rhythmic variation, the piece lends itself to playing with swing versus Latin feel. We revisited the 3-2 clave and formed a Latin percussion section. For variation of the form, we added vamps in the introduction and in-between solos. Harmonically, I demonstrated how to create distinctly different solos by improvising with the blues scale, with a C minor pentatonic scale, or with jazz modes. In addition, we created riffs to play behind soloists, and/or to serve as jumping-off points into solos.

It was clear that to learn to play and arrange this type of piece well required much more time than we had in the context of our course. With “Blue Bossa,” I used every player’s strength to accomplish the various ideas. The musicians with prior background in jazz played melody and harmony. Mara, a Cuban-born student, learned to play a *Montuno* on the piano. Jack, a Taiwanese student, brought his er-hu and showed how he improvised with a pentatonic scale. Over several weeks, we were able to realize a variety of arrangements. The main obstacle was less a lack of technique than a lack of focus and experience in playing in a band.

Most players wanted to play throughout the entire piece and did not recognize how important it is to allow for changing colors and textures. It took a few versions for some to realize the importance of laying out. To offer another experience in this realm, we revisited free improvisation with the guideline to only participate in playing for fifty percent of the time and to lay out and listen for the rest of the time.

In addition to playing, students read six short essays (from Durso and Harby) in which jazz musicians—Joanne Brackeen, Terri Lyne Carrington, Mark Helias, Steve Coleman, Jeremy Pelt, and Hal Galper—discuss aspects they find particularly relevant for developing as a jazz improviser. This presented a large variety of stimulating concepts and possibilities for further exploration outside of class.

Phase 4: Student Projects (Sessions 11-14)

In this last phase of the course, each student created a project to be realized by the group. Following are six examples:

Interaction of Light and Music (Jill)

Jill, a professional lighting designer for theater, developed ideas for the group to improvise while she improvised with the theater lights. She had spoken of this idea early in the semester. Within the class, this was a much-anticipated event. Before class, she had set up the theater lights in three colors. The first improvisation was open, with everyone responding to both music and light—by far the most difficult option to realize successfully. The group decided more definition was needed. Subsequently, Jill divided the group into sections and guided the improvisations with her lighting. A series of improvisations followed during which fast changes in the lighting translated into fast-paced musical ideas, guided by the principle that many visual colors represented many musical colors and darkness represented silence. This was still a rather complex guideline, and the playing instructions became more simplified: one group was assigned to blue light, another one to red, and the third one to yellow. Jill could, thus, have one, two, or three sections play simultaneously. This proved to be the most satisfying experience for all. Her project took up one entire class meeting and exemplified the importance of well defined parameters. It became very clear to the group that simplifying the instructions provided more space for creativity. In a more open setting, it was harder to choose which acoustic or visual signal to respond to. Many classmates commented on how much they enjoyed Jill’s project. This project is the first of several where the group found solutions collectively and the collective effort contributed significantly to the success of the project.

Using the Body as an Instrument (Mara)

Mara brought in a theatrical piece using body percussion and voice. “The goal of my project is to use our bodies as instruments to create some new sounds by using clapping and vocals,” she explained. She found the main challenges to be how to define specific enough instructions and how to create a not-too-intimidating environment, since vocal improvisation was still a big step away from the group’s comfort zone.

Her solutions proved to be brilliant. We sat on two rows of chairs facing away from each other. Each group was subdivided into two sections sitting on alternate chairs. Acoustically, one could hear the three other groups next to and behind oneself. Yet, by facing outwards, there was nobody looking one’s way. She also dimmed the lights to create a more comfortable atmosphere. In each round, four musical ideas were going on at the same time. These included keeping rhythms by clapping, humming, keeping a vocal pattern, and improvising. The only additional element consisted of sheets of paper that had to be crumpled and played with. Initially a bit intimidating for most, it turned out to be a very successful and funny experience.

Mara provided clear and fast-paced instructions, eliminating “worry time.” “My final improvisation project went as well or even better than I expected,” she concluded. “On my mind was to assign each student a task they would be best at. This aspect was probably why the project turned out to be so much fun. [. . .] I realized that even with improvisation there has to be an order and even with specific instructions there is still room for creativity.” The project was a turning point for Mara in terms of her self-esteem as a musician. She gained a deepened understanding of the nature of improvisation and of the interdependence between a solid structural underpinning and a creative flow.

Unique Influences: Improvising with a Composed Motif (Mike)

Mike was interested in the different solutions students might find for arranging and improvising with two themes he composed for the class. The themes were set in 4/4 time, four measures long. Moving in quarter notes, they could function both as a melody and as a bass line. Mike divided the group into two sections and had each group play and arrange one of the lines. It was a good opportunity for students to explore playing—for the first time—in a small ensemble of four to five people. Every group came up with very different solutions and, most remarkably, none of them fell into idiomatic clichés of the musics we had examined throughout the semester. Each arrangement sounded profoundly original! I attribute this to the quality and openness of the source material Mike had provided and to the fact that, by this time, the students had grown as a group and were open to pushing musical boundaries.

Pentatonics (Jack)

A Taiwanese violinist and er-hu player, Jack began with a presentation about the use of pentatonics in contemporary Taiwanese, Chinese, and Japanese music. We heard examples of orchestral music, rock, and punk music—the latter defying any stereotypes of sweet Asian pentatonic pop sounds of the kind one might hear walking through New York’s Chinatown. Jack had demonstrated the er-hu and its musical possibilities in a previous class. For this session, each student had a keyboard to experiment on. Jack had everyone experiment with playing pentatonics, using the black keys only. In the pentatonic mode, all notes can be played simultaneously without a sensation of dissonance. The group comfortably produced a multi-layered pentatonic tapestry of sound. Everyone, regardless of experience with keyboard playing and harmonic knowledge, could participate equally. In this regard, Jack’s project built on collective vocal and drum circle exercises in which each player has the same sonic options.

Ornamentation in Opera (Chris)

Chris, thoroughly trained in operatic singing, centered his presentation on the use of ornamentation in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century opera. To give us an impression of the style, he sang two famous tenor arias, “O Sole Mio” and “Anema e Core,” giving beautiful renditions with his own embellishments. He then had the group listen to two versions of the aria “Una Voce Poco Fa,” from Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville*, one sung by Anna Moffo and the other by Victoria De Los Angeles. He asked the students which they preferred and why. Most listeners, myself included, were astounded how remarkably different the two versions were. The part that involved the class consisted of singing and improvising over “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” He knew almost all his classmates were uncomfortable singing, so he chose a simple song

everyone would know. The idea was to take turns embellishing the melody with ornamentations as he had demonstrated earlier. Only one student managed to find the courage to try. For lack of more volunteers, I was chosen, asked the group to hum the harmony behind me, and felt pushed out of my own comfort zone perhaps more than ever before in this particular class.

The Influence of Listening on Playing (Dave)

Dave was interested in experimenting with the impact of listening to recorded music before playing. In his project, he explored how students would carry elements of the music previously heard into their subsequent improvisation. He had everyone bring a Walkman and headphones, divided the group into three sections, and prompted each section with a radically different piece of music to listen to before improvising. All three sections improvised simultaneously. He asked each player to pick an element in the prompt, emulate it, and continue musically. Ideally, he was hoping the players could figure out what music had been given to the other sections. This proved to be quite a challenge, not the least because our instrumentation was limited. For example, I chose a groove in 6/8 time out of my prompt and played it on a ride cymbal, the only instrument I had at that moment. Without a melodic or harmonic element, without even being able to emulate the entire rhythmic feel, it was impossible for the others to get a sense of the style of the original piece. All the same, Dave's instructions heightened the focus on listening, inspired players to play differently from ideas they tended to fall back on, and led to fresh moments in the improvisations. Dave asked the students to guess the genres of music the other two sections had been prompted with, and then played us the examples. He brought an excellent diversity of music, including Ravi Shankar, Thelonious Monk, Beethoven, and Phish. The experimental character of his project was especially appealing since it captured the characteristic of process in improvisation and called for the unexpected.

Conclusions and Student Observations

As the possibilities of improvisation are limitless, it was crucial to create enough space for each player's musical personality to develop. The originality of students' thoughts and ideas did not correlate with or depend on their prior musical training. In fact, some of the most original ideas came from students with little such training. Technical skills proved helpful only when used sensitively. What mattered most was motivation, both in regards to musical practice and communication. By taking the challenges of this course seriously and applying themselves, most students were able to reach new musical levels.

The last four weeks, when students synthesized their experiences throughout the semester into personal creative experiments, turned out to be a most inspiring experience for all. The group members felt comfortable with each other and entering into unknown musical situations. Several students' journals described this phase as the most exciting part of the semester. Tim's comment, "the presentations were some of the strongest moments because this allowed us to think even further and motivated everyone in the class to participate and use his/her imagination," reflects the energy of those weeks. Several students have since mentioned to me how these experiences carried over into their musical practice and, in some cases, band projects.

Each of the six projects described above was remarkably original, with a truly experimental component or character. They were not situated in a particular style and stayed outside of the familiar idioms the group tended to fall into earlier in the semester such as a blues or jazz tune or a rock groove. The presentations that focused on a genre or idiom, that is, ornamentation and pentatonics, also included space to explore.

Throughout the semester, the strongest and most satisfying moments happened when someone went beyond his or her usual range of expression. Mike, for example, expressed a change in his approach to music: "This course did have quite a substantial effect on the way in which I look at music." Initially, he used to play his acoustic guitar so quietly that he was hardly heard. The decisive moment happened one day when he decided to bring in his electric bass. He began practicing intensely and his playing in class grew to a different level.

That's when I feel my true colors began to show. I never really wanted to be heard until I brought that bass in. [. . .] Before long, I was enthralled with the instrument and I didn't even realize what was happening. I attribute that to the class, my musical "renaissance," so to speak. For that I am grateful.

At the end of the semester, I asked each student to answer four questions:

- 1) How did taking this course affect your relationship with music?
- 2) Which impressions of the semester do you find strongest?
- 3) Did keeping a journal help you remember and analyze what happened?
- 4) Please mention anything you particularly liked/disliked in this course.

The following is a cross-section of students' impressions along with my own observations. The responses address a variety of issues:

Jeff and Dave discussed the philosophy of improvisation. "This course broke the stigma that I had beforehand, that music must be created in a certain way, even improvised music," Jeff said. "Prior to taking this course, I thought that the music making process always consisted of organizing ideas beforehand and then developing them further through improvisation. I was opened up to the idea of creating music using various stimuli as catalysts."

Dave addressed the depth of meaning of music: "I came into the course thinking that music was really for either entertainment or emotional applications. This course showed me the spiritual aspect that can be found in music as well as the various ways of composing."

Jack commented, more pragmatically: "I think I am a better improviser at the end of the semester than in the beginning," and added, "I learned more to adapt to what people do and started to listen more carefully to what other people play."

Several students highlighted the importance of listening and feeling as the most profound aspects of improvising. Jeff realized "how often I play cerebrally," instead of letting the emotion guide the playing:

I will be thinking about what scales and arpeggios to use over what chords and maybe I could play in a relative key or mode instead of hovering around the root. Now that I think about it, the times when I play best are when after a bad day or some emotional event or news, I just pick up my guitar or sit at the piano and just play. I'm not thinking necessarily about what I'm playing but how I'm playing. I'll listen to how each note resonates and sounds with other notes which will evoke some type of feeling or emotion, which in turn will inspire what I do next. The point is that improv can't be forced. If it is forced, then it doesn't sound very good, and everyone can tell it's forced.

Mara addressed the substantial issue of self-confidence: "I took a lot from this course. On a personal level, I realized all I need is more confidence. If I had half the confidence of some of the guys in the class, I would be okay." This is an important statement. There were only two women in the class and both knew me from a previous course. Frequently, the most extroverted (male) students would dominate an improvisation, and others—female and male—felt this presented a challenge. We discussed this in and outside of class; I also addressed issues of gender and self-confidence with the two women students outside of class. It took special attention and time to ensure all students found their space to be heard, to express themselves. By the end of the semester, the mutual respect students had for each other had grown considerably.

In terms of originality, not everyone was able to go far beyond their musical habits and preferences. Still, everyone absorbed a considerable number of ideas from the topics we covered and from each other. Brent writes: "I liked everything about this course. I liked the idea of thinking outside the box and that you could even improvise without scales."

Asked about the journal, the deepest thinkers in the class got the most out of it, finding it essential to think critically about what happened week to week, throughout the semester.

The readings which addressed practical issues of music making were appreciated, but the scholarly texts were not perceived as helpful to the main cause, that is developing improvisational skills. For this reason, some students questioned the usefulness of academic discourse. We recognized the potential conflict of studying advanced scholarly texts while reaching out for the opposite—to immerse oneself in a creative process, freeing the mind from reflection and intellectualization. Also, to a degree, students acknowledged

the usefulness of knowing about an academic discourse on improvisation for further study and reflection in the future.

In terms of choosing readings and listening examples, I suggest selecting them according to each teaching situation and to frequently change the material used if teaching a course for many semesters. Rather than working towards establishing a canon of literature and listening examples for improvisation, which might, over time, become rigid, I prefer to keep the teaching materials and organization of improvisation courses as fluid and flexible as possible. Within the choice of texts and audio examples, however, it is critical to convey a culturally and stylistically diverse picture with a focus on strengthening imbalances in regards to gender and race.

My pedagogical attitude was to provide as much autonomy as possible, with a focus on the power and relevance of getting to profound, “real” moments. Teaching this course required true flexibility. Not knowing what to expect in terms of the students’ final projects, I had envisioned discussing free improvisation in greater detail and examining concepts of European and American improvisers such as Ornette Coleman, Anthony Braxton, and Derek Bailey. But from the moment the final presentations began, we used every moment for them. Applying a core value of improvisation—reaching for the unknown and unexpected—to my role as instructor, meant that I had to deviate from the predetermined agenda spelled out in the syllabus.

Dave said: “I loved the freedom of the class. Your teaching style allowed us to pursue whatever channels we wished. I think that at this school we are not used to such an environment.” Ramapo College began as a progressive liberal arts college in 1971. At that time, the majority of courses were taught with a very open teaching philosophy. Dave’s comment reflects how the current academic climate is under pressure to demonstrate measurable success and how it has become increasingly difficult to keep or create a truly free teaching environment.

On that note, giving grades in creative work is a challenge in itself. The solution to me was to determine grades based on students’ attitudes, motivation, and their musical growth, rather than rewarding levels of instrumental playing or improvisational skills. There were no tests, quizzes, or final examinations. Class participation, journals, concert reports, and final projects were all an integral part of the final grade. This ensured a balance between creative work, musical skill, intellectual work, reflection, motivation, consistency, and the individual development of each student throughout the semester.

Perhaps the single most important factor in successfully designing this course lay in the balance between specific practice and topics, and open-endedness. Group improvisation is a complex social activity, and the group grew through the process of collective practice in unpredictable ways. This group evolution transcended individual progress and my direct influence. In numerous instances, players came up with fresh ideas they would not have developed alone. The inspiration of the group was key and by leaving time to respond to the group dynamic, I was able to let the improvisations flow in their own time. The music itself thus played a crucial part in shaping the course. My course on improvisation has taken place a second time in the spring semester of 2007 and is running again in the spring semester of 2008. The 2007 group had four trained vocalists and a number of students with some background in singing. This led to a different dynamic and focus than in the first group, where only the one opera singer felt comfortable using his voice. Very successful topics, such as the “deep listening” session and Melford’s text, practicing conduction, and using the drum circle are, at present, integral parts of the syllabus. Beyond the core structure, each semester will be shaped differently, and each group will develop in their own unique way.

Notes

¹ Quote by one of the students in the course. See, also, the last part of this essay, “Conclusions and Students’ Observations.”

² For more information about my work and improvisational activities, please visit my website: <www.urselschlicht.com>.

³ See, for example, George Lewis (80) or David Ake as discussed by David Borgo (176).

⁴ For example, flutist-composer Robert Dick, who has taught countless master classes, workshops, and individual lessons, often to highly trained classical players, frequently observed this phenomenon for the past three decades.

⁵ See the course meeting on “Deep Listening.”

⁶ By Fred Ho Wei-Han and Ron Sakolsky.

⁷ Edited by Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble. Published by Black Rose Books in 2003.

⁸ For an extensive historical analysis of gendered access to instruments, and images of specific instruments, see Freia Hoffmann's *Instrument und Körper. Die musizierende Frau in der bürgerlichen Kultur*. [Instrument and Body. On Musical Practice of Women in Bourgeois Culture]. Hoffmann focuses on the classical music culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and argues that this history stubbornly affects gendered music education, gendered images of instruments, and, in turn, restricted access of girls and women to instrumental practice, until today.

⁹ Some of these signals have several variations. We used the following meanings listed. *Downbeat*: “Used to ‘begin,’ commence, and/or activate a directive.” *Sustain*: “The sign for ‘sustain’ is given, followed by a downbeat to commence ‘one continuous sound.’ This sound may be changed each time a downbeat is given.” *Repeat*: “To ‘capture’ (emulate, imitate or follow) information, as close as possible.” *Dynamics*: “Palm(s) of left (and/or right) hand(s) facing the floor, raising them for louder, lowering them for softer.”

¹⁰ I played in both performances, which put me in a position to discuss the events of each conduction in detail and compare the energy of both concerts.

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