Teaching Improvisation in a University Music Ensemble:
A Personal Reflection on the University of Guelph Contemporary Music Ensemble

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When I arrived at the University of Guelph in 2002, one of my first assignments was to lead the brand new "Twentieth Century Music Ensemble," a for-credit class created in response to an enterprising group of students who had formed a new music ensemble the previous year. Having safely passed through the non-event of Y2K into the 21st century, it seemed an obvious move to rename it the Contemporary Music Ensemble or CME. Almost immediately, the group found its identity as an improvisation and project-based ensemble that runs more like a collective than a traditional class. My years with the CME (2002-2008) were hugely formative for me as a musician and teacher, and students from many backgrounds have told me how important they found the combined freedom and personal responsibility the ensemble offers. CME was aptly renamed by visionary bassist William Parker, who worked with us in 2007. He simply assumed that CME meant Creative Music Ensemble, and the moniker continues to resonate through the "official" title. The CME is still going strong under the exceptional leadership of percussionist and composer Joe Sorbara.

In this personal reflection, I share my experience with the CME as a way of thinking about the use value of improvisation in a university music curriculum. In my view, improvisation ought to be an integral part of all musicians' training because of its emphasis on both social responsibility and personal creativity. In its most provocative instances, I have seen improvisation provide transformational experiences for students that complement and enrich the training of classical and jazz players and of popular music practitioners alike.

The Value of Clarity and Depth in Music Education

I am an interdisciplinary scholar and creative practitioner of music, a flutist who works with voice, electronics, and theatre. Like most musical academics of my generation, I began my education in the traditional and deeply hierarchical conservatory. Responsibility to students was defined as the rigorous inculcation of tradition, and the responsibility *of* students was to absorb that tradition (exemplified by the private teacher) as accurately and completely as possible: a status understood and spoken of as "paying one's dues." There was a certain romance to this: striving to win competitions, to get first chair in the orchestra, to attain more advanced skills. Prominent in many professional musicians' bios is a list of their teachers, who are considered to be primary and lifelong influences.

As a student I was hard working and compliant, and my teacher was distant and demanding and very dedicated to his students. If I chafed under a hierarchical system in

which performers of music were not considered to be "scholars," and composers were considered the "true creators," I did not rebel. If I wondered why the curriculum focused entirely on the cliché of "dead white men," I did not display much intellectual independence beyond writing the odd paper about a woman composer. I was too busy trying to master the complex minutiae of a particular musical tradition. My rigorous musical training was "the real thing," and I happily paid my dues. I am not an advocate of the system under which I was trained—it was repressive, occasionally demeaning, and deeply prejudiced (the music academy has come a long way since the early 1980s!). But it *was* thorough.

Fast forward to 2005. I am supervising an honours thesis by a University of Guelph undergraduate, Tegan Ceschi-Smith, who has designed her own "independent studies" course "Women, Music and Change". A classical violinist, she wants to design a model for an alternative music school. Steeped in the educational theories of Paolo Freire, bell hooks and Henri Giroux, she seeks to reconcile the dialectic between her ethical concerns—for respecting students' creativity, making a positive space for diverse voices, deeply sensitive to issues of race, class, gender and sexuality—with her own rigorous and traditional classical training on the violin. Despite decades of difference in age, (she's far more independent and politicized than I was at her age) we find we share a deep affinity for the benefits of our classical music training. We struggle to articulate ways to imagine retaining values of clarity and depth, the meticulous attention to detail that requires patience, struggle, and self-discipline, in the context of a non-hierarchical, non-repressive system. Clarity and depth, we agree, are essential ethical values in music pedagogy.

I think that our primary responsibility to students is to offer up all that we have: in skills, in knowledge, and in understanding with clarity, depth, and discipline. As professors we are in a position of power and it's no good pretending that this is not the case. As professional academics and musicians, we have achieved our positions not without hard work and drudgery. Our students deserve our high expectations, and they need the tools and confidence that underwrite self-discipline.

The burning question then, is how do we retain traditional educational values such as clarity and depth while fostering a less hierarchical pedagogy that promotes independence and critical thinking but also social responsibility and citizenship?

The Value of Respect and Reciprocity in Music Education

I was enormously fortunate to do my graduate work at the University of California, San Diego in a Music Department focused on creative musical research. While continuing in the cult of musical athleticism (this time in the service of "new music"), I was in a peer environment in which performers, composers, and scholars crossed boundaries and freely poached on each others' territory. The meeting ground was often improvisation. Improvising with musicians (with fellow students, professors, visiting artists, and musicians from various musical traditions) I learned an ethics of respect and reciprocity on the ground. Where playing scored music (often of enormous

difficulty) maintained old hierarchies of skill, rank, and creativity vs. interpretation, improvising brought all players into a space where aesthetic success is predicated on good communication, listening, respect, and reciprocity.

My mentors were musicians of deep skill and self-discipline for whom improvisation was not an "anything goes" proposition, but a continuous exploration of new possibilities—adventurous, risky, requiring all one's musical and intellectual resources. Improvising with my peers and with mentors like the great jazz improviser/ computer musician/and scholar George Lewis showed me that self-knowledge, self-respect, and openness to difference are essential musical qualities. My improvising mentors never asked me to play "like them" but rather to develop my own voice.

My own approach to improvisation pedagogy has been deeply shaped by three mentors with whom I have been privileged to work. From George Lewis I learned the power of collaboration, a philosophy in which all musicians must take responsibility for the collective sound and no-one holds sole responsibility for creation. Part of the ethics of this sometimes uncomfortable musical situation is that of allowing every single person to be heard—regardless of their confidence, articulateness, or musical skill. From George, I also learned the potency of silence—of laying out, leaving the room, giving up control. Iconic Canadian composer and educator R. Murray Schafer taught me the value of heuristic learning; that is, learning through experience. In improvisation we discover core principles of music all over again, as if for the very first time. Sound, silence, ictus, timbre, amplitude, form, vertical and horizontal dimensions must be creatively experienced in order to be effectively communicated. This is a radical departure from traditional music pedagogy in which musical verities are handed down from master teacher to student. Finally, the great musician Pauline Oliveros has inspired me (and so many others) with her concept of Deep Listening—the practice of actively fostering a continual awareness and appreciation of all sounds in and around us. In addition, Pauline's work at the cutting edge of distance technologies and adaptive use instruments has taught me that we have only just begun to explore the boundaries of musical participation.

Students in the CME continued to teach me the ethics of respect and reciprocity. From the beginning, I decided not to hold auditions for this group a practice that still remains. Students are asked only to show up and to contribute. Players with advanced skills must learn to negotiate creative terrain with those who are at a different place in their musical journey. Experienced improvisers play with new improvisers. The idea is to set up situations in which hierarchies of skill are not at play—there is no "beginner" group, and I often played as part of the band.

Our projects involved the collective creation of new pieces to be performed in public. Students learned about music heuristically by experiencing the demands of form, pitch, time, texture, and colour. Very soon in the year they would begin to work quite independently of me, with a group of up to 30 students split into several small ensembles. Experienced and new improvisers were grouped together and unusual instrumental combinations formed. The CME quickly developed a reputation for openness, attracting

an exceptionally diverse instrumentation that included rock guitarists, DJ's, classical strings, winds and vocalists, punk percussionists, noise musicians, and jazz saxophonists.

Working in small groups, the students quickly gained self-confidence and trust in their colleagues. By the end of the year, my job was ideally reduced to strolling from room to room "interfering" for a few minutes with my observations on already productive, creative sessions. My role as a teacher was to create a space, and offer some basic rubrics; the students took full responsibility for their creative work, and they very seldom let each other down.

There are certainly challenges to working as an improvisational collective! This kind of musical environment heightens difference, sometimes creates conflicts, and exposes students to situations well outside their comfort zones. Because we always worked towards public performance the stakes were high, our work was on display and students had to grapple with time restrictions, varying levels of commitment, and the inevitable gap between their creative imaginations and what they were able to produce. Collectivity is an often unwieldy and inefficient means of creation. Things break down; I occasionally found myself stepping in to dictate terms and restructure things. The habits of my traditional musical professionalism died hard!

One term, the ensemble of 21 musicians worked together to develop a musical/ theatrical work on the theme of the Panopticon – Michel Foucault's image of omnipotent surveillance drawn from prison architecture and a potent metaphor for power and dominance. This difficult and ambitious piece (the theme was chosen by the students) was developed on the principle of consensus decision making. Things evolved very slowly in rehearsals that included endless discussion. Students experienced considerable stress from not knowing in advance how it would all turn out (and a huge sense of joy and relief when they nailed it at the concert). Valuable lessons of developing group trust, creative conflict resolution, and problem solving were the real products of this project.

Another term, a 30-member ensemble played a concert of large group works for improvisation, for which we commissioned a number of pieces. *Moving Streams* was contributed by a young composer and percussionist Germaine Liu who is an alumna of the CME. Germaine's piece consisted of a bare-bones structure: a series of escalating events from 1 to 10, the content and pacing to be determined by each individual player, and the piece only ending once every player had completed the series. She presented a kind of *koan*:

> Contribute by *leaving space* and *creating space*. *Leaving space* means to not play, providing room for other musicians' input. *Creating space* involves contributing to the flow of music either through playing or not playing. This piece is focused on providing space for listening, communicating, and creativity with a focus on collective consciousness and responsibility in a group setting. (Liu, *Moving Streams*)

As Germaine's instructions indicate, the musical outcome is in fact a social outcome. Rehearsing the piece was really hard! We felt as though we were tiptoeing around one another, and occasionally someone would break out and trample over the sonic ground in noisy frustration. Heated conversations ensued after each attempt, in which one person might express feeling shut out of the music, while another felt completely affirmed. These tensions were not resolved before the performance, and for me, this was a positive thing. Everyone went into the performance knowing that we were modeling a social as well as an aesthetic interaction: success would mean both the acceptance of difference and an equitable negotiation of sonic space. No one was complacent.

Improvisation as a Model for Ethical Pedagogy in the Classroom

My work with the CME has encouraged me to think about the potential for improvisation to model an ethical pedagogy in the music classroom. There are two related dimensions to consider here: 1) the role of improvisation in training musicians, and 2) the role of improvisation in developing human beings. Drawing on information science, creativity expert Keith Sawyer identifies four qualities found in "experts": deep conceptual understanding, integrated knowledge, adaptive expertise, and collaborative skills. Sawyer points out, correctly in my view, that these four qualities are inherent to improvisative practice:

> Improvisation requires that a performer have a *deep musical understanding*—rather than solely a straightforward performance of a score, the performer must have knowledge of the harmonic and rhythmic structures of music. Their knowledge of music must be *integrated*—the harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic elements must weave together to generate a whole. Improvisation requires *adaptive expertise*—improvisers almost always develop a large set of short melodic phrases or "ready made" musical passages but rarely perform them without modifying them to fit the immediate musical context. In addition, almost all improvisational genres are ensemble genres, requiring musical *collaboration*.

My experience with the CME has convinced me that music pedagogy has the potential to do much more than shape competent musicians. In an improvisational collective, students learn important lessons about negotiating difference, making room for dissonant voices, and expressing visions of hope.

Works Cited

Sawyer, Keith. “Improvisation and Teaching.” *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation,* 3.2(2007). Web.