

Upstream Association

Sally Booth

Background

Upstream Association is a non-profit organization based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, that aids in the production and promotion of pan-genre orchestral music. According to Upstream's website, the group's central shared vision "is to produce and present concerts of the utmost intensity that sharpen our wits and increase our awareness of truth" ("Further Upstream"). It aims to achieve this intensity, or what the group calls "ecstatic equilibrium" ("Further Upstream"), by encouraging musicians to play relevant music in a manner that pushes artists through collaboration, improvisation, and intense performance. As Upstream states, "wild abandon is the essential attitude and we are supportive of the courage it represents" ("Further Upstream"). It also promotes "ecstatic equilibrium" by inviting composers to collaborate with Upstream not only by composing pieces for the Orchestra, but also by participating as performers. This integration is important, according to founding member Paul Cram, because it's "a great equalizer" (interview).

Paul Cram was the driving force behind the creation of Upstream. He moved to Halifax from Vancouver, where he was a founding member of the New Orchestra Workshop (NOW). When he arrived in Halifax he connected with a gallery space that was interested in holding a regular concert series. Cram invited a number of composer-performers to rehearse together in preparation for the series, leading to the creation of Upstream (interview). By 1993, Upstream was touring Ontario. The group was originally an octet, consisting of Steve Tittle, Bob Bauer, Tom Roach, Jeff Reilly, Steven Naylor,

Sandy Moore, Paul Cram and Don Palmer. In 1995 some members of the Halifax Symphony Orchestra approached the octet, which resulted in an expanded 17-piece ensemble. Finally, by 2000, the Orchestra grew into a 22-piece ensemble (“History”).

Philosophy and practice

Cram argues that frequently musicians are “trained to play within a grid. The 32-bar song format, etcetera.” But, Cram argues, when the boundary between composer and performer and the constrictions of “grid” playing are broken “we can go to more places, so that there’s more textures and we can be way more open.” One way Cram distinguishes between this textured, open music and other forms of composition and performance is to differentiate creative from applied music. As he says, “There’s creative music for me, and there’s applied music. And applied music is where you actually talk to people, other artists, and make their projects sound good. And that’s fantastic.”

Importantly, Cram is committed to reaching these places in music through what he calls “mistakes.” What he means by “mistakes” is a lack of a regulatory self-consciousness: “your music or my music is really found in the mistakes we make. So, it’s being unselfconscious enough to the point where you can make mistakes. Cause you’re not thinking anymore. When you’re not thinking, that’s your music, is your mistakes” (interview). Upstream is committed to fostering spaces where these “mistakes” can happen, leading to creative and cutting-edge performances and compositions.

In addition to encouraging these individual spaces of experimentation, Upstream argues that it “is an organization that thinks globally and acts locally” (“Further Upstream”). Highly conscious of its maritime environment, Upstream argues that

Halifax's location, by the ocean, uniquely positions it to encourage adventurous music. As Upstream's website states, "Living as we do on the edge of the continent, we are metaphorically ideally placed to throw ourselves into the abyss" ("Further Upstream"). Upstream has also fostered collaborative relationships with an impressive number of international artists and intends to continue to seek out musicians and ensembles in Canada and abroad who share the group's vision of encouraging experimental, improvised music.

Beyond encouraging intense collaborative and improvisational performances from both its resident performers and from visiting artists from the rest of Canada and abroad, the organization is also deeply committed to using music as a catalyst for social practice. Cram argues that music should be brought to the point where "it's actually doing the planet some good" (interview). Upstream also does considerable outreach with young performers in the Halifax area and in local schools. They have formed the Grande Orchestre Plateau de Halifax, which is comprised of young players who, according to Cram "are wandering in the wilderness" (interview). They have also taken pieces – like 'Convoy', which is composed by Francois Houle – to concert bands in local schools. Upstream has also gone into schools to promote and foster the students' own compositions. In October 2001 Upstream continued its community outreach with the start of the Open Rehearsal Series, where invited musicians lead workshops where participants are encouraged "to take some chances in a non-judgmental atmosphere and explore the tricky (and hugely rewarding) terrain of improvisation" ("Improv Workshop in Parrsboro").

The cross-over between Upstream and improvisation as a social practice are many. Upstream's whole mandate is to create and foster music that cannot be compelled into orthodox forms of instrumentation. In stressing the need to break from conventional forms of music making and to embrace mistakes and move through them to self-expression, Cram is echoing the premium placed on spontaneity by many improvising musicians and critics. As Julie Dawn Smith and Kevin McNeilly state in their editorial for a recent edition of *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, "Improvisers will tell you that there can be poetic justice in mistakes. Flubs, bumbles, and clams – all sorts of unintentional slips of finger or tongue – can produce moments of intensely brilliant, accidental music" ("Connective Tissues"). Smith and McNeilly go on to state that these accidents result in "noises of deregulated – that is to say, lived – human experience" (ibid.). This stressing of the embodied, human aspects of improvisation underlies many of Upstream's intentions. The organization insists that to compose a piece is not enough and that to perform this piece, the composer should be in the room, face-to-face with the musicians. This principle stresses the premium Upstream places on lived human experiences in music.

This belief in what is gained through mistakes and face-to-face contact in music making undoubtedly feeds into Upstream's continued belief in collaborative performance. The organization's impressive history of collaboration includes world-renowned jazz artists, but also public school students. Scott Thomson argues that performance is a key site for the creation of "networks of collaboration, dissemination, organizational affiliation, and [...] proximity" ("Pedagogical Imperative"). It is through performance

that “musical improvisation is given public presence and where improvisers’ musical knowledge, aesthetic judgment, negotiation of difference, and sense of play circulate in the process of making collaborative music in real time” (ibid.). Importantly, Thomson argues that these moments of exchange are fundamentally pedagogical moments and that responding to these moments of exchange and pedagogy is the fundamental role of “a responsive, responsible improviser” (ibid.). As such, Upstream’s continued search for collaborations points not only to its belief in the lived human experience of improvisation, but also to its continued facilitation of pedagogical moments of exchange. The fact that Upstream seeks these moments with new and established musicians points to its desire to create a network of musicians that not only spans abilities, but also avoids traditional hierarchies in music making.

Works Cited

Cram, Paul. Interview with Ellen Waterman. July 2003.

“Further Upstream” <upstream.squarespace.com/further-upstream/> , n.d. Web. 9 Feb. 2010.

“History.” <upstream.squarespace.com/history/>, n.d. Web. 9 Feb. 2010.

“Improv Workshop in Parrsboro” <upstream.squarespace.com/improv-workshop-parrsboro/>, n.d. Web. 9 Feb. 2010.

Livingston, Barry. “Paul Cram: Beyond Benghazi.” *Coda* 217 (Dec/Jan 87/88): 14-15.

McNeilly, Kevin and Julie Dawn Smith. “Connective Tissues” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Etudes Critiques en improvisation*. 4.2. (2008)

Thomson, Scott. “The Pedagogical Imperative of Musical Improvisation” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Etudes*