

**Interview with Eugene Martynec:  
*Improvising and a Community***

**Eugene Martynec:** Well, ok the function of the Toronto Improvisers Orchestra is basically an improvised, large ensemble, call it an orchestra, and we use sort of a subset of Butch Morris' hand signals. These are the hand signals that we get from The London Improvisers Orchestra, and the reason I thought we would use those was that I was able to also perform with other orchestras in Europe because they all use the same hand signals. So, I thought it would be a good idea to do that here at least more or less stipulate that it should be very similar because it allows for instance yourself to go to London and say that, for instance, that you play with the Toronto Improvisers Orchestra and we use the same hand signals, so you could go and play with this orchestra, the one in Amsterdam the one in Wuppertal; those are the three I played with and they all pretty well used the same hand signals, slight variations sometimes. They also work in a different fashion- they always get together several hours before a performance and the conductors, should they have slightly different ideas or specific ideas or things they want to try then that's usually rehearsed. We can't afford to do that here unfortunately at this point so we just try and go through the hand signals just before the actual performance. I just think it's a really fun thing to do and at this point, I'm a bit sort of disappointed that the community hasn't come out enough I guess.

**Sandro Manzon:** In terms of audiences?

**Eugene:** No, no, in terms of musicians, I think we... and I'm not really quite sure why.

**Sandro:** When you get a group together what are some of your pedagogical strategies or resources for directing an improvised music ensemble? Because it's not very typical.

**Eugene:** No it's not, well the hand signals we use are very basic, very simple, I think. So it's really, I think that it's, I think that the musicians are more important than the conductor in this case. I think the conductor should just you know get things rolling, get things started and you know, I mean as conductors we get a chance to sort of shape things as well, but I think it's very important to give lots of room for people to play. I think, and as a player, I find that's much more fun and interesting than constantly sort of being directed.

**Sandro:** Yeah, that's interesting, I think you make that explicit because I've done other languages, conducting languages, where it's kind of the opposite, where the conductor kind of shapes everything.

**Eugene:** Yes, well that's great, you know we, also one of the reasons to keep things simple too is that, you know, there is such a huge turnover in the people that come here, so I think anyway that's the easiest way to deal with it. Plus you know the, as you've noticed, people come up with completely own ideas, but it works because people sort of roughly get an idea of what's going on. But I think it's very important, like my idea of this was to, like it's an improvising orchestra you know, so...

**Sandro:** Do you want more free improvisation in the orchestra?

**Eugene:** Well I think, yeah, I think we could do more, you know they also, I'm also use to, you know, for instance we might have two halves in the performance and usually the conductors would occupy more time than we do, you know, sometimes and then we switch around this and there's really nothing wrong with that, that's just the way it is, so we're different in many ways. The other thing that we're quite different with is the fact that we welcome voices much more so than what I was confronted with in Europe.

**Sandro:** Really?

Eugene: Yeah, for some reason, I have no idea why, but we have, I think because of Christine Duncan, there's such a strong vocal improvisation and interest in improvising so I think that really benefits this group very much.

**Sandro:** You mentioned Christine Duncan, she kind of has, she does conducted improvisation with her vocal ensemble and there's also other groups like the Burdocks Ensemble and the CME at the University of Guelph, which is conducted by Joe Sorbara- they use conducted improvisation. Do you know of any other types of conducted languages? Are there...

**Eugene:** No, I'm not familiar with any others, really.

**Sandro:** So the London Improvisers then is primarily Butch Morris...

Eugene: Well, indirectly, I mean it's an offshoot of that, Butch Morris came to London I guess about 12 years ago and they all, they basically started the idea of it but they've taken it from there, but it's still very much his system. Ironically The Royal Dutch Improvising Orchestra, the person who started that up, their director played with The London Improvisers Group. He is a young man, I guess he's getting, well he's in one of the conservatories there, he studied, he studied composition there, but he runs that and that's a very young orchestra, and the one in Wuppertal they brought people from London to do workshops. So there's a real close connection in that, but the beautiful thing about that is that many people from the continent come to play with The London Improvisers Orchestra because the hand signals are similar and it's an easy way to sort of fit and work into it rather than sort of not being familiar with other systems, they have to be somewhat similar, I'd like to keep it simple.

**Sandro:** You want to have that language because you want to attract people from elsewhere...

**Eugene:** What people don't realize is that gives you an opportunity to go to London or to Amsterdam or to Germany, to Berlin the one in Berlin uses the signals

**Sandro:** Is that language written down or notated anywhere? Is it passed on orally?

**Eugene:** Well more or less, you learn them, but The London Improvisers Orchestra has them published, and they have a little video, actually at the Array [web]site there there's links to these videos of them showing the hand signals of two different people and it was at one of the rehearsals before the performance.

**Sandro:** And what is it that is published, is it a book?

**Eugene:** No it's just a video, just video clips.

**Sandro:** Oh, that's what was published, oh really?

**Eugene:** Yes, and there are some PDF files of the hand signals, which you've seen, that's it, that's all there is.

**Sandro:** In terms of the Toronto Improvisers, who is conducting? Just the people who are performing?

**Eugene:** At this point yes, there are certainly people that just want a conductor more than welcome to come. I think also the, my original idea, well actually it was Joe Sorbara's idea, was to try and get people from the different music communities to come, you know people from the rock scene, the jazz scene, whatever, to pull something like that together, that's been very difficult so far.

**Sandro:** How are you trying to go about doing that?

**Eugene:** Well, I don't know, I was hoping word of mouth, I spoke to the Director of The Music Gallery, and he's more of a rock player... I forget his name, anyway, Joe Sorbara told me that he might be a person that might be interested, he was interested and never showed up, but I've had a lot of sort of that kind of response: 'yes we're coming' and they don't come, but that's fine. So my initial idea was, you know I had these delusions of grandeur and we were going to have these big strings section, horn section, wind section, where those hand signals a lot of them mean something, and it's hard with a smaller ensemble, it's difficult, my thought all the time is 'we don't even need hand signals for this'.

**Sandro:** Yeah, sometimes not...

**Eugene:** So you know, but again they're useful and I think people would like to learn or try...

**Sandro:** Yeah, and they're interesting to see as an audience participant, to watch.

**Eugene:** Yeah, I think so, but where the orchestra is going at this point is very difficult to ascertain because you know there's kind of limited interest in it at the moment, anyway.

**Sandro:** Well then, are there any, this is kind of a harder question, what would you say are social implications associated with the improvised music we do?

**Eugene:** I think the idea was, I mean, it's almost, the idea is kind of put for the music community.

**Sandro:** And very general, broad.

**Eugene:** Yeah, and again, letting people play, keeping the hand signals simple, but you know conductors are sometimes invaluable when things get rather 'brown' shall we say, so there's a good trade off there and, I mean in some ways I think it's kind of like a community orchestra in a funny way even though it's improvised music and you want to encourage people that are improvisers but don't fall into the jazz or classical, people that don't fall into those sort of traditional categories, perhaps like, I have some jazz friends that think that the people that come to play here don't play very well, it's like it's perhaps it's even beneath him to even consider it.

**Sandro:** Weird.

**Eugene:** Yeah, it is weird.

**Sandro:** What would you say to the people who don't know about The Toronto Improvisers Orchestra? Where would they come to see the group?

**Eugene:** Well the only place we have it is here [Array New Music Centre], and fortunately Array Music has been very generous to allow us to do this and I think it's part of a community outreach as well. They have the Gamelan every Saturday or Sunday rehearse here, and that's open to the public. We're open to the public, but we're open to improvisers rather than sort of everybody. At this point, it's fun, it would be great if we had more players from different areas in the community.

**Sandro:** It seems that there's a different ensemble each time, there are some of the same people that come out and there are some fantastic improvisers that come every time, but it's often different each time.

**Eugene:** Yeah, well that was the idea, that's what I started to think, it's really a community orchestra of some sort, but when it works it's incredible fun, it also gives people room to play, so I don't know other than that my basic idea was ok I'm coming back from Europe I had a fantastic time playing with these orchestras and I heard there was an orchestra for a while here and then they stopped.

**Sandro:** Which orchestra?

**Eugene:** I don't know it might have been the AIM people, like you know. They might still have one right, I don't know if it got specialized or whatever, I don't think their door is as wide as ours at this point.

**Sandro:** For sure, there's seems more selective.

**Eugene:** Which is fine, basically they want to accomplish something. For us the accomplishment is to get people together to play, to improvise and we get some incredible music sometimes, as good as anything AIM could do, or anybody else for the matter. So it's worthwhile, but it's much looser, and as we were saying the focus is improv.