Computational Music Science

Flow, Gesture, and Spaces in Free Jazz

Towards a Theory of Collaboration

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Preface

Let's try to play the music and not the background.
Ornette Coleman, liner notes of the LP "Free Jazz" [20]

When I began to create a course on free jazz, the risk of such an enterprise was immediately apparent: I knew that Cecil Taylor had failed to teach such a matter, and that for other, more academic instructors, the topic was still a sort of outlandish adventure. To be clear, we are not talking about teaching improvisation here—a different, and also problematic, matter—rather, we wish to create a scholarly discourse about free jazz as a cultural achievement, and follow its genealogy from the American jazz tradition through its various outbranchings, such as the European and Japanese jazz conceptions and interpretations. We also wish to discuss some of the underlying mechanisms that are extant in free improvisation, things that could be called technical aspects. Such a discourse bears the flavor of a *contradicto in adjecto*: Teaching the unteachable, the very negation of rules, above all those posited by white jazz theorists, and talking about the making of sounds without aiming at so-called factual results and all those intellectual sedimentations: is this not a suicidal topic?

My own endeavors as a free jazz pianist have informed and advanced my conviction that this art has never been theorized in a satisfactory way, not even by Ekkehard Jost in his unequaled, phenomenologically precise pioneering book "Free Jazz" [57]. Many attempts to catch the phenomenon and its rationales have been absorbed by either political, sociological or personality issues, such as in Valerie Wilmer's brilliant treatises "As serious as your life" [110], Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli's radical sociological essay "Free Jazz Black Power" [13] or Meinrad Buholzer's personality story "Auf der Suche nach Cecil Taylor" [11]. Also most recent publications, such as Howard Mandel's "Miles, Ornette, Cecil" [64] or Phil Freeman's "New York is Now"

[36] show little if any progress in the comprehension of the phenomenon of free jazz.

We are still far from reaching an accord concerning the concept, definition and implications of what is meant by free jazz. Some call it "New Thing", others prefer "Cosa Nova", "Great Black Music", "Out Music", "Energy Music", "Nouvelle Gauche" and so forth. The limitations of the concepts connected with such terminology rightly reflect the predominant lack of understanding of what is really happening when this radical method of creativity unfolds. I intentionally use the present tense and not the historical past tense, which refers to the first manifestations of this art in the early nineteen sixties. I do so, since it would not be sufficiently justified to write another book on the merely historical phenomenon of free jazz as it appeared in the context of those socio-political liberation movements.

My motivation for rethinking this art in fact transcends that historical context and elaborates on the art's universal characteristics as an unprecedented collaborative endeavor that relativizes facticity—the paradigm of the ready-made objects (even in its most sophisticated form of Western cultural heritage) and the deeply engraved principles of an economy that is based upon the commercial exchange of factual objects. The question backing these perspectives is about values, about what makes a cultural achievement a valid thing, a truly human activity, and not just a placeholder for idle consumer transactions.

Free jazz, as a model for collaborative arts, with its momentum of flow in a specific gestural action space it populates, opens a new perspective that is now being addressed by creativity research, e.g. in Keith Sawyer's concise book on Group Creativity, David Borgo's work "Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age" [9] on complex systems associated with free jazz, or Robert Hodson's detailed account in "Interaction, Improvisation, and Interplay in Jazz" on the structural elements that differentiate free jazz improvisation from traditional jazz practice.

Free jazz is therefore viewed and investigated as a unique example of collaborative behavior, leading to group creativity and collaborative flow, i.e., to characteristics of a groundbreaking direction of human performance, which is desperately needed in the arts, in management[1]*, in computer programming and software design communities, and above all in the research culture. The latter is crucial with regard to interdisciplinary projects and organizations, since it is not possible to perform innovative interdisciplinary research without also changing the fundamentals of scientific behavior from individual and isolated working styles to intense exchange of data, ideas, and engagements.*

We are fully aware that our approach takes not only a musical perspective, but also a new theoretical position on the generic art of collaboration. In so doing, this book opens a discourse that involves cognitive, philosophical, mathematical or psychological threads that may not have been seen in

[1] See [43] for such an approach.

conjunction and may therefore provoke astonishment or even refusal. However, the students' positive response to the free jazz course, from which the present treatise is derived, proves that such a project may perfectly fit in the understanding of unconsumed and inquisitive minds. In this sense I also want to acknowledge the creative discourses, which my class has fostered, the creative experiments in free jazz class rehearsals, and the strong resonance I received from the workshop and CD recording session with the Tetrade group composed of the legendary and deeply grounding Sirone on bass, my long-year companion and omnidirectional percussionist Heinz Geisser, the electronically mazed sky-high trumpeter Jeff Kaiser, and me on grand piano. They have all made it possible to think about free jazz in a more complete way that transcends historical contingencies. The resulting CD "Liquid Bridges" has been included in this book as a proof of concept for the principles of flow, gesture, and collaborative spaces.

My acknowledgments go to my students of the free jazz course, who did contribute to this book by their strong interaction in class and so many inspiring thoughts and comments. I am grateful to one of my most talented and attentive students, Nathan Kennedy, who added a number of textual improvements. My deep gratitude goes to one of the students and now inspired coauthor of the book, Paul B. Cherlin, who is not only a distinghuised free jazz drummer, but also carefully reviewed the entire text, added so many improvements and clarifications to my often arcane text, and has written the very last chapter: a young voice for the future. I am also very grateful to the truly encyclopedic jazz expert Mathias Rissi, my long-time musical companion and energetic saxophonist, who brought me back to jazz twenty years ago, who checked the names and dates of the jazz cats and recordings cited in this book, and who added some thoughtful comments, especially on the extension of instrumental techniques.

I am also grateful for a grant-in-aid support of the University of Minnesota, which enabled me to enrich the free jazz course by realistic artistic performances, and in particular to Michael Cherlin, the Founding Director of the University's Interdisciplinary Program in Collaborative Arts, who wisely encouraged me to embark in theoretical and practical aspects of this innovative program. Last but not least, I am pleased to acknowledge the strong and singular support in writing such an advanced treatise by Springer's Science Editor Stefan Goeller.

Minneapolis, August 2008 Guerino Mazzola