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# PLURALISM IN CONTEMPORARY IMPROVISED CONCERT MUSIC

By Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen

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## 1) INTRODUCTION

Pluralism will here be defined as an attitude taking interest in the co-existence of independent music genres. A certain pluralist attitude is necessary for the practise of music therapy. We must adapt to different clients and show empathy - not just as an attitude of our mind, but surely also in the styles and ways of music-making we employ with individual clients. Especially within active music therapy, the music will be a result of joint endeavours and have its very own style. We will inevitably manifest ourselves as dialog partners with our own personal style of music-making, and the clients will hopefully also make their individualities manifest in case they take active part in the playing.

To make good improvisations, we need training and know-how as musicians. Probably most of us have had important experiences within established music genres. Which ideals and inspirations do we have about freely improvised music?

Active music therapy in its modern form came into being on the background of emancipative tendencies in the mid-sixties and on which questioned traditional concepts of authority. In Western music cultures, both serious and popular, there was a strongly renewed interest in improvisation. Especially from around 1980, formerly clear boundaries between "serious" and "popular" were taken away as a result of these developments. Even though music therapists are often unaware of its existence, an improvised concert music has existed ever since in many cities and deserves our serious interest. Much valuable experience within the medium of free improvisation has been gained here, and a lot of music has been recorded on LP, cassette and CD. There is also a growing body of literature about history and theoretical considerations (see reference list below).

Pluralism is part of the essence of freely improvised music. Changing constellations of musicians is a normal practise, and usually no agreements are made between players before playing. In this presentation, sounding examples will be analysed which connect to explicitly stated pluralist aesthetic views on this kind of music. One comes from Evan Parker who values the co-existence of very different individuals and traditions within playing. Another one is that of Steve Beresford who views conflicts as a creative potential.

Some older examples of pluralism in music are well-known: the history of jazz as an ongoing fusion process between black and white music cultures. And the attitude of Charles Ives who put very different styles together in the manner of collage on the background of a general philosophy which strived to integrate and include extremes - just one example among numerous composers. Contemporary improvised music carries on such experiences but in a more direct way. Consider the concept of polyphony which has been so important to Western music culture since the middle ages: it means literally "several voices", pointing to independent musicians. It has long been cultivated in a modified form through composition which, although performed by several musicians, was constructed by only one mind, that of the composer. So one person

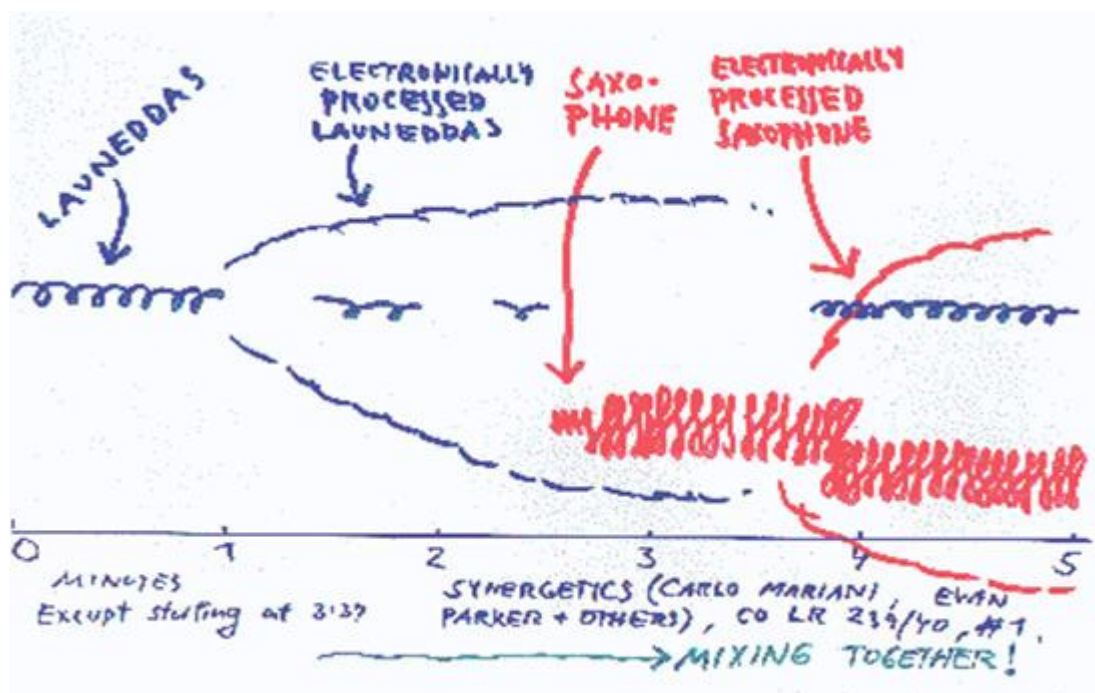
played all the roles, as it were. Within improvised music, by contrast, polyphony is present as the coming together of parts which are in effect different and which can manifest their differences in dialogue with their own individual creative powers. There is a human dialogue taking place here and now, not being pre-arranged - a "multi-mindedness" as Evan Parker so beautifully puts it.

## 2) SYNERGETICS and Evan Parker

Synergetics means the acting of a system which is more than the sum of its parts. And this was the name given to festival section of two concerts, organised after Parker's idea.

Improvised music is a part of experimental, contemporary music concert life to be found in many cities. It developed from free jazz, but had also strong influences from contemporary classical music. Improvised music is not a uniform style, but rather a working method employed by very different musicians. The musicians often deny that their music belongs to any fixed idiom. Their music can be said to have very individual styles, but they often like to play together in groups. They usually improvise without any written agreements, and they often meet in many changing constellations.

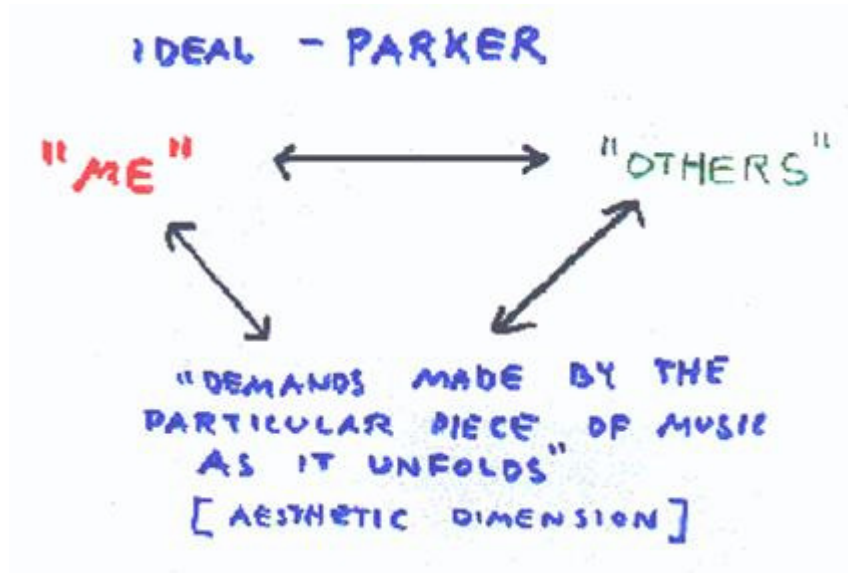
Thus, Synergetics Festival in 1993 taking place in Austria had typical traits of an improvised music festival. It invited musicians from many countries some of whom had not played together before. Concert sections took individual musicians as their starting-point - which is something special and probably Parker's idea. In the following excerpt, the Italian Carlo Mariani plays launeddas - a kind of bagpipe without the bag. He plays solo for several minutes, and then, slowly, others begin to participate. Some of the sound is being sampled and sent out in a changed form. Note how the saxophone (Evan Parker) is playing...



Music Example (Synergetics #1 excerpt of 5 min, from 3:37)

In this example we see a synthesis between tonal and atonal playing coming about slowly. The launeddas starts out in its own traditional style. The saxophone (Evan Parker) invents a kind of ornamental figures to go with the launeddas melodies. Not imitating, but adding some of his own. And they take their time. Here is a quotation from Parker that describes his philosophy of these things:

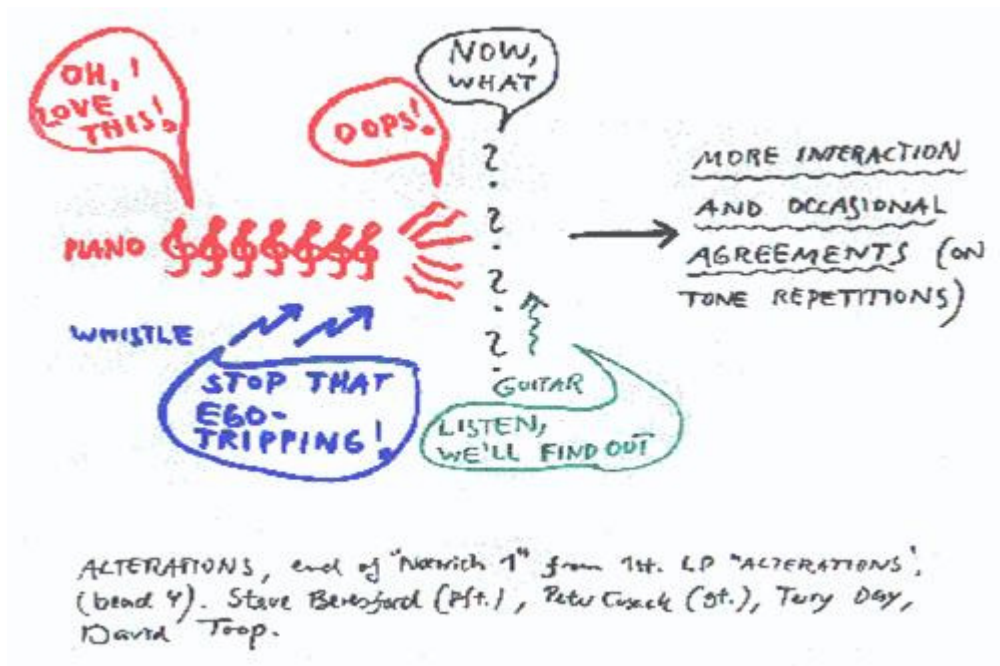
"There is a kind of tension to be maintained between total heterogeneity (where there is no cheese and pickle sandwich) and total homogenization where all identity markers are flattened out and we arrive at a kind of filtered 'new age-world music' pap. (Like a cheese and pickle sandwich in the blender!) The aim as I see it is to initiate and to respond to the initiatives of others in proportion to a sense of demands made by the particular piece of music as it unfolds." (1996)



Parker sees it as an ideal to maintain individualities (including roots in different music cultures), and he uses the "cheese and pickle sandwich" as a metaphor. It is both sweet and sour and spicy at the same time. There is no melting together. He also points to the importance of obeying the aesthetic demands of the unique, "particular piece of music". So Parker's ideal seems to be this: to have a relative heterogeneity which respects the individualities and which is held together by aesthetic properties of the individual improvisation.

### 3) ALTERATIONS and Steve Beresford.

Alterations existed as a group 1977-86. Their music use many kinds of sounds - and they play a big range of instruments and toys. And at the same time, they also introduce traditional tunes and the like, and treat the material in a playful manner. Note the relation between the pianist and the others in the following example...



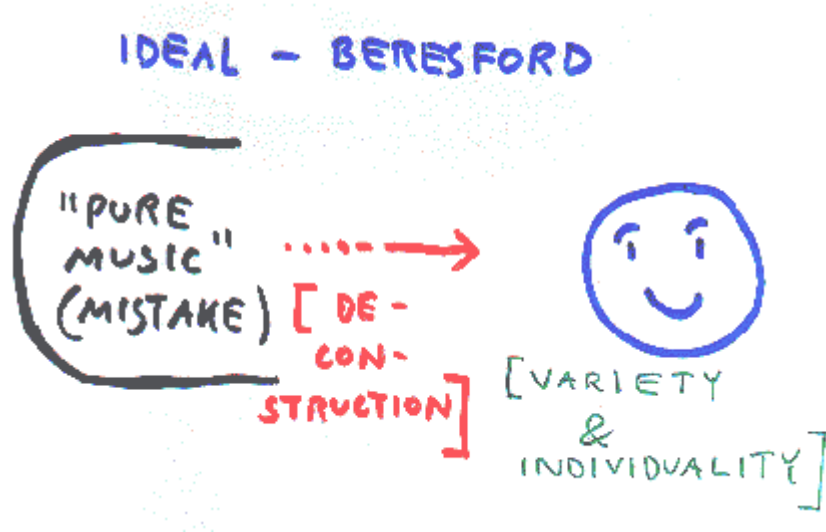
Music example. (1st. LP Alterations Norwich 1 last 1:30)

They are, in fact, doing a kind of musical role-playing. Here is another variant:



Music Example (Alterations Live IRCD 001 Copenhagen, 31:22-34:20)

"The improvised music performances which don't work for me are those which are exactly trying to project an image of pure music which doesn't have the same problems that most music has and that most life has". (1978).



Ideal: being true to the "problems...that most life has". Against aesthetic images of "pure music". To deconstruct "pure music" brings about liberation, variety and individuality. This implies that conflicts can be creatively dealt with.

#### 4) PERSPECTIVES

Significance of pluralist attitudes in improvised music:

- 1) they cultivate confidence in new people and changing situations as well as tolerance of conflicts.
- 2) they allow for humour in the practise of music, which is in itself a conflict-solving means.
- 3) they provide a solution to the problem described by Hannah Vieth-Fleishhauer:

"In the boundless musical and cultural plurality of our time one can ask, how many languages, how much artistic equipment therapists must be able to control in order to understand the expressive messages of the improvisation and to meet them in an adequate way... " (1998).

This could look like a curriculum problem: we must accumulate so many skills to deal with the possible demands of clients. But if we meet the "boundless...plurality" in a creative and playful way as musicians, we can allow ourselves to develop our individual playing like improvising musicians do. And we don't need to be afraid of the plurality. - A dialogue between music therapists and improvised concert music could be of mutual benefit and is highly recommended.

#### REFERENCES:

IF YOU'D LIKE TO EXPLORE IMPROVISED CONCERT MUSIC ON CD AND IN CONCERT LIFE:

<http://come.to/musings.com> MUCH RECOMMENDED - mp3 streamings and informative reviews.

<http://hjem.get2net.dk/intuitive> - my own homepage. Among other things, links that can be helpful in finding concert organisations etc.

#### MUSIC EXAMPLES QUOTED WERE:

George Gershwin - from "An American in Paris", CD PILZ 160 234

Synergetics - Phonomanie III (1996). Parker, Evan(saxophones); Hi Kim, Jin(komungo); Lewis, George(trombone & computer); Lipere, Thebe(imbumbu & percussion); Mariani, Carlo(launeddas); Namchylak, Sainkho(voice); Prati, Walter(electronics); Vecchi, Marco "Bill"(electronics); Yoshizawa, Motoharu(bass & voice). CD Leo Records LR 239/40. Also booklet with notes by Evan Parker and Francesco Marinelli. (First CD, first track, 5:08 from 3:37)

Alterations (1978). Steve Beresford, Peter Cusack, Terry Day, David Toop, 1978. LP bead 4. Also booklet with notes by Carl Bergstrøm-Nielsen, Terry Day and David Toop. (First track "Norwich 1", last 1:30)

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Bergstroem-Nielsen, Carl: Experimental Improvisation Practise and Notation 1945-1999. An annotated bibliography. More than 600 entries, many of them annotated in length, and a text part. In preparation - please mail me (see address below) and give me your own email address if you'd like an electronic copy!

Parker, Evan: "History - The Project". Textbook with CD Leo Records LR 239/240, 1996.

Stige, Brynjulf: "Aesthetic Practises in Music Therapy". Nordic Journal of Music Therapy vol. 7, no.2, 1998.

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Born 1951, Carl Bergstrøm-Nielsen studied musicology at Copenhagen University and became active as a composer and improvising musician during his studies. Since 1983 he has taught improvisation/composition and aural scores at Music Therapy, University of Aalborg. After learning therapy with Benedikte Scheiby and others he became active as a music therapist in 1984, specialising in mentally retarded adults. International activity with publishing, teaching and concerts.

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