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PLURALISM IN PROGRESS

England - the place for radical improvised music.

By Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen



This article is about new improvised English music - its historical basis, its radical and independent character, the interest in environmental sound on the side of musicians, its organizations and its social and musical pluralism. It is a revised version of a radio program sent by German Deutschlandfunk in October 1998.

One historical basic phenomenon was the rising of a specific European jazz in the sixties. One can mention names like Peter Brötzmann, Alexander von Schlippenbach, Derek Bailey and Evan Parker as examples of well known pioneers. Although European jazz retained some of the sound and rhythm of original jazz, the avant-gardists did not make use of its fixed scales and song forms. Instead, collective improvisation became increasingly important.

Starting from European jazz, a freely improvised music developed step by step in which jazz became just one among more influences. An interesting, complex picture of things arises here. The German musicologist Bert Noglik proposed that the interactive aspect in improvised music, i.e. musicians reacting to each others' playing, came from jazz. On the other hand, exploration of sound should be regarded as something coming from composed new music. This is not totally wrong although it is also a generalization. However this state of affairs, improvised music has the privilege of being heir to both elements.

In several respects, England has a conservative image, and this is true for its composed music as well. But it is a fact that the English are not afraid of rough and unpolished sounds in improvised music.

That improvised English music is in fact so radical could be seen as a dialectical necessity, for the lack of a better explanation. In all cases, it can easily be pointed out that England has a whole line-up of independent, de-central organizations: musician-run concert organizations, record labels, and festivals. Even a charity organization for music teaching by self-employed teachers can be found.

Now I would like to go back in history. From 1969 and on the "Scratch Orchestra" was an astonishingly well functioning social music phenomenon, a whole music culture in itself. It was founded by Cornelius Cardew, a teacher of composition at the London Morley College at

that time. For the Scratch Orchestra, Anglo-Saxon experimental music was the most important source of inspiration, not jazz. The name "Scratch Orchestra" implies the idea of starting from scratch. It had between thirty and forty members, among them were professional musicians, other kinds of performing artists, and amateurs who went to the rehearsals not only just to prepare music for concerts, but also enjoyed it as a social event. The orchestra had it's own special music genres, and everybody participated creatively. "Compositions" might be made by non-members. For instance Christian Wolff who for some time lived in London and whose ideas were close to those of the Scratch Orchestra.

"Scratch Music" was a special kind of community music-making taking place according to the participant's own quite individual recipes. It constituted an introduction to the rehearsals which was carried on until everybody had arrived and were ready to go on. Everybody was playing at the same time according to own verbal or graphic introductions. In so doing, a quiet music was supposed to be produced in which everybody accompanied everybody else.

Another genre of the "Scratch Orchestra" which fused a jolly popular atmosphere with avant-garde boldness in a singular way was the "Popular Classics". In these a short excerpt, a particle from well-known, often classical music, was played. The resulting music sounded like a parody or a joke - but it was in fact a seriously meant activity in which participants on one side attempted to play the music correctly and at the same time accepted everything that happened in the process.

The "Scratch Orchestra" ended its activities in 1973. But other English musical phenomena followed. Two years later a magazine with the name *Musics* appeared. *Musics Magazine* published articles on improvised music, reviews of concerts and recordings (among them many Trans Museq tapes), invitations to contribute to various publications and information about events all over England. Since 1973 it began to inform about the "London Musician's Collective".

The musicians' co-operative "London Musicians' Collective" in 1978 set the framework for the festival "Music/Context". In Michael Parsons' "Canal Project" the context was the special environment one could experience when walking by a canal in the neighborhood. With Steve Cripps at the same festival, the context was the sound of an electrical welding machine - Cripps played the welding machine and a clarinette at the same time.



musicians from near and far and let them play in changing constellations is as simple as it is effective. Many of them have never played together before.

Before I end this going through the organizations and their history, I would like to mention that there are many record companies publishing improvised music, solely or for a great part. For instance, Acta, Bead, Bruce's Fingers, Emanem, Incus, Leo, Matchless, Scatter, Quarz, 2:13, Rastacan...

Just like improvised music has its own institutions in England, musicians also work independently of traditional educational institutions. Some are radical auto-didacts. David Toop for instance has acquired much of his musical education by improvising outdoors. - Phil Minton has, by contrast, developed his very special voice indoors, within the context of noisy printing machines.

Often, noises and sound structures replace tones and melody phrases in English improvised music. Radical attitudes concerning instruments can also lead to invention of new instruments. The so-called "pyrophones" of the "Bow Gamelan Orchestra" function for instance on the LP "Great Noises that fill the Air" from 1988 with the aid of burning fire...

One could define pluralism as the co-existence of individual elements. Styles and directions interpenetrate, but do not cancel each other. In London I have experienced both that improvised music has its own special public and that people might also come just for curiosity or because time and place suited them. One can view all this as positive effects resulting from a pluralistic attitude of the city. Individuals and groups are themselves, but at the same time they tolerate each other.

Art is, however, a public contemplation and working on the solution of conflicts, as the psychologist C.G.Jung once said. One can work on the conflicts in a playful, creative and thoughtfully reflecting manner. That which we call polyphony in music has its roots in the simultaneous activity of several musicians. When we hear a composition, then the interaction has already taken place and only in the fantasy of the composer. But in improvised music this is immediately achieved by those who play. And it is a special attraction for the listeners. Contrasts between players may lead to frustration or fighting or discussion. Maybe a new balance arises, maybe an interesting new unbalance. It is a real polyphony instead of an imaginary one.

I already mentioned the festival "Company Week" where musicians play in various constellations. Here, pluralism is so to speak made into a system. There is an ever open field for surprises and possible interactions. There is one more yearly festival which since 1993 does a similar thing in a more condensed form, "Relay". Three trios begin to play at three different venues in the same part of town. Ten minutes later four more musicians join in the various groups. Every time a new musician joins a group, another musician must leave. So the constellations change all the time during the three hours of the event. The critic Ben

Watson described the music of Relay 1995 as pluralistic in the sense that he heard both chamber music qualities in it as well as coarse-sounding manifestations reminiscent of certain popular genres.

Inspirations from jazz, from new music and more. Independent organizations and musicians. Ongoing pluralism - those have been keywords in this article. I believe the radicality of English improvised music will endure, even through changing generations. One can only recommend those interested to take an explorative trip to London. Be sure to check the events calendar on the web at www.l-m-c.org.uk [note: this is now history. Funding ended in 2008. Cafe Oto and Mopomoso are at the time of writing some of the places to go - 2012].
