

## An Actionable Interface

As musicians, we benefit from the inherent freedoms bestowed upon us by the breadth of methods in negotiating aural expression through seemingly spontaneous action and reaction. While the act of improvising allows for freedom of the individual, it does not, by definition, guarantee an actionable interface between improvisers. This brings forth methodological choices made in the action of improvising. Is personal freedom to act at a premium? If so, does this allow for group identity? Can the two co-exist?

While examples of musicians negotiating these issues abound, recognition of the complex interrelationship between personal and group action is central to the process of codifying one's musical identity. It was this process of self-analysis that led me to compose "953+430."

In today's world, dominated by the capitalist ethos, personal freedom is placed at a premium. In accepting self-determinism as central to the success of capitalistic action, how are we as improvising musicians able to objectify our place in the cogs of a wheel that can only guarantee the individual real integration through actions determined by one's best interest, not necessarily the group continuum? "... group improvisation may be less resilient to personality conflicts or pronounced aesthetic differences between individuals. With traditional musical practices that are organized in a predominantly hierarchical manner, personality differences can often be managed in deference to the group leader, the authority of the musical score, or the professionalism of 'getting the job done.' Free improvisation ensembles tend to aim for a more egalitarian organization that makes them particularly susceptible to the full spectrum of both musical and so-called 'extra-musical' influences." (Borgo, p. 127-8) Just as the individual's function within free society affects the core equilibrium of the whole, the individual musician's function impacts the musical conglomerate created by the mass decisions of individuals acting within the musical proper. At base, the governing dynamics of communicative improvisation mirror that which exists in capitalist society. How, then, are we to temper our musical initiatives while maintaining personal identity?

Interdependence offers one avenue by which the improviser can negotiate the question of group cohesion; namely, that the action of the self will be supported by the autonomous actions of others, thus arriving at an aural conglomerate which pervades the expression of the whole through the contributions of the individual. While this is a widely successful method for musical interface, I have been curious to see how, through compositional strategy, it would be possible to sever the dependence on group cohesion, with the inherent possibility of conflicting musical ideals, and maintain the freedom and autonomy of the individual.

“Successful group improvisation demands a problem-finding approach, since it is often impossible to determine the meaning of an action until other performers have responded to it. The particular challenge of group improvisation is that each performer may have a rather different interpretation of what is going on and where the performance might be going.” (Borgo, p. 186)

Problems abound- to create any situation which manages to negotiate the oft-time incompatibility between individual freedom and group accountability remains a serious issue made all the more complex by increasing international interdependence in the world markets. Improvisers too are faced with a bevy of ‘styles’ and perceived ethos which widen interpretational potentials. If one is to attempt negotiation of these principals, interactivity is a central theme to examine.

### **Why Interact?**

Interaction between musicians can take on many strategic forms. As in my work on T.T.T., I sought to draw a compositional parallel to an accepted societal structure through subverting a usual musical process. With the composition of “953+430”, I intended to examine semi-improvisational interactive dynamics, and thus began by questioning the interactive principles of improvisation. At the base of this interactivity lies action and reaction- in spontaneous musical space, the normal thought process involves the initiation of, and reaction to, musical material. In an ideal situation, a free-flowing actionable interface is created between players. This give-and-take relationship garners credence amongst those involved when the equation balances the individual’s initiative with a sense of group culpability. The equation would also function as an

idyllic societal dogma. If one were to balance his capitalistic duty to exert economic action, with a democratic acuity for the social proper, a truly successful society might emerge. In lieu of the realities of modern American socio-political dynamics, our society is far from the ideal.

Expectation is paramount in thwarting the widespread success of the societal ideal for the citizen as both civilian and improviser. Accepting this hypothesis, how could one subvert an individual's musical expectations while still inspiring creativity and personal identity? Again, why interact? In most improvised music, interaction itself is a central aspect of group identity. I felt that it would be plausible to create a situation in which two could improvise independently- and, through certain compositional strategies, create a singular sonic space. This led the discovery of another improvisational potential dynamic- "boxed improvisation." The musician moves between techniques in blocks of times without wavering or reacting to the other musicians- thus, the composition controls the interaction of sounds through time. This compositional technique is found in many examples of mainstream musical literature- the composed works of Earle Brown and the New York school, the improvised works of European improvisers, the collage forms of Anthony Braxton, and the reductionist movement in Berlin. In avoiding the potentiality of incompatible reactivity, a level of control can be retained while maintaining a level of choice-based ingenuity. With this strategy in place, the question of language used and instrumentation remains to be addressed.

### **An Aural Conglomerate**

The explanation of interactivity is best initiated with the most direct form of interactivity- one-on-one. A duo plane reduces the possibilities for composing the interactive properties of the piece. It also functions as the most direct and transparent avenue to explore a non-interactive "boxed" climate- through subversion of the self, dedication to the process proves its plausibility. The governing dynamics of person-to-person interactivity can be reduced to actions of the self, and actions of the self towards another. To successfully objectify one's negotiation of this process through the integration of personal individuality, while subverting expectations for

sustainable interactivity, a musical continuum can act as the blueprint for possible social interaction, subverting the process of personal expectations.

By retaining the validity of self-determinism, the ideal of democratic action is maintained. Differentiation and social modulation would not require abrupt social change: socialistic dissolution of the self, but regulation of that which colors our affirmation of interpersonal relations; and expectation of an interactive situation satisfying one's personal needs. We all function in our societal "boxes", just as improvisers function well within their own improvisational boxes. When we combine these boxes, allowing for independent freedom to exist within the general social or musical proper, a societal or aural conglomerate emerges. The individual cogs in the wheel can now function independently, preserving the self, yet allowing for interaction to occur through process- a process no longer reliant upon dialectic success, but rather one's personal strength to produce independently robust material.

Language is the key in determining the success of the individual's contributions to the composition. Instrumental language is obviously a far-reaching and vast topic. Since I sought to form a more unified sound space, it was necessary to find a narrowed textural space affording the instrumentalists enough variability. Thus, in "953+430," traditional sounds are replaced by drones, produced through extended techniques.

The reasons for these particular parameters are two-fold. First, by resorting to strict use of extended sound production, a symbolic alternative to traditional interaction is more pronounced. Second, the performer is challenged to find specific sonic territories, allowing for long-term variation. In addition, each boxed event requires a slightly different technique. This encourages the performer to find levels of filtrating for each existing drone-technique.

Having set the language parameters, it was now necessary to compose the level of interactive control for the boxes. In the spirit of reduced interactivity, I thought of the turntablist. He/She is faced with two simple options when introducing new material- the cut and the cross-fade. This is an extraordinarily simple and elegant method for juxtaposing the entrance and exit of new musical material, and is the crux of motion for "953+430". It also serves to control dynamic

variables- cross-fading requires the performer the mind their dynamics while negotiating the material.

### **Singular Sonic Space**

Through integration of improvisation within a composed interactive plane, the goal is to arrive at a musical state which is not merely a musical conglomerate, but a singular sonic space. When this singularity is achieved, a greater meta-physical affirmation is attained; the musical integration of the self signifies the integration of the self within a societal group. Subversion of traditional interactive expectation is now tempered by extreme personal accountability. A complete reorganization of social dynamics is unnecessary; the goal is achieved by utilizing the resilience of individual ingenuity within an egalitarian environment, tempered by a pre-ordained order of interaction.