

What's New? The PoD Roundtable moderated by Bill Shoemaker

What's New? is an occasional email roundtable that brings together persons of diverse backgrounds to discuss the issues shaping jazz and constituent experimental musics in the early 21st Century.

The panelists for this roundtable include:



Saxophonist **Lotte Anker** is the co-leader of the Copenhagen Art Ensemble. Other ongoing projects include her trio with Craig Taborn and Gerald Cleaver, and working with Marilyn Crispell and Marilyn Mazur in various settings. Anker teaches arranging, composition and improvisation at Rhythmic Music Conservatory, Copenhagen and has recently been selected to participate in the Danish Jazz Launch Project, a three-year effort to export Danish jazz. For more detailed information, consult: <http://www.lotteanker.com/>



A Brooklyn-based composer and woodwind instrumentalist, **Ned Rothenberg** has performed hundreds of solo concerts during the past 25 years. His ensembles include Double Band, Power Lines and Sync. Ongoing projects include New Winds and a duo with Evan Parker. His latest CD, *Inner Diaspora* (Tzadik) is reviewed in this issue. For further information, consult: <http://www.nedrothenberg.com/index.html>



An Oxford, UK-based pianist and electronicist, **Pat Thomas** has performed and recorded with a wide swath of improvisers, including Derek Bailey, Eugene Chadbourne and Charlotte Hug. Other ongoing projects include Pianoforte with Stephen Grew, Howard Riley and Keith Tippett, and a duo with Lol Coxill. For more detailed information, consult: <http://www.efi.group.shef.ac.uk/>

Bill Shoemaker: The ever-quotable Evan Parker was cited by John Corbett in his booklet notes for a new CD, likening collective improvisation to a pot luck dinner: "It's not enough to come to the table hungry. You've got to bring something to eat." The delicious metaphor aside, it does speak to issues of equity and expectations in creating freely improvised music. What do you bring to the table in these situations and what do you want your counterparts to bring to the table?

Ned Rothenberg: Talking and writing directly about music is so difficult, so I think ideas like Evan's are very helpful to approach what we are doing. I might take the metaphor one step further. In all musical performance - not just collective improvisation - we are not just eating the dishes we bring; we are

bringing the ingredients and trying to cook together. Both the audience and the musicians actually eat the meal. However, since it is just a metaphor I should quickly add that however you break it down I heartily agree with Evan - you have to bring something - especially in the collective setting. What I bring; a reservoir of my own expressive musical language and a desire to create something together with my colleagues. I may have an imagination about what we will cook together but not an agenda. My playing will depend on what I hear. I do not come just to place myself in a 'context'. I come to participate as chef du cuisine, apprentice and dessert chef all simultaneously or in turn, depending on what occasion arises.

I hope my musical colleagues are equal partners - as a solo performer I can cook the whole meal myself so if we are up on stage together then lets all shoulder the load. This doesn't mean equality is constant - it is more interesting when everyone has an interest in accompaniment as well as the confidence to take the lead. So I ask them to bring the same things I bring: interesting ingredients they have created over their years of musical development along with openness to whatever may or may not happen. There may be many choice ingredients that just do not find a place in tonight's meal - there should be no 'need' to display everything you have brought. This relates to the thing I need least of all: a need to control the situation in order to present dishes that have in fact been pre-cooked. Rather, in a performance situation I want a feeling of accommodating strength from my partners. This is a willingness to listen and respond to what I'm doing, while asserting other complimentary or contrasting musical ideas with full confidence. I try to come fully prepared to do the same. Finally, the analogy works perfectly in that it's most successful when we all bring a sense of cooking a balanced meal - not all hors d'oeuvres, protein or pastry.

Hmm, now who would be good at the musical version of a great after-dinner espresso?

Lotte Anker: What I bring to the table is closely connected to why I go the table at all:

Although music and food is different in many ways, the Evan-quote makes me think of a famous novel by an author from my own country, Isak Dinesen: *Babette's Feast* (Babette is a French cook that ends up in the 1900 century rural, poor, Lutheran and puritan Denmark who, when she gets the chance, cooks a fantastic meal for the village people that touches their souls, brings them a glimpse of something divine, and changes their lives).

Although Babette's role might be closer to the role of the composer and the orchestra in one, her vision of the meal corresponds in many ways to my overall vision of any concert (improvised/through composed music). That vision energizes the desire of making music that has a transcendent, spatial and vibrant quality - eventually going into areas which might be new or might feel strange. Doing this in collective improv means that you have to create (compose) the meal together - eventually inventing dishes that might never have been done before. In collective improv/composing part of the beauty is also the actual process (at the table or in the kitchen) and not knowing where the process takes you. I'll go to the table hungry (to create), curious (because I don't know how this meal will develop and which shape it will take) and bringing my own developed food/ingredients for the common meal.

What I bring to the table as ingredients are my musical language, aesthetics and expression which are not fixed things, but, hopefully, alive, flexible, open and constantly developing. That language has, of course, a certain signature but I try to keep it open since my task in being at the table is not to throw my ingredients all over in the food but find a way of how I can contribute to this certain collective meal so it gets substantial and balanced. I also bring my perception of how to interact or respond - which is partly based on experience partly intuitive; the way you introduce certain ideas, having an intention, not having an intention, going with ideas of others, going against, thinking contrapuntal, be in the background/foreground, being silent etc.

Even though I might have a vision or hope that the certain meal/improv might end up being as magical and transcendent as the Babette meal that does far from always happen and it is certainly not possible to force/push it through control - so I try emptying my mind at the same time as of course being listening, responding, conscious and present. Sometimes it might happen that the meal cooks and creates itself. Sometimes nearly indigestible chaos or weirdness might have a strong ear attraction. Sometimes very little happens, but in a vibrant, intense and fulfilled way...

What do I want my fellow musicians to bring? First of all I hope they bring their own language and expression – even when it is very different from mine – and I hope they bring a wish of creating music together. They might have a different perception of certain things, but I hope they are into seeing the common creation as the most important. Equity: playing an improv session together is, for me, not a democratic act or about justice, but a collective created piece of music where different voices might at different times step out and define direction. Equality lies in the right of everybody to express themselves and to contribute in their way to the content and shape of the common meal. Obviously this can create a lot of conflicts but that is part of the dynamics going on in a living way of creating/communicating.

Shoemaker: How do you handle musicians who bring little to nothing to the table? Carry them? Marginalize them? Cut the set short and head for the bar?

Pat Thomas: This is one of the trickiest things to deal with, I suppose. I will try and play within their sound world. If it is very droney, I will play longer phases. One trick I have used is to count a number of seconds before playing. I am glad to say this happens very rarely, because I feel the music becomes more composed and more predictable. Sadly, these sets tend to last longer, so it becomes more of a way to catalog your own vocabulary and ride the gig out. I have been very lucky and in the last twenty years or so have not had to do this.

Rothenberg: I've taken all 3 approaches you mention. Improvisation is a social as well as a musical enterprise so a lot depends on how I feel our relationship functions.

If they are students I am happy to 'carry' them. Mostly they will imitate me so I will try to challenge them with material that forces them to play differently. I will try to get them to teach themselves something. If they are weak players but nice folks it may be a similar vibe. If they bring little but the sounds they make are fairly inconsequential, then marginalizing them may be viable, especially if there are some stronger players participating. If I find both their personalities and sonic contributions obnoxious then I will employ the ever available option to lay out and/or cut the set short.

Anker: It doesn't happen often....but: If I find myself in a group where all the others are very new/young in improv and maybe very passive I think I still try to go into their thing but will also tend to play more or push a direction to try to make something happen. If I feel totally disconnected or alienated to the music I might choose to play very little or stop playing, start dreaming about the bar and hope for a short set.

Shoemaker: Usually, I don't see much difference between terms like "freely improvised music" and "instant composition." But, the real-time assessments you make about the music and the contributions of others are based on many of the same questions composers ask as they compose: What fits? How do I avoid the cliché? How do I change what's not working? And, perhaps most importantly: How does this resolve? There seems then to be an unavoidable conflict between the purist and the pragmatist, the improviser who values process to the possible detriment of the resulting music, and the improviser who will trim the process to achieve a desired result. Where do you place yourselves on this spectrum?

Thomas: To me the term "instant composition" is a necessary component of the free improvisation process, even if the aim of the player is not a finished piece. One of the great myths is the idea that composition and improvisation are two different methods. Usually, improvisation is seen as inferior; but in fact the way material is developed and documented is the same. The difference may be the media that is used. For example, the composer will archive material as sketches, to be developed later, while the improviser will make mental schemas that are used when required, maybe in ten days or ten years later. It is the same process. The improviser creates a number of mental schemas that he can use as potential source material, that are refined in real time over years. This enables him to make highly individual music on a consistent level. The difference between composition and improvisation, then, is not to musical process. It has more to do with ownership: the composer owns the right to the way the material is used, whereas the improviser agrees to share material in a collaborative piece. The composition is determined by the composer, whereas the collective improvisation is determined by all concerned. The improviser however moulds the material quicker and also takes into account the time,

place and people, factors that the composer is incapable of taking into account as his piece is an end product. One of the remarkable things that Jazz helped reconcile was allowing a piece to work in time and place, the performer composer helping to mould a piece to its current environment.

Rothenberg: I really don't see an 'unavoidable conflict'. As a musician who pursues everything from through-composition to open improvisation I am constantly asked how I deal with 'the basic conflict' between the 2 approaches. I don't! I think this 'conflict' can exist but its 'inevitability' is an intellectual canard that arises out of the late 19th-early 20th century schism that was driven between the 2 disciplines by the academy. All the heroes of classical music up to 1900 were great improvisers. Whether composing or improvising my goal is good music. I love improvisations that sound composed and compositions that sound improvised.

Getting to Bill's particular angle on this - I would call myself a purist in that I always pursue the sonic result rather than some underlying conceptual idea of how the music is produced. I realize here that I have flipped Bill's proposal - I guess this makes me more the 'pragmatist' by his set of definitions. I don't always get on terribly well musically with folks who primarily pursue a personal process. I am more interested in the musical process that goes on. So I do care about structure and form just as much while I am improvising as when I am writing. I think many of the musical elements of 'composition' - rhythmic processes, cadence, resolution, melodic and harmonic development - can be handled with virtuosity by skilled instant composers/free improvisers - even if their sonic materials may have little standard pitch content. These elements have been conceptually and sonically expanded over the course of the last 100 years, so we can deal with them in all their possible forms.

That said, there have been times when I've made excellent music with folks who Bill might call 'purists'. That is because it is totally possible to conceive of what we are doing in different ways and still achieve a successful result. Conflicts are created by intransigence, whether it is political or musical, and flexibility is of utmost importance in this art form.

Of course musical conflicts themselves can sometimes be interesting in performance. But that opens a whole other can of worms.

Anker: Like Ned I don't necessarily see an unavoidable conflict between the purist and the pragmatist. For my own part, working both as a composer and an improviser, I rather think that those two activities stimulate and inspire each other. I don't see myself as purist in the meaning of the purist being an improviser who has a certain ideology on improvising (that the process is more important than the actual music or that it is "forbidden" to play stuff that has certain references to other genres or that it should always be "nie erhörte klänge"). So I might be more of the pragmatist but not in the way that I want a certain result -- I will still be open and into the process but at the same time I am definitely concerned with form, structure, counterpoint etc. I can feel pretty empty in a situation where there is too much focus on the process and where the music maybe becomes formless or too "therapeutic;" but I can also feel trapped and claustrophobic if the music becomes too composed, too defined or has hidden compositional or aesthetic agendas. But, part of the pleasure with improvising is that there are so many different views and approaches to it that these questions, conflicts and discussions come up all the time.



The poster features a central, intricate, golden mandala-like design with a face-like center, set against a dark, textured background. The text is arranged around this central image.

24th
Festival international musique actuelle Victoriaville

17 to 21 May 2007

ANTHONY BRAXTON 12(+1) TET
JOHN ZORN SOLO
ACID MOTHERS GONG
CRISPELL / ANKER / CYRILLE / HELIAS
CORKESTRA
JEAN-FRANÇOIS LAPORTE « WAVES »
MICHAEL SNOW / ALAN LICHT / AKI ONDA
THERESA TRANSISTOR
THE MELVINS
KOENJI HYAKKEI
KAHN / KORBER / MÖSLANG / MÜLLER / WEBER
VICTORIAVILLE MATIÈRE SONORE
LARRY PEACOCK
CARLA BOZULICH « EVANGELISTA »
MAGIK MARKERS
QUASAR / ALEXANDRE BURTON / JULIEN ROY
ANTHONY BRAXTON DIAMOND CURTAIN WALL TRIO
FINE KWIATKOWSKI / HANS TAMMEN
TILBURY / WISHART / KURZMANN / DAFELDECKER
FOND OF TIGERS
JOANE HÉTU « FILATURE »
KEVIN BLECHDOM / EUGENE CHADBOURNE
DANIEL MENCHE
KEIJI HAINO / MERZBOW « KIKURI »

In collaboration with
**Cascades**

www.fimav.qc.ca
1-810-752-7912 / info@fimav.qc.ca

...More What's New

> back to contents