

A More Attractive Way of Getting Things Done: Some Questions of Power and Control in British Improvised Music

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Questioning power relationships, and the relevance of inherited structures of authority and deference, was a prime mover behind the activity of many British experimentalists within 1960s classical music. But such questions were also crucial to the radical explorations of the British freely improvising musicians concurrently forging a new musical language; both groups were seeking to remodel the institutionalised composer-interpreter hierarchy. How did composer/musicians from the jazz/improvising tradition attempt to square the circle of 'telling others what to do' while pursuing the ideal of individual freedom? Are there paradigms outside the classical tradition which might provide composers with a more viable, communitarian working model? The author's current research seeks to answer such questions through musician interviews, along with extensive study of experimental scores in the BMC archive at Huddersfield University. In addition, the author has himself over 30 years experience in both freely improvised music and composing, conducting or otherwise structuring music involving improvisation.

Keywords: Free Improvisation; British Experimental Music; Derek Bailey; Cornelius Cardew; Composition for Improvisers; Performer Alienation

This article aims to explore why the 'free' in Free Improvisation remains fundamentally important to many creative practitioners, and why those composers who wish to work with improvising musicians might do well to remember this.¹ It proposes a brief and relatively non-specialist historical insight, which will perhaps go some way to identifying why ideas of freedom remain central to the practice of improvisation, and some of the consequences of these aspirational ideals for the real world of practical music-making. My current research deals with the British strand of Improvised Music activity, and I am going to confine most of my comments to this field; this should not

be taken as signifying parochialism (although developments in the British scene have clearly been of huge significance for the international evolution of this music).²

I am an improvising musician, a double bassist and a composer. Each of these three elements is a key part of my activity, but the order of allegiance to these roles has shifted back and forth over the years. I have been playing improvised music since the mid-1970s, and in the subsequent 40 years have played extensively in a wide range of contexts, including with many of the central figures of European Improvisation. My research is therefore underpinned by long-standing and eclectic experience of actually *playing* improvised music. I have also simultaneously been involved in performing composed or structured music of various types; the exploration of composition for improvisers has been an important strand in my work since the late 1980s. This has involved either participation in, organisation of, composition for or direction of small, medium and large ensembles; related experiences include touring with Butch Morris' *London Skyscraper* conduction project in 1997,³ and 8 years spent regularly playing in, composing for and conducting The London Improvisers Orchestra.

For various incidental reasons, in 2013 I found myself working within an academic musical framework for the first time since 1978, after a period of some 30 years as a practising improviser and composer. My subsequent (and continuing) study of current improvisation literature—along with numerous seminar, lecture and discussion experiences—leads me to propose that although the word (and idea of) 'improvisation' now features extensively in many academic and composition-based situations, many in that community still struggle with the impossibility of accurately defining the word 'free', and the idea of freedom, in many of these contexts. Indeed, for some the evident contradictions involved in the use(s) of ideas of freedom in improvised music render the positing of concepts such as Free Improvisation and 'non-idiomatic' music-making deeply problematic.

It is not my intention here to address these questions directly, or explain at length where these ideas of 'freedom' might be located for a performer (or indeed composer). Nor will this article address a tendency towards a misleading homogenisation of the nature of improvised music by the academic community, a homogenisation which is in danger of misunderstanding (and ultimately re-writing the history of) the practice of European Free Improvisation since the mid-1960s; I will return to these subjects in subsequent writings.

Many readers will be familiar with the Cage quotation from which this paper draws its title. In the foreword to *A Year From Monday*, John Cage writes 'a composer is simply someone who tells other people what to do. I find this an unattractive way of getting things done' (Cage, 1968, p. ix). Whilst there is much to debate about the relationship of Cage's own work to the aspiration suggested by this statement, I don't propose to explore these questions here. Rather, I'd like to take this statement as being emblematic of a general unease with hierarchy which is felt by many involved in creative activity, and which often raises significant problems in (ideally egalitarian) creative music-making.

Many creative musicians of different backgrounds were amongst the wave of the post-war baby-boom would-be dismantlers of the old order who were manifesting themselves throughout Western Europe and North America in the 1960s. Whilst questioning power relationships and the relevance of inherited structures of authority and deference was a prime mover behind the activity of many *soixante-huitards* of all nationalities, I'd like to consider two groups of British musicians for whom this issue seemed particularly apposite and pressing.

One could broadly—and inevitably simplistically—characterize these two groups of musicians as on the one hand a group of post-avant-garde experimentalists whose roots lie within the traditions of classical music performance, albeit at its most experimental and subversive nexus, and on the other a group of post-jazz improvisers developing (mainly) out of free and modal jazz improvisation, and using the highly developed improvisational sensitivity of the jazz tradition to question ideas about structure and predetermination.

Cornelius Cardew often acts as a familiar figurehead for the first group; a cluster of composers who, disenchanted with modernism, were searching to rebalance the creative relationship between composer and performer, and revitalise the collaborative rather than executive aspects of performance. On his return from working as Stockhausen's assistant in the early 1960s, Cardew was driven by disenchantment, not only with Stockhausen in particular, but with high modernism in general. Specifically, the lack of trust in—and creative collaboration with—the performers, and what he saw as the inflexibility and imprisoning effect of the scores of total serialism. Cardew had been particularly struck by the fact that a huge amount of time and energy was devoted to realising highly complicated notations for passages which could have been improvised from more general instructions with almost exactly the same results. Of a particularly complex passage in *Carré* that he had spent considerable time realising he wrote: 'all because Karlheinz is afraid of musicians—doesn't trust them to respond to the prescription "start low then play fast passage ending high"' (Cardew, quoted in Tilbury, 2008, p. 84).

But if Stockhausen was 'afraid' of the musicians, as Cardew put it, perhaps he had good reason. There is a social dynamic within large ensembles which can easily lead to abdication of responsibility, depersonalised rebellion or provocation, and which can be pitiless when encountering weakness. Suffice to say, many composers in the post-war years preferred to display their compositional expertise and subjugate musicians through technical intimidation, rather than lift the veil and allow them to see the fragile nature of the whole mechanism. (Cardew's own strategies to try and turn back the clock of the process of musical alienation subsequently led him through an exciting and heady labyrinth: from indeterminacy, partial abdication of composerly responsibility [e.g. *Octet 61*], graphic and text scores to the free-wheeling collectivity of the early Scratch Orchestra, and freely improvised music with AMM.)

During the 1950s and 1960s, musicians without the expectations and connections of Cardew's solidly (if somewhat unconventionally) middle-class background would more often find their musical education in commercial music-making,

or—particularly relevant to the group of British improvisers of the late 1960s—National (Military) Service, rather than the hallowed establishments of Academy or Conservatoire.⁴ Such was the background of the group of musicians I have referred to as post-jazz improvisers, but who in many cases are actually ‘post-functional music’ improvisers.⁵ Several of the key figures in early British improvised music share this background—Derek Bailey (1930–2005), Paul Rutherford (1940–2007), John Stevens (1940–1994), Trevor Watts (b.1939) and Tony Oxley (b.1938) having extensive experience of military and/or commercial music-making.⁶

The crisis for these players was less one of oppression through notation than the effects of liberation through improvisation. As long-form improvisation came to dominate the modern jazz of the early 1960s, it inevitably raised questions about the value of the traditional composed starting-points for these improvisations; consequently some jazz musicians adopted ‘free-form’ playing, with an implicit denial of the necessity for any pre-determined structures. But Bailey and his colleagues were seeking to sever the hierarchical relationships that still bound Free Jazz musicians in quasi-traditional roles, and to do so they felt they had to reform the language spoken by these musicians. Ironically, composition was one way this might be effected, and for Bailey and Stevens in particular, a key starting point was the music of Anton Webern.⁷ The British improvisers seem to have been as provocatively stimulated by developments in European composed music as they were by the experiments of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor or John Coltrane, and they sensed the magical potential Webern seemed to offer.⁸

However, the attraction for some of the improvisers lay not so much in the theoretical excitement of a virtuosic deployment of serialism as in the very specific nature of Webern’s soundworld, to which serialism was one among several contributing factors. Roger Sutherland has referred to these musicians as being ‘less interested in how Webern’s music was constructed than how it sounded’ (Sutherland, 1994, as cited in Callingham, 2007, p. 153), and this is certainly borne out by the comment of Evan Parker (b.1944) about contemporary composed music of the period: ‘I don’t listen to these things for their realisation of formal concepts but only to the way they work as sounds’ (Parker, quoted in Carr, 1973, p. 91).

Nevertheless, Derek Bailey *was* also profoundly intrigued by how Webern’s music was constructed; his personal archive contains several compositions from this period which manipulate tone rows and investigate Webern-like gestures and intervals (see Figure 1). Even more importantly for Bailey, Webern provided an example of how the standard expectations generated by even an extended harmonic and tonal system could be side-stepped. Bailey remarked that

tonality is like an argument, and the answers to the questions are always the same [...] Atonality is a way of moving from one point to another without answering questions [...] Atonality has a non-grammatical quality, a non-causal sequence to it. (Bailey, quoted in Watson, 2004, p. 213)⁹

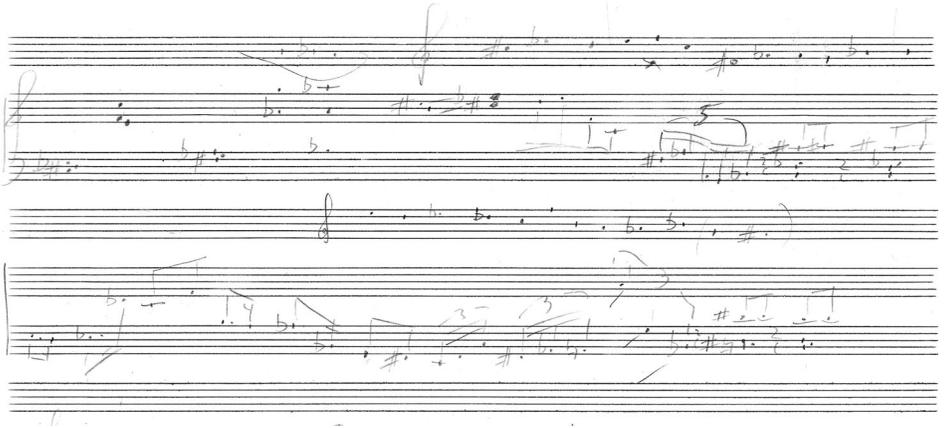


Figure 1 A sketch (1966/1967) for the third of Derek Bailey's *Three Pieces for Guitar*, showing the use of a tone row and its inversion.

But within a few years he had come to see that he needed to move beyond atonality to what he described as non-tonality: 'It became necessary to reject all tonal, modal and atonal organisation in order to leave the way free to organise only through the powers of improvisation' (Bailey, 1980, cited in Lash, 2010, p. 27).

But even whilst Bailey's brief compositional career was still following this progression, he was realising that with equally adventurous playing partners his 'non-tonal' language could realise an improvised music which was much more vital and immediate than the mechanics of composition would normally allow. Free improvisation can very quickly result in extraordinary and dramatic music; of course it can also result in much less extraordinary music, but it shares these potential outcomes with pre-determined music *without* the investment in work-specific preparation and a general hierarchical command-and-control structure which composition tends to imply.

Both these sets of musicians were trying to re-establish trust, collectivity and personal freedom without jettisoning decisive and incisive input from inspired individuals. For a brief period, the two camps I've outlined collaborated frequently on genre-blurring projects such as Eddie Prévost's¹⁰ *Spirals* and *Silver Pyramid*, Cardew's *Treatise* and *The Tiger's Mind*, and groups including AMM, The London Contemporary Chamber Players, The Music Now Ensemble, The Portsmouth Sinfonia and others. However, by 1973, the collaborations between the two camps had started to run out of steam. Cardew himself had had a political epiphany, and moved to a form of socialist realism which severed all links with experimentalism. Many of Cardew's key associates had become seduced by the avuncular minimalism of Systems Music; inevitably, free improvisation had no part to play in the music of these newly ironic systems-based composers, with Christopher Hobbs noting that he left AMM because it was getting 'too sort of mystical' (Hobbs, quoted in Anderson, 1983, p. 126).¹¹ By 1972 it had become clear to Derek Bailey that the musical fruits that

could be harvested through composition did not justify the time and ideological compromise it demanded from him; indeed, the (re-)discovery that it was possible to make such extraordinary music without anyone having to act as musical leader or director (even on a temporary basis), thus sidestepping many politically sensitive areas, was too rich a prize to abandon.¹²

However, some musicians from both composition and improvisation backgrounds continue to explore ways of incorporating the creative power and spontaneity of improvisation within the long-term structuring and conceptual possibilities of composition or pre-determination. Usually this involves a great deal of agonising about the ‘telling people what to do’ question, and invokes profound issues of trust and respect. The would-be composer/instigator/director needs to realise that, if an improvising musician’s *raison d’être* is to explore freedom, structuring the context of that freedom *can* feel like a slap in the face. The introduction of structural ideas, or direction modifying strategies, into the context of improvisation does *not* constitute an implicit assertion that improvisation can be (or needs to be) ‘improved’ by these interventions—but this is a fact which many improvising musicians find counter-intuitive.

The strategies adopted by both composing improvisers and improvising composers have a lot in common. The ability to effectively read standard music notation is by no means ubiquitous amongst improvising musicians, nor is it necessarily seen as a pre-requisite for creative music-making. Consequently graphic and verbal/text-based scores are particularly prevalent, whilst I have also seen video and film, sponges and birthdays being used as structuring devices. More basic structuring options include the simple organisation of who improvises when, or the episodic interleaving of composed and improvised sections; however both of these methods often prove unsatisfying, exactly because they sidestep the true difficulties of combining the two disciplines. In almost all these endeavours, there are underlying tensions revolving around the compromising effect that any kind of distracting simultaneous activity can have on an improviser’s ability to focus on the realisation of effective improvisation. For many, the moment attention is split between creative playing and relating to some structuring device, the quality of improvisation can suffer quite dramatically.

A reluctance to appear authoritarian on the part of the instigator can often result in a mode of ‘default improv language’ activity; the players have lost faith (or have not yet found faith) in the structuring strategy, but have not the freedom of self-direction that would enable their improvisation to develop significantly in its own right: this kind of no-man’s land is common when the level of intervention is relatively high, but without any clear or worthwhile conceptual justification. Conducted improvisation remains problematic; in the hands of some practitioners the level and rigidity of discipline required renders questionable any meaningful relationship with improvisation (at least on the part of the players, rather than the conductor). Its most successful practitioners tend to use smaller vocabularies, have more open-ended goals, and are able to resist the temptation to over-direct. A key skill for structuring improvising activity (and one which can be very difficult for a composer to acquire) is the ability to

relinquish and jettison an idea, no matter how wonderful, elegant or skilfully crafted, simply because it is no longer appropriate.

A further source of tension can be the perception of listeners' difficulty in allocating responsibility for creative elements. Cardew's caricature of the average concert musician's approach to modern music was 'we play it, but don't blame us for what it sounds like' (Cardew, quoted in Tilbury, 2008, p. 109), in other words these disagreeable sounds are demonstrably the composer's fault. For many jazz musicians, a comparable subtext might be 'this person's composition is unremarkable, but may subsequently be redeemed by my exceptional improvisation'. Some musicians find much comfort in the relatively clear allocation of credit or blame. In addition the question of what constitutes proper composerly responsibility is still a sensitive one: as recently as 2011 I experienced a situation where a performer was not prepared to consider my suggestions about what might happen in a more open section of a new commission, because he felt that if I had had any interest whatsoever in what happened at that point, I should have written it down. For this musician my invitation to participate creatively signalled an abdication of authority, and introduced into the piece a *zone blanche* in which no artistic or aesthetic criteria could be brought into play.

Are there alternative strategies of political organisation that may be usefully drawn upon by creative musicians? Cardew's passionate search in the post-Stockhausen years was for a recipe which would allow him to enjoy the collective responsibility, shared creativity and egalitarian relationships of collaboration or improvisation, whilst retaining the possibility of exploring abstruse intellectual concepts, structural experiments and the fruits of recourse to discipline and precision when necessary. It strikes me that there is at least one clear paradigm for this kind of approach, but Cardew's background and education had made it unlikely he would be fully familiar with it; effectively, he was just too 'classical' a musician to see how relevant jazz methodology might have been to such a quest.

Of course, jazz has been combining improvisation and composition in various ways for a century but I suggest that some aspects of its hierarchical organisation strategies might be worth considering in this context. The resilient pervasiveness of distinctions between composer and interpreter in European Art Music and its derivatives has deprived many performers of their sense of collaborative creative community. Clearly, jazz history has its fair share of doctrinaire authoritarians, martinet bandleaders and royalty-appropriating stars. However, much of the history of jazz has been made by loose groupings of similarly-minded creative artists, adopting a kind of rotating hierarchy system where different members of the informal collective exert a lighter or heavier hand on artistic direction, but with the common understanding that tomorrow—or next week, or next month—the current director would be the willing instrument of a colleague's direction. Although some of the key long-term groups in creative jazz have had an explicitly collective structure, I'm thinking here about the 'leader/sideman' structure upon which archetypal modern jazz is built; a structure which presumes that (with the exception of certain commercially bankable interests) creative musicians will move back and forth between leader and

sideman¹³ roles constantly—often within the same personnel. In fact, this is crucial to the viability of their creative community.

This rotating hierarchy effectively strips the permanent markers of rank (composer, conductor, interpreter and soloist) from participants, since these are regularly reallocated from project to project. The central role of improvisation ensures that jazz has (like improvised music) a particularly highly developed awareness of the value of the individual creativity of the collaborator, and the more flexible examples will be able to spontaneously refashion any compositional structures to take account of exceptional contributions by collaborating musicians. The resulting music is understood to be a unique synthesis of the individual voices of all participants, not just those with posts of ‘official’ responsibility. In my experience, trying to reflect the ideals of this kind of rotating hierarchy in any kind of performance project can generate a relationship of supportive mutual creativity and considerable trust. In fact, by diligently acknowledging (and trying to incorporate) the creative potential of all collaborators, it might be possible to erase two centuries’-worth of drip-fed propaganda about musical geniuses and their inalienable right to tell other people what to do. In the process, one can reassert a musical environment where creativity and leadership are qualities possessed by all, to be exercised when necessary and as appropriate for the common good.

Not only is there no better antidote to performer alienation and the promotion of musical social cohesion, for a creative musician there is also no better way of avoiding getting stuck in the artistic tramlines of musical predictability.

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Notes

- [1] I use the term ‘composer’ with reluctance here, given the dubious connotations which this designation has for many members of the improvising community. It remains a useful shorthand, but there are various similar terms which might be used which are often less (or differently) hierarchically loaded: instigator, conceiver, leader, director, organiser, etc.
- [2] What may initially appear to be inconsistencies in the capitalisation of certain terms in this text is actually an attempt to differentiate between the use of these terms as objective descriptions, and their use as genre or school labels to denote an (approximately) agreed type of activity. For example, British experimental music would include any music that was both British and experimental, whereas British Experimental Music is intended to signify a widely agreed

(but not absolutely fixed) group of composers and their activities (in this case essentially those identified with this label by Anderson, 1983); similarly, whilst Free Jazz may often be improvised music, in that it may have no pre-determined elements whatsoever, it only very occasionally becomes Improvised Music, in the sense that it almost never leaves behind the instrumental hierarchies inherited from the jazz tradition.

- [3] Butch Morris Conduction: London Skyscraper Tour. 30 October to 10 November 1997; Arts Council of England Contemporary Music Network.
- [4] For several of the players subsequently mentioned, National Service was a voluntary undertaking rather than an obligation. Despite compulsory National Service having been abandoned in 1960, would-be musicians continued to sign up for the armed forces since it represented a way of acquiring extensive training and skills that did not depend on social connections or family prosperity.
- [5] By this I mean that these musicians come as much (or perhaps more) from the tradition of functional music (music for commercial or practical purposes rather than 'art' music) than from jazz as an artform (a status jazz tends to have increasingly acquired since the arrival of Pop Music).
- [6] I can personally attest to the fact that the rigours of commercial music making can be every bit as alienating as the demands of total serialism—or 'death through music', as Cardew mischievously labelled it (quoted in Tilbury, 2008, p. 347); although I have no comparable experience of military bandsmanship, I think it is safe to assume that it too involves a certain degree of hierarchical discipline.
- [7] For evidence of the interest Bailey and Stevens showed in Webern, see: Beresford (2010), Watson (2004, pp. 138, 422–424), Bailey (1992, p. 107), and Butcher (2011).
- [8] In general, this is in contra-distinction to their free-jazz counterparts in the USA; this phenomenon is very probably related to the profound sense of cultural apartheid which has haunted American music in the twentieth century.
- [9] I would suggest that by this Bailey does not mean that every tonal 'question' always demands the same answer, but that while any answer may be given, it is always heard in relation to a quite specific question. Whether atonality dispenses with this characteristic, or merely provides less specific questions, is open to debate.
- [10] Edwin (Eddie) Prévost (b.1942); English drummer/percussionist, improviser, educator and author. Founder member of AMM.
- [11] I have yet to ask Hobbs exactly what he meant by this, but given the historical context I wonder if 'mystical' may be a euphemism for 'political'—AMM have been repeatedly riven by political disagreements both doctrinaire and personal. But it may also be that the musicians of AMM were becoming increasingly convinced of the value and merit of 'free playing', and that—as someone who was an improvising composer rather than a composing improviser—Hobbs was unsure that this was the path he wished to follow.
- [12] Note that the oft-cited catalogue of Obscure Records LPs (curated from 1975 to 1978 by Brian Eno and Gavin Bryars), which potentially represents one of the most impressive documents of the links between the improvising and experimental composing communities, was in fact a retrospectively reconstructed document of a period of collaboration which had already withered away by 1975.
- [13] I use the term 'sideman' whilst denying what might be seen as its implicit sexism. Although I have seen the term 'sidewoman' used, the general tendency in the jazz community seems to be towards the use of 'sideman' for collaborators of both sexes. In this sense, it might be thought similar to the term 'chairman' (although I have yet to come across the term being abbreviated to simply 'side').

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