

At any given time, and in any given medium, practitioners work from a body of generally accepted knowledge and a set of common practices.

Over the past 200 years, or so, our culture has come to accept, especially in the field of what we call 'serious' music, a paradigm in which composition, performance and musicological study have been almost completely disconnected.

Composers tend not to perform, and performers are expected only to reproduce - as accurately as possible - whatever composers and conductors ask. Musicologists, meanwhile, are left to spin theories based on a mixture of study and extrapolation from earlier theories, since they are themselves nearly always disconnected from both compositional and performative practice.

In other words, while composers have been losing touch with the realities of musical performance, performers have become increasingly - and often completely - alienated from the business of musical creation. Professional academics have to pick up the pieces and try to make some sense of them - but always as observers and not as participants.

So at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - the position, at least in the field of Art music - which, for our cultural gatekeepers is still the only music that really counts - was that *research*, which is to say, the *practical investigation of form and technique* - was lodged firmly in the hands of composers, since it was they who in their works announced discoveries, made musical proposals and experimented with new ways of organizing sound.

Of course there were other musical practices, disregarded by the elite culture, which continued to work from very different norms and assumptions - folk musics and popular musics, for example. And, as the twentieth century unfolded, it was *their* generative paradigms, rather than those of the art elite, that began increasingly to penetrate and transform mainstream culture; a process that was mediated in large part by the universal medium of *recorded sounds*.

One of the more interesting consequences, from our point of view, has been that the work of creation and innovation was slowly delivered back into the hands of performers.

I say back because, of course, for most people and for most of human history, music has always been understood as something made in real-time out of the fabric of a performer's memory and imagination. This is because all performances in aural cultures are manifestly transient acts of direct communication - fleeting events that occupy no more than the moment in which they are realized before vanishing back into oblivion. Or, rather, they emerge out of a single memory before being absorbed into a cluster of memories.

In such cultures, music is simply what *musicians* do.

It was the introduction of *writing* into the practice of music that set in train the division of performance from creation - and of theory from both.

The reason is simple: a performance cannot be separated from the *immediate time* of its realization. In other words, a performance is always a *process* - while a score is an *object*. Far from being a manifestation of an immediate present, a score is a frozen agglomeration of superimposed moments from the past.

So when performers play from the page, they are not *remembering* but repeating a formula that superimposes a fixed past onto a fluid present. A performer is no longer *making* the music, but rather *reproducing* - or at best - *interpreting* it.

Writing also offers extraordinary rewards because it gives certain kinds of minds the means to calculate, experiment, visualize and apply theories - and to correct and perfect musical ideas. Completely free of the straightjacket of sequential time.

In this way, writing made possible the creation and orchestration of musical effects of a previously unimaginable complexity and perfection. To writing we owe all of early polyphonic, medieval, renaissance, baroque and classical music. And much of today's too.

Writing also underpinned the evolution of analytical theories and comparative studies and the birth of musicology as an independent discipline, as well the establishment of a vast and permanent library of reproducible works.

In other words, writing gave music a *history*.

It also gave birth to today's orchestras and ensembles - no longer constituted as groups of performers involved collectively in music making, but rather as factories for the reproduction and interpretation of scores.

In short, writing institutionalized a brilliantly sophisticated music that was increasingly assembled from alienated specialisms: a music *designed* by composers, *controlled* by conductors and *operated* by skilled, but obedient, workers.

Which is how musicians lost touch with the source of music.

It was no coincidence, either, that this massive shift in the understanding of what music *was*, followed so closely the *technological shift* in the productive and reproductive process of music-making itself; that is to say, the shift from the dominance of *subjective* memory to the dominance of *objective* memory. Or to put it another way, from the organic negotiation of individual recollections to the unquestioning acceptance of a single, definitive text impervious to change.

Since this new form of memory – the written score – was entirely under the control of composers, it would naturally be composers who determined the direction music would take. Because composition had become a process from which performers were effectively excluded.

But, as Plato remarked: *when the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake.*

And the mode of the music has categorically changed over the last century, thanks mainly to the emergence of a third memory system, which has been, in its revolutionary power, quite as radical as notation was 1000 years before it.

That new form of memory is sound recording. It's a technology that is neither subjective and unreliable - like biological memory - nor objective but silent - like written instructions, but which remembers *sound itself*.

That means recordings remember *performances*. And *personalities*.

The quintessential model for this paradigmic shift was early 20<sup>th</sup> century jazz - a music rooted in an oral culture, and mediated still by *biological*, rather than *written*, memory. In other words, a music in which performance was immediate and primary. And to which improvisation was fundamental.

And what gave this music the ability to invade and colonise musical thinking across many generations and continents was the existence of *sound recording*. Because sound recording gave it material form.

To explain: until sound could be recorded, a performance existed only for whoever was able to be in a particular place at a particular time. And while scores survived, and could travel, performances didn't and couldn't. So a score might reverberate down the centuries and circumscribe the globe, but a performance could only influence a roomful of people. But once a performance could be recalled... note for note and sound for sound - then a single performance could send a shock wave around the world.

*Sound for sound*. That's the point. And musicians understood this immediately, since recording was a technology that remembered *them*.

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Of course, in the Art world, individual voices were of secondary importance. A composition was never a sound; it was a score. Performances were just possible - and interchangeable - iterations of that score. They would inevitably be lost, but the music – that is, the written text - would endure.

This is a concept that would be wholly alien to an aural culture, in which performance is *everything* - and where music depends intimately on something that musicians describe as *feel*.

We have no idea how the music of Monteverdi, Bach or Beethoven sounded in their own time, but there would definitely have been a *feel* that

performers knew how to embody. Today - although we can reproduce the notes - the feel is lost. So we have to interpret it in our own way. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying this is a bad thing - it's just indicative of the fact that once written down, the *music* and its *feel* are divided.

Which is why written music so quickly ceases to be *living* music.

What we know as funk, reggae, rock and jazz are all *feels* -by which I mean that they are expressed in a way that has to do with their being *fully immersed in a material cultural practice*.

Jazz that doesn't swing, isn't jazz. And jazz *notation* certainly doesn't swing. It can't even tell you what swing is.

But a recording can.

### 1. J.S BACH, Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, Jacques Lussier

By the same token, it's a simple fact that every great instrumentalist has a voice that is uniquely his or her own.

That was just as true in 1568 as it is now.

But in 1568 *sound* couldn't be preserved. Therefore sound could have no place in musical history. And musical history, equally, had no place for any music that depended on its sound - or on the individuality of its performers.

Until 1877. That was the year Thomas Edison built the first working sound recorder. Now everything changes. Because, once sound can be recorded, the specificity of individual sounds becomes, not just an aspect - but in many cases *the most important aspect* - of a musical work.

In other words, sounds and performances are no longer *incidental* but have become *primary materials* from which music can be shaped and given form. And these materials - along with *feel*, personality and *timbre* - are under the immediate control not of composers, but *performers*.

I only have to listen to 10 seconds of this ----

### 2. KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN, Gesang der Junglinge

Or this

### 3. ALICE COLTRANE, Universal Consciousness

Or this

### 4. THE BEATLES, All you need is love

And I know immediately both the performer and the work.

In fact, in a real sense these performances *are* the works.

This is the revolution that sound recording engendered.

Unsurprisingly, then, it was in those musical genres that were populated by musicians *who were still in contact with the creative roots of music-making* that the potential of the new medium was most thoroughly investigated.

Let's consider, because it's the most *personal* of instruments, the human voice...

For a singer, the *first task* is to *fill a space*.

In public spaces, singers had, above all, to *project*.<sup>1</sup>

The operatic voice, the *lieder* voice, even the music hall voice are the direct product of that purely technical requirement. These are, we might say, *technical voices*.

But the process of recording *eliminated physical space*. There was no space to fill any more. Just the few inches between a singer's mouth and a microphone.

Art composers, trapped in their writing paradigm, didn't notice. It was of no significance.

But *singers* did. Listen to this, for instance, recorded in 1926, a few years after the introduction of electrical recording:

## 5. WILLARD ROBISON, *The Devil is Afraid of Music*

This is not a song; it's a *person*. Outside the nursery, such intimacy was never heard. And it's not the invention of a composer, it's the invention of a performer experimenting with a new means of communication. Crooning, is classic instance of practice as research

By research I mean *investigation by empirical experiment*; through a hands-on, improvisational, trial-and-error method that, if successful will be followed by a public presentation of results, leading in turn to further refinement by others following the same method.

The critical point I am trying to make is that recording gives formerly *unquantifiable* qualities like sound, expression, *timbre*, *feel*, personality and character parity with - if not domination over - more formal vectors such as structure and composition, and this shifts *productive power* in the direction of performers.

In fact it implicitly *privileges* performers, who are uniquely able to research and exploit their own skills (and gifts) - especially in the

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<sup>1</sup> And on early recordings, singers like Caruso still had to project - in order to make a substantial physical impression in the resistant wax.

laboratory conditions of the recording environment, which empowers them not only to fix but to *compose with* their own performances.

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It should also be said that a studio is not just a tool; it's the wellspring of a universal forum through which ideas can circulate and be conserved.

And naturally, once sound can be preserved there's a far greater pressure to experiment - to find new sounds and unusual sounds and new and unusual ways of organizing them, setting in train the cascade of empirical research that distinguishes the musical history of the twentieth century.

John Cage's formalisation of piano preparations is a well-known example.

In 1938, pressed by circumstances, and recalling something his old teacher Henry Cowell had done, Cage embarked on a series of experiments. First he laid a pie plate on the piano strings and hit the keys. Then he listened. Then that he put nails between the strings and after that screws, because the nails kept slipping out. He listened again. Next he tried rubber strips and coins... all the time listening and taking note of anything that *sounded good* to him. In other words, he improvised directly with his materials. And, having created his palette of sounds, he composed his piece with them.

## 6. JOHN CAGE, *And the Earth Shall Bear Again*

Staying with the piano, here's Stephen Scott. All his techniques too are the direct product of experiment and research. This piece was played in real time on a single concert grand by ten people working together.

## 7. STEPHEN SCOTT, *Vikings of the Sunrise*

Or take the pianist and composer Zygmunt Krauze. Same story, except, he's working with rounded rocks.

## 8. ZYGMUNT KRAUZE, *Stone Music*

In all these examples, it's the performers who are doing the research and who are generating the material; and all their researches are conducted through a process of *focused improvisation*.

Plainly, no one knows better what an instrument can do than someone who lives and works with it all the time and, conversely, it is virtually impossible to discover techniques like these *without* having a deep and physical intimacy with an instrument.

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Let's return to the voice for a moment. Some of the earlier vocal innovations in Art music have been associated with composers like Luciano

Berio and Peter Maxwell Davis. But, in fact, both depended profoundly on the researches of individual singers:

Davis wrote his highly influential *8 Songs for a Mad King* specifically for the actor Roy Hart who, with his teacher Alfred Wolfson, had worked for decades on discovering the range and abilities of the human voice.

Here is a little of Hart's research:

### **9. ROY HART, Octave exercises**

And here's one of his applications

### **10. T.S. ELIOT, The Rock Roy Hart**

This was what inspired Maxwell Davis, who wrote the *Eight Songs for a Mad King* specifically for Roy Hart's experimental techniques.

### **11. PETER MAXWELL DAVIS, Eight Songs for a Mad King**

Even more directly, Luciano Berio's groundbreaking *Visage* was constructed collaboratively using studio improvisations by his then wife, Kathy Berberian.

### **12. BERIO/BERBERIAN, Visage**

Finally, here's the British improviser, Phil Minton, who is a living laboratory of singing techniques

### **13. PHIL MINTON, Extracts**

Once marginal, this method of generation and composition is now increasingly applied across a wide range of musical genres.

This Raashan Roland Kirk, from the world of jazz:

### **14. ROLAND KIRK, One Ton**

From the world of contemporary art music, the harpist Anne LeBaron

### **15. ANNE LEBARON, Harp Study No.1**

From the world of free improvisation, trombonist Connie Bauer

## 16. CONNIE BAUER , Märzfeber

From the world of rock, guitarist Eddie van Halen

## 17. EDDIE VAN HALEN, Eruption

I could talk for a year and not run out of examples. New techniques, unique sounds, personal expression – they are all ubiquitous today across most musical fields. And they are the work of performers, not composers.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the most innovative practices tend to be avoided or ignored by an increasingly isolated musicological community, which has failed to develop the tools with which to understand it.

Which is why, of course, it is so important to theorise our own practices.

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I hope you are persuaded that finding new sounds, and ways effectively to use them, is no longer a matter of *ideas* but rather of empirical research.

And it's fairly clear that no form is more welcoming – or more conducive to this kind of research - than *improvisation*, when it is used not as a goal, but as a tool - an aspect of improvisation, curiously, that is seldom mentioned.

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I've spoken of recordings as a means to spread ideas. And I've described how the studio environment encourages performers to create new works through direct experiment and research. But we can also understand the studio as a *laboratory*. A workshop that releases its users from the demands of time; a medium that supports the creation of both imaginary and impossible spaces, all ripe for exploration And not only by individuals exploiting their own abilities and skills, but also by groups, working collectively. Improvisation is the collective form of creation, *par excellence*, and the studio is in its essence a working medium, ideal for collective work.

The last piece I'm going to play started out as a long collective improvisation. The band - there were six of us – selected just 48 seconds of it, and made an enormous loop – 18 metres long - so long, in fact, we had to wind it all the way around the studio, using bottles as capstans.

By the time it had gone around the room once, the accumulated friction of the bottles had slowed the tape down by about three semitones. It also made the transport unsteady, giving the sound a rather fragile, febrile quality. This was what led us to our next step.

First we added various small extra textural details using guitar and saxophone. This was to vary and articulate the track, and to obscure the rather brutal *loopness* of the loop. The players just improvised, following the intention - and the group decided what to keep.



Next we thought we needed, a counter-theme to give the piece some tension, shape and content. And by chance, we had earlier in the day heard one of the melodies from another composition we had been working on running at half speed. This also sounded shaky and querulous, so we decided to use that as our second element.

So we copied the tracks we needed – omitting the rhythm section - noting how the half-speed tempo made an interesting contrast with the rather frenetic character of the first theme. To make it sound slightly less unreal, we wrote extra parts for the half-speed melody, which we overdubbed at normal speed.

More discussion followed. We tried and abandoned a lot of possibilities and finally decided just to make a very long, slow crossfade between the first and second block.

Before play it, I should say – because I think it’s interesting – that, throughout the process, we almost never discussed what we were doing in musical terms, but only in visual, dramaturgical and cinematic terms. We understood this process wasn’t about notes or rhythms, but a inchoate attempt to capture a feeling of fragility and loss.

Here’s how it ended up. This is Deluge by Henry Cow.

### **18. HENRY COW, Deluge**

In all the activities I have described, we have found ourselves back inside a nexus of integrated music-making, a nexus in which interrogating instruments, interrogating sounds, or interrogating procedures or juxtapositions is no longer a work that has to be subservient to some overarching theory, but is rather a work of *practice*. A practice, moreover, whose primary technique, is improvisation.

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