

isim international society for improvised music

Newsletter no. 1, Fall 2005

Welcome from the President

Dear ISIM members:

It has been entirely gratifying to see the enthusiastic response to this organization, and I thought in this first newsletter I would reflect a bit on its origins. In the early 1990s I started an ensemble at The University of Michigan School of Music called the Creative Arts Orchestra. The CAO was and still is one of the few groups of its size that plays entire concerts with nothing planned in advance. While nowadays the group numbers around 15-20 members, there were times when it was as large as 36! CAO not only traversed diverse musical terrain, it also brought together musicians, actors, dancers, poets, storytellers to explore the possibilities in spontaneous, collective, stylistically-open creativity. It was a forum where classical musicians could take their first improvisatory strides, and where advanced jazz players could expand their horizons. Rehearsals and concerts often began with meditation practices, and over time the CAO evolved into more than a performance ensemble—it became an environment that promoted penetrating reflection and dialogue on the creative process, its origins in consciousness, and its ramifications for life at large.

As the group toured the East Coast last winter, it dawned on me how ISIM is kind of a broader elaboration on the Creative Arts Orchestra. ISIM is a community that embraces spontaneous creativity and the melding of influences, while at the same time honoring the traditions that are the source of these influences. ISIM promotes diverse pedagogical methods that make improvisation accessible to all musicians. ISIM supports the probing of consciousness as a foundational realm of human creative expression. And ISIM recognizes the importance of deep reflection, which is at the heart of research, on the improvising process and its ramifications for our understanding of creativity across fields. When a couple of years ago I described the CAO to a group of lawyers, psychologists, and business negotiators at a conference of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard's Law and Business Schools, they were struck by the parallels to much of their creative interactions. Improvised music is increasingly looked at as a model for creativity across fields.

While it is gratifying to see other professions acknowledge their improvisatory core, art is unique in its capacity to access deep realms of consciousness and channel ideas into abstract elements of sound, imagery, and movement, resulting in a transformational experience for artist and perceiver alike. No one articulates this more eloquently than the improviser-author-philosopher Stephen Nachmanovitch. An important source of inspiration in the earliest days of the Creative Arts Orchestra was his highly acclaimed book *Freeplay: Improvisation in Life and the Arts*, and it is a great pleasure to feature Stephen—who is also an ISIM Advisory Council member—in this first issue of our newsletter. We are also happy to profile ISIM member Joe Giardullo this fall and look forward to featuring different ISIM members in each issue. We hope that you enjoy learning about our those who comprise our great community as much as we do.

Thank you all for being part of the ISIM project!

Ed Sarath
ISIM Founder and President

Welcome from the Executive Director

Dear ISIM Members:

Welcome to ISIM! I am so excited you have joined our movement of the moment in sound.

ISIM is off to a great start, with top professionals from around the world joining as members, chapter leaders, board, and advisory council. The quality and dedication of those involved in our growing organization provides a solid foundation for ISIM to build upon.

Please take advantage of our website features for members. The online membership database is a wonderful resource, listing searchable profiles for all members. Find an ISIM member in your area, read biographies, see pictures, visit websites of members, or just browse the membership. The online discussion forum is already underway. Take part in current discussion topics or create your own. This is a great way to network with other ISIM members. The online events calendar is a place for members to post events and see what other ISIM members are doing. Events submitted are posted within one week.

Currently we are forming ISIM Professional Chapters and ISIM Student Chapters. The purpose of the chapters is to provide a local forum and support for ISIM members. Get involved with your local chapter or start a chapter in your area!

ISIM is developing a compilation CD program. A compilation CD will be included with each newsletter, featuring ISIM members. Contact ISIM for information on submitting material for the first compilation CD, to be distributed with the December 2005 newsletter.

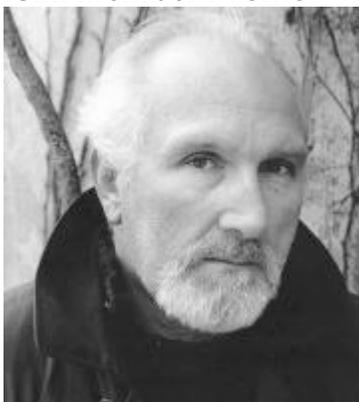
We have already begun planning the ISIM Conference and Festival 2006, taking place December 2006. More information will be released on this event as plans develop.

We are open to your suggestions on programs for members. Please contact ISIM with your ideas. This will assist us in our continual development of programs to support ISIM members.

Again, Welcome to ISIM!

Sincerely,
Sarah Weaver
ISIM Executive Director

ISIM Member Profile



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Joe Giardullo is a multi-instrumentalist who concentrates on soprano saxophone. His recording and performing associations include notables such as Pauline Oliveros, Joe McPhee, Steve Lacy, Milford Graves, and Carlos Zingaro.

Currently he is concentrating on solo soprano performances and in the realization of a new generation of music for large improvising ensembles- entitled "G2-Music for Creative Chamber Group". Writer Francis Davis, in Downbeat Magazine, called Joe's music for large ensembles the most "intensely democratic music" he'd ever heard, describing it with references to both Anthony Braxton's Paris music and improvised Webern, and also using the vocabulary of geology, physics and mathematics to get at certain qualities of the sound.

Joe tours the US, western and eastern Europe extensively.

Occupation

- educator
- performer

Availability

- presentations
- residencies
- clinics
- concerts

News from the Chicago Professional Chapter Don Malone, Coordinator

The Chicago chapter is forming. We have had three meetings at the Chicago Collage of Performing Arts of Roosevelt University. We are moving the meetings to other facilities in Chicago. Sarah Weaver has offered her loft for the September meeting, and we are investigating performance spaces in an effort to attract a wide range of artists. The discussion has been centered on activities for the chapter and the improvisations presented at the meetings. We have ongoing plans to get the word out about the chapter. We have attracted mostly improvisers from the Chicago New Music scene. We also had a performance by Chicago's great ud player Issa Bolos. David Schrader who keeps the ancient European High Art improvisation alive is scheduled to perform at an upcoming meeting. The performances have been excellent and very informative. It is a rare occasion to have access to improvisers for discussion of their art. To attract more artists, listeners, teachers, critics, scholars, and industry leaders, the Chicago Chapter is planning a spring festival. To sum it up, we are starting slowly to offer support to improvisers in Chicagoland, including starting a venue list, monthly meetings with performance and discussion, and planning a festival.

A Word from the ISIM Advisory Council An Interview with Stephen Nachmanovitch, author of the book "Free Play"

Sarah Weaver: How does your concept of "Free Play" relate to improvised music?

Stephen Nachmanovitch: In *Free Play*, I began writing it at the suggestion of Yehudi Menuhin. I began writing it at as book about the insides of improvising music, particularly on string instruments. Almost from the beginning of the process it became an exploration of creativity itself. I came to realize improvisation is really the front door to all forms of creativity. The essence of improvisation is to respond to what is in front of your nose. What you hear. If you're a musician, and you're playing with somebody and the two of you have not talked and haven't said we're going to play in D minor or something like that, you just stand up and playing together. If you have the good will to listen to each other completely, then in fact you're going to play a beautifully coordinated piece of music and nobody in the audience will particularly know that it was improvised. However if you come into the position with an agenda, and you say, "Well, I've got this wonderful riff that I'm going to show off," then A. you're not going to have improvisation, and B. the collaboration will fall apart because you're not responding to the other person. We haven't spoken before, and the next time we speak we will not have the same conversation. Every conversation is different. Every musical conversation is different, even if you're playing the Eroica trio. And so, to be able to respond to what's in front of your nose, and actually deal with it, is the essence of improvisation. That is also the essence of creativity in all its forms, and the essence of living life gracefully. So people need to get out of their heads the idea that improvised music or improvised theater is some kind of "anything goes" or you just do whatever you feel like because it's not. You're doing whatever is called for by the situation at hand.

SW: How does the process of improvisation relate to all the different ways that people can interact with music, whether it is listening, interpretive performance, composition, improvisation, or studying the history of music, as an important way for people to interact with music?

SN: I think it's an important way for anyone to interact with music, whether they're becoming professional performers or not. If a student is studying music, it's great for them to have the experience of creating music. Not everyone is going to become a composer. We're now talking about population of students in a music school. Not everyone is going to become a composer and spend the years studying the theory and the skills for that, but for them to have some experience of actually being the source of original creation is fantastic. And if they go on to be a composer, having that juicy experience of instantaneous creation only helps. Not everyone is going to be a virtuoso violinist or virtuoso trombonist, but for them to have the experience of creating something interesting with an instrument right now is incredibly valuable and incredibly empowering. It gets to the source of what music is all about. It is really wonderful for people to sidestep, at least to some extent, this notion that the joy of creation is only available to you after you've done years and years of hard work and study. Absolutely true that if you've done your years of hard work and study you're going to be able to operate at a deeper level. But to kind of delay the gratification until you've gotten your certificates, as it were, it's much better to get that joy right away and then continue to get it as you're doing your studies. Certainly for composers to experience performing and for performers to experience composing, which they can all do by being improvisers, is a wonderful thing. The point of this is that improvisation is an important musical art form in itself, and anything that you can do to promote awareness and visibility for improvised music in it of itself is extremely important. Secondly, improvisation as an educational procedure, to enable people to have the experience of being creators today, rather than waiting 4 years until they've completed their course of study is extremely empowering. Through the cross-fertilization of disciplines, their creativity juiced up and intentioned by the improvisational experience, they can go back to their own work and see something in a fresh way.

SW: Do you think the fusion of improvised music languages is an effect of globalization, since we are now aware of so many different cultures and their forms of improvised music that we can't help but be influenced by all them?

SN: To me, if we don't blow ourselves up in the 21st century, then this move to cultural globalization becomes the seed of a new renaissance. With Schoenberg and the other avant-gardists at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a perception once we'd reached the kind of gargantuan symphonic works of Mahler let's say, that we've gone about as far as we can go with this major/minor tonal system. And we then go from one hour symphonies to two hour symphonies, and you know, there's a limit to how complex you can make it. It seems to many people that this form is kind of played out. So Schoenberg says ok, let's try this 12-tone system. But the 12-tone system was based on an abstract system that was also equal-temperament, which is as you know is out of tune. It was certainly one extremely interesting attempt to create a different system that brings out of the fact that people have done fascinating things with the major/minor system for a couple hundred years and now maybe it's enough of that. But the fact is that there was also available to us the innumerable 5000+ scales of Indian music and the scales of Chinese music and the rhythms of African music. And if you want to break out of the 2 rigid major and minor scales you have thousands and thousands of choices to work with that have been developed over time. And this is what's coming to the floor now - both the interesting classical music and the interesting pop music are gleaming off of that incredible fountain of material that's available from all the cultures in the world. Essentially, musically it's a fascinating time to be alive now.

SW: Your view on creativity and consciousness has a relationship to Zen teachings. Could you describe this relationship? How does Zen relate to improvised music?

SN: Almost 30 years ago, I met a Zen priest who used the word practice to mean zazen, or sitting meditation. Even though I'd heard the word practice used this way many times before, it somehow hit me between the eyes that time - I realized, I'm a musician, I know what practice is.

Gregory Bateson on practice: "We practice in order to get a skill, which is then a tool - in which I, unchanged, now have a new tool, that's all. The Oriental view is that you practice in order to change yourself. You incorporate the discipline of practice in you, and you come out of the practice as a different sort of person. This is the whole theory of Zen practice, Zen and archery, all those things." [1]

Practices like meditation, koan study, tantra, the arts, serve to position us in a place from which we can see realities that cannot be described but only experienced. If we accept that "reality" is not describable in any language, if we accept that any science or philosophy can give us at the very most only a partial and provisional (and mistakenly concrete) picture - then the best approach to learning about the world at a deeper and more inclusive level does not involve piling on the terminology and concepts, it involves positioning body and mind in a place from which we can experience a bit of the world more directly than we usually do. If perception is active then practice is the way to perceive better and more

completely.

SW: What is the greatest impact ISIM can have on the field of improvised music and society?

SN: For musicians, improvisation is a method of creating art. But beyond music, improvisation is a key to being able to respond directly to what we see, hear, and feel. It's can be liberating for people in a wide variety of fields to have this kind of training, just so that we can respond to what is in front of our faces. Unfortunately we often get clogged up by agendas, plans, and the expectations of others, by fixed ideas and fixed vocabularies, so that we cannot come up with the clear and obvious response. It's important for people to understand that improvisation is not behaving randomly or that "anything goes," but rather learning to see and listen intensively so that we can act in the moment, without delay.

Now (2005) we live in a time of societal devolution, a time when it's not entirely clear whether we can look forward to a period of civilization or brutality. Probably a confusing mixture of both. Any ways we can find to help clarify our connection with each other, to cultivate a more holistic consciousness, is badly needed: not an academic question but a question literally of life and death.

[1] Bateson, Gregory, and Jerry Brown, "Caring and Clarity: Conversation with Gregory Bateson and Edmund G. Brown, Governor of California, edited by Stewart Brand. CoEvolution Quarterly, 1976, 10, p. 41.