

Message from the President

Dear ISIM Members:

Luciano Berio, in a 1985 interview, expressed little regard for improvisation. While he conceded that improvisation might have “therapeutic value for uptight classical performers”, the process was incapable in his view of achieving the structural complexity of composition and therefore held limited musical value.¹ While this view might reflect the attitudes that have long prevailed in musical academe, recent decades have seen an expanded awareness of improvisation—particularly in terms of its practical and pedagogical benefits. Organizations such as the Music Educators National Conference (MENC) and the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), recognizing improvisation’s capacity to unite performative, theoretical, aural, inventive, historical, and cognitive skills, have issued strong appeals for improvisation to be a central aspect of the training for all musicians. While subsequent inroads toward these ends have arguably been limited, that a modest shift in awareness of the benefits of improvisational training is evident gives at least some reason for encouragement.

Might an even more expanded understanding of improvisation be possible, an understanding that includes yet goes beyond the therapeutic and pedagogical functions ascribed to the process in the academic world? I believe so. I believe the next frontier in the emergent understanding of improvised music—and thus a key to the broader integration of improvisation into musical study—is the realm of aesthetics. By aesthetics I mean the creative, expressive, and transformational/transcendent aspects of art forms—the principles that make art magical, beautiful, powerful, and important in human life. Paul Klee stated that the “mission of the artist is to penetrate to that sacred ground where primal law fuels growth.” Aesthetics has to do with this sacred ground, and how it is accessed. Musical academe has conventionally been rooted in a composed-work-mediated aesthetics, where beauty and substance are associated primarily with European classical repertory. Sacred ground, to appropriate Klee’s phrase, is accessed through performance of this repertory. Thus, as much as today’s curricular guardians may appreciate improvisation’s pedagogical and practical benefits, they are understandably hesitant to make room for musical experiences that, in the eyes of academic musical culture, appear to lack an aesthetic grounding.

But might this thinking reflect a limited aesthetic awareness, an awareness that is mediated by a particular musical culture within the broader landscape? Might an aesthetics of improvised music exist that is rooted in contrasting principles? In a 1996 article in the *Journal of Music Theory*, I made a stab at a response to this question by presenting a new model of temporal cognition for improvised music.² While still in its formative stages, my basic idea is that improvisation is rooted in a unique kind of moment-to-moment temporal consciousness, which I called then “inner directed” conception, as opposed to the “expanding” temporality of composition. Different cognitive modalities are associated with different aesthetic/transformational principles. Compositional conception enables unique architectural/formal results. Improvisational conception enables unique interactive results, as well as the realization of the inherent transformational properties in improvisatory structures (such as jazz’s rhythmic time feels and harmonic frameworks, and Hindustani raga and tala cycles). I argue that the extraordinary merging of performers, listeners, and

¹ Berio, Luciano. 1985. *Two Interviews*. New York: Marion Boyars. Lacy, Steve. 1994. *Findings: My Experience with the Soprano Saxophone*.

² Sarath, Ed. 1996. “A New Look at Improvisation.” *Journal of Music Theory*. 40.1/1-38.

environment that is possible in improvisation—where in Stephen Nachmanovitch’s words, all “become one being, pulsing”—is rooted in an improvisatory temporal conception.³ When combined with the structural aspects that are central to some improvisatory genres, a framework for an aesthetics of improvised music begins to emerge.

Only time will tell whether my theory holds water. However, I am convinced that an articulation of some sort of improvised-music aesthetics is not only essential but imminent in our field. I would not expect any such aesthetic model to rule out the points at which improvisation and composition might possibly intersect. Nor that it would suggest improvised music is superior to that composed. Rather, that it would illuminate foundational distinctions between two important musical paradigms in our world, so that we are better able to understand their unique contributions, and the possible ways they might intersect. As Steve Lacy put it, “there is a music that must be composed, there is another music that can only be improvised.”⁴

Lacy’s wisdom points to the need to extricate improvisation from its common classification as a sub-species, and for many one that is less-sophisticated, of composition. Because curricular strategies are rooted in aesthetic assumptions, whether we are aware of them or not, curricular designers will be loathe to loosen up existing models at the risk of compromising conventional notions of musical substance. Therefore improvisation will continue to be marginalized in musical study.⁵

Two things need to happen to rectify the situation, both of which I see as important functions of ISIM. One is awareness raising about the depth and richness, in addition to the pedagogical and “therapeutic” benefits, of improvised music. Another is the framing of curricular models that integrate improvisation, along with composition, into musical training. Shortly we will be announcing a new initiative called the ISIM Curriculum Project, which will be an attempt at an entirely “new” model of musicianship for our times in which improvisation and composition are both central. (I place “new” in quotations since these processes have been central; what is in fact new is their marginalization in musical study).

I hope you share my excitement about the contributions this project might make both for ISIM and for musical study at large. I look forward to staying in touch about this and other ISIM developments!

Sincerely,

Ed Sarath
ISIM Founder and President

³ Nachmanovitch, Stephen (1990), *Free Play: The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts* (Los Angeles: Tarcher)

⁴ Lacy, Steve. 1994. *Findings: My Experience with the Soprano Saxophone*. Paris: CMAP, *Outre Mesure*.

⁵ The fact that composition is also marginalized may seem to contradict my premise that pedagogy is rooted in aesthetics. Otherwise, if musical academe is grounded in composed repertory, then why is composition marginalized? Here it is important to distinguish between the composed-work/interpretive performance aesthetics that prevails and a composition-process/based aesthetics in which all students would compose.

Message from the Executive Director

Dear ISIM Members:

I would like to thank the founding members, Board of Directors, and Advisory Council for a spectacular start-up year. Your dedication to this organization has yielded a strong foundation for ISIM to build upon. This was a big goal to achieve this year, since the rate and span of our growth is determined by the strength of our foundation. Thank you for your important commitment to the creation of ISIM.

We now have members from thirteen of the United States and five countries, a testament to the breadth of our organization. Professional and student chapters are forming to provide local support for members, I look forward to further development of these chapters in 2006.

In 2006 ISIM will continue strengthening its foundation, and will begin implementing new programs. Among these programs is the ISIM Conference and Festival 2006, taking place December 1-3 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Mark your calendars for this inaugural event! Featured at this conference and introduced throughout 2006 will be the ISIM Curriculum Project, charting the terrain for musical study in the 21st century. ISIM will also begin the ISIM Fellowship Program, introduce ISIM Compilation CDs, and expand the ISIM website, among other initiatives.

Please send your submissions for the spring Compilation CD by February 1, 2006. ISIM is planning two compilation CDs for 2006, one in the spring and one in the fall. The CDs will contain tracks from ISIM members and will be distributed along with the ISIM Quarterly Newsletter.

Thank you again for your participation in ISIM. Happy Holidays and Best Wishes for 2006!

Sincerely,

Sarah Weaver
ISIM Executive Director

ISIM Member Profile



David Chevan, Active Member

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Occupation: Performer, Educator, Researcher

Availability: Concerts, Clinics, Presentations, Residencies

News from the University of California-San Diego Student Chapter - David Borgo, Faculty Advisory James Ilgenfritz, Student Leader

The UCSD Student Chapter is coming together, with a slew of activity in the next few months. Meetings will take place in January, February, and March, primarily to gather interest from students and faculty, but also to acquire attention from local musicians, in hopes to set up a San Diego Professional Chapter. Faculty Advisor David Borgo and Chapter Leader James Ilgenfritz will work together to set up some interesting lecture and performance opportunities for local and visiting artists, which will be presented in conjunction with a UCSD Student Chapter meeting and recruitment session. The new year gets started on Jan 25, when the Paul Rutherford/Torsten Muller/Harris Eisenstadt trio will be on campus to give a workshop from 2-4 and a concert at 8, both in the recital hall. Then, on March 4, the UCSD Student Chapter will present a performance by the UCSD Soundpainting Ensemble, in conjunction with the Society for Ethnomusicology Southern California Chapter. Also, the coming months will include UCSD Student Chapter sponsored performances by the NYC-based Trio Caveat, as well as performances by members of San Diego's Trummerflora Collective, and a performance/lecture by David Borgo on his new book *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (Continuum Books). The winter and spring months promise to be a period of increased activity for the UCSD Student Chapter, with an active role being played in the school's creative music scene as well as in the greater San Diego Community.

Word from the ISIM Advisory Council
An Interview with Oliver Lake
By Michael Nickens

MN: I am interested in the fact that you are working in many different mediums within music and outside of music, and I am interested what you feel like are the strong points of your creative process dealing with various types of creative expression in which you are involved.

OL: Wow, you started off with something that is very difficult for me to answer. What are the strong points of my creative process. I can't even think of any words but that I'm just kind of in it, and doing it so it's hard for me to shape it into terms of words. I'm very open to all kinds of music and all kinds of influences and I really enjoy being able to play and compose in the different contexts that I work in. Two days ago I just did a concert with Mary Redhouse, a Navajo vocalist who I have been collaborating with for the last three years. In that group was Pheeroan Aklaflaff, a drummer that I have been playing with over the last 20 sum-odd years. I'm just giving that as an example. Prior to that I was in Vancouver, Canada doing some of my big band arrangements with a group out there called Now Orchestra headed by Coat Cooke. So that's just two examples of the range of things I've been involved with. The creativity for me, it's hard for me to separate it and think about it. I just know that the time that I spent in St. Louis in the Black Artist Group in the very beginning of my career involved music, poetry, dance, visual arts. It has been something that has been like a school for me. So I continued to do that when I moved to New York in 1974, and throughout my career, so I'm painting, I'm writing poetry, and composing music for the various groups that I'm involved with right now. The month of November I was out with the World Saxophone Quartet. We were doing our tribute to Jimi Hendrix. We did that for three weeks in Europe. So I mean it just kinda goes on from there. I mean all of it, the creative process is involved in everything that I do.

MN: Could you speak to how improvisation helps you when you're dealing with these different media, and perhaps anything that you find is common to your different creative activities?

OL: Improvisation, I think is about communicating and having a complete communication. And I'm trying to do that regardless of what context my saxophone is put or however the saxophone is surrounded. I'm trying to have this direct communication with the audience and hopefully, generally, the audience does feel that the communication that I'm doing is sincere and true, and coming from my heart. And I can also feel the energy coming from the audience. Improvisation is what I built most of my career on, although I do like to compose as well. But the majority of my performances are improvisation. The other night my performance with Mary Redhouse and Pheeroan Aklaflaff, 95% of it was improvised. It plays a big part in what I do.

MN: I'm also interested in cultural influences. I find with my own music making, all the things that make me *me* end up coming out. You know, in terms of what I've grown up with, the rock music, the hip hop, and of course my classical training and my limited jazz training, but it all comes together and starts to become an entity of its own. Would you speak about your influences and how they come together?

OL: Well actually, what you just said is pretty much a synopsis of how I'm dealing with the different influences for me, but I do feel that the blues goes through everything that I do whether I'm writing for string quartet...There's a group in New York called the Flux String

Quartet which I have been collaborating with for about the last three years also. When I compose for that group I feel that the blues is going through that. When I compose for my steel quartet with Lyndon Achee playing steel pan or whether I'm playing solo, I think the blues is going through all of the musics that I'm involved with, all of the different styles and genres. And lately the fact that I've been associated with Mary Redhouse, the Navajo vocalist, the Native American thing has been there because part of my heritage is Native American, so I've been checking that out and getting that out and in a musical way as well, and trying to compose some things for her that kind of cross those boundaries, but also mix in the elements of Native American music. So it's all there for me, I mean whether I'm doing the string quartet where a more of a semi-classical kind of sound is in there or my big band...there's a wide open palate there. I can go many ways with that group. And I do listen to hip hop, one of my sons is a DJ and he makes sure that my Ipod is full of all the latest hip hop, so I get to hear all of that. And my other son, sometimes he plays with the world saxophone quartet. He recorded this Jimi Hendrix project with us. So really I'm open to every style and everything that's happening. And at some point I want to incorporate anything that I like into my compositions, so it keeps everything really wide open for me.

MN: I'm interested in your notation style. I remember when we did our concerts last year there were many different ways of representing a musical idea on the paper, or the flipside, sometimes it would be a symbol that would spark creativity and we would have to figure it out on our own. Would you speak about your notation style?

OL: Actually, I do a lot of traditional styles of notation but I also do some graphic notation. That's something that we did with Creative Arts Orchestra there at Michigan. And I'm just still kind of experimenting with that, I mean I've been doing that for a long time in terms of the graphic notation and that was really the only thing that was different about the notation with Michigan that I used. Other than that, I'm doing really kind of traditional notation. With the string quartet, this last one I did I composed in May, I did try to mix the two things more together. There were several graphic portions to this last piece that I wrote for them as well as traditional notations, so I'm just kind of mixing things around here.

MN: And what do you find the effect is?

OL: Oh you know, whatever I like, I keep.

MN: Is there anything that you find is more successful that you keep going back to?

OL: Not in particular, I just know I really like using the graphic things. Every time you do that it's going to be completely different, so I like that.

MN: I would like to hear what you thought about your two experiences playing concerts with the University of Michigan Creative Arts Orchestra.

OL: Oh that was a lot of fun. You know, to find the young kids like that who are totally interested in being very creative on their instruments and open to all the improvisations. I don't know, we had a lot of fun on the concerts I did. That's basically the way I think about that group when I think about the experiences that I had. It was the fact that they were enthusiastic and they were all looking for ways to stretch out, so it was just a lot of fun. I look forward to anytime coming back to work with them.

MN: With recording, you spoke before about interacting with an audience and that energy there, what if anything do you find is powerful about being in the recording studio and that whole process?

OL: Well you know, it just seems to me that I've gotten better energy and everything when it *wasn't* in the recording studio. Sometimes that magic has happened in there but generally I think the live things have been more exciting for me. Just to give an example, the other night I *didn't* record the concert I did two nights ago with Mary and Aklafl and it was incredible and I was beating myself up for not having recorded. I think the live performances, for me lend themselves better than in the recording studio, for me so far. I've been more excited about what happens out of the recording studio than what has happened inside.

MN: You've mentioned a few musicians that you've enjoyed playing with specifically, do you have some anecdotes about any truly peak experiences where you maybe found yourself stretching farther or broke some new ground unexpectedly?

OL: Well you know that's happened several times throughout my long career, that's happened several times. And when that does happen, that's very exciting for me because it is a time when it feels like there is something when I do extend past myself, when I say to myself "Was that me? Who played that?" and generally that happens when I'm not thinking. So it's like a state that you can get into where you're...I don't know how to put it. It's just more like a magical state that happens, and it doesn't happen all the time. But it generally happens when there's not any thinking going on, you know, you're just kind of in that moment. And I surprise myself with some of the things that I have played. And that's happened a lot of times, but I can't pick any specific time or times that it has happened throughout my career, but when it does happen, it's a very magical moment.

MN: Looking to the future, what are your thoughts about what kind of role ISIM can play in the future of music and where you'd like to see music head, and also within the institutions such as groups like the CAO and where you would like to see all of this going?

OL: Well you know, exposure is always a wonderful thing, and I think your organization is going to help bring more attention to improvised music and that's very important. Now we have the internet and everybody can have their own radio stations so hopefully that's going to help in terms of getting the word out about different styles of music, especially the kinds of music that we play or music I'm associated with. The landscape is changing for that. I mean through the internet, through everybody making their own CDs, through the downloading. So all of it's there and the young audiences are aware and technically savvy on how to get the music that you may not hear on the more commercial radio stations or something like that. And the World Music is influencing all of that, so I'm very excited about everything. The creative parts of me are excited by the different collaborations that I've had, from string quartets, to big bands, to Native American music, to hip hop, to all of these things that are happening and just different ways of getting them out there. I even run my own small label called Passin'Thru, and getting that on the internet and just trying to make stuff happen. So I'm really excited about the projects that I'm currently working with, and different ways of getting this music out there.

MN: The poem Separation, that to me seems to encapsulate you and what I've seen you do and what I know of you.

OL: Well yeah, that's kind of been my philosophy poem, and I've been doing that poem for over 20 years. I got it on my website (<http://www.passinthru.org/oliverlake/poetry.html>) as well because people always ask about that poem so I make sure it's on the site if anybody wants to use it or anything. And for me that really kind of summarizes my musical philosophy of just being very open and incorporating whatever I can into the musical palette and just using it and it's right there.

