Editorial

Reaching Out: Improvisation's Potential and Limitations

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Welcome to Vol 4.1 of *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation*. As we see from the essays and interview included in this issue, the exploration of improvisation as social practice provides a varied palette of inquiry around the themes of action, interaction, and reaching out. Investigating musical and perceptual models, pedagogical and social ideals, promotional discourses in the art world or in activism, these contributions highlight or question how improvisational practices open up new possibilities for social relations. In this issue we give pride of place to the voices of improvising artists and arts programmers whose on-the-ground work reaches out to diverse communities to stretch the aesthetic and social potential of the art form. But we also take a critical look at the utopian claims sometimes made for improvisation more generally, in essays that question the limits of improvisation as an ideal.

Featured in this general issue is a mini-focus on the inspirational work of Anthony Braxton, including a full transcript and streaming video of Braxton's keynote talk from the 2007 Guelph Jazz Festival and Colloquium. In his keynote address, Braxton lays out the poetics that have shaped his music modeling systems over the past 40 years. He stresses, through what he has termed a "trans-idiomatic" approach to music, a desire to strive toward global interconnectivity. The streaming video allows us to hear Braxton's ideas come alive through audio examples from across his oeuvre. Sonic experience and its extension into mystical and associated sensory perceptions is the focus of two essays by noted Braxton experts. Graham Lock's in-depth study explores the notion that Braxton's music embodies and advances a "synaesthetic ideal." Lock explains that Braxton's graphic and symbolic scores promote improvisation that allows an affirmation of the performer. Stuart Broomer calls attention to Braxton's use of bass instruments and his interest in plumbing the depths of the lower registers where, in a mystical interpretation, "pitch turns ineluctably into rhythm."

Flutist, improviser, composer, and band leader Nicole Mitchell is a rising star who has gained much recent recognition for her work. In an extensive interview with Ellen Waterman, Mitchell discusses her broader vision and philosophy, her educational work, and her active role in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Mitchell's career models the historic interconnections between Great Black Music and community activism in ways that are completely contemporary. We are proud to present Mitchell's photo and music on our splash page for Vol 4.1: you can listen to the complete track of her piece "Double Voiced Praises" by clicking on the link in the interview.

Saxophonist and writer Alain Derbez presents a poetic appeal in recognition of Mexico's rich jazz heritage. In an act of cultural memorialization, Derbez recalls key moments in Mexican jazz that answer back to historical acts of violence and cultural erasure. Derbez asks the question, "Why do we commemorate and why does someone need us to forget, or simply not to register, not to inform?" His eloquent and moving answers look unflinchingly at harsh realities, but confirm his belief that "jazz will set us free."

Pierre Carsalade, Romain Tesler and Alexandre Pierrepont have assembled their observations on the workshops led by Cooper-Moore and William Parker that took place in the context of the *Actions musicales* of the Paris-based Banlieues Bleues Festival. Moore's and Parker's involvement contributed to the empowerment of disenfranchised youth of the Paris suburbs and fostered dialogue within their community and beyond. Carsalade, Tesler and Pierrepont's sociological perspective situates the musicians' intervention within an African-American tradition where "music is considered as both an aesthetic process and as a form of social, ethical, and political expression."

In contrast to the above accounts, two essays test the claims made for the cultural and social impact of musical improvisation in institutionalized pedagogical and cultural settings. Kenneth Prouty outlines the challenges that educators and students have encountered as the legitimacy of jazz and improvisation is negotiated in academia. While racial and social stereotypes have certainly contributed to the limited inclusion of jazz in the curriculum, Prouty suggests that the practice of improvisation itself, which implies a reevaluation of power relations and hierarchy, necessarily challenges the authority of teachers and the institution. These factors must be taken into account if one is to evaluate critically the possibility for improvisational practice to develop new social relations in academic settings. In the arena of arts funding

and cultural representation, Alan Stanbridge too calls for a more rigorous evaluation of improvisation as a tool for social reform. He examines the values attributed to jazz and creative improvised musics and the positioning of discourses as they are made in the name of marginal or mainstream art forms. Both essays underline the complexities of any artistic medium: improvisation represents not a panacea but a set of possibilities.

Once again, instrumental in the preparation and publication of this issue is a dedicated team of talented individuals. Thanks are due to Greg Fenton, Paul Danyluk, Karl Coulthard, Wayne Johnston, Martin Eckart and Joel Herman for their able assistance in preparing and producing Vol 4.1.

The editorial team would also like to extend hearty congratulations to Jesse Stewart, book reviews editor since the journal's inception, who has accepted a tenure-track position at Carleton University. We will certainly miss his energy, integrity and incisive judgment, but we very much look forward, as he embarks on this new journey, to future collaborations with him.

Our next issue, Vol 4.2, marks a new direction for *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation*. It's a special issue that will be guest edited by Dr. Kevin McNeilly and Dr. Julie Dawn Smith (University of British Columbia). *Comin' Out Swingin': Sexualities in Improvisation* will include contributions from the conference of the same name presented by the Improvisation, Community and Social Practice project at U.B.C. in fall 2007. See the call for papers under Announcements. This fascinating special issue will explore provocative themes that are prevalent in improvisation, but rarely discussed.