

Three decades of The Necks: Reciprocal Patterns of Improvised Music and Organisational Behaviour

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Volume 15, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092933ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v15i1.6117>

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Publisher(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rose, J. (2022). Three decades of The Necks: Reciprocal Patterns of Improvised Music and Organisational Behaviour. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 15(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v15i1.6117>

Article abstract

This article explores the nature of organisational behaviour within a long-standing improvised music group and its reciprocal relationship with their musical practice. It uses ideas from Ingrid Monson (1996) relating to social activities expressing the values and aesthetics of musical practice and adopts research findings from business management literature, in particular Kenneth Bettenhausen's (1991) notion that the task patterns of a group play a role in shaping attitudes and behaviour, informing our understanding of the way improvisational music practices correlate with social and organisational behaviour.

The Australian piano trio, The Necks, perform minimalist extended improvisations with ritual-like patterns in performance and social behaviour. Being self-managed with the same line-up since 1987, they present a unique case study in how a band's organisational behaviour has a mutual relationship to its musical practice. This study traces out their organisational patterns to show how these have developed in tandem with an improvisational ethos in which members undertake slowly evolving group minimalist improvisations guided by an unspoken set of behavioural patterns with adaptable parameters for change. The findings reveal an underlying narrative of tension between group homogeneity and individual autonomy, experiences of group flow, the use of varying modes of communication for varying contexts, similarities between their musical improvisation parameters and their social interaction, and strategies for implementing change and innovation. The article sketches how their social and organisational behaviour converges with their musical process: a slow rate of change, effortless, and yet with a long arc of possibilities.

Three Decades of The Necks: Reciprocal Patterns of Improvised Music and Organisational Behaviour

Jeremy Rose

Research on improvisation that has turned to the social sciences suggests that underlying social and psychological structures inform performers' creative choices (see Bastian & Hostager; Sawyer; MacDonald & Wilson; Schober & Spiro 2014, and MacDonald & Wilson 2016). Terms used to express such happenings include “interactional dynamics” (Sawyer 148), “social practices . . . among musicians with experience in common” (MacDonald and Wilson 59) and “influence of the social context” (MacDonald and Wilson 23). Such a narrative explores relationships between band members and the dynamics of individual personality types. Models used to examine musical interaction, however, seldom consider ensemble behaviour outside the musical environment such as the way groups operate in social contexts outside of their music. By establishing organisational behaviour links between music groups and their socius, we can better inform collaborative models across a wide range of contexts.

This article traces how organisational behaviour is developed in relation to improvised musical processes. Using qualitative research methods including interviews with, concert observations of, and analyses of published recordings by the Australian piano trio The Necks, this article discusses emergent patterns of reciprocal behaviour between their music and social behaviour, showing how their improvised music processes correlate with their organisational behaviour.

The Necks are somewhat unusual in their long-lasting line-up, having performed together since 1987. They have released twenty albums and helped to define minimalist long-form improvisation as an art form. The group has earned a following among both jazz and non-jazz audiences and has achieved relative fame and notoriety as a cult band that seems misaligned with their relative smallness and with their original intentions to perform only for themselves. The group has remained committed to slowly evolving improvisations that easily adapt to new stylistic influences and modes of improvising.¹ The Necks have been largely self-managed and run their own record label, though they use booking agents in various regions and outsource their publicity. For these reasons, they lend themselves well to the interests of this research, which provides a privileged insight into the workings of such a group, unique in both their longevity and standing within the field.

This research is further aided by my recent collaborations with Necks members Lloyd Swanton and Chris Abrahams. *The Sacred Key* (2021) is a live performance by Vasesh—featuring myself on saxophone and bass clarinet, bassist Lloyd Swanton, and tar player Hamed Sadeghi—recorded at the Sydney Opera House. Vasesh adopts a minimalist aesthetic similar to that of The Necks. We create long-form improvisations underpinned by Swanton's slowly shifting bass lines, albeit with a less static rate of change and with our being heavily influenced by the Persian Radif-inspired compositions of Sadeghi. *The Vampires' Nightjar featuring Chris Abrahams* (forthcoming) demonstrates a shift in the ensemble's improvisation practice from its previous albums, adopting a Necks-like minimalist aesthetic and long-form build of texture, such as on *Khan Shatyr* and *Waves*. These professional collaborations and collegial engagements provide a unique perspective on the subject matter of this research.

My work here begins from the assumption that research into how musical groups operate in and out of their performance settings will add to our understanding of the complex web of research into improvised music, which has evolved significantly over the past several decades. In his book

Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music, British guitarist Derek Bailey suggests that, while improvisation has always been a part of human history, “free improvisation” came into being as a musical style of its own in the early sixties, driven by what Bailey calls a “questioning of musical language [. . .] or more correctly, the questioning of the ‘rules’ governing musical language” (84).² When viewing the documentation of influential artists from Eurological and Afrological perspectives and traditions, I note that one thing they share is a questioning of the “rules” analogous to the questioning of societal norms and political change of the sixties.³ Other theories on improvised music view it as a negotiation of players’ historical roots in emotional and intellectual terms. George Lewis expands upon Bailey, saying that “individual improvisers are now able to reference an intercultural establishment of techniques, styles, aesthetic attitudes, antecedents, and networks of cultural and social practice” (110), pointing to a complex web of cultural and social practice that informs musicians’ decision-making that is still not fully understood.

Numerous studies (Murnighan and Conlon; Ford and Davidson; Seddon and Biasutti)—have shown a mutual relationship between effective internal dynamics and the success of professional chamber groups. More recently, Tom Arthurs (“Improvised Music”; *Secret Gardeners*) completed an extensive investigation into the improvised music scene in Berlin, drawing on numerous models of inquiry including grounded theory, ethnography, and social network analysis to address a variety of aspects of European improvised music making. Arthurs’ methodology provides an alternative model for understanding how music operates, highlighting how diverse factors—including race, gender, and economics—can impact its practicalities, aesthetics, and ideologies (*Secret Gardeners*). Whilst these modes of inquiry provide excellent insight into the broader socio-economic factors influencing improvised music and should be applied to other music scenes around the world, my own investigation examines the musicians’ psychological and social behaviour as it develops in tandem with their practice.

Research on organisational behaviour provides further understanding of the relationship between music and social behaviour. Investigations such as Murnighan and Conlon’s 1991 study on how string quartets operate highlights how a group navigates conflict between its members and how certain strategies are imperative in shaping the overall success of a group. In this study, the most successful groups were shown to manage differences of opinion implicitly rather than resolving them completely. Whilst each group’s “temperament, conflict resolution strategies, decision-making styles, and basic interpersonal skills” (170) varied, they were most effective in achieving successful performances when they balanced “diversity and similarity . . . so that members are familiar and sympathetic with each other’s points of view yet different enough to be fresh” (170). In other studies, ensembles with such qualities were shown to produce mutually engaging spontaneous musical variations during performance, with players described as being “empathetically attuned” (Seddon 67) and as exemplifying “group flow” (Sawyer 157). Ingrid Monson’s interviews with jazz musicians show how metaphors for playing “in the groove” (*Sayin’* 91–3) complement other phrases that are helpful when thinking about effective group performance, such as “walking down the street *with* somebody,” “compatibility of personalities,” and “a mutual feeling of agreement on a pattern.”

Whilst the foremost concern of musical groups is the creation of music, they can also act as miniature enterprise organisations, with DIY initiatives in improvised music—such as Derek Bailey’s Company, which acted as both an ensemble and festival—and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), with its own set of organised general meetings, agendas, and business concerns (Bailey 133–9, Lewis). In business studies, organisational improvisation literature highlights the relationship between group improvisation and social behaviour. In their article “Organizational Improvisation: From the Constraint of Strict Tempo to the Power of the Avant-Garde,” Cunha, Clegg, Rego, and Neves analyse improvisation

research in organisations, suggesting that improvisation is a contextually sensitive practice with many different forms depending on a company's structure as well as its political and cultural context. They conclude that improvisation is best managed by an organisation with certain rules and systems in place (the notion of "freedom within limitations"). Examples of this approach include "semi-structures and simple rules," enabling organisations to be both "organised and nimble, creating syntheses of structure and freedom that favour adaptation and consistency via a stream of product innovations" ("Organisational Improvisation" 9). Semi-structured improvisations were also shown to balance the forces of individual freedom, allowing individuals to express themselves within a group whilst working collectively in an organisation to readily adopt innovation.

Bettenhausen and Murnighan (1985) examine a similar theme in their research into the development of norms in newly formed groups using an experiment in competitive decision tasks. They observed the formation of social and behavioural norms in groups as new members shifted their expectations to those of the group. Subsequently, Bettenhausen (1991) surveyed over 250 studies that addressed the dynamics of small social groups: "the fundamental tension between individuals and groups, how group members form a common understanding of their world, and how groups develop and change over time" ("Five Years" 345). Bettenhausen outlines how a "basic concern in the organising process involves the fundamental tension between group members' desires to identify with and conform to group expectations and their simultaneous desire to maintain their individual identity and independence." (348) He suggests that this tension is often overlooked, highlighting how a group's effectiveness is often dependent on how well they manage expectations of both the individual and the group.

Literature that turns to social science to explain group interaction in improvised music explores the dynamics between the individuals that make up a group and the group itself. Ingrid Monson, for example, uses the social theory of Anthony Giddens to highlight forces of identity and community on musical outcomes, arriving at similar findings but from different perspectives than Bettenhausen:

Viewed as a dynamic system through time . . . the day-to-day activities of group members express the norms, values, and expectations of a collectivity that extend beyond any one individual. The focus of cultural and social inquiry becomes the question of how the actions of social agents constitute, reproduce, and transform the social entity in question. (quoted in Monson, *Sayin'* 14)

Monson argues that jazz and improvised music are a product of existing political and social systems (*Sayin'* 14). Musical outcomes are derived from the sum of the individuals within a collective's social identity and interactions, not a geographically defined community or social category, but rather "the ways in which the latter social categories (and their representations) intersect *within* the activity of jazz performance" (Monson, *Sayin'* 13). Bringing these ideas back to my own research, it is imperative to consider the broader social dynamic in order to create meaning for players and audiences.

In this article, I examine the relationship between organisational behaviour and musical activity in an active, long-established improvising ensemble. I suggest that the characteristics of mutually engaging improvised musical collaborations can apply to ensemble behaviour beyond musical activity, and develop Bettenhausen's findings regarding the role of task rituals in shaping attitudes and behaviour. I then trace organisational behaviour throughout the musical development of The Necks as an ensemble to show how they have developed as an organisation

in tandem with their improvisational ethos. As *sui generis* improvisers, the Necks offer insights into how mutually engaging improvised music operates.

The Necks

The Necks is an Australian improvising piano trio consisting of pianist Chris Abrahams, bassist Lloyd Swanton, and drummer Tony Buck. They have produced an expansive body of work since 1987, establishing a *modus operandi* along the way that facilitates musical exploration within certain parameters. Their music is dynamic, having absorbed influences through time, with descriptors including John Walters' infamous quote: "entirely new and entirely now . . . they produce a post jazz, post rock, post everything sonic experience that has few parallels or rivals" ("Bishopsgate"). Their musical oeuvre is wide and diverse, making definitions of their music insufficient and suggesting it is often best to think of what The Necks' music is not, rather than what it is.

The Necks cite modal jazz as a starting point for their early musical explorations which, according to Derek Bailey, was a common point of departure for free improvisers including himself, providing a vehicle for playing 'free' but with a "definite modal orientation" (83). Tony Buck cites the use of repetition and the sustained build-up of tension in McCoy Tyner's piano solo on John Coltrane's "My Favourite Things" as providing the group with a direct source of inspiration in sound, feel, and harmonic stasis (2018). The group explores a shared overlap of language and influences, including—but not limited to—jazz, rock, ambient, new music, free jazz, post-free jazz, (post-)reductionism, textural improvisation, and durational playing. Their performances last between 45 minutes and an hour and feature evolving motifs, textures, and sounds.

To highlight the diversity of styles incorporated into their work, we can look to one of The Necks' recent releases, *Body* (2018), a post-rock eruption showcasing pounding keys and shrieking guitars, with Buck being the clear aggressor on both drums and guitar. The 56 minutes draw on Abrahams' signature piano style featuring slowly ascending/descending tremolo figures. Swanton's double bass pulses intermittently whilst Buck's backbeat continually shifts position, suggesting multiple meters or no sense of bar line at all.

A typical performance by The Necks will use one piece over the duration of a set with a long arc, a point of climax, and a steady release. However, recent experiments with improvised form defy these now-expected patterns. Whilst this use of duration and climaxes is perhaps not entirely new or unique to The Necks, the practice has become associated with them and has influenced others, such as a time when Evan Parker casually apologised to Buck following an electro-acoustic ensemble performance of his for "taking The Necks idea there" (Buck).

The Necks' musical concept has precursors in American and UK minimalists; however, Abrahams describes their music as a "human version" of minimalism, with a focus on the humanistic shortcomings of trying to repeat something indefinitely: "Things slowly morph over periods of time because we are human and our concentration, our physical ability to play a certain thing . . . not just through fatigue, but that each time you play something it is slightly different" (Abrahams). The immersive style of playing, inductive of flow states, was said to have formed early on in the workshoping stages of the band when they began playing without the aim of public performance (Buck). Swanton suggests that they were impelled to create a piece that "could go on forever" but were driven by their "aesthetic choices" to change:

When we first started out, we more had the concept that this piece could go forever, but just our aesthetic choices, in an attempt to make a piece that went forever, actually dictated that it wouldn't go forever. And that was cool, we weren't trying to see how long we could play for, but we were going in with the "if you have no end product" in mind. I guess, by definition, a piece could go on forever because you have no intention of ending it. (Swanton)

Whilst literature exists on the group,⁴ no research has investigated their psychology or how their social behaviour is linked to their musical processes. Using interviews and concert observations, this study traces how their social and organisation behaviour developed in tandem with their improvisational ethos.⁵

This study adds to the growing call for investigations into how improvisation operates, particularly in solo and duo settings.⁶ It is one of the first accounts of The Necks' social and organisational behaviour and is significant for providing special insight into one of the field's most pertinent improvising groups.

Findings and Discussion

Initial findings show an overlap at the meta level of organisational behavioural characteristics. Whilst the three members of The Necks expressed having individual identities and "autonomy" (Abrahams) in both musical and non-musical activities, they all spoke to the importance of a sense of collectivism. This notion is compounded by the immersive experience of their performances, as Abrahams explains:

We have kind of stuck to that structure, being an hour to forty-five minute piece of music where we use certain ideas of repetitive minimalism, and create a kind of *unified totality* that transcends the individuals of the group. (Abrahams)

Abrahams suggests here that their individualities merge to become a single entity, both sonically and consciously.

All members of The Necks made comments regarding a force greater than themselves and a form of mutual engagement that "transcends the individuals of the group" (Abrahams). The members all have an "openness" (Swanton), are "subservient" to the greater forces of the "band sound," and "wanted it to be a collective sound world where we could somehow create together," (Abrahams). As Buck put it, "there's often a cumulative effect of the sound in the room . . . a physical phenomenon . . . we are somehow going to adhere to in the performance." Abrahams notes that he does not "actually understand" their music but is part of a mechanism "too complex to break down."

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow provides an excellent model for understanding what Abrahams might mean by a *unified totality*. Flow, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is an experience linked to the complete immersion of oneself in an activity during the pursuit of manageable goals. In an interview with *Wired* magazine, Csikszentmihalyi holds up jazz performance as an excellent example of flow: "The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost" (Gierland). In this context, The Necks achieve "flow through incremental repetition and "slow" improvising.

The Necks all talked about what they do as some sort of game. Swanton, for example, reflected that “in a way what we do is a game and people are just coming along . . . to be a part of this game or ritual.” Buck defines their music in similar terms:

It's very simple methodologies, but [they are] continually able to bear fruit [for us] because of what they're *not*, also. The thing about how you do something that's kind of defined, but not . . . It is what you do, but what the material is. So yeah, it's sort of opened itself to continual new influences, and in a way it's almost a game: how do we take this material that might be, on the surface, diametrically opposed, and how do we fit it into The Necks without diluting The Necks, or without feeling like you are shoving something that's not going to work into a framework that you have. (Buck)

The Necks' members pursue artistic challenges such as subverting their own expectations and modifying the rules of the game to satisfy creative curiosity and stimulate the application of new ideas. Buck's challenge of finding “diametrically opposed materials” to fit within The Necks way of doing things is a poignant example of creating adaptable goals—each performance or studio album represents a new set of musical challenges to grapple with. For example, Buck describes their 2004 album, *Mosquito/See Through*, as his attempt to adopt ideas from pointillism, a style that seems almost incongruent to what The Necks do. The rumbling sound of Buck's wooden chimes here is reminiscent of a *klangfarbenmelodie*, set against high register piano motifs from Abrahams, whilst layers of non-rhythmic material are superimposed against non-metric accents in the bass and ride cymbal. The wooden chimes and high register piano coalesce to suggest a sort of dialogue. Throughout the sixty-one-minute-long piece, each element drops in and out to create a steady sense of forward movement while retaining a feeling of stasis. Buck reflects:

There's a record called *Mosquito* where, from my perspective, I think I really addressed that particular issue. This abstract, never repeating, almost constantly changing pointillistic way of improvising, which is not The Necks way of improvising, but I found ways to incorporate that sort of vocabulary into The Necks' vocabulary.”

Buck also suggests that playing in the slow manner of The Necks—which he describes as “improvisation... but sort of like a sloth version”—creates its own set of challenges. He sees the challenge of bringing in new musical materials to this way of playing as a game in and of itself:

Sometimes, improvisation is much more mercurial and changing. It's a bit faster and interactive with most improvised music, or at least a lot tends to be. With The Necks, it's sort of like that, but sort of like a sloth version. Like, when someone does something and it changes it will be like [Buck makes a slow-motion hand movement]. The reaction will be very slow and measured where a lot of improvised music I play, everything happens pretty quickly. (Buck)

Rather than compare their style of interaction to groups which are often discussed in the critical literature as epitomising group interaction—such as the Bill Evans Trio with Scott La Faro and Paul Motian, in which the breakdown of form and instrumental roles allows them to, in Robert Hodson's words, “engage in a free-flowing musical conversation in which all three musicians may improvise simultaneously” (119)—I would suggest that The Necks' sound is more aligned with the McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison, and Elvin Jones' rhythm section from John Coltrane's Quartet, where an emphasis is placed on “building energy” and on a “stream that consists of utterances” (Michaelsen 47).

The Necks are also united in their conscious subversion of models from both jazz and free jazz. Their musical processes attempt to avoid the showcase of virtuosity common in jazz and the democratic processes of “everyone soloing at once” common in free jazz. Swanton explains:

[W]e have demystified improvising to some extent because we are working with such a restricted, small palette. When a change happens, even the least musically gifted audience member can hear that something has changed, and they feel intelligent. They don't feel dumb. They don't feel lectured to . . . With a lot of the jazz that I was hearing when we formed the group, it's just like: “This is really arcane special interest stuff.” There's a lot going on in here and that's great, but a lot of people feel excluded from that [. . .] In a way, what we do is a game and people are just coming along [. . .] to be a part of this game or ritual.

Abrahams also rejects the idea of a “soloist backing group,” and uses an aesthetic of “anti-display of chops” so as not to be “spotlighting individuality in any way.” As Abrahams tells it, the band “tried to work out what it's like to make a band sound rather than a display of individual talent.” The notion of membership is very helpful here, and perhaps aligns the group's structure to more of a trade union than a corporate structure. Tomlinson and Lipsitz, in their exploration of how accompaniment operates in improvised music and social contexts, warn of the dangers of musicians “thinking of a performance [as a] display [of] their own skill.” Rather, play should “entail a personal and ultimately political commitment to be a contributor rather than a competitor and to think beyond virtuosity and visibility” (28).⁷

The album *Aether* (2001) represents a high point for The Necks in their move away from jazz references. That move was heavily influenced by the members' experiences performing in the Berlin improvised music scene, a cultural hub and concert programme based around the Echtzeitmusik website, which served as a gig listing and community forum. Abrahams and Buck were regular participants, and Buck actually relocated to Berlin from Amsterdam in 1998–99 for a “complex mix of socio-musical reasons.” The music on *Aether* demonstrates the removal of all aesthetic traces of jazz and a move away from pitch-based materials to an exploration of timbral and spectral possibilities of sound itself. Sonic possibilities, as well as silence, are material for interrogation, research, and exploration here. Buck reflects that this is another example of The Necks' “really minimal, silent way of improvising, this reductionist thing.”

The balancing of individual voices and that of the group sound, Abrahams explains, allows them to explore the potential “mystery” of music, providing an underlying narrative of tension within their ongoing musical discourse. He explains this balancing act as being able to play “the same piece every night,” in an almost Zen Buddhist view of their performance:

There's two ways of looking at it. You could say there are three solos or no solos, or that we play a different piece every night or the same piece every night. All four of those statements are correct in some way. So yeah, the no solos thing, we verbalised at the start. (Abrahams)

This concept of negating a showcase of the individual also plays out in the way the players exploit the acoustics of venues to extend the sonic potentials of their individual instruments and to enable the converging of the group's distinct voices into a unified totality. Multiple sound textures from each instrument can create the effect of a sound greater than the sum of the individual parts. Particularly in certain venues with live acoustics, multiple textures from the three instruments merge, often creating sonic apparitions. Both band members and audiences have been known to experience hearing “phantom” instruments. For Abrahams, “there's a big

part of our live performance which has to do with the instruments transcending their sounds, you know, and coalescing in a way that creates sort of a hallucinogenic, sympathetic resonance, where the instruments tend to lose their individuality.” Buck also noted that finding multiple voices within the one instrument expands the possibilities for the group: “I guess it’s also how you play things, because three people can also play like five people if you really want to . . . Highly poly-possible instruments, like piano and drums, where you have two hands and two independent voices within one person.” There was a period when Swanton was trying to get “multiple voices on the instrument,” and he added that it was important to “avoid playing in such a dry acoustic (room) as it tended to force the pieces into a much more compact form.”

Organisational patterns that mirror these musical processes include self-management and the homogenisation of tasks and responsibilities. The Necks have no leader and they share managerial and financial responsibilities.⁸ All their roles are interchangeable, as Swanton explains:

Likewise, in terms of outside the band, we all have different roles that overlap. I mostly run the record label. Chris does the travel booking. Tony used to setup the European tours but now we have a European agent, Lee [Patterson]. Chris does the accounts for The Necks. Account minded, I do the accounts for Fish of Milk, the record label account. When we used to drive, I used to do 90% of the driving because Tony doesn’t drive. Chris records the gigs. I do the bulk of the merch at gigs, look after that. Well, we can all cover each other.

Whilst they each do tasks that feel most natural to them, all roles are transposable—they function as an organisation that allows for tasks to be exchanged and individual strengths to be utilised within the collective.

The band has a number of processes for implementing new ideas and change. Band choices are made through a decision-making process with mechanisms in place that allow them to avoid major disagreements. Whilst their process is not strictly a majority-rules democratic system, our interviews revealed that having three members is somewhat of a magic number when it comes to balancing voices within a group, both musically and non-musically. Tony Buck explains that the dynamics of the power of three in the group helps “clarity to exist, but also all the variations,” balancing the forces of the three voices within the group whilst creating stimulus to work from:

Three is a great number to have an improvised group with because you’ve got relationship of complementary and contrasting bits and two people can be playing complementary things and someone can contrast it, or you can have three individual voices, or three united voices. And this whole thing of tension and release, or whatever it is [. . .] There’s not too many opinions, but you can achieve balances of strong against a less dominant voice. So, there’s all those kinds of combinations and it doesn’t get boring. (Buck)

Modes of communication are predominantly verbal and collaborative throughout their touring and album collaborations. Their live performances are non-verbal and nothing is discussed in relation to their music before and after a concert. Abrahams explained that “It’s not like there’s a concept that we’ve discussed, and we’ve said: ‘This is what we’re going to explore, and this will be The Necks.’” This avoidance of discussion around what will happen on stage and in the studio provides The Necks with a game in which they can challenge the shifting parameters and evolving, situated processes in their music. It also fosters greater spontaneity and avoids

predictability, an important priority for Swanton: "I would die if I thought the other guys were going 'Oh, bloody hell, Lloyd is doing that thing again, he always does that.'"

In contrast, modes of communication in studio mixing sessions are highly collaborative and include "rigorous discussions about aesthetic choices" (Buck) and "very robust discussions" (Swanton). Whilst in the studio, The Necks record dozens of improvised tracks and later edit them into a final composition and mix, which can all take a week or more to develop. In these situations, they demonstrate efficient interpersonal dynamics, freely conversing and expressing creative opinions, even if they differ from one another. Speaking on their modes of communication in the studio, Swanton shared that:

Everyone is more than welcome to say to anyone else, "I don't think that's working" or "Can we try this?" or "That's fantastic, can we do more of that?" And we sort of had a rule that we don't do anything unless all three of us are in favour of it. We have never had a situation where two of us are really keen to do something and one of us is dead against it, but they have to go along with it because two of them are into it. So, I think that's important. If someone is really against it, of course we will try to talk them around, but if they remain unconvinced, well, it just doesn't happen. I think that's really important. You never get any member of the band doing anything against their will that they would really resent. But yeah, you just try to convince people of your position without being offensive and you just draw on whatever you can to make your argument. But we certainly have some really decent discussions in the studio. But on stage? It's too late, now. It's like—the time for that was thirty years ago, if it was really ever needed.

To avoid resentment and creative fallout, The Necks employ decision-making mechanisms such as a veto rule whereby all band decisions have to be unanimous and no one can be overruled. This is a crucial structural element within the group, providing a sense of safety for the members. It also means that creative decisions do not have to undergo compromise through concession. Instead, any individual can reject a band decision or proposal through veto, a distinguishable difference from the way other groups may operate. Despite having rigorous discussions, there has been no major falling out between members.

Abrahams explains the importance of the veto rule:

I think the veto rule is very important, which means that if one person really doesn't want something to happen it won't happen, and to respect that and for people to feel safe to say that it's a very important mechanism.

A sense of safety is built through this veto mechanism as well as through the respect and healthy internal dynamics of the group, not to mention humour and friendship. These allow everyone to be creative and feel safe to take risks and assert individual identity when necessary. According to Swanton, "what each person comes up with is always respected. No one is ever going to tell each other what to play." These mechanisms to avoid conflict and deal with disagreements align with Murnighan and Conlon's 1991 study on successful string quartets, finding that difference of opinion is better recognised but not resolved completely. Writing about such successful groups, they note that:

They viewed conflict as constructive but let emotions dissipate and unnecessary disruptions disappear by dropping things for a while. They pushed their points of view in their arguments, then dropped the issue, letting its substance either resurface or find its

way into their play. Conflict management was consistent with their performance goal—to produce an integrated, unified sound. (182)

These findings highlight how effective communication and dynamics are paramount to the success and longevity of a musical group. The Necks are a prime example of this conclusion.

The notion of group flow, which The Necks incorporate into their musical practice, can also be applied to the band's career. The Necks' trajectory has followed an arc of expanding international opportunities and engagements whilst nurturing their audiences in Australia.

Swanton explains:

In terms of the appeal, we like to say that we have never pushed anything. We grab opportunities when they appear in front of us, which is very much like the music which. . . we have learnt to not push the music anywhere. The moment anything appears, grab it and say, "Yes, that's what we're working with," but never try to force it anywhere. We sort of feel like saying the career that we have always. . . well, we just do what we do and if the opportunity arises, we just try to grab it as quickly and responsibly as we can. And enough of that happens that it's built. The concept of the band hasn't changed. We have never set our sights on stardom. Ironically, the least ambitious approach has actually borne a lot of fruit, and it has done really well, possibly by never actually trying to do well.

As Swanton suggests, the band's decision-making processes are similar to the fundamental decisions they make when improvising. Musical decisions continually repeat and intersect with one another. Abrahams outlines his creative thought processes and acceptance of repeating himself in simple terms:

Well, I play myself into an idea. And often the ideas are similar to what I've done before. I mean, I don't try and come up with a new idea every time. Well, I know it sounds like a truism, but you just play, and something forms, and you're there . . . and often what forms is something that is probably similar to something that has formed before.

The development of an idea by an improviser undergoes the same fundamental decisions as any, as outlined by Jeff Pressing: ideation, execution, and evaluation ("Improvisation: Methods and Models"). These play out within both the Necks' performances and in their organisational behaviour.

The group displays social interaction and behaviour that also follows patterns. For instance, communication within the band is occasionally limited, and their social interactivity between tours can be minimal. This time off from each other allows them to maintain professional relationships during periods of intense touring and recording. Their tour schedules are limited to three weeks to avoid major disruptions to their lives and avoid tour fatigue. Buck shared the idea that his living in another country (and hemisphere) meant that they would have concentrated bursts of activity followed by periods off. He also reflects on how they dealt with each other in these periods:

So, when I came back here (to Australia), we would set apart a specific amount of time, rather than just dribs and drabs, and then if everyone is living in the same city you just do things here and there, and just, I don't know. So, it became very focused because of that . . . ironically, if one member leaves the country, the band becomes more focused.

And maybe this isn't specific about the music, but in a way it is—the way you deal with people personally and stuff, really influences the music. (Buck)

The Necks' model of musical exploration creates a challenge for the artists to continually develop and seek out new influences to apply to their music's methodology. Each musician has their own sphere of influence and realm of musical references. For Buck, "it's like three overlapping circles," and he insists that "we do challenge each other with really new ways of playing in the group." The challenge is a game for the musicians to push themselves into new musical territories.

Two examples of the way The Necks adopt new ideas into their music include the abandonment of playing in time and their experimentation of structure and form. Their exploration of rhythm includes playing out of time and using non-metric and poly-metric rhythms as well as dual tempos. Buck says that these rhythmic experiments began around the year 2000. He introduced these ideas carefully, aware that it might upset the homogeneity of the group or, in his words, "upset the apple-cart." Swanton recounted this transition as well:

We are playing very differently now than the way we were thirty-one years ago. But the only really tectonic shift was when we all abandoned the idea that we had to play in time. I might have been the last one on board for that.

Swanton finds that they rarely play in time anymore, in fact. If they do find themselves playing in time, it might be just with themselves. This often creates streams of rhythm that operate against one another.

A live performance of the group at The Riverside Theatre (Parramatta, Australia) on February 4, 2018 highlights the group's exploration of rhythm, with each member playing their own sense of pulse and fluctuating in and out of a tempo. The piano and bass gravitate towards a rapid tremolo figure, creating a feeling of all-out metric abandonment.

The band's experimentation with form includes dramatic variations in orchestration and returning to musical ideas later in a single performance. Examples discussed by Swanton include Abrahams starting a piece and subsequently dropping out only to come back in later using material from earlier in the piece. Swanton reflects:

We are starting to actually improvise form. Previously, it was just one form: one person starts, then another person comes in with a complementary idea, a third person comes in with a complementary idea, and then gradually we would kind of leap frog and it may build in intensity, but it was just a question of you move, and then you move, and then you move, and you would never refer back to anything that you played earlier because that is kind of classical form. We are going way out and then we are coming back, you know, with a recapitulation, but we have started doing that to some extent.

One area—I started to notice it many years ago—was that Chris would often start a piece and we would all join in eventually, and then he would drop out, and so, in a way, he wasn't saying, "I want to play this and see where it goes," he was saying, "I want to play this, start you guys off," and then all it was, was a starter, like a match. And we've lit the fire and then we've put the match out, it might take ten minutes or so, but he would quite tangibly disappear and then maybe come in with something quite contrasting, which, up until that point, we hadn't really experimented with that, you know. You tended to be on the idea you're on, and then you would change it until it was unrecognisable,

but you did that over a long period of time. So, we have kind of added concepts along the way without replacing what we are building them on. We have never done a complete recoup, but we have slowly evolved into other areas.

This highlights another element to add to the group's ever-evolving game. Their model of inclusivity and ever-developing concepts of rhythm, form, and style has led to a diverse range of musical outcomes. As Buck points out, their *modus operandi* is to "exploit the differences," providing a path of continual change and innovation, another prompt to reflect on how The Necks might be considered for what they are not, rather than what they are, in their pursuit to defy expectations without doing a "complete recoup."

Conclusion

This paper has showcased how The Necks' organisational and social patterns correlate with various aspects of their performance practice. Their musical processes have allowed them to continually adopt new influences—including materials that are often diametrically opposed—as part of a process that they have turned into a game. Their performance experiences were shown to be conducive to Csikszentmihalyi's flow states, described as an immersive experience where they lose a sense of individuality and merge with a unified whole. Communication within the group was shown to use different modes for various contexts, including collaborative and non-verbal mechanisms in place to promote feelings of safety for difference of opinion such as a veto. A narrative of tension between individual voices in the group was shown to be a powerful part of the ongoing creative game that allows for the assertion of individual identities whilst serving a sense of collective or unified totality.

The findings reinforce Bailey's description of improvised music as a "questioning of the 'rules' governing musical language," with the band members describing their music as a dialogue of musical ideas that pushes the boundaries of The Necks' "way of doing things." Perspectives on improvised music must encompass a complex array of cultural and social practice, as Lewis ("Improvised Music") asserts. This study also reinforces Monson's call for inquiry into how a band's social and organisational patterns are expressed in their "norms, values and expectations" (14). Band members play out day-to-day activities in similar ways to their performances; musical parameters are reproduced off the bandstand, such as how their roles are transposable, yet utilise each other's strengths, the way that they choose to not push anything in their career and their music, often leaving them sitting in periods of silence on stage before a performance, waiting for one of them to self-nominate themselves to start a piece. They form a unique social entity that constitutes a dynamic organisation in parallel to their music.

The Necks' musical methodologies, coupled with three brilliantly creative performers and conceptualists, has facilitated a broad range of aesthetic and stylistic output. As Abrahams states, "conceptually, we all think that anything can fit in." The band's career trajectory has developed as their music has: effortless, with a long arc, yet with the potential for never ending possibilities. Their music is testament to their ability to continually reinvent and explore the fundamentals, and their stylistic diversity leads us to think of The Necks not as what they are, but as what they are not.

Notes

¹ For more information on the work and critical reception of The Necks, see Barr 333; Galbraith 114; Mitchell 55–77; Rose and Coady 68–86; and Australian Music Centre.

² Bailey points out the other labels for such music as “Free Improvisation,” “Open Improvisation,” “Free Improvised Music,” and “Non-Idiomatic Improvisation” (83).

³ See Bailey, Brown, Collin, Dean, DeVito and Coltrane, Jost, Lewis, Litweiler, Monson, and Porter.

⁴ See Barr; Galbraith; and Mitchell 55–77.

⁵ Interviews provided an oral account of the three band members’ thoughts, experiences, and opinions. Formal semi-structured interviews (see Rapley; Shopes 451–66) were conducted in accordance with qualitative research methods outlined in Angrosino and Rosenberg, Atkinson, Creswell and Plano Clark, Gobo, Hammersley, and Rapley. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were guided by a semi-structured protocol, supplied in Appendix A (see below). An audio recording was made of the interviews which was then transcribed. Data from the interviews were coded according to a general inductive approach, as laid out by Thomas (“A General Inductive Approach”). Themes were extracted from the data and coded to provide a simple nontechnical means of carrying out qualitative analyses. Performance observations were undertaken, in accordance with Atkinson, of two concerts by the group and cross-referenced against the findings of the interviews. The study took place in Sydney during the band’s Australian tour in February 2018.

⁶ There are numerous studies that explore musical improvisation within groups of three or larger; however, psychological research into improvisation primarily focusses either on the individual or on improvising duets. Others that attempt to understand improvisation have focused on individuals’ creative choices, such as Johnson-Laird, Hargreaves, and Pressing—who draw from theories from cognitive psychology—as well as ethnomusicologists such as Berliner and Monson.

⁷ See also Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz.

⁸ The Necks run their own record label, Fish of Milk. They now outsource distribution and promotion of their releases, though Buck was the band’s booking agent early on. They now work with several booking agents in various territories including Lee Patterson (UK/Europe) and Jordan Verzar of Top Shelf Productions (Australia).

Appendix A: Interview Prompts

Are there any improvising strategies that The Necks utilise?

In particular, how do you deal with performing durational works using a slow rate of change?

How did these come about, and have they evolved over the lifespan of the band?

Has the model of improvisation changed within the band over time?

How do you make musical choices within the group? Specifically, how do you make choices on whether to change or stay the same?

Do you have any evaluative dimensions of what you do within this context?

Do you construct ideas about trajectory, rate of initiatives, degrees of novelty and diversity, reproduction/innovation, structural concerns, experience of enjoyment?

Do you have any limitations on what you can do musically? For example, experimentation with rhythm, harmony, levels of embellishment and complexity?

Do you use long-form improvisation in any other groups?

Do you use a personal sketch or outline in your thinking process, or any other method of future planning?

Do you monitor and evaluate your own output? That of others?

How are you impacted by others' contributions?

How do you divide your attention between your own performance and others'?

What is the impact of long-term relationships on the music and how does it affect your creativity, organisation, and responsibilities?

What is it like, socially and in an organisational capacity, to play in an improvising group for thirty years? Has the music affected how you go about touring and making band decisions?

What do you think allows the band to stay together for so long?

Do you feel you share the same musical aesthetic and taste as the other bandmates?

How important is aesthetic kinship? Humour? Mateship? Shared understanding? Group creativity? Group leadership? What effect do these have on your thinking?

Does the social world ever affect musical outcomes?

Are there roles within the band, both musically and non-musically?

Are there any points of leadership, while others follow?

Are there any opportunities to be the dominant voice?

Are there any points of conflict?

What experience have you had performing in large, improvised ensembles and how is that different from performing in The Necks?

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