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Slowing Down

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Résumé de l'article

Guitarist Nathan Moore relates his experiences as an improvising musician responding to COVID. In this piece, he describes the practice of recording solo improvisations that are then sent to colleagues for an overdubbed, improvised response.

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Slowing Down

Nathan Moore[1]

Obvious to write, but even during the best of times, most improvising musicians cannot support themselves financially through their artistic practice. Ironically, writing about the music, or running a venue or festival that programs it, might prove slightly more lucrative, depending on the musician's public profile—the point being that free improvisers tend to be fairly resilient because they have had to be.[2] Nevertheless, through social distancing, the pandemic has triggered a particularly disruptive consequence: musicians cannot gather to play in groups of any size. To the extent that improvisation is considered a physically proximate social act, the pandemic has rendered it more or less impossible (at least indoors).

Some colleagues have turned to the Internet as a stand-in for in-person gatherings. This is not to be underestimated as a way to keep communities in touch and, to some extent, active. Nevertheless, the screen is not the territory.[3] Hopefully, this type of interaction-at-a-distance might produce a new type of improvisatory practice—one that extends interactions to include more visual input alongside the aural, and which incorporates and transcends the current limitations of time delays, poor sound quality, broken connections, and so forth. If so, interesting questions will be raised about what, where, and when the communal practice of improvisation is, and how this practice might be relayed to an interested audience. In the meantime, though, it is still worth thinking about that which has just come to an abrupt halt: people coming together in person to play improvised music, with or without an audience.

This halting is somewhat traumatic yet, until in-person gathering becomes viable again, a problem is posed: how might improvising musicians respond to the "new normal"? As noted, the internet provides a possible solution by providing an alternative array of options for interaction. Another solution might be more representational: the lone improviser(s) attempting to reflect or communicate, in their work, the experience of social distancing. That I find neither of these alternatives particularly convincing is, of course, a matter of personal taste. A third possibility, one which I have found rewarding, is dependent upon having the means and situation to allow for recording at home—a situation that, despite relatively cheap technology, is certainly not open to all of my colleagues.

Recording at home, combined with an internet connection, facilitates an exchange of such recordings with similarly situated colleagues. My method involves recording a solo improvisation and copying this to a colleague who then records an improvisation over it, or vice versa.[4] Rather than attempting to overcome the distance between us through "real-time" interaction—or by trying to make the distance itself the represented "content" of the work—this type of exchange makes our distance-ness part of the process. This means of working would not be interesting unless the process influenced the work in some way; more specifically, if this process didn't change how we improvise together.

How, then, does this distance-ness affect things? I have been fortunate in being able to have on-going exchanges with several colleagues since the UK lockdown began. The most significant consequence is that it slows the improvisatory interaction down. This has stimulated a number of thoughts:

a) Being together in the same space imposes a certain speed of interaction, determined by the speed of sound and the speed of hearing. In exchanging recordings, this speed becomes potentially less relevant. Its relevance could be maintained from the choice (for

example) to improvise over a recording in one take, without listening to the recording beforehand. There is nothing wrong with such an approach, but it is, in the context of recordings, somewhat arbitrary: the technical situation does not demand it, and so the attempt to simulate spatial and temporal simultaneity is then a matter of preference rather than an unavoidable restriction. When a colleague sends a recording for me to improvise over, I can listen to it a few times and decide upon an approach. The time for such pre-performance listening—and preparatory decision making—would obviously not be available when playing with one another in person. Therefore, the improviser's available time for decision-making has been significantly extended by the exchange of recordings.

b) This opens up possibilities that would not usually be available when performing in-person. There are a number of variables here, linked to the type of instrument and the player's attitude towards it. With the electric guitar, for example, I can radically alter the sound through the use of effects. I have several more effects than I would ever take to a gig, so slowing down allows me the luxury of a set up more tailored to my colleague's performance than might be possible during a gig. Of course, there are merits to limitations, but the point is that the exchange of recordings allows the time for a different approach. Likewise, an acoustic musician can think longer about how they might approach their instrument in response to the sound of a recording.

c) An important aspect of this is the foregrounding of the question: what is it one does when improvising? Commonly, fast responses are accepted as indicators of skill (on the part of the player), as they make for effective, interactive exchanges between in-person musicians; fast reflexes imply that listening and communication are taking place. The ability to respond quickly is a skill that I work on, recognising it as significant for the art of improvisation. Yet is it *necessary* for a good improvisation? Is an improvisation to be judged only (or even predominantly) by the players' ability to respond quickly? This smacks more of an Olympiad or time-trial than it does aesthetic creation. The question, then, that the exchange of recordings has emphasised for me is: what makes for a good (or "authentic") improvisation when the players have more time to decide upon their response strategy?

d) Once this has been decided upon, the next choice concerns how many takes one allows oneself when recording. From an improvisatory perspective, the less takes the better would seem to make sense, and this is a principle to which I have stuck. Usually, if a retake is required it will be because, in the playback and recording scenario, I am unable to hear either the recording or myself adequately. If I have to stop, I begin again from the very start. Are these preferences arbitrary? To a degree, but what is interesting here is a blurring of the difference between improvisation and composition, once the time of the exchange has been slowed down. Too many takes, or too many pre-recording decisions, and one is moving further away from improvising and closer to composing. Slowing down is interesting for highlighting a certain zone of indiscernibility between improvisation and composition—but one that does not involve the figure of the composer in any way. Rather, in this situation, it is the *technical means* of repetition (of both playback and recording) that brings composition into proximity with improvisation—not a pre-written score or set of authored directions. Instead of composition attempting to enclose improvisation, improvisation draws closer, temporally, to composition—but on its own terms.

e) When I am recording from scratch for a colleague to eventually play over, I must approach my relationship to that person in a different way. In person, the interaction can

> be more dynamic: I can leave space, I can claim space or yield it, I can be supportive or divergent, and so on. However, when recording alone for a colleague's future response, I find that the primary concern is to leave space for them. This is a limitation on our musical interaction but, as ever, focusing in on one aspect tends to produce interesting results. In this case, what I have found especially important is that the relationship should develop over time—not the exchange of just one piece, but the exchange of a number of pieces. As I get to know my colleague's responses (to previous exchanges), I seem to develop a better sense of how to leave spaces for them that they might find interesting. My colleague, through this time, becomes present to me through their absence.

In short, the practice of exchanging recorded improvisations poses the question of what improvising might mean, once the time of decision making has been expanded beyond the usual fleet reflexes of in-person performance. It is something I hope to continue with, even beyond the return of our faster, in-person improvisation sessions.

Notes

[1] School of Law, Birkbeck College. Thanks to Daniel Kordik, James O'Sullivan, Emmanuelle Waeckerlé, Henry Kaiser, and Eddie Prévost. Some of the improvised exchanges resulting from the practice described in the text have now been released: Daniel Kordik & N.O. Moore, *Here in the Distance* and James O'Sullivan & N.O Moore, *Time Parts.*

[2] I do not mean to imply anything heroic about this resilience, nor to denigrate those who, for whatever reason, decide to do other things with their lives.

[3] On the problems of representing a territory, see Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science." On the militaristic origins of computational screening, see Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, "An Ecology of Operations." Note that, for Geoghegan, the development of the computer screen, as an interface for co-ordinating militaristic control of a territory, necessarily transforms our understanding of what territory is. At the very least, it renders territory calculable for the purposes of modern warfare and sovereignty. Similarly, we can consider that the screen of communication technologies re-formats interactions according to the protocols of the software, and ergonomics of the hardware, involved. An extreme expression of this insight is offered by Paul Virilio: "If [. . .] the two interlocutors communicate with each other through (real-time) interactive technologies, it is the absolute speed of radiation that will facilitate their [. . .] face-to-face encounter, and this happens no matter what intervals of space and time effectively separate them. Here, the event *does not take place*" (45).

[4] This is not an activity exclusive to the pandemic. Overdubbing is nothing new in various types of improvised music and, in the realm of free improvisation, the two *Post Improvisation* recordings made by Derek Bailey and Han Bennink in 1999, and released on the Incus label, stand as obvious precursors.

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