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FEATURE

It's easy to agree with Nietzsche's maxim from *Twilight of the Idols*: "Without music life would be a mistake." But what would music be without improvisation? Though today it is chiefly associated with jazz, improvisation crosses all boundaries, informing many of the world's musical traditions. The Philadelphia Music Project's 2007 grantees include artists working in a range of disciplines, employing improvisation in various proportions and with vastly different results. Peruse the season's offerings and one will find big bands, jazz encounters with classical orchestra, avant-garde experimentalists, virtuosi of *Carnatic* (South Indian) music, keepers of the klezmer heritage, and interpreters of Renaissance and Baroque masterworks. These performers would seem to share little in common. But a close look at some of the skills and practices involved can reveal striking commonalities. Improvisation is something that bridges oceans, cultures, aesthetic temperaments and even historical periods.



Improvisation: Charting the Unknown

BY DAVID R. ADLER

Almost all music involves a give and take between the prescribed and the spontaneous. In the music known as "free jazz," of course, the role of the latter could hardly be more pronounced. But while it often steers clear of fixed tempos, harmonies and forms, free jazz can nonetheless follow a subtle compositional logic. In a five-concert series called "Out There," International House, in conjunction with Ars Nova Workshop, will present several major figures in the field. Trumpeter Bill Dixon, who spearheaded the October Revolution in Jazz in New York in 1964, will play a spring 2008 duo concert with drummer Tony Oxley, a pivotal member of the circle known as the London Improvisers. From the Netherlands, pianist Misha Mengelberg and drummer Han Bennink, cofounders of the Instant Composers Pool (ICP) Orchestra and colleagues for well over 30 years, will lead an irreverent quartet in January featuring the noted trumpeter Dave Douglas. John Zorn, the dean of New York's "downtown" scene from the early '80s to the present, will duet on February 29 with the veteran free drummer Milford Graves, whose concept of improvisation extends to back flips and even promenading around the hall with an audience member on his shoulders. "Music is motion; it is life itself," Graves has written.

At the Annenberg Center, the American Composers Orchestra (ACO) will explore another branch of jazz's family tree via the "Orchestra Underground" series, curated by composer/clarinetist Derek Bermel. Major jazz instrumentalists, including pianist Uri Caine, alto saxophonist Steve Coleman and drummer/percussionist Susie Ibarra, will premiere new concertos, bringing their jazz artistry into an orchestral environment. The phenomenon is not new: Since the rise of the Third Stream movement of the 1950s and even well before, jazz musicians have contended with long-form composition and various jazz/classical hybrids. The first

concert, on October 21, placed the new music in historical context by including an innovative Charles Mingus work from 1957, "Revelations."

Uri Caine's piece, premiering in Philadelphia on February 10, will be close in spirit to his bluesy, radical 2002 treatment of the Beethoven Diabelli Variations. He sees that effort, and his multi-genre reading of the Bach Goldberg Variations (2000), as "an extension of the jazz idea of having an underlying structure that then gets amplified, commented on, violated or what have you." In the new piece, as yet untitled, "the orchestra is either creating motifs to play against, or textures to play with, or sometimes it's functioning like a really big rhythm section." Caine has taken a similarly unorthodox approach to Mahler, Wagner, Schumann and Mozart as well. In his essay "Theme and Variation" (from *Arcana II: Musicians on Music*, edited by John Zorn), he describes the titular concept as a "metaphor for the coexistence of structure and freedom in music."

Steve Coleman comes to concert music from another angle. For roughly two decades, he has pioneered a musical concept he calls M-Base (macro-basic array of structured extemporization), described on his Web site as "a non-western conception of how to use music to

developed cohesion among a small circle of initiated players. With limited rehearsal time, an orchestra reading can be more of a seat-of-the-pants affair than a jazz gig.

According to Bermel, even the most polished classical performance can brush up against the unknown. "Tuning, dynamics, attack—all these elements are unpredictable in the concert experience," he says. "So there's always a factor of improvisation, the question is how much. The tension is, where does a composer ask for that improvisation, and where don't they." That tension lies at the very heart of the jazz big band tradition, from Ellington through Mingus and up to such current composers as Mike Holober and Maria Schneider. Holober, a pianist and leader of the Gotham Jazz Orchestra, will perform his newly commissioned piece "Hiding Out" in February at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. His expansive, hard-swinging music involves a delicate balance between form and freedom; soloists may dazzle the audience, but they serve a higher purpose as well. "When I conceive a solo section," Holober explains, "I'm turning over responsibility for the development of the form to the improviser. I feel strongly as a writer that when you improvise, you're sharing the compositional duties."

Page 2: Pianist and composer Uri Caine will premiere a new work at Annenberg this season

Page 3: Han Bennink and Misha Mengelberg, photo by Francesca Patella



express experience... There is no limitation on the kind of structures or the type of improvisation, or the style of the music." Though he burst onto the scene in the late '80s with a complex, funk-inflected take on jazz, his sound-world has grown ever broader. At the ACO's October concert he premiered a work titled "The Illusion of the Body."

"Improvisation is at the base of everything I do, including composition," Coleman offers. "The Eurocentric idea is you take a pencil and paper and go away for five months and come back with a symphony. I call improvisation 'spontaneous composition,' and for me both processes are the same. It's just that one is more deliberate."

In Coleman's score, the non-improvising players of the ACO may encounter a rhythmic vocabulary that is rather unfamiliar. "At one point in the piece I improvise a cadenza," Coleman says. "Then I start playing parts of the composition to bring the orchestra back in. Now, with my band [Five Elements], that's a very simple thing. I can even play a form without a melody and they'll know where I am. But that's not something you can do overnight." And therein lies the paradox of the jazz-meets-classical exchange. There is an image of jazz as loose, a perpetual jam session. At its highest levels, in fact, it can require highly

For Maria Schneider, who will bring her celebrated large ensemble to the Museum in January, the input of improvisers "changes the music from night to night. Each piece becomes a personality that behaves in different ways. And what we create belongs to all of us. The joy is everybody's." Infusing her recent work with Brazilian, flamenco and Peruvian *lando* rhythms, Schneider throws curves at her musicians, expanding their palette and prompting them to "figure out what to do, how to stretch. It gives them something to work with other than the usual." Needless to say, jazz's globalizing instinct is as old as the music itself. Susie Ibarra, drawing on her Filipina heritage, has made extensive use of *kulintang* (tuned gongs) and other East Asian elements. Her ACO commission, "Pintado's (The Painted's) Dream," is inspired by the tattooing, or "painting," of indigenous tribes in the Philippines and northern Japan.

Bass clarinetist/composer Gene Coleman (no relation to Steve) also merges Asian instruments and improvisational concepts in his Ensemble N_JP, which performed on September 20 as part of the Slough Foundation's Soundfield@Slough series. Coleman, Slough's music curator, has developed special notational systems for such in-

Reaching back centuries and even millennia,

struments as the *sho*, *shamisen* and *koto*. The players, including Ko Ishikawa and Ryuko Mizutani, are “very special performers with all the traditional training, who have chosen to go over into the area of experimentation,” Coleman says.

Other Slough projects this season involve Coleman’s Ensemble Noamnesia, a chamber group that uses Western instrumentation but is no less unconventional. On October 21 they joined violist Vincent Royer to play music by the experimental composer Luc Ferrari (1929-2005). On March 20 they meet the Rome-based ensemble Ossatura to realize compositions by Anthony Braxton (b. 1945), among others. And on February 26, the Austrian/British-based Polwechsel arrives at Slough’s West Philly venue to perform original electro-acoustic works.

Inspired by Braxton and other ’60s leaders of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), Coleman represents a generation that doesn’t so much blend jazz and classical music as deconstruct the categories altogether. His work employs open-form structures, defying any firm distinction between the notated and the improvised. “The improvisation I do is very linked to the music I want to write,” Coleman says. “The old idea is that these are completely different musics, with completely different hierarchies, and these worlds never connect. We don’t even study them in the same space or talk about them as being related. That’s slowly gone by the wayside.”

If hybridization and modernization are becoming the norm, traditional forms are flourishing as well. This concert season will include a “Mosaic of South Indian Classical

Music” presented by SRUTI: The India Music and Dance Society. Veenai Jayanthi Kumaresh, master of the *veena* (a lute-like string instrument), will be among the featured performers. “There are two important branches in Indian classical music, the creative and the recreative,” says Jayanthi. The former entails *raga alapana*, or scalar improvisation; *swaraprastharas*, in which, “solfa syllables of the raga are performed in as many permutations as possible within the meter;” and *nereval*, “wherein any one line of the composition is taken and interpreted.” In the “recreative” portion, *krithies*, or “compositions by great legends of the past, are recreated each time according to the style and individuality of the performer.” *Carnatic* music is in many ways a world unto itself, but it has had a considerable impact on Western improvisers, including Steve Coleman. Jayanthi’s account of a typical concert should sound familiar to jazz players: “So much of the music depends on the atmosphere, time, day, audience, acoustics and the performer’s mood.”

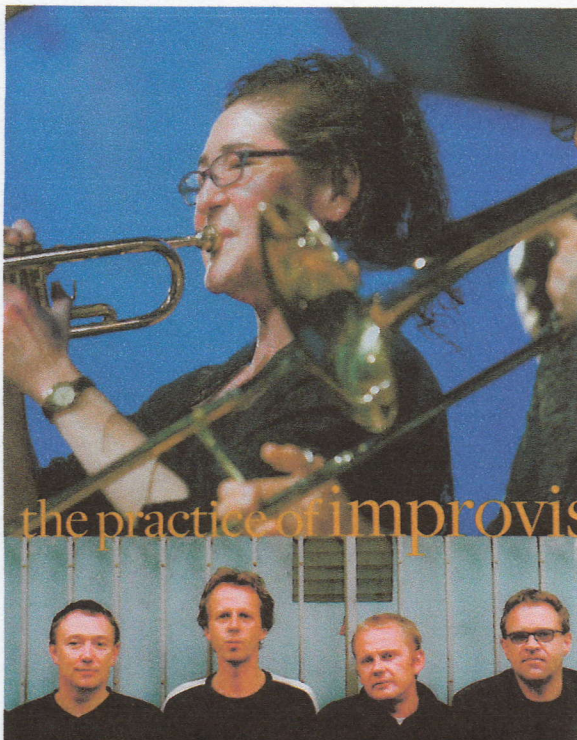
Like Indian music, klezmer—the folkloric idiom of European Jewry—has its modernizers and its purists. John Zorn, never a klezmer player per se, has created a new zeitgeist through his Radical Jewish Culture series, presented on his record label Tzadik (Hebrew for “righteous one”). “Just as jazz music has progressed from Dixieland to free jazz and beyond in a few short decades ... the same kind of growth should be possible—and is perhaps essential—for Jewish music,” Zorn has written. On March 1, International House and Ars Nova will present works from Zorn’s still-unfolding series “Masada (Book Two): Book of Angels,” performed by the electric

groups Asmodeus and Secret Chiefs 3.

In Europe, klezmer was all but obliterated in the Holocaust; in the U.S. it faded along with the jazz big bands. To play it today, on some level, is to reinvent it. But for drummer Elaine Hoffman Watts, matriarch of the Hoffman Watts family and heir to an illustrious line of Philadelphia klezmer artists, talk of the music’s “revival” rings false. “It never went away,” she declares. “I cut my baby teeth on it, I drank my bottle to it. My daddy used to take me down to the basement and he would practice his xylophone and show me the beats to play.” With support from the Philadelphia Folklore Project, she and her daughter, trumpeter Susan Watts, are preparing a spring 2008 concert featuring rare melodies from the early 20th century written by Joseph Hoffman (Susan’s great-grandfather).

There are notated elements in klezmer, but spontaneous group interplay is essential. Melodic ornamentation, so evident in the crying klezmer clarinet sound, is what gives the music its character. According to Dan Blacksberg, a jazz trombonist who plays frequently with Susan Watts, “there are accompanying parts that also involve a lot of improvisation. The middle voice has a lot of freedom. I play everything from harmonized melody to rhythmic phrases, where I’m outlining the harmonic progression. At a klezmer gig you don’t really tell me anything—we just start playing.”

Renaissance and Baroque ensembles may go about it less casually, but they too are intimately familiar with ornamentation and middle-voice improvisation. Two period-instrument groups, Piffaro and Tempesta di Mare, are among this year’s PMP grantees, with unique early music programs on the



Top to bottom:

Klezmer trumpeter Susan Hoffman Watts,
photo by James Wasserman

Polweschel

Composer Maria Schneider,
photo by David Korchin

the practice of improvisation evolves anew in every age



docket (in early January and early March, respectively). Hearing them, one can appreciate changes in improvisational practice that accompanied the transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque period.

Renaissance ornamentation involves “division,” or the practice of “taking long notes and turning them into a melodic contour of shorter notes,” according to Piffaro’s woodwind player Robert Wiemken, who likens the practice to learning “licks” in jazz. In Baroque music, says recorder player/flutist Gwyn Roberts of Tempesta, “ornamentation is much more about grand gestures and swoops and swirls” than about manipulating cadences on the micro-level. Another major change in the Baroque, says Wiemken, involved “the vertical harmonic conception of a piece with a figured bass line.” What emerged was the practice of continuo, which Roberts describes as “essentially a jazz chart upside down. Rather than having a melody and chords, you’re looking at a bass line and chords.” A series of numbers above the bass line serve to “describe what the harmonies are,” Roberts explains. “It doesn’t mean you have to play a chord at every point. Primarily, continuo players create a rhythm track, deciding on the emphasis and size of the chords in a way that highlights both the metric structure and the musical interest.” While the overall arc of the piece is written, in other words, many of the specifics are “performer-determined.”

What distinguishes Piffaro and Tempesta is their application of antique disciplines to new performance settings. Piffaro’s program, “A 21st-Century Epiphany Vespers,” will include contemporary motets by the Philadelphia composer Kile Smith—“new work based on old tradition,” Wiemken says. Tempesta’s “No Strings Attached: Love and Death with Music and Puppets,” will involve, yes, puppets: life-size inanimate characters acting out mythic stories of love to pieces by Monteverdi and Handel.

Reaching back centuries and even millennia, the practice of improvisation evolves anew in every age, in ways that are both culturally specific and all-embracing. Bernard Holland of *The New York Times* paid great tribute to the spirit of improvisation when he recently included Count Basie on a list of important Minimalists. In a Basie piano solo, Holland wrote, “Chords [do] the work of a jazz-music continuo and fragments of melody ... point at things present but unsaid.” Indeed, if music is the universal language, improvisation is its alphabet. Elementally human, heightening expression, it electrifies audiences and performers alike with the charge of the unexpected.

David R. Adler writes regularly for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Philadelphia Weekly*, *Jazz Times* and *Down Beat*. His work on music, politics and culture has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Republic Online*, *Slate*, *Democratija* and many other publications. He blogs at lerterland.blogspot.com.