

Research Article

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Composing for Improvisers: Negotiating the Issue of Individual Voice

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Abstract: This paper addresses one aspect of my Practice as Research project exploring composing for large groups of improvising musicians. It looks at how my practice evolved as a result of contemplating the nature of solo improvisation, together with Garry L. Hagberg's writings around "Collective Intention." I discuss a new work for octet that started with small-group improvisations, initially totally freely and then later using thematic material inspired and informed by the initial sessions. By basing the finished compositions on improvisations this way, I aim to bring the creative voice of the individuals into final performance. Not just by employing the compositional techniques of the likes of Graham Collier, John Zorn, Anthony Braxton and many others who allow room for realtime improvised contributions in performance, but by weaving the unique voices of the musicians into the written material as well. In this way, I am challenging the stereotype of a lone composer working away from the ensemble, which the contemporary big band composer often fits.

Keywords: improvisation, composition, large ensemble jazz

My practice is located at the intersection of composition and improvisation, and my PhD research is a Practice as Research based enquiry around composing for large groups of improvising musicians. In this paper, after giving some background to my working methods, I discuss a critical question around solo improvisation and its relevance to my practice. I go on to describe how engaging with this question changed my methods for composing the LUME Lab Octet suite, with reference to Mike Picknett's approach to "devising music" (*Devising Music*). I conclude by reflecting on the effectiveness of this, and whether the process answers any of the questions raised by the discussion of solo improvising.

In Ekkehard Jost's book *Free Jazz*, he discusses the musical and economic problems inherent in working with large groups of improvisers.

The problem of the big band in free jazz . . . lies first and foremost in employing the sound potential of a large apparatus . . . without having to reduce the individual creativity of majority of the players to merely reading notes. (182)

This is reflected in the clear preferences of most improvising musicians to perform in small groups, a situation where listening and responding freely is easier. When investigating groups of improvisers, Harald Stenström "finds an ideal size of four musicians, followed by the alternatives three or five musicians" (45), and he cites Simon H. Fell view that large ensemble improvisation is "a scarce commodity" and "a high-risk strategy, possibly with musically modest benefits" (Fell online). John Corbett agrees, saying groups of five or more suffer because "it's more difficult to pay attention to the overall music" (123). Although, Corbett differs with Fell on the potential benefits, noting that hearing a large ensemble "can be jaw-dropping," making a comparison with "watching an Olympic diver: the degree of difficulty is so much higher than when it works, it's worth lots more points" (123). This is something that motivates me as well; I was initially drawn to large groups by the excitement from both watching and performing with them.

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To explain my practice around trying to solve some of the difficulties mentioned, it might first be useful to divide the compositional process up into three stages.

1. Material generation
2. Material development/arrangement
3. Rehearsal and performance

Commonly in large ensemble jazz music, the musicians are required to have some level of creative involvement through improvisation during the third stage, typically in the form of improvised solos. However, a large part of playing in a large ensemble like this is the playing of pre-written material, as alluded to by Jost above. Throughout my PhD, I have been exploring ways of having musicians contribute during the first and second stages, to investigate whether the resultant music can effectively feature the individual voices of the musicians, and to what extent. Also whether I can bring about a greater sense of collective ownership over the material through this approach, and if so, how this might affect the music. This paper explores one aspect of this, namely how my engaging with critical thought around collective intention has affected these aims.

My initial approach to investigating this was to send a variety of stimuli to the musicians who would be involved in a piece and have them record themselves improvising a response. I would then feed these responses into the final piece in a variety of ways. As an example; for my piece *Winter 16* (Appendix A) I sent audio files of myself improvising to each of the other musicians who would be performing and they recorded themselves either improvising along with my audio, or improvising a response afterwards. These responses informed the material in each box on the score, either by directly transcribing a melody or riff—the 2nd and 4th boxes on the first line, and 2nd box on the bottom line—or representing the presence of a lot of long tones in the improvisations, for example. In this way, I am enacting Kevin Whitehead's observation that "free improvisation is one way a group discovers its own sound" (154). This has resonances with Marcel Cobussen's analysis of free-improvisation: "Everything starts with the process of making connections, that is, the actors are interactively produced through one another; they emerge through their interactions" (25).

Is Solo Improvising Really Improvising?

Given that, up to this point, the ways I had asked musicians to contribute all involved improvising solo, the critical question above arose which forced me to reassess my working methods. Two particular quotes sparked this line of enquiry; the first is from a respected critic, curator and promoter John Corbett, and the second from one of the most prominent free-jazz saxophonists, Peter Brötzmann.

Doubts can be raised about whether improvisation is even possible for a lone player. (Corbett 119)

Jazz . . . is something you do together. The solo playing . . . is not really a part of it. (Brötzmann and Rouy 77)

Elsewhere in Corbett's book he talks about the dialogic nature of free improvisation and dedicates a chapter to "Interaction Dynamics" (47-67), inviting readers to listen out for the different modes of interaction present in improvised music. Clearly, without other musicians to interact with, these interactions that Corbett and others value highly are no longer present, causing him to question the legitimacy of solo improvisation. Corbett does concede that, in their place, it might be possible to consider the interactions "between the soloist and the instrument or the performance context or the audience" (120), but there's a fundamental difference here when compared improvising with a live human being.

When Brötzmann says "Jazz . . . is something you do together," he is not disregarding solo improvisation as not possible (and indeed, has released records of solo playing himself), but is instead placing it in a separate category: "solo playing . . . is something different."

Brötzmann, of course, is not the only improviser to perform solo, which seems to contradict Corbett's claim that solo improvisation is not possible. There is plenty of support for the notion of improvisation as a

group rather than lone activity, both from the academy—Paul Berliner’s assertion that “the highest points of improvisation occur when group members strike a groove together” (388)—and from other musicians, such as French percussionist Lê Quan Ninh’s bold statement that “My solos are always failures” (73). Despite this, improvising musicians continue to perform solo, including Ninh himself, perhaps constant failure isn’t enough to deter him, or he is judging the solo playing by the same criteria one would use for a group performance, and finds it lacking. I discuss his motivations later.

Rather than focus on whether solo improvising can actually class as improvising, the apparent contradiction in the views expressed above points instead to a category error, as Brötzmann hints at, and Garry L. Hagberg asserts; “There is a difference of a fundamental kind between performing solo and performing in an ensemble” (Hagberg 481). Furthermore, this is something that “every performer knows” (Hagberg 481).

Relating this to my own work, it is not too big a leap to say that a methodology that places an individual’s solo improvisation at its core might be missing something essential. My contemporaries and I spend the vast majority of our performing time with others, and, therefore, it is safe to assume that the development of our skills is mostly done with ensemble playing in mind. Indeed, the chapter “Solo” in Derek Bailey’s widely referenced book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* opens with; “improvisors are, as a rule, musically gregarious, preferring to work with other musicians in any combination” (105).

Language

Whilst the above could lead us to question why anyone would want to improvise by themselves, plenty of improvising musicians still do, and Derek Bailey once again offers some insight into why. In the chapter “Solo” mentioned above, Bailey discusses his own approach to solo playing, which he was motivated to do initially as a learning process, as part of his practising, “to have a look at [his] own playing and to find out what was wrong with it and what was not wrong with it” (105). The reason he turned to solo playing to do this, he states, was because of the way it highlights the musical language being used by virtue of the fact that the usual interactions with other musicians are absent.

[In solo playing] the language becomes much more important and there will be times in solo improvisation when the player relies entirely on the [musical] vocabulary used. (Bailey 106)

Lê Quan Ninh—expanding on the earlier point about all his solos being “failures”—also recognises this focus on language that arises in a solo context, when, lacking the “network of solidarity” (73) that he experiences in a group, he is forced to turn to what he refers to as “my *compulsory figures*, motifs that have emerged and that I have memorized” (73). Although the way he describes this seems less pragmatic than Bailey, he too is aware of the developmental nature of solo playing, stating that “Playing solo offers me the chance to interrogate those patterns and motifs” (Ninh 73).

In Graham Lock’s book about Anthony Braxton, this same connection is highlighted: “His own musical language grew out of the solo context” (26). Braxton pinpoints his first ever solo concert as one catalyst for the development of his language and approach to making music that went on to inform all of his music, not just in the solo context.

I imagined I was just going to get up there and play for one hour from pure invention, but after ten minutes I’d run through all my ideas and started to repeat myself. (qtd. in Lock 27)

This account is a fairly common one when speaking anecdotally with other musicians. There is often the need to have an idea of where one is heading, or starting from, and a couple of points in between, in a way that does not typically happen in group free improvisation. These preparations can act as a safety net, guarding against the experience described by Braxton, and tend to be unnecessary in group playing with other musicians to provide impetus. My own experiences of performing live by myself are that time seems to pass much slower and what I think has lasted a full half hour set has barely scratched the surface. Perhaps

what is happening is the number of ideas present would be last around 30 minutes in a group, but with no other musicians to develop them, or contribute their own ideas, then the set is over much quicker.

What is the significance of this language that these improvisers talk about? Pianist Vijay Iyer (399) sheds some light on this by invoking Barthes' "The Grain of The Voice" (Barthes) essay to suggest that meaning is not only constituted by the "semantic content" and "melodic logic" of an utterance "but also by its *sonorous* content." He goes on to be more specific:

Tellingly, among many jazz musicians, a most valued characterisation is that a certain musician has his or her own, instantly recognizable sound, where "sound" means not only timbre, but also articulation, phrasing, rhythm, melodic vocabulary, and even analytical methods. (Iyer 399)

He recognises that melodic vocabulary is part of what makes up the voice of an improvising musician, but that it is just one of several elements, and David Toop would seem to support this stance as he says "the player exists within the sounds" (8). If I am focussing on material generated when a musician is playing alone and Bailey says this preferences material at the expense of other elements, then I am neglecting these other aspects that make up the sound of the improvising musician. In particular, the element that many musicians themselves would consider to be most important, the interactions between the musicians. Judith Lewis suggests an explanation for what is missing; "Solo improvisation . . . does not rely on any inherent dialogical elements such as those found in group improvisation" (259). Or, as Brötzmann puts it; "jazz . . . is something you do together" (Brötzmann and Rouy 77).

To further explore what might be missing here, we turn to Hagberg's discussion of collective intention in ensemble improvisation. He rejects "the Cartesian model of selfhood" (482) that would have an improvised performance be the sum of its individual parts, or rather, the intentions of each individual involved as, in this view, "there could be no such thing as an intention that transcended, or was external to, any given single individual" (482). He turns instead to Bratman's concept of collective intention. For something to count as "true collective intention," the activity must be "non-summative; irreducible to the individual; worked out across the span of its enactment" (Hagberg 487). He uses a Coltrane trio performance displaying "a kind of audible mutual trust" (487) to show that improvised ensemble performance meets these criteria, and draws parallels with de-individuation, "the regrettable phenomenon of merging into a mob and then doing things as a collective that no individual within that mob would choose to do" (488).

So the aspect that I am missing by using solo improvisation is recognised by recent philosophical thought as a phenomenon, such that "there is something essential to the phenomenology of collective action that remains after we subtract the sum total of the individual intentions from the final result" (Hagberg 483).

Furthermore, he goes on to discuss "the interactive style of a given player," which he claims "will differ from player to player in a way as distinctive as fingerprints" (Hagberg 492). While Iyer and Toop above seem to suggest that a musician's unique voice is contained within the semantic and sonorous content of their playing, here Hagberg offers a strong argument for the way in which a particular player interacts with others as being equally unique.

What seems clear from the above discussion is that solo improvising is indeed distinct from ensemble playing and, as I am aiming to investigate how to feature the individual musicians' voices in my music effectively and this led me to reassess my working methods.

On a more practical note, the solo improvisations were not without difficulties. For my piece *Winter 16*, I set out to exchange recorded solo improvisations with the trumpet player who would be the featured soloist when it was performed. As it transpired, we only managed to send each other two files before the piece was to be finished, due to a variety of time constraints. Changing tack slightly for another piece, *Always A Fox*, I sent the same five short melodies to each of the ten musicians who were to perform it, and asked them to record themselves playing any of them followed by improvising and to send me the results. Only three of the musicians responded by the deadline, and something rather illuminating happened in one of those. During the recording of one contribution, Participant B could not continue due to laughing

too much. This fit of the giggles was brought on by imagining me listening back to the recording, and the surreal nature of this derailed the process.

As well as this specific incident, interviewing musicians involved afterwards revealed a more general disconnect between the process of development and the finished performance.

By the time this was on the stand in the [rehearsal] I had probably forgotten that anything we had done by correspondence was going to be involved in this. So I think by the time I looked at this I just thought, “this is Anton’s piece.” (Participant A)

So, the practicalities of getting musicians to find the time and the inclination to sit down and record themselves playing solo—a setting that they are predominantly not used to—proved difficult. And when they did, it didn’t necessarily bring about a sense of collective ownership like I had set out to achieve, perhaps partly due to the sense expressed above that musicians tend to prefer not playing solo, which certainly seemed to be the case for Participant B.

Bringing these back to the context in which I am working, to motivate the next phase of my research, I can hypothesise that changing my methods to use small groups to develop material, as described in the following section, might lead to the musicians feeling greater ownership over the music, greater involvement in the process and, if I have been neglecting the “interactive style” (Hagberg 492) of the players, there may be some evidence of this in the final performed music.

LUME Lab Octet

In an effort to address the above question, and the difficulties raised by the practicalities of my previous methods, it was clear that my compositional practice needed to explore ways of using group improvisation in the development of the material. One possibility for a method of working can be found within the practice of devised theatre and dance. Michael Picknett has explored bringing these techniques into a musical context (*Devising Music, Navigating the Uncertain*). Whilst he goes into great detail about involving the musicians in the creative process, with the goal that “the project is unique to the performers” and “the performers have an especially intimate relationship to the material,” he also notes that “when a performer performs in a devised piece they rarely improvise” (*Devising Music* 11). I hope to use and adapt some of these methods to develop that intimate relationship Picknett talks about, but bringing them into the context of improvised music, specifically with large groups.

The opportunity to explore this came from London-based improvised music organisation LUME, who invited me to be part of their “LUME Lab” series, aimed at giving composers time and space to develop brand new work. I decided to bring together a new octet for this project, including two musicians who have been involved in each stage of my PhD research so far, to enable their insights to assist me in comparing my approaches. Alongside these two regular collaborators and myself, the rest of the octet was deliberately chosen to be musicians I had not often performed with previously.

Picknett states that “the core of the creative process of devising is the performers’ improvised responses to tasks or questions. These tasks or questions are set by the composer/director” (*Devising Music* 11). As all the musicians involved identify as free-improvisers, I decided to set the first task as simply to improvise. I started with small group free improvisation sessions, with the members of the octet broken up into two duos, a trio and a quartet. This is motivated by Stenström’s observation of improvising musicians’ own preferred group sizes (45).

These initial sessions were recorded and I then, in a similar way to previous pieces of mine, transcribed certain elements to extract themes that would form the basis of the following sessions. These were again in small groups (although mostly different combinations), and this time the task was to improvise around the thematic material, with little to no additional direction from myself, rather to let the group collectively define how the material is played. All sessions were recorded, and the improvisations informed the final compositions in a variety of ways.

To illustrate one of these, the melody in (Figure 1) appeared in quite a frantic session on trumpet. Bringing it to the second sessions, the melodic phrase became much more drawn out, the busy improvising

became much more textural, and the drone became more of a feature. This shaped the whole arc of the piece in its final form, the composition *Managed Decline*, as evidenced by the recording.¹



Figure 1. Melody transcribed from trio improvisation.

In another example, during another trio improvisation the chords in (Figure 2) were formed, and played very serenely with a lot of space between them. These were taken as written to the second sessions for development, during which different approaches to the material were tried, with different people cueing the chords and so on. The character of them did not drastically change, and as such, they formed the opening of the composition *When Flowering*, as well as informing the harmonic content and overall mood of the piece.

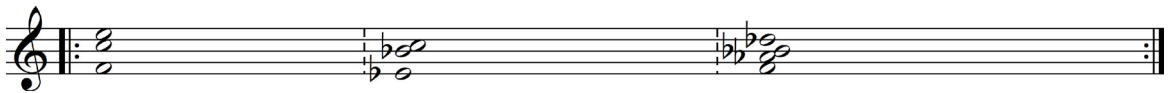


Figure 2. Three chords transcribed from trio improvisation.

As well as these specific examples, I organised the recordings from the second sessions into playlists based around each idea, so I had, for example, six different recordings of small groups improvising around the chords in (Figure 2). I used these playlists to put myself back into the soundworld created by the small groups interrogating the material, and as such to disrupt the normal workings of a lone composer. In interviews, Participant B reflected on this aspect of the process, and echoed Kevin Whitehead comment above that “free improvisation is one way a group discovers its own sound” (154). “So that starts to unify the group . . . the ways in which all of those people in various different combinations play one idea” (Personal interview).

By using recordings in this way, I am able to work towards a group sound that has been developed collectively, rather than imagining how the musicians might fit together based on what I know about them individually. This was highlighted especially with this group as I chose to work largely with musicians I was less familiar with, who I had performed with fewer times, or sometimes not at all prior to this commission, and as such the recordings were especially useful. Reflecting on this and Hagberg’s writing, I feel this method gets closer to incorporating the collective intention he talks about into the composing process than I had done previously.

Reflections

Interviewing some of the musicians who had been involved in this and earlier projects raised some interesting insights. Participant A had commented above on the disconnect between the process and the final performance in an earlier piece, said of the octet work; “I felt more involved in the process of doing this than I did in the previous ones” (Personal interview). This was what I had hoped would come from working with groups this way, although whether this was manifested in the music is another question.

Despite the musicians talking favourably of the process of developing the music, they also highlighted what they saw as shortcomings in the final pieces: “When it came to playing the pieces there was little or no space to affect the authorship of the actual performance” (Participant B). With specific reference to *Managed Decline*, the strong tonal centre was remarked on as being restrictive. In another piece, *When Flowering*, the

¹ <https://soundcloud.com/hunteranton/sets/lume-lab-octet/s-UQQwW>

tonal nature of the music was intended to be pulled around more than it was in performance. In interviews the musicians raised this as an issue around my scoring, suggesting that, by using conventional notation, I was leading people to play in a more conventional manner than they might otherwise.

I raise these issues here to highlight that, although they felt more involved in the process that led to this music than previously, this was not their primary concern. It perhaps should not have come as a surprise that improvisers might be more interested in how things happen in the moment rather than the process by which the music was developed, but I had hoped it would have had a greater influence on the performance than it did. Within the wider aims of my research, this approach did not lead to effectively featuring the individual voices of the musicians.

One of the hypotheses behind my methods is that, with a greater sense of ownership over the music, musicians might feel more inclined to re-shape the material in performance. This was motivated by the way this happens in small group situations, specifically with duos and trios I have played regularly with, and developed the music collectively over a period of time. Picknett says “ownership gives the performer permission to take risks in both creation and performance,” (*Devising Music* 33) but in this instance, it doesn’t seem to have had this effect.

Another possibility is that my engagement with the practice of devising music might be at fault. As a relative newcomer to the process of devising, I perhaps became too focused on the process and neglected to take a wider view of how the finished music might be performed. Perhaps this is a welcome reminder not to focus too much on the processes behind the work at the expense of the performance. Another interpretation could be that the field of devising music in this way is a relatively recent on, and as such needs further development. It is possible that this methodology is not one suited to improvising musicians, or that more time is needed to familiarise both the wider scene and myself with these working practices. Devising in theatre has a long history (Heddon and Milling), and translating these approaches to improvised music might not be without its difficulties at first, not least due to the strong individual voices that musicians spend their careers developing (Iyer 399). It is plausible that this might make improvising musicians more reluctant to enter into a process of devising.

One of these compositions was released on the Live at LUME compilation CD, and so I have the benefit of being able to bring in some reviews. Journalist and broadcaster Daniel Spicer commented on his radio show “a cracking line-up, a great bit of music.” (*The Mystery Lesson* online) Ian Mann on his blog said “the term “composition” is used lightly . . . this evolves into an animated collective conversation.” (online) While being far from exhaustive, both these two excerpts choose to refer to the group, with Spicer referencing the high calibre of the musicians—so perhaps their voices are well represented—and Mann referencing the collectivity of the music, implying the performance is constituted largely by improvisation.

By developing the music with groups, I have foregrounded the collective intention that Hagberg talks about above, and that Mann reflects in his review. This is something that Picknett recognises in devising, observing that the music “forms around the instrumentation of the group and is idiomatic to that particular group of musicians” (*Navigating the Uncertain* 160). As a possible consequence of this foregrounding, the individual voice has perhaps been backgrounded. Certainly, the musicians interviewed felt this and, although Mann’s review talks about the improvising as a large part of the piece, he refers particularly to the “collective conversation.”

This is in contrast to earlier work of mine, with my eleven-piece ensemble Article XI. The music was developed using solo improvisations, and reviews of the music talk about there being “ample room for individual voices to be heard” (Spicer, *Lume Festival* 79) in live performance, and on the released album “each member not only shines but clearly contributes to the whole” (Epstein online). Returning to my opening questions about whether I can develop music that effectively features the individual voices of the musicians and whether I can bring about a greater sense of collective ownership over the material, these reflections suggest that the individual voices are better featured when I’ve worked with solo improvisations, which would support the discussion above around solo improvisation and language. Similarly, the collective ownership is improved when working with Picknett’s devising methods, which also presents some evidence of Hagberg’s collective intention.

Conclusion

Using Hagberg's discussion of collective intention, I have shown a distinct difference between solo and group improvisation, which has then changed the way I have approached composing, specifically by applying the devising approach explored by Picknett to a large group of improvising musicians. The outcomes of this investigation, discussed above, have been both positive—the musicians felt more involved in the compositional process—and negative—the musicians felt restricted by the compositions, regardless of their involvement in creating them. This would seem to contradict Picknett's assertion that "ownership gives the performer permission to take risks," (*Devising Music* 33) and so I have also suggested that the process of devising music might not be suited for improvising musicians. The same could be said, however, about any other method of composing for improvisers, and thus call into question a whole lineage of artistic endeavours. At the top of the article, I highlighted some of the challenges of working with large groups of musicians as identified by Jost, Fell and Corbett and how I am seeking to use composition to address some of them. This article has outlined some of the ways I have been approaching this, and some of the questions that have arisen during the process as I work towards a greater understanding of the issues. It is a continuing process, as much Practice-as-Research is, and I will continue to question, develop and refine my practice because, as Corbett says, when it does work "it's worth lots more points" (Corbett 123).

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Appendix

Winter 16

A Hunter (a response to 'Autumn 60' by Cornelius Cardew)

- For improvising soloist with ensemble of any size.
- The soloist is also the conductor.
- On soloist's cue, the ensemble should move to any of the 12 boxes. Or continue doing what they are doing. This repeats for the duration of the piece.
- The box in bold ('Soloist's Melody') shouldn't be played by any musician until the soloist has played it.
- The soloist is free to improvise whatever music they wish, but it must feature the 'Soloist's Melody' at some point.
- In addition, the ensemble should collectively label three sections 1, 2 and 3. The soloist may cue these by holding up the appropriate number of fingers. For added fun, the ensemble should pick these sections and not tell the soloist.
- Ending: if an ending doesn't occur naturally, the soloist should make a fist (to end the piece abruptly on the next cue) or hold up 5 fingers (to fade out on the current texture)

<p>...with the soloist</p>	<p>...or other semitones</p>	<p>Tremolo and slide up</p>	<p>Continue in a similar manner</p> <p>Whatever pitches fit. Omit some notes sometimes too.</p> <p>Pick a line</p>
<p>Concert</p> <p>Tremolo and slide down</p>	<p>Soloist's Melody (expand)</p>		<p>Long sustained tones, vary tuning. Look for beats frequencies.</p>
<p>Long sustained tones, vary timbre</p>	<p>Play with rest lengths and repetitions. Stick to these notes though.</p>	<p>Improvise a texture</p>	<p>Pick a line</p>