

After avant-gardes: thoughts on the nature of improvisation and its place in contemporary music

Jerry Wigen

Department of Music, Goldsmiths University of London, United Kingdom
jerrywigen@mac.com

Abstract

This paper will consider the position of freely improvised music within the context of the common understanding of the term 'avant-garde'. Against a background of increasing awareness of the form's value and importance and a burgeoning diversity of practice, I will attempt to gather some thoughts about my own perspective and experience, both of which continue to broaden as a result of practical involvement and observation of the texts and commentaries of others. The need to respond to the moment of performance is felt to be intrinsic to the form by many musicians but this will more often than not involve the use of techniques that have been developed as part of a personal and individual sound vocabulary. I will therefore attempt to address the paradox of the improviser's theoretical potential for continuous renewal and innovation set against their frequent use of developed material and techniques, the former seemingly positioning the music as an ideal 'cutting edge' form, the latter suggesting a potential for stasis and conservatism. I will also consider the implications of the preference of many performers to eschew any kind of predetermined arrangement as to form and structure and the bearing this has on the music's acceptance or non-acceptance as valid artistic activity. I shall explore the perception of improvised music as a means to develop interactive skills and the view expressed by the late Derek Bailey that the priority of improvised music is not necessarily novelty or innovation per se, but the need to discover new areas of enquiry by embracing and engaging with a diversity of different approaches; more of an activity that enables personal growth in a collective context, but not necessarily with any underlying progressive agenda.

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Jerry Wigen is a composer/improviser who plays mainly clarinet and guitar. He is presently studying for an M.Phil/Ph.D in composition at Goldsmiths College with Roger Redgate. He was an spnm shortlisted composer between 2003-2006 and has had work performed by Alan Thomas, the Post Quartet and many others. A regular participant in Eddie Prevost's improvisation workshop, he has lectured on approaches to improvised music and has presented papers at ICMSN 2007 at the University of York and at the Music and/as Right Action conference at the University of East Anglia. He recently took part in the First Athens Composer/Performer Conference as both composer and performer.