

What is Improvisation?

Interviewee: Clinton Green

What drew you to the world of improvised music?

I think that before I dive into this and the other questions, I need to define what I mean when we talk about 'improvised music'. Improvisation plays a role in all kinds of music, notated, structured or otherwise. I think these questions are more concerned with a practice where improvisation is the main aim. A structure may exist, but it is there to serve improvisation. This is the kind of practice I will refer to in answering these questions, rather than the situations where improvisation exists within aspects of a composition or some other kind of structure.

As for myself, the first music I ever played was improvised. This came from nothing other than a lack of skill or knowledge of how to play 'real' music, or even how to play an instrument. However, I was aware that 'jamming' and 'noise' were allowed, and a lot fun. So my first band consisted of myself and some friends playing instruments that we didn't know how to play. Some of the music we composed, but we'd also just jam. The attraction to improvisation was access; I could make music without having acquired the knowledge or skills of musicianship or composition.

This soon morphed into more traditional structures of writing and performing songs. I only came back to improvisation years later, when I started performing my own experimental and noise music live on a regular basis. My solo performances were not primarily improvised, but as I started to perform in collaborative situations with others, it was accepted that improvisation was the primary method of live collaboration (and still is). So at that time, it wasn't the practice of improvisation itself that drew me; it just so happened that improvisation was the accepted collaborative conduit in the musical circles in which I moved. It was only later that I began to appreciate the practice of improvisation for its own sake.

For readers unfamiliar with your musical output, what should they check out first and where can they find it?

My latest solo release can be heard here

<https://illuminatedpaths.bandcamp.com/album/lay-your-high-city-low>

More video and music can be found at <http://ClintonGreenMusic.com>

Specifically in regard to improvisation, I've also designed several scores/scenarios/situations that seek to subvert habits and clichés often present in collective improvisation. Of interest

is 'Good Improv/Bad Improv' - <http://www.shamefilemusic.com/ug/goodimprov.pdf>

and the improv talent/gameshow Improv Idol, co-produced and hosted with Carmen Chan – <http://ImprovIdol.com>

What are your top five albums of improvised music?

I'm much more attracted to improvisation as a live rather than recorded experience, but some albums that come to mind are (in no particular order):

- The Necks 'Open'
- Keith Rowe & John Tilbury 'Duos For Doris' (assuming it is improvised?)
- Many Sun Ra Arkestra improvisations (which Sun Ra often denied were improvised).

Can you articulate your approach to improvisation?

My main experience of improvisation is a relational one; my relation to the other performers, to the audience, to the space. For me, music is a social practice. In improvisation, the structures are removed, leaving bare how we relate to each other. Are we listening to each other? Are we in conversation? Are we solving, or creating problems? Reflecting on my own experience of improvisation, both as a performer and observer, I believe a performer's behaviour is heavily influenced by their relationship to the other performers, as well as to the audience, the site, and the relationship the performer has with his or her instrument. In some ways, with musical/compositional structures removed, all we have left to work from is that relationship. This is something I have become more and more aware of. For example, I recently played a duo with Ren Walters, with both of us playing pieces of metal Colourbond we had found in the bush. As it was a new instrument/object for me, I spent some time in the weeks before practising with it, envisioning what we might

play together in this improvisation. When the day of the performance came, Ren played his instrument completely different to what I had anticipated; however, his gestures and choice of action/sound were something that I identified as very 'Ren'. I thought to myself, "I've been doing all this preparation for playing this instrument, when really it is about playing with this person".

The age-old question: Do you think improvisation can be taught? And if so, do you have any tips for those looking to improve their approach to improvisation?

Yes, it can certainly be taught. I'm no teacher, so I'm not sure what the methodology would be, but you only have to see how someone improves as an improviser over a period of time to appreciate that one can build his or her improvising skills. As for myself, I believe I've learned a lot from fellow improvisers who have been mentors to me. Self-reflection on my own tendencies as an improviser can be tough, but I think really important in developing further. All this can only come through playing a lot with others, not letting failure stop you trying again. In some ways, failure (whatever that means) is inevitable in improvisation. I also feel I've learnt many things from watching lots of improv gigs as part of the audience; probably as much from the bad ones as the good ones!

Is there a certain level of proficiency on an instrument needed for one to be a good improviser?

Hmm, that's a hard one. I think it certainly helps. But then again, I've seen great improvisers pick up an instrument they have limited or no proficiency in, and do wonderful things with it. Equally, I have seen musicians with high levels of proficiency in their chosen instrument with no idea about how to truly engage musically with others (even in a couple of instances where said-players claim to be improvisers). I think I would say that proficiency is always important; in your instrument, but more broadly in your craft as well. Perhaps improvisation is the craft, and your instrument is just one of your tools (although a pretty important one).

What are you listening for and what are you responding to while you improvise?

Lots of things. It's not easy to detail after the fact. In what others are playing, I listen for patterns and punctuation points, responses to what I'm playing, hidden meanings or

interpretations. I think I'm often looking for my place in the music. I have found, however, that in improvisations of long durations, such thought/decision-making processes become far less conscious.

It is often believed that the best improvisations occur when performers subvert their personal agenda and become open and receptive to one another to create something that could not have been possible without the presence of those individuals at that precise moment in time-space. We can find a familiar example in a deep, verbal, conversation, where the insights and inputs of others can draw us to new topics, or modes of thinking. With that consideration in mind, how does one improvise and reach a comparable state of receptivity, or reach these modes of thinking, during a solo performance?

I think the key for solo improvisation performance is still dialogue/conversation, but it is with the audience and the site itself. Improvisation never takes place in a vacuum.

Receptivity to the audience is just as important in performance. As for the venue itself, the social and cultural echoes I find are just as important as the acoustic properties. When I build up a history with a venue, I find this colours my performance and improvisation a great deal. Everything I play (or don't play) is built on my history with the place.

When reflecting upon an improvised performance we often discuss it in terms of its temporal character; as a sequence of events. For example, the duration of the performance, or at moments when a performer interjects. However, it's far more difficult to discuss performance in regards to place – yet I argue that considering the experience of the performer in regards to place provides far more insight in regards to understanding the agency of the performer. Can you describe how place might inform the way that you improvise? This might include your physical environment, your cultural upbringing and/or political orientation (being Australian as opposed to American, or living in Australia but growing up in another country), and the influence that other bodies (performers and spectators) in the venue have on your performance, etc.

I've already started responding to this in the previous question, but there's another thing or two I'd like to say in response to this subject. I've become much more aware of the influence of place on improvisation through recent years when I've performed in unconventional locations, such as unauthorised public space performances, people's private home, and outback locations. The richness of these locales, as well as the subtraction of traditional performance venue tropes (stage, lights, PA, designated audience, alcohol) has cast my experiences of performance and improvisation in a new light. What does it mean to improvise to an audience that is not really an audience, but mere passers-by? Or to no one at all, besides your fellow improvisers? This is something I'm very interested in, and when I return to the traditional bar or performance space, it can sometime lack energy in comparison.

People talk about different styles of music being more so or less improvised than others. What do you think the boundary or limit of improvisation is?

As far as styles of music are concerned, I think I address this in a way in the first question when I define improvisation (as opposed to improvising within songs or compositional structures, where improv is not the key aim). I guess I'm placing limits on the idea of improvisation right there, but that is for the purposes of discussion only. I'd love to say that improvisation should not have limits, but I'm not sure how true that would be. Any

improviser knows the great problems we deal with are habit, repetition, and our own personal limitations (technically and creatively). Do the limits/boundaries of improvisation refer to its definition, or a value judgment (and there's some overlap there)? I guess it's like saying what are the limits of conversation? Not sure I know the answer to it, or how you'd even assess it.

Obviously, there is a difference in trust and familiarity when improvising with long-term collaborators versus when we improvise with people we have never met before. On the one hand, with people we know well, we might feel more comfortable taking risks, but on the other hand, we may fall into mannerisms and project certain expectations on our collaborators. When performing with someone we don't know however, we may be forced into areas where we truly improvise, but it is just as easy to revert to old habits and play it safe. Do you think your approach to improvisation changes in the two settings? If so, how?

Yes, I feel my approach is definitely different. I'm more likely to 'play it safe' with people I don't know well. I need that level of trust to really push it, to take risks, not only for my own security, but for theirs as well! If I try something new or unexpected, I need to be confident my trusted fellow improvisers can cope with it/forgive me. Trust is vital for me in improvisation. I feel my improvisation skills have developed mainly through an environment of trust. I am interested in playing with new people, and continue to do so, but in some ways these latter improvisations are trust-building exercises as well.

Outside of artistic practice, the concept of improvising is generally associated with less than ideal circumstances and outcomes; an improvised shelter, for instance. And on the surface, even improvisation within an artistic context seems relatively straight forward. Yet for those of us who have engaged in improvised music making, we understand that it can be extraordinarily complex. What makes this approach to music making so difficult? And as an aside, what makes it so rewarding that we persevere?

For me, the payoff is the excitement of the new – both as a player, and an observer. Songs and composed music mostly leave me bored very quickly, as I've heard it all a 1000 times before. As a player, I find the creation of something new gives me a lot of energy and satisfaction.

Do you consider the outcome of your improvised performance *before* you perform? I.e. do you work towards or within a certain idea or framework to achieve a particular aesthetic?

I'd love to appear a purist and say that I don't, that I go in with no expectations at all, but I'd be a liar. Yes, I do consider aspects of possible outcomes, and that is mainly related to the practical consideration of instrumentation. I don't play any particular instrument, so part of preparing for any performance, including an improvisation, involves me deciding what instruments/objects/materials to use. In making this choice, part of the consideration involves how I think certain instruments will fit with the other improviser/s, as well as the venue, and of course where my current interest and direction is in regard to instrumentation. Having made those preparations, I do try to be as open as possible within the improvisation and not be locked in to anything by those instrumentation choices. I've approached this in the past by bring loads of materials, but then I found myself trying to use all of them in a performance, which was not always to the benefit of the outcome. I'm trying to work on bringing less stuff to a performance and using that limitation as a way forcing me to improvise in new ways, discover new avenues and solutions with limited materials; that's a work in progress. But I do think too much planning/preparation for an improvised group performance can lead to problems. Very often I see less-skilled improvisers who have obviously approached the performance with a bag of well-used riffs/tricks.

As a spectator, what would you like to see/hear more of in improvised musical performances?

Risk-taking, and thus failure. Some of my favourite improvisations as an observer have been where something has obviously gone very wrong. I love watching how the players deal with that.

Interaction. I don't care how great you are on your instrument if you are not interacting with other players. Nothing more boring than a bunch of admittedly-proficient instrumentalists playing side-by-side, but not together.

Is there anyone from the Australian scene that you would like to improvise with but haven't?

I've been very fortunate that I've played with many of the improvisers I admire.

Interestingly, some I admire greatly I only got to know their music by playing with them, rather than listening to them. Others I didn't even like their music, but when I improvised with them I gained a new appreciation for their work.

Having said that, some names stand out of improvisers I admire a lot who I haven't played with. Jim Denley and Carolyn Connors would be at the top of that list.

Do you have any upcoming projects that we can keep an eye out for?

Always, always more. I think the rest of 2017 will be a time dedicated mainly to development of new ideas and works, through residencies and hopefully establishing a permanent studio space. I also hope to do more site-specific work in remote locations.

Do you have any final remarks that you would like to make about improvisation that was not covered in the questions above?

Thanks for thinking of me, Sam.