

What is Improvisation?

Interviewee: Nick Tsiavos (www.nicktsiavos.net)

What drew you to the world of improvised music?

Necessity.

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

Solo work – *run rabbit, run* and *one hundred months, third of east*

Duo work – *the fallen woman* (with Deborah Kayser), *folia* (with Anthony Schulz), and *sixteen alleluias* (with Adam Simmons)

Larger ensemble work – *Liminal*

all available at Readings Carlton

What are your top five albums of improvised music?

In no particular order... and probably not true:

Call me when you get there – Barre Phillips

Open to Love – Paul Bley

Black Market – Weather Report

Kind of Blue – Miles Davis

Three Ragas – Ravi Shankar

Can you articulate your approach to improvisation?

How I tend to use improvisation in my music is as a means of introducing instability in architectural structures I compose to explore whatever ideas I am involved with at the time.

It is not particularly 'genre based' in its elemental materials, although the past 25 years I have been exploring the musics I have been born into – namely the Hymnography of the Byzantine Church and the secular adaptation of some of its melodic material found in the music of Epirus (my place of birth).

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?

Of course. My advice is to read widely, listen carefully and practice the techniques you require to make meaningful noises on your instrument.

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

Yes. But that also depends on the genre you are practicing within – virtuosity need not only be in the realm of the maximalists.

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

Whatever it is, it is just beyond my conscious awareness – couldn't tell you other than, if I have to think about it, it isn't working.

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 am a bit wary of the preamble, perhaps I see it as a rash generalisation – I don't think a collaboration means that anyone 'subverts' their personal agenda to become 'open and receptive' at any given moment; it's not as though a performer's psychology is a 'switch on or off' thing. Your second sentence has more resonance, deep conversations are more likely to occur when there is a depth to the relationship between the people in conversation – similarly, most of the musicians that work with me have been on the journey with me for

very long periods of time – ranging between 10 and 35 years. I think that enables a depth of understanding of the language and the materials being used – a more acute awareness and resonance to each other's presence within the architecture. And now to the question posited in your last sentence – I might ask, would Pollock or Rothko or Picasso or Mondrian lack anything in their expression? They are acting alone, without collaborators, and yet they express themselves wondrously. I feel it is the same for a solo improviser in music – so perhaps I don't necessarily agree with your first sentence :-)

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 don't think the listener is necessarily consciously aware of the sequential nature of an improviser's work – this is more the province of academic analysis. If the listener is aware of time, I think the improviser has not convinced the listener to immerse themselves in the performance. Place has always been one of the major forces on music making – whether physically (acoustic environments and their effect on the music being performed – especially on acoustic instruments and voices) or culturally (loaded spaces such as churches, concert halls, bars etc.). Place (physical, cultural, spiritual) acts a contextual frame that deconstructs the thesis you are improvising.

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?

The bandwidth of possibility within improvisation is very wide – I prefer to think of the depth of meaning being created, as opposed to the level of improvisation – but then, I do not act as a custodian for any particular genre or institution.

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?

Again, I would rather think about the depth of meaning being generated than the level of risk taking being attempted. A couple of anecdotes – Barre Phillips related this one to me: He recalled going to Jimmy Guiffre's house every afternoon for months and improvising together before going into record a Free Jazz record – this was not about 'playing it safe', this was about a deeper exploration of their languages, generating a deeper level of meaning in their improvisations. Secondly, I remember seeing the Art Ensemble of Chicago at Dallas Brooks hall in 1981 – they had been performing together for 15 years or so by the time I got to one of their concerts... at no time did they seem to be 'playing it safe'. In my own experience, I tend to view working with new musicians as a time where we initiate a developing relationship, and hope, that if we are still playing together in five years, things will be coming up to speed!

If we compare, for example, John Coltrane's approach on the track *Giant Steps* to his approach on *Ascension*, we notice two distinct playing styles. Notably, we hear a lot of patterns and repetition on *Giant Steps*, a result of the chord changes, that are absent from *Ascension*. Do you think that navigating complex chord changes, or rhythmic structures, inhibits your ability to improvise? If so, is it possible to overcome these challenges?

You should ask Tommy Flanagan this question. Coltrane devoted time and energy to the first example, he came to the recording prepared while Flanagan was introduced to the music at a very late stage – the results speak for themselves. If Bop, Post-Bop etc. is what you want to play, then you need to devote time and energy to those genres that demand that sort of processing. If it is not your natural desire to explore that form of improvisation, I would ask why you are doing it.

There are commonly two way to consider temporality; one is that we're moving from the past, and bringing our memories and all we have learnt with us, to the present and into the future; the other is that our will to change the future dictates how we behave in the present, which is then documented in our past. When considering your approach to improvisation, do you feel that one of these perspectives on temporality is more accurate than the other? Or, can you conceive an idea that is more authentic?

Again, I would say that I don't agree with the above precepts. Psychology has no real on/off switch. History does not end on a whim. Time (as considered in the above sentences) is something that perhaps we should not be aware of when improvising.

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?

Life is complex, improvisation is as complex as you need it to be – no more, no less. Life is difficult, improvisation is as difficult as you need it to be – no more, no less. These moments of instability, provide us with glimpses of crystal clear abstractions of our psyche.

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?

Always.