

## What is Improvisation?

Interviewee: Niko Schauble ([www.pughousestudios.com/niko/](http://www.pughousestudios.com/niko/))

What drew you to the world of improvised music?

I grew up in a family of musicians and music teachers. My father had a large collection of jazz and Brazilian music. My uncle was a well know jazz bassist. I started playing the piano age 4 following a classical music education. At age 11 I got a drumkit (after a pestering my parents). I had a young local drummer as teacher and a lot of my practise consisted of playing along to records, which I enjoyed enormously. I got very interested how music was 'put together'. Alas my piano teacher had only the scantest idea (despite being a known piano virtuoso). Playing drums was liberating and fun. Piano playing was a chore (still appreciate that I 'was made' to learn it).

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

<http://pughousestudios.com/niko/>

What are your top five albums of improvised music?

That's a terrible question!!!!!!

I have no way of 'judging', but what I will do is list some albums that highly influenced me:  
**Bill Evans – Live in Montreux** – totally blew my mind; had no idea drums could be played like this (Jack DeJohnette).

**Ahmad Jamahl – At the Alhambra** – So focused making it sound so easy; so light so profound; joy and delight.

**György Ligeti – Lontano** – no improvisation here, but the sound the sound!

**Errol Garner – Concert by the Sea** – The Swing. The Swing!

**Weather Report – Black Market**

**Mahavishnu Orchestra – Apokalypse**

Must stop...

Can you articulate your approach to improvisation?

I don't feel that I am 'making up' things. I feel that the music/sound/texture/etc. is already there and what I need to do is 'tune in' and 'listen in'.

I also think it is important to create a form of some kind.

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?

I don't think it needs to be taught; playing is innate in children. The issue is rather that their curiosity and joy be not stifled, but nurtured.

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

No, in the sense that listening is probably more important than playing. Musical statements can be simple and don't have to be complex to be a valuable musical contribution. Of course, proficiency on one's instrument will allow for a broader range of expression.

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.

I agree.

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.

I feel this is much more limited as preconceived ideas and long held attitudes in conscious thinking are much more pervasive.

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 don't perform much solo. If I do (or in an extended fashion during an ensemble performance), I try to create a framework and then see how I go responding to those limitations.

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.

As I wrote above, the space the performance takes place in informs the music greatly. I am aware of my musico-cultural background and while relishing in the tradition, try not to let it stifle me (a fine line). Political orientation does play no part at all. Other performers greatly influence the music. The audience does too, to a degree (there can be a certain energy that one can 'feed from').

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?

That's a bit blurry. It's like asking, 'What is freedom?' I would think that making small choices in timbre, dynamics and rhythm are not improvisation, but interpretation (thinking about some playing a very prescriptive piece of music). Improvisation for me means that 'big decisions' are made by the performer, including form, rhythm pitch.

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?

When I was young, I could never have imagined how wonderful it is to have long standing performing connections. I never felt that there was a risk of 'reverting to old habits' or playing it safe. Quite the contrary!!! These strategies are much more likely to kick in when playing with new people.

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?

In regard to chord changes...Well...I am a drummer 😊!

In regard to complex rhythmic structures: Indeed, it can be inhibiting. I try to not find myself in a situation where I feel I am not able to contribute in meaningful way (I may be able to provide a supporting role, but not be a leading/soloing voice, which is fine). If I feel I am not up to the challenge I will not play.

How to overcome the challenges? Practice.

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? I feel neither considerations apply to me. I do not want to dictate the future, nor do I want my past to overly influence my playing now (that's the old paradox: practice, but when you play, don't play anything you practiced!). I try to be in the moment (forgetting about the past and the future).

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?

Predictably, for me improvisation is not associated with less than ideal circumstances. As I wrote above, I think that the difficulty experienced by performers can often be traced back to a stifling music education. There is of course musical complexity, but if the student is curious and engaged, practice will make it possible to master complexities. It must be said that practice and study may take decades.

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?

Generally not. I consider the setting (other players, acoustics), which may present limitations or inspirations (the former often informing the latter).

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

More listening to each other, less ego and more wit.

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

Possibly

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

I am very excited about a trio project with Paul Grabowsky and Mirko Guerrini, called Torrio! Also, the new Nick Haywood Trio (with Colin Hopkins).

I am also looking forward to a follow up album to 'Night Music' (released 25 years ago...)

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

Improvisation is what I like. I don't consider it better or worse than other music practices. I think, though, that improvisation should be encouraged to a much larger degree in education. After all, skills learned through this practice are all very much applicable in life. Quite possibly more so than learning set strategies and modes of operation.

I will always remember being asked by a young student after a performance at a primary school (with Jex Saarelaht and Philip Rex): "What does it feel like playing this music?" For me that's what it is really all about. It is why I started wanting to play the music and why I am still doing it. It can't be simply described in one word, as it can be exhilarating/scary/deeply satisfying/depressing/challenging/overwhelming/and much more. In the end though, playing music results in – to say it with Mr Brown "I feel good!"