

What is Improvisation?

Interviewee: Ren Walters (www.renwalters.com)

What drew you to the world of improvised music?

I first came into contact with musical improvisation through the pre-sixties jazz records that my father listened to and then later in rock guitar solos. However, at the time, improvisation seemed to me just part of the broader 'composition' that was being performed. I understood the *solo* as a structural component along with intro, verse, chorus etc. Gradually, in my own work I dispensed with pre-organised musical elements and the more and longer I did so, the more natural and comfortable it felt without them. Having said that, often the composer in me struggled against this, in seeking a specific outcome. But the attraction of an exploratory process without limit, mucking around with sound in performance excited me greatly.

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

I have a few commercially released recordings from the past some of which may still be available (aside from the boxes I have at home!) and well over 100 recordings made into CDR's over the last 20 years plus a couple of terabytes of performance recordings sitting on a hard drive from the last 7 or so years. NMIT Polytechnic in Melbourne has 60 titles accessible in their library. There is a Soundcloud page with a few random things from the last few years (<https://soundcloud.com/renwalters>). There are also videos at www.gaipsite.com and via my Youtube and Vimeo. There are bandcamp links also on www.renwalters.com

What are your top five albums of improvised music?

I don't think I have any.

Can you articulate your approach to improvisation?

My approach is formulated or modulated by my understanding of and relation with the general and specific conditions, context and reason for wanting to create with sound in performance. When performing with others, our relation, their expectations, and my physical, emotional and mental condition at the time of performance, have a direct bearing on what is heard/seen/experienced. Taking into consideration what I know of these things in advance feeds into the nature of my preparation, which has a conscious and sub-conscious dimension.

Whilst consideration is given to all the above factors, a constant requirement of my self, is to be as alive as possible to the unpredictable alchemic interaction of these ingredients, to match the dynamic presence of all constituents of the performance. This is the recipe that can sometimes produce transformative energies for those present.

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, I think an improvisational process can be learned and understood. I am making a distinction between the genre-specific improvisation and extemporization of jazz and other musics and an improvisational process, that involves playing with sounds in a way that has no obligation to any musical syntax and that occurs to one in the moment of playing.

An improvisational process is most natural to all of us, or perhaps *was*! As our lives become more 'sophisticated', patterned and habituated, 'making things up as we go', figuring out on the fly, experimenting as a child at play might, this way of 'worlding' recedes, perhaps showing itself in designated pleasures or leisure time (like sports, hobbies, holidays, etc.).

If a person is willing to investigate, a pathway exists.

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

No

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

I cannot say that there is anything I either listen for or respond to that consistently appears in every improvisational scenario. I do seek to feel “connected” within myself, to my co-performers or to the situation and context within which I am improvising. This could be understood as being engaged in a state of *flow*, where one’s energies feel supported, enhanced and coalesce with the other elements to create an ease of performance/being. The way to bring this about requires different and often subtle approaches dependent upon the situation. Approached too consciously and sometimes a pressure to attain such a state creates its opposite. Improvisational performance is a dynamic situation that requires a dynamic presence to its unique set of conditions. Often, we have to accept conditions that are not optimum and find a way of functioning within those parameters. If I am attached to a particular methodology, process or relation in order to set up my feeling “connected” and to have a good improvisational experience and for some reason I am unable to create this, then acceptance of whatever confronts me as being the ingredients with which I have to work today is a fruitful response (although not always easily achieved!), and one which can then bring about the sense of *flow* which I was unable to attain in the first place.

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?

Listening for the unintended; being prepared to ‘loosen the grip’ of one’s control over how sounds are being made and following the consequences of that, which requires using awareness rather than judgment, and patience to allow something initially unfamiliar/uncomfortable, its own space. Consider that whatever this sonic event/process becomes, will be a unique story, it then becomes a matter of commitment to elucidate.

There is a tendency toward the virtuosic because this apparently signifies commitment and deep engagement.

Imagine observing a large and beautiful tree its sculptural qualities are easily admired and enjoyed. After a while we begin to notice more details, like its bark and leaves. We may be drawn to get closer. Oozes of sap, insect lives, spider webs, soon it becomes apparent there is a thriving micro ecology that was not visible before. There is a world of sonic possibility for us outside/inside the accomplished gesture. Accessing it, for me, is often a matter of placing my attention in different places and being patient with whatever emerges from the *potent aural space*. I can then have a sense of collaborating with the world around me, a feeling of freshness with my living and my relation.

So subversion of my habitual skill set is desirable to bring dynamism to the performance process. However, my approach and application of this strategy is nuanced and context dependent.

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.

To perform in a café, a dedicated performance space, or a domestic situation, will often provide contrasting experiences due to the nature of these environments. But performing indoors in a hotel in a city or outdoors in the middle of a salt lake will emphasise the difference more so. The difference is articulated in the physical dimension but it is also strongly felt in the human geography, the usage and its vibrational effect over time

The influence of physical place or 'site' on my engagement is profound. Site can also be understood as one's own inner conditions or the relational space between performers, etc. The effect of admission of any of these 'environments' on my performance can range from subtle to extreme. As musician Wade Matthews notes, "Site-specific improvisation presupposes a constant, intense, and untiring perceptive effort on the part of the creator. Inevitably, this also has an effect on the perceptive experience of the audience, and the result is music which guides its listeners towards greater consciousness of the setting." I would add that the 'setting' includes the political, cultural and spiritual qualities of the performer in relational action. Performance consciously located within a site acknowledges the broader web of relations that come into play, offering an invitational energy.

Doreen Massey wants "to replace the idea of space as an inert container with a conceptualization of it as an emergent property constructed through interrelations and containing diverse simultaneous trajectories. In general, she advocates a view of space as 'lively' rather than 'dead'." This idea of place denotes an environment that is not just about physical geography, it is human geography ("the ability to attribute meaning to places") as well, and according to Massey, "is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus." If this is true, then open, porous musicking will be readily embodying a place's existing vibrational energies as its ingredients, and so concocting a sonic brew in return. The music that comes as an expression of my relationship with my fellow performers is modulated by the 'lively' space of our performance site.

"When a musician enters a space, he listens carefully to its sounds and its resonance. When he plays his first notes there, he makes an evanescent mark, bouncing his sound off the surrounding objects as a way of *knowing*" (Wade Matthews).

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?

There are certain situations, such as in a more traditional theatrical context, where there may be a theme, a story, and the improvisation is designed in a sense to produce an effect

What is Improvisation?

An interview series by Sam McAuliffe

not in detail but in generality, and here I can understand considerations of a particular process and outcome. However, I generally like to have a sense of discovery about every aspect of an improvisational performance. I find aspiring to an aesthetic or any other construct an imposition that distracts me from exploring and responding fully to the conditionality of the moment in process, where I attempt to avail and hand my self over to the alchemic brew of forces that reveal the unique nature of this occurrence.

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

Perhaps Jon Rose, and Jim Denley some more.