What is Improvisation?

Interviewee: Nat Grant (http://www.natgrantmusic.com)

What drew you to the world of improvised music?

I borrowed a loop pedal from a guitarist friend when I was in the third year of my undergraduate (repertoire) performance degree, to use in a composition by Nigel Westlake. I got some microphones too and just started making loops with percussion – textural, rhythmic – and layering up from there. It was the beginning of both composition and improvisation for me.

Having said that, as a percussionist I'd improvised before this without quite realising it – doing session work and recording instrumental tracks for animators, filmmakers, and songwriters at uni. I guess this kind of soundscape creation is quite natural for percussionists so I hadn't really considered that I'd been improvising.

I also collaborated with different artists at this time – mainly dancers and sculptors. I made music for live performance, which again was some very early improvisation and composition for me but I didn't think of it like that at the time. I was just playing.

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

My PhD project, *Momentum*. You can listen to it here:
https://natgrantmusic.bandcamp.com/album/momentum-box-set

It's quite a lengthy listen… The shorter part of the project I made in Turkey is here:
https://natgrantmusic.bandcamp.com/album/momentum-turkey

What are your top five albums of improvised music?

There is a track on Arthur Cantrill's *Hootonics* album, actually it's a bonus track:
Cicada Mix

Lou Reed/Laurie Anderson/John Zorn – they did do at least one album but I'm thinking more of their recorded live improvisations.

Albums that comprise improvisation and composition:

Lo Res – *La Sortie*

Eves – *Disrhythms*

Artists who I listen to a lot who improvise (but I can't pick one album)

Colin Stetson

Peter Brötzmann

Can you articulate your approach to improvisation?

Listening and responding, but not in a call-and-response kind of way: more in a 'doing the thing I was already doing but being conscious of existing sounds' kind of way. It's hard to explain. Texture has always been my focus, which is why I've been drawn to looping and using long delays to layer and juxtapose sounds. I'm really interested in minimalism and small changes over long periods of time. But everyone is different, and improvising with other people has pushed me to broaden this approach – to sometimes play loud and/or fast because that's what is required at that point in time.

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 had a primary school student say to me recently: "you don't really teach me, you just tell me to do stuff and I do it." What is teaching anyway? Explaining concepts and ways to develop them and include them in an existing practice? I'm not really sure, and I've been a teacher for 13 years. I have developed as an improviser by playing with other people and by recording myself and listening back, the same way I've developed other parts of my instrumental and composition practice. I think when you are stuck or first starting out that setting some limitations can make the whole process less scary. I start students improvising on drum kit with a few set rhythms that they can move around the different drums and cymbals, and on the marimba

with just a few notes of a scale at a time. From there I just expand the scope of what I'm encouraging them to try, and at some point usually they will just let loose without even realising that they're improvising and pushing themselves. It's cool to witness.

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

Nope. BUT I do think that improvising is a skill that can be honed and developed and can require sensitivity, focus, and in some cases a lot of hard work. There is a cool accessibility to improvisation, especially free improvisation, that doesn't require virtuosity, but that doesn't necessarily mean that anyone can do it well (that's a problematic term right there) without some amount of practice and attention.

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

Nothing in particular: just trying to be aware of other performers, how things sound in the space, and what else is going on. Audience can influence this as well. A really attentive audience can inspire (in me, at least) more minimal, sparser playing, and vice versa.

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 actually think it's exactly the same. When I have approached a solo improvisation with any kind of 'agenda' ie a stubborn or fixed idea of how it might go, it just doesn't work. I like to have lots of options in terms of sonic palette and then to just see what happens: to pick a sound to start with and to just listen and be with that sound, in a space, with an audience, and see where it needs to go next.

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 know about this. I've improvised mostly with other Australian artists but also with people from New Zealand, Japan, the USA, Switzerland, and the UK, amongst other places. Maybe they have all been from big cities and therefore culturally our experiences are similar, but I've found that free improvisation with people from different places has shared a lot of common ground. Similarly performing and collaborating overseas has not been a very different experience to what I do here. I've found that whatever style someone is comfortable in can have more to do with different approaches or reluctance to improvise. In terms of physical environment, I guess where I play must influence me in some way but I can't really say how because I've never noticed a pattern in this regard. I've played great gigs in lovely venues and shit gigs in lovely venues. I've had incredible experiences in terrible dark spaces with awful sound, and vice versa.

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?

There are SO many types of improvisation, and a lot of popular/jazz/folk/rock music can contain elements of this in solos etc. For me this is different to completely improvised music, and I feel like it's possible to tell if something in performance has happened before and has been planned or if it's happening in the moment. There's no hierarchy here but I do really enjoy experiencing the kind of improvisation where

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people are really engaged and listening and taking risks… and sometimes it doesn't quite work! But I'm up for that too, as a performer and an audience member, because you'll often get at least some small moments of gold too and they make it all worthwhile, in my opinion.

I guess there is a point where improvisation becomes composition. Maybe when something is repeated enough times that it is incorporated into one's musical language/toolbox/whatever. I think the conversation analogy works really well here. We all talk all the time but a lot of what we say are words, phrases, and ideas we've articulated many times before. Sometimes you're really put on the spot though and it's much more of a struggle to search for words – or when you're trying to explain something that you only just grasp… It feels different to regular conversation, and I think that's where the line is for me.

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?
I feel like I have really grown into some long-term collaborations. With Miranda Hill, for example: we've been playing improvised shows for a couple of years, and there is this huge level of trust now, so with each show I feel more comfortable and able to push/stretch myself, and our sound is really changing and evolving. At the start I think our first few gigs were quite similar as we tested out the common ground we'd already found with each other.

I've experienced some magical moments in first time improvisations. It can be so exciting because sometimes (being thrown together with a visiting artist for a gig, for example) you really don't know what to expect. I think in this scenario everyone can be very alert and open and this can yield awesome and surprising results.

I try not to change my approach in either setting because I want to be always pushing myself to play differently and to extend the boundaries of what I can say, sonically. But I would say that in a more conventional band setting I take fewer risks in an improvised solo than I would in a totally free improv gig. In one setting often a specific tempo and tonality need to be retained for continuity. It's a totally different experience and mindset to a free improv situation.

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?

Only because I haven't committed nearly as much time to being able to play over complex changes as I have to reading notated music or freely improvising. It's all about practice: that 10,000 hours thing or whatever discipline/practice rule people subscribe to. So yes, totally possible to overcome, but it's also about priorities and we tend to spend more time on things that interest us the most.

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'm not sure if I can separate those two concepts, as ways of living just as much as ways of playing and improvising. Actually I don't think you can ignore the past or the future so maybe it's not even possible to separate them. I guess my focus shifts from one to the other in terms of living, but in terms of improvising I don't think I can really conceive of much outside the moment. I think just about everything we do is about

memory, but I wouldn't say I focus on this that much when playing, more on reflection after the fact.

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?

Those moments of gold I mentioned earlier. It can be hard work, but also such an incredibly magical way of connecting with other artists and audiences. I think this makes it totally worthwhile. But it's all about personal preference. Some artists are most comfortable and can be their best free selves when performing composed/notated music. Some people only feel this way when improvising. For many I'd say it's a combination.

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 times when I have something that I would like to happen in a performance, usually tied in with pushing myself. I've had conversations with collaborators about these things before a gig, but often those goals just go out the window when playing. I think for me it's about brain space and focus, and I need all of my attention for the listening and improvising part, which means the planning part of my brain isn't really dominant. There is often a framework though, whether that's instrumentation or if the improvisation is a Zorn style game piece or something like that. Which is cool. I'm not anti planning I just find I forget. I often write shopping lists and to do lists and then instantly lose them but I think I get the most out of writing the list and articulating what I think I need to do. Then my subconscious can take over. If something is really important I'll remember it when I need to.

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

Consideration.

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

The Necks. Can you arrange that? ☺

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

Yes, a residency at the Testing Grounds in Melbourne. I'll be there until July 21, continuing my Momentum project http://momentumproject.blogspot.com and also curating two performance events featuring myself, Peter Knight, Elnaz Sheshgelani, Mark Pedersen, Francesca Sculli, Channels, and Toby Brodel. Event details on the Testing Grounds website http://testing-grounds.com.au

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

That thing about conversations. Everything really comes down to listening for me. And if I find it difficult to converse with someone or feel that they aren't really listening or hearing what I'm saying then I have found that musical conversation doesn't work either. And vice versa – I'm sure I've been the one who doesn't listen on occasion. And that's fine. You don't need to be able to collaborate with everyone you meet, even if you really like their music. Some things just don't work and that's ok.