

On Improvisation

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From my earliest memory to this day, I have had the ability to so totally immerse myself in music, that all other perceptions of space and time disappeared. Although I was always convinced many people had this gift in a much greater intensity, I discovered late in life that a vast amount of people actually didn't.

I was six years old when my mother took me to my first violin lesson. I was left-handed and also was quite limited in mind-eye-hand coordination. My lifelong struggle with this very difficult instrument did not turn me into a Menuhin or Heifetz as I'd heard on the radio, but I am now convinced it was a superb therapy for my left-handed clumsiness. Neither the music school nor my parents ever expected me to become a performer, for which I was always grateful.

When I was 19 years old the Czech Ministry of Culture extended an invitation for a music student to attend the Prague Conservatory of Music. Nobody wanted to go to the wrong side of the Iron Curtain and I turned out to be the only applicant. There was no tuition required and living expenses were to be paid for. In return, I presume I was to proclaim the glory of communism upon return to my native Iceland. This was a secondary school; my fellow classmates were 13 years old and already much better players. I remember rationalizing that I would play on the last stand in the 2nd violin section and have a heap of free time to study, travel, and discover music.

And it all worked out.

In the late sixties I found myself freelancing in New York but, alas, hating it. Overworked, underpaid, I had just enough money to wrap a long black skirt over my blue jeans (I was thinner then) and make my way to the podium. I did, however, discover, among other composers, Mahler and Bruckner, hitherto unknown to me. Even more significant was the exploding pop scene with the Beatles, Stones, The Who, and many other rockers. Life got better.

And then I discovered VIDEO! What a liberation—and I was good at it too. Video went through endless progressions, from open reel to cassettes, from analog to digital, and in the nineties this evolved into video that could be manipulated in live performance. I first experimented with acoustic violin and a video cassette player. It became obvious that a laser disc with MIDI protocol would greatly expand the addressing scheme, such as speed control and location.

At this point in my musical life I had joined some amateur chamber music groups, playing mostly string quartets.

I soon became an adamant anti-performer and assumed my newly purchased MIDI violin would be used exclusively for my own private pleasure, with perhaps a few experiments to be saved on a video tape.

My friend Michel Saup, who had been working with similar technologies, asked me to join him on stage for a joint performance at Ars Electronica in 1992. We had never tried anything out and the day before the performance, Michel lost all his computer files. He spent the entire night restoring them, so we had no rehearsal at all.

Our only plan was that I would play first, then Michel would join in, and then both of us would play together. We had one projector and a row of monitors front stage. The hall was packed—seats had been taken out in order to accommodate a standing-room-only overflowing audience, and the mood was great. From the beginning the audience was with us, laughing, clapping and eventually jaw dropping.

The jaw dropping did it! I experienced the sublime joy of performing and became a junky.

But I am supposed to be writing about improvising, not performing. For me it is the same, since no matter how much I prepare, on stage it is always a 'seats of the pants' event. In preparation, I begin with assigning the 5 strings to 5 MIDI channels, and then assigning certain functions to each string. The functions are image selection, speed control (fast, slow, freeze, backwards, forwards), effects control (keying, colorizing, displacement, warping, and so on).

My Zeta violin is not a very musical instrument and needs a lot of audio processing. I therefore rely heavily on the pre-recorded soundtrack of the video clips. On the stage I look for lucky instances of sound/image events to combine with the sounds coming out of my violin. It is therefore not surprising that I seek masterful co-performers, like Michel Waisvisz, Trevor Wishart or even myself in my earlier (videotaped) incarnation as a classical musician. Over the years I have learned to cope with the nervousness and guilt of too little preparation, in anticipation of all the fun when everything works. It is an experience which I would not have wanted to live without.

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