

AMM — historical and theoretical precedents for the workshop

*Informal sound has a power over our emotional responses that formal music does not, in that it acts subliminally rather than on a conscious cultural level. This is a possible definition of the area in which AMM is experimental. We are searching for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them. The search is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician [...] is at the heart of the experiment.*¹

In 1999 I returned from a jazz festival and colloquium in Guelph, Canada and decided to set up and develop an improvisation workshop. This was to test, with others, if there was any continuing momentum and meaning in the kind of practice I had been part of, and subject to, within the ensemble AMM. The reputation of AMM might be enough to encourage the curious. Whether a significant amount would stay the course and help explore and develop a unique theory of improvisation was another matter. Only time would tell whether I would become more (or less) convinced of the efficacy of this practice. That was sixteen years ago. People are still coming. I have heard much music. I have learnt things. Made many friends. The following is a brief historical account of how I perceived AMM and my consequent thoughts about the theoretical basis of our shared experiences and how this has been extended and applied to a continuing cohort who share making music with others at our London workshop meetings.

In 1965 four men in their mid-twenties began the musical explorations that became known as AMM. In the following year they were joined by the avant garde composer Cornelius Cardew (then in his early thirties) who had recently relinquished his role as Stockhausen's assistant and was immersed in the development of his graphic musical *magnum opus Treatise*. These five musicians — Cornelius Cardew, Lou Gare, Eddie Prévost, Keith Rowe and

¹ Cornelius Cardew, 'Towards an Ethic of Improvisation' (1967) *Cornelius Cardew A Reader*, Copula, 2006

Lawrence Sheaff — made the 1966 recording AMMMUSIC.² The general trajectory of this phase of AMM's early history (as well as Cardew's experiences with Karlheinz) is well documented in John Tilbury's biography of Cardew.³

Suffice it to say, it was a rapid learning curve for us all. And, Cardew's presence certainly aided our awareness (and possible significance) of the new ground we were breaking. Cardew was to be a lasting influence on the theory and practice of AMM. This should not, of course, diminish the energy, creative thrust or theoretical insights arising from the rest of the ensemble. A band formed or led by Cardew would have been very different from AMM. It was, I suspect, the differences and the creative personalities issuing from this educationally and culturally disparate group of people, that fascinated Cardew. Just as his unprecedented presence invigorated the rest. But by the early 1970s the band had fractured and Cardew moved progressively further away from any relationship with the 'then' new music, into his life as an active Marxist/Leninist/Maoist.

In 1981 Cardew was killed in a hit-and-run incident. Regarding AMM, this was during a period of a tentative rapprochement. There had been some informal playing in which he rejoined AMM. His death shocked us all. But life and AMM went on. The activity which had shaped our early years was maturing. Various AMM formulations emerged but by the early 1980s the ensemble had settled down to Prévost, Rowe and Tilbury. With this maturity came a more confident and informed sense of what we doing. This arose as the ensemble began to be perceived as a significant part of the newly emergent aesthetic broadly referred to as free improvisation.

By the mid 1980s it was not unusual for AMM to participate in workshops and discussion about improvisation. On one such occasion I addressed a small interested group at Goldsmiths'

² A CD version of this recording is currently available.: AMMMUSIC -1966. ReR AMMCD. A new vinyl version: AMMMUSIC LP. Black Truffle #: BT018 is due for release in January 2016

³ John Tilbury, *Cornelius Cardew a life unfinished*, Copula, 2008

College. I recall a muffled scoffing sound coming from a (now) well-known contemporary music composer. This (then) disconcerting response I later realized was a 'Mandy Rice-Davis' moment. My undervaluing of the priority of composing had elicited a visceral, inarticulate retort. I contented myself subsequently that: 'he would say that, wouldn't he?'⁴

This incident was representative of a general dismissive and rather patronizing attitude improvisers met from many composers, (eg Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, Elliot Carter), as well as my pal at the Goldsmiths' conference. We (and by that I mean the improvising community) needed to ignore these responses to our work or face them out.

It was in my paper at Goldsmiths' I first aired the twin analytical propositions of 'heurism' and 'dialogue' that, albeit reductively, seemed to inform the practice of improvisation.⁵ However, I was aware more needed to be done to develop a useful theory of improvisation. The essential critique was: 'improvisers only played what they knew'. Improvisers needed help to find (what M. Boulez described as) 'a primary form of material'.⁶ I did not think these criticisms were meant to be helpful. However, he had a point. Help came from an unexpected source. My later editing and publishing of Cardew's published output, not unnaturally, led to a more careful reading of his thoughts.⁷ I noticed (from the quotation at the head of this article) a hitherto unnoticed resonance with my own emergent twin analytical propositions. Styled in a much more poetical manner but theoretically aligned.

We are searching for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them.

⁴ This paper 'Improvisation: Music for an Occasion' was later published in the *British Journal of Music Education*, Vol 2 No. 2 July, 1985. Later reprinted in: Edwin Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent*, Copula, 1995

⁵ There were those in attendance more supportive of my general thesis!

⁶ Pierre Boulez, *Orientations*, Faber and Faber, 1986 p 461

⁷ ed. Edwin Prévost, *Cornelius Cardew, A Reader*, Copula, 2006

Two words govern the axiom. 'We' is the socializing denominator (dialogue) and 'searching' describes the pro-activity (heurism).

Boulez and company were not wrong about the creative dependence of most improvisations upon *existing* material. Most obviously, the majority of musical improvisations are (or close to) analogues of previously heard or already conceived music — even if couched informally or in an avant garde form. In effect (it could be argued), such improvisations were as much a presentation of (reflected upon) material as might be a more formally (or traditionally) constructed composition. However, Boulez and company were wrong about from where 'a primary form of material' must inevitably arise (ie via the compositional method). Cardew's early observations about what distinguished AMM music from other forms of music, and other forms of improvisation, was the (albeit inconsistent) priority of the collective search over the *presentation* of considered material.

This *collective search* is the theoretical starting point for the workshop. And, given this approach is entirely contrary to how most music within western classical and popular cultures is developed, I concede we might have to forego calling what we do as 'music'. Cardew's observations were, of course, based upon an ensemble which (apart from himself) had no formal musical education. We were not 'readers'. The sounds we 'found' and applied had a completely different relationship to the historical context of music.

At a workshop session I introduce these general propositions fairly slowly. I sense not all comprehend what I am saying. They might hear the words, but do not necessarily appreciate how directly I mean them. Some, it is plain from the responses and sonic output, are not listening to others and some are clearly not searching. Most of us fail to do this consistently, including myself.

Does this theory of collective searching have any basis in reality and what is its reason for being? Cardew's early observation can be corroborated by my own playing techniques — in which there is a strong exploratory component — and the workshop experience. We might have to withdraw any claim that the results are musical. So be it. But this depends upon our definitions of the cultural practice — which has many forms — we call music. As we have seen above, my own definition demands (at least) two things:

- a. treating the materials for making sounds with continuous curiosity.
- b. attending to all other ambient sounds and, in particular, those from collaborating participants.

In practice this means the 'meta-musician' works to discover what the instrument or sound-source can develop. They push, pull, theorize and test. Often the results are surprising and spectacular. Sometimes not. Serendipity. An 'awkward wealth' can emerge, the player hardly knows what to do with it.⁸ All this done within a collective ambience of awkward customers (ie other musicians!).

It is from these sources we (ie those involved in this practice) derive our primary material. It is a way of developing a personal repertoire independent of 'received thinking' or plagiarism (and the regressive repetitiousness of self-plagiarism). This, if you recall, is in contrast to the general assistance offered by a composition developed either by musicians themselves and presented in performance, or from an outside source. As Cardew noted:

*Written compositions are fired into the future; even if never performed, the writing remains as a point of reference.*⁹

The sonic existence, temporality and cultural meaning of a musical composition, can only be anchored by some external decision to make a performance. This is primary material derived from the

⁸ 'awkward wealth' a memorable phrase constructed by Seymour Wright and first used in his CD notes for *Penumbrae*, Jennifer Allum and Eddie Prévost, Matchless Recordings mrcd79, 2011.

⁹ Cornelius Cardew, 'Towards an Ethic of Improvisation' (1967) *Cornelius Cardew A Reader*, Copula, 2006 p 126

thoughts of others and detached from the wider circumstances of performance. Perversely, it only remains primary for a short while. Once used it immediately becomes secondary. Performance decisions using external sources (no matter how creatively ‘interesting’) become invested with notions of authority. You might think the creative watchword for an improviser is autonomy. However, the situation is more complex. Human beings are dependent upon their biology and the ensuing sociobiological structures which configure the species. We are social beings.

Music is specific to human beings. Other species may make sounds we find musical. No matter how beautiful and satisfying, those sounds are inextricably bound up in *their* own species-being.¹⁰ Likewise with *Homo sapiens*. Music tells us something about our humanity. Despite the risk of mythologizing human biology we can ground these suggested operative procedures — observed and intuited by Cardew — within recent evolutionary biological thinking.

Human cognitive make-up (our brains) is a tantalizing mixture of technical and social domains. Organs and instincts that give us the ability to survive. Our collective technical prowess nestling within concomitant social skills. It is the enhancement, refinement and understanding of these faculties that make us potentially *more* human.

*We [AMM] are searching for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them.*¹¹

To repeat: Two words govern Cardew’s axiom. ‘We’ is the socializing denominator and ‘searching’ describes the pro-activity. (My own twin analytical propositions of heurism and dialogue seem to chime.) However, musicians and potential myth-makers we may be, because there is a pungent almost deterministic quality detectable in this kind of reductionism. Is it too good to be true?

¹⁰ There is much anthropomorphizing going on in describing the sounds of birds, insects, seals and whales as ‘singing’.

¹¹ Cornelius Cardew, ‘Towards an Ethic of Improvisation’ (1967) *Cornelius Cardew A Reader*, Copula, 2006

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Readers might feel — given the singularity of this general proposition — that I have reduced an activity of informal music making to such a basic level of abstraction as to render it meaningless. However, my defence is: reductionism is a tool for understanding. It may not fully expose a reality. We look for this through as many observational and imaginative tools as possible. It might, I suggest, be useful not to overuse a Popper programme for truth: where confuting the smallest attendant fact necessarily disproves the whole theory. It just might be, in the case of our collective searching procedure, we have hit upon an idea that transcends the lazy general perceptions of what music is for. Given that most people think music has no meaning (apart from some mythical idea of high culture or merely sounds to dance to).

Whence high culture? This is not an objective condition. Neither is pop culture. Although the desire for bodily movement may well have its roots in some biological imperative. High culture is a figment of our collective imagination. It is heavily imbued with the value system of our present hierarchy. It has, of course, in recent years turned its face from the old ruling class hegemony and their fetishes and become increasingly reflective of market capitalism. Look hard at the programmes for the annual BBC Proms. There is now, inevitably, a growing infiltration of popular culture associated with some of the repertoire. There are more 'sensational' elements. Presumably to promote a wider interest in this cultural bean-feast. This arises as public relations which becomes not only a tool but a celebrated part of the ideology. Anyone who defends this state of affairs is simply unconsciously complicit in collective subjectivity, or some mild form of incestuous amplification which afflicts us all.¹² Ideas come from somewhere. But nowhere certain. They could simply be the products of linguistic determinism. Bright ideas. So bright and unique, just begging to be true. Conversely, ideas might be the cognitive enriched material derived from some connection with our human actions, which even if implausible or 'awkward' can produce something new and positive. The question for my counter-theory is whether it too is anything more than an unrealizable myth.

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¹² Incestuous Amplification: A condition in warfare where one only listens to those who are already in lock-step agreement, reinforcing set beliefs and creating a situation ripe for miscalculation. — Jane's Defense Weekly.

The theory is saved (or developed in our imagination) through observation of the practice. It has been my experience that if I encourage searching, there is a tendency for the more empathic skills to be sidelined. Conversely, close attention to the output and imagined mind-theory of others is often at the expense of the investigatory competence. At a workshop in Trondheim a few years ago I asked a group of music students to search collectively. The approach was new to them. As the process ensued I noticed the young men (mostly), freed (perhaps) from the normal constraints of musical expectations, found themselves enmeshed in a self-absorbed frenzy of experimentation. This was at the expense of any sense of awareness or empathy for those with whom they were cohabiting the musical space. Not exactly satisfactory. Concurrently (and at the risk of gender stereotyping) I thought I detected (mostly) in the female musicians a greater tendency to collaborate with others rather than investigate. Also, perhaps not entirely satisfactory.

The cognitive archaeologist Steven Mithen offers us a bold idea about the nature of human creativity to explain this to my reserved satisfaction. He suggests human creativity maybe owes its — albeit fluctuating — condition through the integration of human technical (heuristic) and social (dialogic) domains. One form of intelligence seeping (as it were) into the other.¹³ The key element in this proposition is the condition of cognitive fluidity is intermittent. What we describe (mythologize) to ourselves as the somewhat erratic emergence of inspiration could simply be a stuttering, fitful evolutionary condition. A loose connection. Whatever may be an acceptable description of what is going on, one thing seems plain. A situation such as the kind of workshop I have described — and which (hopefully) will be exemplified by the representative group of musicians who have a connection with my London workshop — qualifies as ‘experimental’. But, as I have hinted above, it is an autonomous kind of experimentation. As of the Cardew quote at the head of this essay:

¹³ Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind*, Phoenix, 1998

The search is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician [...] at the heart of the experiment.

Cardew wrote the passage which heads this article in the late 1960s. As direct and as lucid as his writing is, we readers have perhaps allowed some of implications of his thinking to pass over our heads. Or can I claim this undervaluing only for myself? Cardew suggested that sound:

[...] has a power over our emotional responses [...] that it acts subliminally rather than on a conscious cultural level.¹⁴

His very words, even if initially unheeded, are a game changer. All sentient beings respond to external stimuli. The adaptive imperative is central to our continued existence as a species and we have, to an extraordinary extent, culturalized these fundamental responses. Fear and foreboding, joy and anticipation now inform our emotional lives beyond life-threatening or life-enhancing physical moments. They are, for many, the stuff of art. We have the ability to convert the subliminal into the sublime. The hidden can be made explicit.

Implicit in Cardew's recognition that AMM's principal *modus operandi* was 'searching', is the attendant imperative towards a new sense of 'listening.' If the musical operating levers are different from conventional music making, then it follows the consequent 'meaning' we observe, acknowledge or invest in these sounds are subject to a different value system. Their emphasis may have varied but The Italian Futurists, Varese, Cage and Pauline Oliveros also enjoin us to listen differently. John Tilbury helpfully explains his own way around this aesthetic shift:

Over the years, and specifically through my involvement, in particular with Cardew, Feldman and AMM, I have come to 'hear' classical music, for example, differently. Even with painting I 'see' the work of Vermeer, for example, differently, probably radically so. The mimetic aspects — the 'recognisable'

¹⁴ Cornelius Cardew, 'Towards an Ethic of Improvisation' (1967) *Cornelius Cardew A Reader*, Copula, 2006

maid, lute, basket, fruit etc. although represented with staggering technical aplomb, are for me virtually immaterial in my appreciation, which seems to transcend these technical aspects. In other words, as a viewer I do not feel the need for an intellectual, cultural or historical adjustments when I move from a Vermeer to a Rothko, And, I find, or rather feel, that they have much in common. ¹⁵

Exactly what kind of values John Tilbury reflects back on to the old art (and thence the old music) is not entirely transparent. And, even within AMM, playing may have produced some ambiguities in this regard. A new musical philosophy is bound to be reactive in some way. But, to demand a representative or narrative reference for a Rothko painting clearly misses the point. As with music. Any overt resemblance to the old forms suggests some kind of regression. At times we have all probably been guilty of this. I still have problems understanding why Keith Rowe wished to compare some of his earlier playing within AMM to the role of continuo within Baroque music. And, his later reported association of some aspects of his playing with Mozart seems perverse and confusing, coming from someone as uniquely creative. Contrarily (or so it seems to me) whilst advancing towards a classically blessed aesthetic Keith also moved progressively away from jazz.¹⁶ This suggests some uncertainty about lending his work wholly to a new cultural order.

Consistency within transitional periods — politically, culturally and artistically — is always likely to be variable and complex. I was alerted to this by a recent listen to Shostakovich String Quartet No 15. Parts of this, to my ears, are extremely modernist heavily laced with romantic overtones. A mixed sonic message from within a conflicted artistic and political life. Of course, the experience of music can transcend its production methods and its ideology. 'Sublime moments' (a woefully overused and misunderstood term) do not come attached to technical considerations. Nevertheless, in our reflections upon what we hear there has to be discernment. And,

¹⁵ booklet notes: Eddie Prevost solo percussion CD *Material Consequences*, 2001, Matchless Recordings MRCD48

¹⁶ The irony is jazz (in its current more formal phases) has relinquished most of its experimental self and become a more 'authorized' regime. Exactly the same trajectory of the 'classical' tradition.

meaning has to have an objective dimension beyond the sublime.
What can AMM music mean?

The practice of free improvisation — what I call a metamusic — (ie without any guidelines or external or even internal explicit directives) is where we can dispense with what is culturally familiar as *music*. Henceforth involve ourselves with an imaginative world of what Cardew referred to as *informal sound*. In doing so and engaging with others in a social manner, we allow ourselves and any listener, the possibility of discovering new cultural horizons. These I hope will feed and sustain an outward looking view upon the wider world in which I imagine the priorities of curiosity, care and cooperation supersede the current ideological imperatives (ie also imagined!) of exploitation, control and hierarchy.¹⁷

Eddie Prévost — September 2015

¹⁷ This appraisal goes somewhat, I hope, to counter the oft repeated claim that improvisation is a vehicle of the self-absorbed and the solipsistic. Certainly, those of that persuasion can hide themselves with the folds of this discipline. However, such are (surely as Cardew suggests) still working in the realms of the subliminal.

