

EDDIE PRÉVOST

On Making All the Correct Mistakes— Monk's Mood and Cage's Artlessness

The author analyses the aesthetics of improvisation by taking the stances adopted by Cage and Monk as a starting point, and points out a third way in which the qualities and potential of chance and experimentation may turn out to be creative and allow for free collective improvisation.



The term ‘improvisation’ has a casual slant. We think of the unfinished or the makeshift. In western classical music (if the term is used at all) improvisation is thought of as a method to aid composition, where things are tried out before being formalised and finalised. And even when a musician’s spontaneous response to the written music is expected — say in a cadenza — then we note how soon a preferred and fixed form is developed and adhered to subsequently.

Most improvisation in music has been attributed to informal, aboriginal or unschooled sources. The western musical conservatory mind has always figured improvisation —mostly pejoratively— as primitive. And even within traditions and movements which use and value some kind of improvisational method —say for example Indian classical music and jazz— there is a tendency for the improvisation to turn into a style or idiom and reflect some kind of format and procedure that can be anticipated. Stylistic development within these forms seems to come about through subtle, marginal changes that often can be traced to musical idiosyncrasies and even errors which have crept into the music. Oral traditions are more tolerant and are happy to live with these irregularities — a Chinese whisper syndrome. Often the deviations become cherished features.

Except for the most robotic, all musical expressions bear the imprint of the musician. No two musicians play the same way. Weight of note and wisp of breath are difficult to control and quantify. In formal musical life the tendency, however, is to try to iron out these differences and to create a standard in performance technique. What then if there was an aesthetic which saw creative challenge in operating within the cracks of intentionality? The bebop pianist Thelonious Monk apparently once left the stage in a morose mood. He was very dissatisfied with the music he had just played. On being asked why this was so he replied that he had made all the wrong mistakes. This observation brings us to a neat, if tight, philosophical knot. It suggests that if there are wrong mistakes then the possibility of correct mistakes also exists!

Monk —although no doubt completely serious in his remark— was being playful in his use of words. The observation remains fruitful precisely because it sits on an apparent contradiction. However, it brings us to the central nub of the aesthetic of improvisation. No one (I hope) would suppose that Thelonious Monk entered the musical arena without the express purpose of making meaningful music. Any



John Cage hunting mushrooms, 1967

musician who works in the public domain has some kind of intention. And we may appear to make only a minor shift of linguistic nuance to move from Monk's intended mistake to Cage's idea of controlled accident. One of the most important things that many of Cage's aleatoric and chance systems encouraged was to get musicians to loosen up in their relation to the music-making materials. Detaching musical expression from any narrative certainly places the awareness of sound —its weight and texture as opposed to its emotional resonances— more to the fore. This can have positive effects for all musicians.

However, there are substantial differences in the respective approaches of John Cage and Thelonious Monk. In Cage's music the idea of the controlled accident places the musician in a neutral or detached position. Any resultant music is not (to be) thought of as an expression of personal musicality. However, the music is still the result of a compositional act even if the musician is a willing accomplice to Cage's instructions. The non-musical decisions that Cage's procedures demand obviously take the musician away from any conscious input to the resulting sounds. If we are to believe what is said about these forms, the music exists outside of the musicians' control. The music is somehow itself. Cage came to these kinds of idea through his introduction to the Taoist Book of Changes, the I Ching, which traditionally uses divinatory techniques to find answers to certain enquiries; it is oracular. Of course what is absent for any musician who uses Cage's chance techniques is any personal question about the nature of the music being undertaken. There is only knowledge of its indeterminacy and uncertainty. The musician acts as a kind of crucible in which music is formulated but in relation to which —if it performed correctly— the musician should have no intellectual or emotional control and no expectations. The project demands a positive sense of disinterestedness. It seems therefore to follow that there can be no criteria —other than a rather passive neutrality— to judge any resultant music. The music just is. And, if a musician's personality has intruded upon the listener's sensibility, then the music is deemed to have failed in its intention, which is to focus our senses upon innocent sounds. At their best Cage's detached procedures, together with the music's apparent atemporality and absence of narrative, suggest a unique and powerful sense of nowness that is nowhere. A sort of abstracted naturalism. ▶▶

The project demands a positive sense of disinterestedness.

» In Cage's indeterminate music there is no sense of the incorrect other than the intrusion of a musician's personality. Contrast this with Thelonious Monk. His was one of the most individual voices in jazz. Yet it is difficult to deny that his music was trying — as much as Cage's music was — to find other places. Both musics have the ability to surprise. Monk, however, posited the personality as the vehicle for creative music as much as Cage advised the removal of the performer's ego. If anything, Monk's approach pushes the musician to even more extreme lengths of individuality than the albeit loose canon of jazz might recommend. It might be suggested that the strength of Monk's imprint upon his ensemble music was just as powerful as Cage's philosophy of chance was on his. Monk pressed and prodded piano and fellow musicians alike and was, as it were, actively looking for mistakes — or new solutions — upon which to build new musical worlds. Cage, on the other hand, asks musicians to make formulaic and almost mechanical calculations as a way of constructing a blueprint for a performance in order to remove any hint of personal expression, for example in *Variations 1-6* and *Concert for Piano*. Consequently, by removing the musician from specific musical intention, this procedure also removes the very conception of error.

There is, however, another way in which the qualities and potential results of chance and experimental procedures may prove to be creative as well as allowing the development of individual and collective human experience, namely free collective improvisation. And contrary to any idealism or authoritarianism that might be attached to notions of collective activity, the reality of working with others sharpens any inherent instabilities and increases the messiness of making music. Looking for new things, nudging the instruments, nudging the other performers (and allowing oneself to be nudged!) is a processive and a far from a neutral or uninvolved engagement. All of this activity inevitably goes beyond any dominating idea of control. Yet at the same time it places the musician at the heart of the magical and humanising process called music-making.



Thelonious Monk, 1945

In the London improvisation workshop which I have convened once a week for nearly four years now, we have developed procedures in which there is no prescription of what to do. Musicians of all ages, sexes, musical backgrounds, ethnic groups and national origins have come to work with the materials at hand — their instruments, their physical, emotional and intellectual sensibilities, the place and the other musicians present. No one is instructed or commanded, and the only recommendations are to put aside previously developed concepts of what constitutes music and, in the process, focus upon the instrument or material they are using in a fresh way. They are encouraged to reassess their responses to the instrument. And as a consequence each time in the moment of making music try to do something — no matter how minor — that

they have never done before: to move away from their normal habitual responses and to explore this environment. It is then suggested that they use their own investigations in a processive dialogue with the other musicians with whom they are playing. Using the presence of others as both a sounding board and as a point of resistance to sense the relevance of their own engagement with the materials.¶

EDDIE PRÉVOST is a percussionist and founding member of the improvising group AMM. Matchless imprint, Copula, published in 1995 his essay *No Sound is Innocent*. He lives in London.

This article also appears in Edwin Prévost *Minute Particulars: meanings in music-making in the wake of hierarchial realignments and other essays*, Copula—an imprint of Matchless Recordings and Publishing, UK 2004.