

'In the moment': exploring improvisatory techniques and approaches within new music and media

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Background

Within popular music and jazz as well as, increasingly, within electronic music, improvisation is an integral element of composition and performance. 'In the moment' sought to engage undergraduate students of Commercial Music and Creative Music Technology (based at the University's Broadstairs Campus) in an exploration of improvisation through the composition and performance of new music composed especially for the project by three members of the Music Department. The compositions explore different facets of improvisation including, for example, melodic and harmonic invention, interdependence, decisions and interactions, freedom within structure as well as spontaneity within musical development. In addition, the project engaged students of Digital Media (also based at Broadstairs) in the process of producing improvised visualisations in response to the project's music using specialist computer-based video processing software.

Approach/methodology

The research project led to the composition of three new musical works:

1. **As it was bright** for flute, vibraphone, cello and electronics by Andrew Gower offers a musical reflection on a verse of poetry from *The World* by the 17th century Welsh poet Henry Vaughan:

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright,
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,
Driv'n by the spheres,
Like a vast shadow moved, In which the world
And all her train were hurled.

The flute plays a special role within the ensemble as the intermediary between the acoustic and electronic, or in this context between the present and the otherness of what is beyond. Through seven sections the discontinuity of the opening music is drawn gradually towards continuity by the resonating, sustained quality of the metaphorical light conveyed within the electronic sound.

2. **Burn like Icarus** is a collaboration between Matt Wright, the saxophonist Evan Parker and the University's electronic music ensemble, CONTACT'. It is an open-form composition, built over a series of workshops between Evan, CONTACT and Matt. Designed to be memorised and freely navigated by improvisers, the structure borrows from a range of dialectical sources – Greek lyre music, turntablism, contemporary composition and the 'noise' scenes of New York and Tokyo. It takes its impetus from the Greek myth of the flight of Icarus and deliberately calls on musical metaphors such as *Learning to Fly*, *Ascent*, *Burn*, *Descent* and *Crash*. In particular, Matt was interested in a sense of music at the edge of collapse (something he has been interested in since hearing records fall out of sync with each other as a teenager). A final section rewrites the myth, with a digital Icarus ascending skywards.

3. **Spaces** by James Dean for nine-piece band consists of seven linked movements comprising composed and improvised content, and is influenced by jazz in terms of its instrumentation, harmonic and rhythmic sense as well as improvisational approaches. The composed elements in *Spaces* provide a structure around which improvised content is developed, based on given chord sequences. In addition electronic loops and samples are triggered by laptop computer and used to create links between movements whilst providing added texture to some sections of the music.

1 Ensemble CONTACT combines electronic instruments (laptops, synthesisers, filters and turntables) in the production of live improvised music. It performs regularly at a range of venues including the University's Sidney Cooper Gallery and at Canterbury's Orange Street Music Club.

Outcomes

The focus of the project, on contemporary musical languages and collaboration between composer and performer, enabled the 16 Music students directly involved in the project to develop their practice-based research skills in the areas of composition and performance, as well as in music and media production. Through engagement with research-based activities the students gained highly relevant experiences in improvisation, music production and performance that directly enhanced their potential employment as composers, arrangers, performers and/or music producers. As part of the musical development process Music students attended workshops and rehearsals with saxophonists Evan Parker, Paul Booth and Keir Neuringer, and took an active part in the project as performers.

The project made a significant contribution in bringing to the fore research and academic scholarship in the Creative Arts at the Broadstairs Campus. It provided an exciting opportunity for collaborative working between academic colleagues, and through the public performance of the music as part of the Sounds New contemporary music festival at Orange Street Music Club in Canterbury, as well as the distribution of the music via the Department of Music's record label (C3U Records), the project has acted to enhance the research profile of the Departments of Music and Media.

Enhancing RIT

This project acted to strengthen a research-lead curriculum centred on the specialist interest of the staff involved, with experiences gained by both staff and students integrated prominently into the learning experience. Students were engaged directly with practice-based research as composers (contributing to participatory workshops), as performers (including within CONTACT) and as music producers. Learning and teaching were further enhanced through the involvement of external contributors including international saxophonists Evan Parker and Paul Booth. The project proved to be an excellent opportunity to strengthen and develop synergies between Commercial Music, Creative Music Technology and Digital Media.

Reflections and any future plans

The success of this project has led to another collaboration between Dean, Gower and Wright, now joined by another colleague from the Music Department, Robert Stillman. The results of the 'Mobile Music' collaboration will be performed in a concert as part of the Sounds New festival in May 2010.

From the *Kentish Gazette*, Thursday 7th May 2009:

Three modern works premiered

The more intimate setting of Orange Street was perfect for the premiere of three works as part of the Sounds New contemporary music festival and attracted a large audience.

An unashamedly modern piece, As it was bright, by Andrew Gower, a reflection of a 17th century poem, started the evening. Electronics and a vibraphone (Ethan Lewis Maltby) were used to good effect complementing the mellow cello (Phoebe Anagnostou) and the lightness of the flute (Heledd Francis).

Burn Like Icarus, by Matt Wright, Evan Parker and CONTACT, was an amazing piece, with Evan Parker on soprano sax. The piece finished with a bird-like digital sound as Icarus rose skywards.

The third piece was James Dean's Spaces, with Paul Booth on saxophone. The evening finished with a performance by Fusion, featuring music students.

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