

Born in Sheffield, Derek Bailey studied music with C.H.C. Birtcliffe and guitar with, amongst others, George Wing and John Duarte. Throughout the 1950s he worked as a guitarist in every kind of musical situation - clubs, concert halls, radio, TV and recording studios. He became increasingly interested in the possibilities of a freely improvised music and by the mid-60s was devoting himself exclusively to this field. He has performed solo concerts in all the major cities of Europe, Japan and North America, played with most of the musicians associated with free improvisation, and recorded over 90 albums on labels including CBS, RCA, Deutsche Grammophon and Island.

In 1970, along with Tony Oxley and Evan Parker, he founded Incus Records, the first independent, musician-owned record company in Britain. In 1976 he established Company, a changing ensemble of improvising musicians drawn from many backgrounds and countries that performs throughout the world. In 1977 an annual Company Week was inaugurated in London. He now divides his time between solo performances, organising and playing in Company events, running Incus, practising, writing and – something he considers essential – ad hoc musical activities.

*Improvisation: its nature and practice in music* was originally written in 1975/6 and first published in 1980. Translations followed in Italian, French, Japanese, Dutch and German, and it has formed the basis of a series of TV films made by Jeremy Marre and screened in several countries in 1992.

# IMPROVISATION

its nature and practice in music

**DEREK BAILEY**

DA CAPO PRESS • *New York*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

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Bailey, Derek.

Improvisation: its nature and practice in music / Derek Bailey.

p. cm.

Originally published: Ashborne, England: Moorland Pub. in association with Incus Records, c1980.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-306-80528-6

1. Improvisation (Music). 2. Music—Performance—History. I. Title.

ML430.7.B25 1993

93-24899

781.3'6—dc20

CIP

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First published in the United Kingdom in 1992 by  
The British Library National Sound Archive

First published in the United States of America in 1993  
by Da Capo Press, supplemented with photographs.

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Published by Da Capo Press, Inc.  
A Subsidiary of Plenum Publishing Corporation  
233 Spring Street, New York, N.Y. 10013

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This book is an account by practicing musicians from various idioms of their use of improvisation, its place in music and their speculations on its nature. The widespread presence of improvisation in music, combined with a scarcity of documentation concerning it, means that any single volume will inevitably be selective. This is an attempt to cover the practice of improvisation in the main areas in which it is found and to reveal those features and characteristics common to all improvisation.

The book is divided into sections ranging from the traditional uses of improvisation (in Indian music, Flamenco and Baroque music) through its uses in church organ playing, in Jazz and in Rock, its relationship to its audience, its relationship to recording, its uses in the classroom and some of the recent developments involving improvisation in contemporary Western composition. It concludes with an examination of some aspects of the recent rise of free improvisation and the correspondences found between all types of improvisation.

#### Acknowledgements

The number of people who have helped me with the book from its inception through its various stages and revisions is countless. Primarily, I am indebted to all the musicians whose words I quote in the book. They are the book. But I would also like to thank all those musicians whose ideas and words appear without acknowledgement, passages in the book which derive from conversations held with many players over many years.

Among those who helped in a variety of other ways, I have particular reasons to thank Alistair Bamford, Mick Beck, Karen Brookman, Peter Butler, Janice Christianson, Chris Clark, George Clinton, Mandy Davidson, Martin Davidson, John Fordham, Charles Fox, Laurent Goddet, Henry Kaiser, Rudy Koopmans, Frank Long, Paul Lytton, Ulla Lytton, Michael Oliver, Peter Riley, Marion Rout, Beryl Towns and Paul Wilson.

My thanks also to Harcourt Films and Channel 4 Television for permission to use certain quotations from the series of TV films based on the earlier edition of this book. Particularly, I am indebted to the director, Jeremy Marre. His perception of the social and spiritual powers of improvisation lead me to a greater understanding of its universal significance.

Improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practised of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood. While it is today present in almost every area of music, there is an almost total absence of information about it. Perhaps this is inevitable, even appropriate. Improvisation is always changing and adjusting, never fixed, too elusive for analysis and precise description; essentially non-academic. And, more than that, any attempt to describe improvisation must be, in some respects, a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of voluntary improvisation which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation.

My purpose in undertaking such an unlikely project as, firstly, instigating a series of radio programmes in which practising musicians from different idioms discussed their use of improvisation, and then assembling a book combining these programmes and further discussions with these and other players, was to show the significance of improvisation through the experience of those who use it. My feeling was that there was an important part of improvisation not easily indicated or conveyed by its results, a part which perhaps only those involved in doing it seemed to be able to appreciate or comprehend. This suspicion arose mainly as a result of the almost total absence of comment concerning improvisation and the hopeless misconceptions usually expressed in the comment which does occur.

Defined in any one of a series of catchphrases ranging from 'making it up as he goes along' to 'instant composition', improvisation is generally viewed as a musical conjuring trick, a doubtful expedient, or even a vulgar habit. So in this book the intention is to present the views on improvisation of those who use it and know it.

Obviously this is not intended as a history of improvisation, a task which, if it were ever attempted, would be a vast and probably endless undertaking. Even about its presence in Occidental music, the most inhospitable area for improvisation, E.T.Ferland in his *Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music* can write: 'This joy in improvising while singing and playing is evident in almost all phases of music history. It was always a powerful force in the creation of new forms and every historical study that confines itself to the practical or theoretical sources that have come down to us in writing or in print, without taking into account the improvisational element in living musical practice, must of necessity present an incomplete, indeed a distorted picture. For there is scarcely a single field in music that has remained unaffected by improvisation, scarcely a single musical technique or form of composition

that did not originate in improvisatory practice or was not essentially influenced by it. The whole history of the development of music is accompanied by manifestations of the drive to improvise.'

So the omissions, those musics which have to be excluded in order to avoid the book assuming encyclopedic proportions, would make an extensive list. It would include many parts of Islamic music (notably Persian *gushah*), the blues, Turkish music, many African musics, the Polynesian 'variable' musics<sup>1</sup> and all the many forms of vocal improvisation found in settings as culturally different as the Presbyterian chapels of Stornoway<sup>2</sup> and the markets and bazaars of Cairo. Those and many other forms of music involving the use of improvisation are not here.

However, it did become increasingly clear during my contacts with different musicians and their musics that the main characteristics of improvisation could be discerned in all its appearances and roles. What could be said about improvisation in one area could be said about it in another. I hope I have managed to avoid doing that. I have tried, in fact, to use the different sections not only to present an account of improvisation in that area or idiom but to highlight a characteristic most obviously demonstrated by that area. For instance, the section on Indian music examines the usual method of learning to improvise, Flamenco deals with improvisation and authenticity, the chapters on church organ playing present something of the scholastic attitude to improvisation, and so on.

The musics covered here have been chosen simply because I had the opportunity to talk to an active practitioner from each of those fields. I couldn't imagine a meaningful consideration of improvisation from anything other than a practical and a personal point of view. For there is no general or widely held theory of improvisation and I would have thought it self-evident that improvisation has no existence outside of its practice. Among improvising musicians there is endless speculation about its nature but only an academic would have the temerity to mount a theory of improvisation. And even they can run into serious difficulties. Ella Zonis in her book *Classical Persian Music*, after noting that 'Persian music theorists, considering improvisation to be intuitive, do not consider it in their writings', ignores the warning and plunges in. 'A further obstacle in this area is the readily apparent discrepancy between

the theory of practice and the practice of practice. Not infrequently, after a lengthy interview regarding performance practices a performer will illustrate the aspects of practice he has just described by playing something entirely different from what he has just said ought to be played. One must realise from the beginning that in Persian music there is no 'always', for no rule or custom is inviolable.' After examining the various structures and constituents in Persian music she later concludes: 'After considering all these procedures, however, we must admit that the performer is not bound by them. For, in Persian music, the essential factors in a performance are the feeling of a player and those of his audience. At the actual time of performance, the musician does not calculate the procedures that will guide his playing. Rather he plays from a level of consciousness somewhat removed from the purely rational... Under these conditions the player performs not according to the "theory of practice", but intuitively, according to the "practice of practice", wherein the dictates of traditional procedures are integrated with his immediate mood and emotional needs.' I hope it will be adequate if I refer to the 'practice of practice' as practice. In any event, that is what this book is mainly about.

There are no so-called 'musical examples' quoted. Transcription, it seems to me, far from being an aid to understanding improvisation, deflects attention towards peripheral considerations. In fact there is very little technical description of any kind, simply because almost all the musicians I spoke to chose to discuss improvisation mainly in 'abstract' terms. In fact there was a commonly held suspicion that a close technical approach was, for this subject, uninformative. In general, intuitive descriptions were preferred and, as Thomas Clifton says: 'The question is not whether the description is subjective, objective, biased or idiosyncratic, but very simply is whether or not the description says something significant about the intuited experience so that the experience itself becomes something from which we can learn and in so doing learn about the object of that experience as well... No one is saying that any particular intuitive description, taken as true, is the whole truth. Intuitive descriptions erect their structures very much in the same way that scientific descriptions do: slowly, methodically with frequent erasures and backtracking. Both kinds of description are concerned with intersubjective confirmation.'<sup>3</sup>

I have used the terms 'idiomatic' and 'non-idiomatic' to describe the two main forms of improvisation. Idiomatic improvisation, much the most widely used, is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom - such as jazz, flamenco or baroque - and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom.

<sup>1</sup> The procedure of variation is one of the oldest and most persistent of performing principles, being present without interruption from the earliest known musics to the present day. Early vocal and instrumental improvisation, while it might take the form of embellishment, was not used merely to alter what already existed but as a means of celebrating the act of music-making. It was an end in itself - the means of expression open to the performer. The composition stood or fell on whether or not it provided a good vehicle for improvisation.

<sup>2</sup> The collective improvisation by the congregations of these chapels has been described as 'elaborate melismata around an extremely slow moving metrical psalm tune, an astonishing sound, but almost impossible to learn. One has to unlearn the tempoed scale to begin with, to say nothing of one's sense of what is harmonically proper' (Michael Olevy in a letter to the author).

<sup>3</sup> From 'Some comparisons between intuitive and scientific descriptions of music' Thomas Clifton in *Journal of Music Theory*.

Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called 'free' improvisation and, while it can be highly stylised, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity. I have also followed what seems to be the usual practice in writings about 'straight' music, of treating the contemporary as a special, quite segregated musical activity. Here one finds 'specialists' in 'new' music as though music, in order to be normal and unspecialised, has to be a sort of sonic archaeology.

The word improvisation is actually very little used by improvising musicians. Idiomatic improvisors, in describing what they do, use the name of the idiom. They 'play flamenco' or 'play jazz'; some refer to what they do as just 'playing'. There is a noticeable reluctance to use the word and some improvisors express a positive dislike for it. I think this is due to its widely accepted connotations which imply that improvisation is something without preparation and without consideration, a completely ad hoc activity, frivolous and inconsequential, lacking in design and method. And they object to that implication because they know from their own experience that it is untrue. They know that there is no musical activity which requires greater skill and devotion, preparation, training and commitment. And so they reject the word, and show a reluctance to be identified by what in some quarters has become almost a term of abuse. They recognise that, as it is generally understood, it completely misrepresents the depth and complexity of their work. But I have chosen to retain that term throughout this book; firstly because I don't know of any other which could effectively replace it, and secondly because I hope that we, the other contributors and myself, might be able to redefine it.

The difference between the present musical climate and that of the mid-1970s, when this book was first written, could hardly be greater. Most surveys of the intervening decade and a half tend to be lamentations on the galloping artistic cowardice, shrivelled imaginations and self-congratulatory philistinism which typified the period. Other assessors, applauding the strenuous efforts evident in all areas of music to be more 'accessible', speak of a Golden Age. Either way, and significant as they are, the changes that have taken place seem to have made very little difference to improvisation. Transient musical fashion, of course, is unlikely to have any effect on something as fundamental as the nature of improvisation but even in its practice improvisation seems to have been, if at times diverted, as prevalent and irrepressible as ever.

Essential changes to the book, then, were only rarely necessary and revision has mainly taken the form of additions; new voices appearing, some for no more than a single remark, others in extended interviews.

Turning once again from improvising to writing about improvisation was done reluctantly; they are very different activities, it seems to me, and not always compatible. Writing did provide, however, the opportunity to look at the whole thing again through other peoples' eyes, an instructive experience and one intensified this time because I was simultaneously working on a series of TV films based on the earlier edition of this book. That brought its own revelations, as much about television as about improvisation, and while not everything covered in the programmes is of relevance here - TV making its own highly specialised demands - a number of quotations from the discussions held around and during filming are included. Most useful, though, was the opportunity once again to make contact with some of the endlessly various approaches towards improvisation and to be able to further draw on the wealth of insight and practical experience available in virtually all musics as testimony to this bedrock of musical creativity.

*Derek Bailey, London, September 1991*

## FREE

Freely improvised music, variously called 'total improvisation', 'open improvisation', 'free music', or perhaps most often simply, 'improvised music', suffers from – and enjoys – the confused identity which its resistance to labelling indicates. It is a logical situation: freely improvised music is an activity which encompasses too many different kinds of players, too many different attitudes to music, too many different concepts of what improvisation is, even, for it all to be subsumed under one name. Two regular confusions which blur its identification are to associate it with experimental music or with avant-garde music. It is true that they are very often lumped together but this is probably done for the benefit of promoters who need to know that the one thing they do have in common is a shared inability to hold the attention of large groups of casual listeners. But although they might share the same corner of the market place they are fundamentally quite different to each other. Improvisors might conduct occasional experiments but very few, I think, consider their work to be experimental. Similarly, the attitudes and precepts associated with the avant-garde have very little in common with those held by most improvisors. There are innovations made, as one would expect, through improvisation, but the desire to stay ahead of the field is not common among improvisors. And as regards method, the improvisor employs the oldest in music-making.

The lack of precision over its naming is, if anything, increased when we come to the thing itself. Diversity is its most consistent characteristic. It has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it.

Historically, it pre-dates any other music – mankind's first musical performance couldn't have been anything other than a free improvisation – and I think that it is a reasonable speculation that at most times since then there will have been some music-making most aptly described as free improvisation. Its accessibility to the performer is, in fact, something which appears to offend both its supporters and detractors. Free improvisation, in addition to being a highly skilled musical craft, is open to use by almost anyone – beginners, children and non-musicians. The skill and intellect required is whatever is available. It can be an activity of enormous complexity and sophistication, or

the simplest and most direct expression: a lifetime's study and work or a casual dilettante activity. It can appeal to and serve the musical purposes of all kinds of people and perhaps the type of person offended by the thought that 'anyone can do it' will find some reassurance in learning that Albert Einstein looked upon improvisation as an emotional and intellectual necessity.<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of free improvisation as a cohesive movement in the early sixties and its subsequent continuous practice has excited a profusion of sociological, philosophical, religious and political explanations, but I shall have to leave those to authors with the appropriate appetite and ability. Perhaps I can confine myself to the obvious assumption that much of the impetus toward free improvisation came from the questioning of musical language. Or more correctly, the questioning of the 'rules' governing musical language. Firstly from the effect this had in jazz, which was the most widely practised improvised music at the time of the rise of free improvisation, and secondly from the results of the much earlier developments in musical language in European straight music, whose conventions had, until this time, exerted a quite remarkable influence over many types of music, including most forms of improvisation to be found in the West.

Two important pieces of reading concerning free improvisation are Leo Smith's book *Notes: 8 Pieces* and Cornelius Cardew's 'Towards an Ethic of Improvisation', which is from his *Treatise Handbook* (published by Peters Edition). Each of these documents is written by a musician with a great deal of experience of free improvisation and they write of it with insight and pertinence. They are however totally different from each other. Smith speaks of free improvisation almost exclusively as an extension of jazz and Cardew considers it mainly in terms of European philosophy and indeterminate composition. And both accounts are valid, each reflecting perfectly one of the twin approaches to free improvisation which took place in the sixties. It is necessary to point out that for Leo Smith the predicament of the black man in America, particularly as this applies to the black musician, is of far greater significance than the purely musical matters dealt with here. In a rather similar way Cardew's objections to his situation were later to take a purely political form. But these documents also indicate that for musicians of integrity, in either field, wishing for a direct, unadulterated involvement in music, the way to free improvisation was the obvious escape from the rigidity and formalism of their respective musical backgrounds.

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Minszkowski reported that in 1919 Einstein told him '... improvisation on the piano was a necessity of his life. Every journey that takes him away from the instrument for some time excites a home-sickness for his piano, and when he returns he longingly caresses the keys to ease himself of the burden of the tone experiences that have mounted up in him, giving them utterance in improvisations.' *Conversations with Einstein*, published 1921

Opinions about free music are plentiful and differ widely. They range from the view that free playing is the simplest thing in the world requiring no explanation, to the view that it is complicated beyond discussion. There are those for whom it is an activity requiring no instrumental skill, no musical ability and no musical knowledge or experience of any kind, and others who believe it can only be reached by employing a highly sophisticated, personal technique of virtuosic dimensions. Some are attracted to it by its possibilities for musical togetherness, others by its possibilities for individual expression. There is, as far as I know, no general view to be given. So I propose to base my account of free improvisation largely on my own playing experiences within the music. Objectivity will, I am sure, be quite beyond me, but whenever possible I shall quote other views and opinions. I should emphasise that it is not my intention to try and present an overall picture of the free music scene, nor to give a definitive account of the groups mentioned. I intend only to point to certain aspects of certain groups and situations which seem to me to illustrate some of the central tenets of free improvisation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Nor is it my intention to make a contribution to the increasingly frequent re-writing of the history of the beginnings of free improvisation, except perhaps to mention that my first involvement with it – which left me totally confused and alienated – was in 1957. It was a confrontation which has no musical significance in this account, but it does provide some evidence that free improvisation wasn't 'started' by anybody.

In 1987, seven musicians, all closely associated with improvisation, took part in a public discussion staged as an adjunct to a series of concerts.<sup>1</sup> Inevitably, the first subject up for consideration concerned the relationship between improvisation and composition. After forty minutes of collective incoherence and mutual misunderstandings, the predominant view to emerge was that there is no such thing as improvisation, or, if there is, it is indistinguishable from composition. Furthermore, composition, should there be such a thing, is no different to improvisation. Having established that, there didn't seem to be anything else to discuss and the group dispersed, gratefully returning to playing music: improvising, in fact.

This, in a sense, is where we came in. Improvisation is not a word which is highly thought of, particularly by improvisors, some of whom will go to considerable lengths to avoid being tarred with what they have found to be an unhelpful brush. But, additionally, there was a view struggling to be expressed which is, I think, a fundamental belief for some people: musical creativity (all creativity?) is indivisible; it doesn't matter what you call it, it doesn't matter how you do it. The creation of music transcends method and, essentially, the composition/improvisation dichotomy doesn't exist.

This kind of spongy generalisation often obscures, perhaps by design, more than it reveals but, pushed to its limits, it still can't hide the fundamental difference that separates composition and improvisation. In any but the most blinkered view of the world's music, composition looks to be a very rare strain, heretical in both practice and theory. Improvisation is a basic instinct, an essential force in sustaining life. Without it nothing survives. As sources of creativity they are hardly comparable.

None of these lofty projections, however, are necessary to reveal the manifest and multiple differences between composition and improvisation. Here's one, for instance, discovered at street level by composer/improvisor Frederic Rzewski and improvisor/composer Steve Lacy. Frederic tells the story:

*In 1968 I ran into Steve Lacy on the street in Rome. I took out my pocket tape recorder and asked him to describe in fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation. He answered: 'In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds.'*

*His answer lasted exactly fifteen seconds and is still the best formulation of the question I know.<sup>2</sup>*

\* \* \*

These discussions are conducted only, I think, within the world of freely improvised music and arise from the contradiction inherent in attempts to organise or to combine composition and 'free' improvisation. Other areas of improvisation – 'idiomatic' – combine fixed and improvised naturally enough, both working organically from a common base. Perhaps the nearest thing to a successful combination of fixed and freely improvised music is in the long serving improvising groups where, as Evan Parker admits, 'I think we accepted long ago those aspects of each other's playing that we are never going to be able to change and we work upon the parts that are negotiable'.

The debates, of course, are unimportant. In fact, external matters – aesthetics, musical fashion, even economics – are to a unique degree irrelevant to the practice of this kind of music making. There seems to be no apparent correlation between the viability and the visibility of improvisation. Its survival, its general health, even, seems to be unaffected by the shifting security of its precarious toehold on the treacherous slopes of the music industry. There are now, to be sure, a number of improvising virtuosos operating on the fringes of one or other of the established music markets, and U.S. improvisors particularly have conducted a sustained assault on the outskirts of rock, but in virtually all cases where some kind of uneasy alliance with the wider music world has been achieved the improvisor's function amounts to little more than peripheral decoration, accepted, if at all, for its novelty value. The bulk of freely improvised music, certainly its essential part, happens in either unpublicised or, at best, under-publicised circumstances: musician-organised concerts, ad hoc meetings and private performances. In other words, simply in response to music-making imperatives. And it's easy to see that the more conducive the setting is to freely improvised music, the less compatible it is likely to be with the kind of presentation typical of the music business.

<sup>1</sup> This took place at the BIM House in Amsterdam. The musicians involved were: Cecil Taylor, John Zorn, George Lewis, Misha Mengelberg, Butch Morris, Gerry Hemingway and me. The transcribed results eventually appeared in *Jaarboek 7* published by Van Gennep, Amsterdam.

<sup>2</sup> From 'Listen to Lacy', a brochure published by Wiener Musik Galerie in 1990 to accompany a series of concerts.



Speculations about the future of free improvisation – its possible popularity or extinction – seem to me totally to misunderstand the function of the activity. Rather like presuming that the course of the sun is affected by the popularity of sun-bathing. It is basically a method of working. As long as the performing musician wants to be creative there is likely to be free improvisation. And it won't necessarily indicate a particular style, or even presuppose an artistic attitude. As a way of making music it can serve many ends.

Paradoxically, and in spite of the earlier arguments, it seems to me now that in practice the difference between free improvisation and idiomatic improvisation is not a fundamental one. Freedom for the free improviser is, like the ultimate idiomatic expression for the idiomatic improviser, something of a Shangri-la. In practice the focus of both players is probably more on means than ends. All improvisation takes place in relation to the known whether the known is traditional or newly acquired. The only real difference lies in the opportunities in free improvisation to renew or change the known and so provoke an open-endedness which by definition is not possible in idiomatic improvisation. And this is certainly a great enough difference, but in its moment to moment practice the essentials of improvisation are to be found, it seems to me, in all improvisation, and its nature is revealed in any one of its many forms.

In all its roles and appearances, improvisation can be considered as the celebration of the moment. And in this the nature of improvisation exactly resembles the nature of music. Essentially, music is fleeting; its reality is its moment of performance. There might be documents that relate to that moment – score, recording, echo, memory – but only to anticipate it or recall it.

Improvisation, unconcerned with any preparatory or residual document, is completely at one with the non-documentary nature of musical performance and their shared ephemerality gives them a unique compatibility. So it might be claimed that improvisation is best pursued through its practice in music. And that the practice of music is best pursued through improvisation.

I believe the above to be true. But improvisation has no need of argument and justification. It exists because it meets the creative appetite that is a natural part of being a performing musician and because it invites complete involvement, to a degree otherwise unobtainable, in the act of music-making.

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