B. J. Music Ed. (1999) **16:3**, 263–73 Copyright © 1999 Cambridge University Press

'To say something that was me': developing a personal voice through improvisation

Ros McMillan

The study and practice of improvisation in music departments of Australian colleges and universities tends to be dominated by jazz and other African-American styles. However, the School of Music of the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne has developed a course of study with a different focus. While rooted in the fundamentals of jazz performance, the philosophy of the course is that students at the end of the twentieth century should endeavour to develop their own musical 'voice'. An important means of assisting this development is the encouragement for students to compose their own music as the basis for improvisation. In many cases personal concerns and events form the basis for these original pieces and allow performers to develop their own compositional concepts. This is also a significant means of allowing the music to reflect the era and culture of the performers. This article outlines an investigation of ten students conducted over the three years of their degree studies. The investigation aimed to ascertain the conditions under which a personal voice might be acquired and the extent to which composition was employed in the participants' major performances.

Introduction

Musical improvisation has a long history. Indeed, it is likely that the earliest forms of music-making were created through improvisatory activity, possibly incorporating sounds of the natural world such as seed-pods, stones and wood. Throughout the ages improvisation has played an important part in many musics. However, the twentieth century has seen the rise and development of an improvised music of such significance that Christopher Small (1987: 4) has described it as 'an outburst of creative energy surely unparalleled in the known history of the human race'. Small was referring to African-American music or jazz, a genre that has provided one of the most dynamic forms of improvisation in the history of music. Taylor (1989: 92) has described it as the 'classical music' of the United States of America.

African-American music is a growing area of music education. Stage bands, as well as small-group combinations of instruments, are increasingly prevalent at all levels of education, particularly amongst advanced student musicians in secondary schools and at the college level. The educational worth of jazz improvisation cannot be exaggerated, particularly in the development of aural skills. Many musical attributes are needed for its performance and to this end Elliott has noted that a multi-dimensional concept of musicianship is required to 'make and listen for jazz' (1996: 8). However, although they do not question the skills that students can acquire through this activity, some feel that the content of much of the music is rather limited in form. A large amount of jazz performance also involves the re-creation of other people's music. As more school programmes include jazz, with a consequent rise in the proficiency of its performance, the notion that improvisation

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

can be an activity other than the re-creation of past jazz styles is often not considered.

This article will discuss an investigation into students of improvisation enrolled in a course of study in Australia, the major philosophy of which is the development of a personal musical 'voice'. It will begin with a discussion of musicians who have striven to perform with a personal voice, followed by consideration of factors that have been important in this development. The major portion of the article will focus on the investigation into the Australian improvisation course. It will make particular reference to the use of composition to assist students in developing their personal voices.

The quest for a personal voice

The history of African-American music revolves around the sounds of unique musical voices, including Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman. Baker (1980) has described these players as having a highly developed intuitive sense with a 'single minded devotion to problem solving', which enabled them to cope with problems without 'succumbing to irrelevancies'. However, much as audiences and critics revered these players, many of them encountered criticism when they no longer performed in the style for which they had become famous. John Coltrane was one such performer whose popularity with audiences waned when his modal style of playing developed into a freer sound, one which jazz critics saw as 'anti-jazz' (DeMichael 1962: 20–3). Miles Davis also experienced critical disapproval. When he died in 1991, Davis was considered to be one of the greatest contributors to the language of African-American music through his involvement in the development of several styles over fifty years of performance. Yet, whenever he abandoned a style with which he had been associated, some regarded the move as a 'sell-out' and failed to see the result as 'true jazz'. According to Cole (1974: 105), Miles Davis became 'a household name at the expense of his own creativity and the intrinsic value of his whole band' with the release of his album *Bitches' Brew* in 1969. Doubt about his music from that time on came not from the musicianship but from his choice of idiom:

> The music is not as demanding to listen to as it once was, and the whole emphasis is extramusical, with clothes, machines and ... the mannerisms of the players pulling one's interest away from the music itself. (Cole 1974: 108)

Davis, however, ignored the criticism and continued to use the resources of the time, including the incorporation of funk rhythms and other sounds from rock music as well as electronic devices on his trumpet. The jazz critic, the late Leonard Feather, supported the new direction. Commenting on *Bitches' Brew* he noted that the music was 'a new and more complex form, drawing from the avant-garde, atonalism, modality, rock, jazz and the universe' (Carr 1982: 200). From our vantage point in the 1990s the album is now seen as one of the most significant occurrences in the history of contemporary improvised music. This is both because Davis, one of the leading jazz figures of the time, made a radical shift in direction and, in so doing, reflected the sounds of the day.

Notwithstanding the efforts of John Coltrane and Miles Davis amongst others (or, paradoxically, probably due to their efforts) the desirability of performing in an authentic jazz style is paramount to many players. To this end, Bailey has written that in African-American music to say that someone 'sounds just like' somebody is usually

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

meant as a compliment. There is considerable pressure on musicians to aim to be no more than very good imitators. He believes that the desire to imitate great players may create problems in the learning of improvisational techniques. Stages of learning tend to be, firstly, the choice of a player or 'master' and an absorption of his or her skills through imitation, after which the development of an individual style should proceed. However, too often there is a tendency to omit the last step, the development of a style becoming the preserve of a handful of innovators. For the rest, writes Bailey, 'the only game [is] to follow the leader' (1992: 53).

He suggests that this is a phenomenon that has been brought about not only by educators but also by performers of African-American music. He has written that jazz performance today 'seems capable only of looking backwards' and that each successive revival sees 'a further mining of its history'. Musicians who were previously renowned for their adventurousness and musical vision are now 'celebrated as the guardians of their tradition'. At the same time, an increasing number of younger players, who appear to have taken on a curatorial role, are performing jazz styles of the past. This takes the form of the re-creation of the playing styles of the past, sometimes reinforced by dressing in the clothes of the period (Bailey 1992: 49).

Steve Lacy, a soprano saxophonist associated with the free jazz movement, described this dichotomy as 'a question of appetite'. He noted that while some people 'search for the perfect arrangement of the old patterns . . . other people want to beat down the walls and find some new territory' (Bailey 1992: 55).

The guitarist Pat Metheny believes that to imitate the playing of others is 'a little bit disrespectful'. As a young player he was strongly influenced by Wes Montgomery, to the point where he stated that he sounded like Montgomery 'playing my ideas'. Metheny claimed that he was helped by associating with people, particularly musicians, who rejected the notion of imitating other musicians. On this matter he wrote:

> For me, it was a really good lesson learned young, which was, Wes did that, it's been done, and that's that. There's plenty of lessons to be learned from his music without coming out and playing octaves with your thumb all night long [a distinctive characteristic in Montgomery's sound]. (Metheny 1990: 60)

The concept of independent thinking in relation to style has been an important factor in the development of individual musical voices. However, other factors have contributed, including the need or desire to take risks in improvised performance. The late Betty Carter said that taking a risk 'every now and then' is the factor that makes a singer a jazz singer. In an interview after fifty years of professional singing Carter stated:

> I've lived long enough to absorb a lot of music in my head so why shouldn't I be adventurous? Why shouldn't I grow? Why shouldn't I take a chance? Why shouldn't I get risky? I mean, that's life. Nothing is ever creative if you don't take a risk. (McLeod 1994: 75)

Dave Brubeck (Sperber 1974: 76) and Steve Lacy (Bailey 1992: 54–5) have also given personal accounts of risk-taking in improvised performance. Indeed, the very act of improvisation is fraught with risk-taking, with results which range on a 'spectrum of satisfaction from serendipitous to undesirable' (Berliner 1994: 210). Unintended mistakes, for example, must be treated as 'spontaneous compositional problems requiring immediate musical solutions', solutions which Berliner has dubbed 'musical saves'. He has written that experienced performers 'raise the musical save to the level of high art' and that with skill:

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> improvisers respond to accidents with composure and ingenuity, performing saves with such speed and assurance that listeners are unaware that any element of the performance is unintentional . . . Ultimately, musical saves require that a soloist have the imagination to conceive an instant solution in the face of error and the technical control to implement it. (Berliner 1994: 215)

As well as stylistic independence and risk-taking, a third factor appears to play a part in the development of a personal voice, that of musical relationships between players. The British musician Eddie Prevost has written that it is relationships that have kept improvisation alive, particularly those:

> individual responses of musicians, who work best, and usually by choice, in close creative communities – exchanging ideas, accepting and giving support, albeit in an imperfect world of few career prospects and an unsympathetic market ethos. (Prevost 1985: 184–5)

The guitarist, the late Emily Remler, also believed that a close relationship could 'push' her musically to a point never before reached. Discussing her work with the drummer Bob Moses, Remler noted that:

> I'll hear myself do something because of what he played and say: 'How did I ever think of that?' I just played the way I play, and he played this thing against it, and we came up with a new thing together. (Berliner 1994: 391)

Both the literature and personal and anecdotal accounts indicate that the three aspects of stylistic independence, the ability to take risks and musical relationships between players are common factors in the development of the personal voices of improvising musicians. They were significant for Louis Armstrong in the 1920s, for Miles Davis in the 1970s and for musicians in many styles in the intervening years. The result was music that reflected the culture and times of the performers, an important consideration if an art-form is to 'live'.

A study of students of improvisation

An emphasis on performing music of one's own culture is found in the teaching programme in an Australian institution, the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), located in the southern city of Melbourne. Within the School of Music at the VCA are two strands, one known as Repertoire and the other as Improvisation. The two streams are independent and students choose to study one or the other.

The improvisation course, which began in 1980, was originally titled Jazz Studies. This name changed in 1987 to Improvisation Studies to reflect better the style of music performed by the staff, who are all professional performers, but particularly to accommodate the music of the students. While a few students prefer to play in conventional jazz styles using the traditional format of 'head, improvisation and head', the majority perform music that reflects influences from a wide variety of genres. Thus, while the sound with its rhythmic basis has roots in African-American music, performers can use any number of formats to produce it.

This diversity was exemplified at a recent workshop class I attended where five groups performed. One group played a bebop piece. A second sang a song composed by the Head of Department consisting of a free-time vocal solo in E minor over a strongly rhythmic 7/4 pattern played by piano, bass and drum kit. A third group, consisting of piano, flute, bass and two saxophones, played a powerful and evocative

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

piece comprising only the notes E and F. A fourth group performed a funky Latin-based piece and the last played a free improvisation in which the singer read a poem written by one of the group. Notably, the students and staff composed all the material on which the improvisations were based, including the bop piece.

The driving philosophy of the course is that each student should attempt to find an individual voice and to reflect the music of an Australian culture at the beginning of a new millennium. This notion of 'voice' is similar to that used by Donald Graves, who established his name in the teaching of language. Graves has said that voice is the driving force behind the writing process that is:

> not a process component or a step in the journey. . .to final revision. Rather, it underlies every part of the process. To ignore voice is to present the process as a lifeless, mechanical act. (Graves 1983: 227)

'Voice' in this sense is the revelation of self through an expressive act. However, Graves also used the term in the more literal sense of speaking aloud, of making a transition from speech to print and coming to terms with one's speaking voice through which writing becomes alive. This concept of personal expressivity is regarded as an important outcome in the visual arts. However, in music education it is often understood as interpretation, as an aspect of the re-creation of other people's music rather than the manifestation of an individual's musical ideas and expression.

An opportunity to investigate improvisation students at the VCA was provided by the Head of Department who was keen for such a study to occur. In preparation for this, a preliminary investigation was undertaken which included observation of six performances. The investigation involved attending three workshop classes (one of each at Years 1, 2 and 3) and three end-of-year recitals given by a student from each year. The purpose was to observe learning processes in improvisation in the classes and to witness the finished products in the recitals. Of all the pieces performed in the recitals only one was in a conventional jazz style, a Latin-based piece performed by the Year 1 student, while the Years 2 and 3 recitals consisted solely of works designated as 'contemporary'.[1] Aspects of the Year 2 recital that denoted a non-conventional approach were the use of unusual instrumental and vocal sound including distortion, non-Western percussion, a choir and electronics. The venue for the Year 3 recital also provided an opportunity to incorporate less conventional sounds. The performance took place on a shipping platform in the middle of Melbourne's Yarra River, which flows through the city, and utilised the structure of the platform, as well as the sounds of the city and river traffic.

From this preliminary observation, in conjunction with readings and anecdotal accounts of African-American musicians, a framework was developed to form a basis for the study. It suggested that students enter the VCA with a diverse background of musical, cultural and educational experiences. Throughout their practical and theoretical studies they experience a variety of musical genres and participate in music-making which requires them to make artistic choices regarding the style of music played. They are encouraged to take artistic risks and to perform with musicians whom they regard as 'kindred spirits'. The music they produce can be analysed through a network of musical characteristics, the result of the analysis determining aspects that identify the musician's personal voice.

The study categorised style in two ways: conventional and unconventional. Conventional styles included blues, ballads, bebop, Latin pieces, jazz standards and modal pieces with a structured harmonic basis such as John Coltrane's *Impressions*. Unconventional forms included free-form pieces, fusion and contemporary pieces as well

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as modal music with a non-structured form or a basis other than traditional cyclic harmonic systems. Risk-taking ranged from high-risk, including performing original compositions in an unconventional style, to low-risk, which was performing known repertoire in conventional styles. Concerning musical relationships, it was thought that observation of those people with whom the participants chose to play would provide evidence of these.

The study was established at the beginning of the academic year when the twenty-two students who were selected, after audition from some 230, enrolled in the course. The audition, held in the preceding year, consisted of the performance of two contrasting pieces and an interview. Observations were made on a range of criteria including creative and technical facility, reading skills, knowledge of scales, chords and rhythms, and aural skills. In particular, creative and instrumental skills were sought as was an opinion from the 'auditionee' that improvised music could represent a variety of styles. While students were free to play in a style such as bebop, they were questioned whether they thought that they would be comfortable in a course in which the performance of that style occurred in a limited way and in which the major priority was the development of one's voice.

All twenty-two of the Year 1 students were invited to participate in the study. Seventeen accepted the invitation. Ten students formed the final cohort, consisting of all five females who had auditioned successfully and five males. They included the first pianist, drummer and bassist to respond to the invitation, two mature age female saxophone players and the only brass player to have auditioned successfully. The other four participants consisted of a pianist and a guitarist who had both auditioned unsuccessfully in previous years, a female singer and another pianist who was not initially selected but was included after completing the first week's evaluation.

Following the preliminary observation, the investigation consisted of attendance at the weekly Ensemble Workshop classes in Year 1, selected classes throughout Years 2 and 3 and each participant's end-of-year recitals throughout the three years of the course. The workshop classes, which require all students to perform in groups each week, provided the chance to observe the developing skills of the participants. The recitals, where students choose their format, content and co-performers, gave the opportunity to observe the development of the participants' personal voices and relationships.

Data collection and analysis

Three years of data provided an extensive collection of material. This included six interviews with the participants, recordings and detailed descriptions of their recitals, recordings of solo performances in Years 2 and 3 and journal entries from the participants for all ensemble workshop classes in Year 1 and selected classes in Year 2. Additional data included observation of lecturers' teaching styles, as well as the teaching content of Ensemble Workshop and a class designed to develop solo improvisational skills known as Performance Materials.

The classes provided the opportunity to observe staff who gently but constantly reinforced the importance of the students performing their 'own' music. Staff often referred to the great African-American artists in these sessions. However, when they did, they spoke of them not as people to copy slavishly but for their spirit in forging new styles. Hand-in-hand with this was the encouragement for students to write pieces as vehicles for improvisation that capitalised on their strengths as well as those with whom they chose to play. Simple examples included a suggestion that drummers

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

write a piece based on a rhythmic pattern, singers invent lyrics to inspire the writing of a melody and keyboard players compose a set of chords. As a means of encouraging students to compose, the Head of Department developed Concept Pieces. These are compositional outlines sometimes written in multiple time signatures or more unconventional configurations of chords than those generally found in jazz standards.

The major sources of data for observing the developing personal voices of the participants were their end-of-year recitals. Many of these contained original works and the following section provides details of these works and the style in which they were written.

Year 1 recitals

Of the ten participants in the study, nine performed works based on their compositions. The large number of original works was seen as an attempt to show musical independence although some of these were performed in conventional jazz styles. Table 1 provides an outline of the stylistic influences in the participants' compositions.

Table 1. *Stylistic influences in original pieces in Year 1 Recital*

Alex:	*Nobel Menchu – the Gift for Peace:* contemporary with Latin, free & non-Western sounds
Belinda:	*Silent Impressions*: ballad
Cassie:	*Zingara*: contemporary
Damien:	*Reconciliation*: ballad
Elly:	*Improvisation*: free
Fran:	*Exit*: contemporary
Gina:	*Folk tune No. 1* and *Improvisation*: both modified modal
Hugh:	*Vernon the Mynah Bird* and *Tip to Toe*: both fusion
Ian:	*Us in A Flat*: Latin; *Duo for two double basses*: free

Newsworthy events inspired several of these works. Alex dedicated *Nobel Menchu* to the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchu. It was a suite containing four sections: war, sorrow, strength and hope, inspired by Menchu's fight for her people, the Guatemalan Indians. Ian's duo for double basses was a protest on violence against women. It consisted of a three-part work that sought to portray the aggression of violent males, the emotions of the women involved and the issue of beating. (The death of a Melbourne woman had been a recent news item.)

The interviews following these recitals invited the participants to explain their thinking in relation to their original piece. Hugh described *Tip to Toe* as a piece about people 'from top to bottom' adding: 'We all have disparate elements to our personality ... and I tried to represent what's going on in me'. Belinda noted the value of expressing personal feelings. She stated that she wrote *Silent Impressions* at a time when she was 'broken-hearted' and that it came to represent 'all my anxieties and all my hurt and all my frustrations'. Damien noted that his piece *Reconciliation* represented his feelings towards relationships with people and the importance of being reconciled after 'disagreements and stuff'. Fran summed up her peers' feelings when she stated that it was important 'to say something that was just me'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Year 2 recitals

By the Year 2 recitals the number participants had reduced to eight, and of these six performed original works. These pieces featured a variety of styles, with details appearing in Table 2.

Table 2. *Stylistic influences in original pieces in Year 2 recitals*

Alex:	*I had a Yarn* [sic] *in Africa*: contemporary and free including African influences.
Belinda:	*Blue Gold*: jazz standard; *Take Wings*: conventional modal; *Hip Man*: bebop; *Shadows*: bebop ballad.
Fran:	*Song for Pia*: contemporary; *Seven Steps*: contemporary; *Dog Tired Day*: jazz standard.
Gina:	*Nowhere to Run*: contemporary; *Seven Steps*: contemporary; *Dog Tired Day*: jazz standard
Hugh:	*Mantra*: contemporary; *Soundscape*: free; *Laughing Music*: free; *Progresso Continuo*: free/fusion.
Jon:	*Game of Mirrors*: bebop ballad.

Personal influences inspired several of these works. Alex's single twenty-minute piece was inspired by his participation in a vocal ensemble that included African pieces in its repertoire. Hugh's piece *Progresso Continuo* was a comment on the progress he was making in his musical life while Gina's *Nowhere to Run* was a realisation of her thoughts about facing the future. (Of major importance to Gina in this year was her musical association with Fran, with whom she performed regularly, both as a duo and within a larger ensemble. Their performance in a joint recital seemed to confirm the value of musical relationships.)

Commenting on the value of improvising on her compositions, Fran noted that she always played 'better over something I've written'. This was not only 'familiarity, but because I've written it I feel I've got something to say'. Alex's suite *I had a Yarn in Africa* also provided a flow that he believed was an important contrast to the usual series of songs performed by jazz artists. 'You're continually introducing something that has no relation whatsoever to the piece you've just done before'. Alex saw this as a 'presentation problem' which 'works to an extent' but of which 'we of the next generation [are] saying: We don't need to do that. We've got something else we can do.' His recital was a major step in his development. The concept of the performance, from the theme and format through to the realisation, was 'the first time I've conceived and produced something (a suite of works) on my own . . . and it happened and it worked and it won't be the last'.

Year 3 recitals

The most important aspect of these recitals was the large number of free and contemporary works performed, with only nine pieces of a total of thirty-six not composed by the participants. Everyone performed at least two of his or her compositions and five people performed entirely original programmes.

Personal concerns, interests and events were again the basis of many of these. Dedications included Alex's tribute to 'all those who help without question' in *When the Big Winds blow* (following a near-disastrous wave-sailing incident) and Fran's piece *She Walks,* which was inspired by an 'English teacher extraordinaire' from her school days. Personal regrets were the basis of Jon's *Stand a little taller at Yom Kippur*. Hugh

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 3. *Stylistic influences in original pieces in Year 3 recitals*

Alex:	*When the Big Winds blow*: free; *Torch Drums*: free; *Emmagen Creek*: contemporary.
Belinda:	*Dreaming of the Sea*: free; Duet: contemporary ballad; *Oceanic Call*: contemporary; *Reflections*: contemporary ballad; *Take Wings*: contemporary; *Bronte's Chant*: modified modal.
Cassie:	*Makin' it up*: contemporary bebop; *Bon Ami*: ballad; *Zingara*: contemporary.
Fran:	*That Bad Cat*: contemporary; *Lo-Arna*: contemporary ballad; *Ode to Bela Bartók*: free and contemporary; *Snapshots*: contemporary ballad; *She Walks*: contemporary Latin.
Gina:	*Or-Weh*: free; *Falling Awake*: modified modal; *Joy Song*: contemporary Latin.
Hugh:	*Improvisation*: free; *Jacaranda*: free; *Bath-time*: free; *WHOKNOWSWHATSTHAT*: free; *Three Steps Forward, Two Back*: fusion.
Ian:	Unnamed piece: contemporary fusion.
Jon:	*Scumbag Blues*: contemporary bebop: *Stand a little taller at Yom Kippur*: contemporary ballad.

wrote his piece *Jacaranda* to celebrate the blossoms on a tree by his optometrist's rooms that he observed with his first pair of spectacles.

This use of personal events and feelings to inspire compositions proved to be a valid means by which the participants imbued their work with a certain freshness. The integration of the participants' artistic making with their personal lives also reflected the findings of another study. Berliner (1994: 91) found that many jazz musicians were 'guided not only by purely musical concepts but by wide-ranging experiences that shape the artists' need for self-expression and infuse their creations with distinctive attributes'.

Three examples of the participants' music, which demonstrate how previous experience can aid the shaping of sounds, can be heard on the accompanying CD. (Tracks 17–19.) All are extracts from the recording of the Year 3 public recitals, which accounts for extraneous sounds such as a creaking piano stool and audience rustling.

Belinda's piece *Dreaming of the Sea* is the first example, one that was considered an example of high risk-taking because it was a free improvisation. Its title reflected the theme of Belinda's recital, which was inspired by aspects of the sea as seen from her home town of Sydney, and which consisted entirely of her own works. The importance of writing her music, Belinda thought, was the direction it gave her. In her final interview she stated that developing improvisational structures 'gives me goals which are years down the track because I realise limitations about myself that I want to overcome'.

Example 1: Belinda (soprano saxophone): *Dreaming of the Sea*. Soprano saxophone, piano/synthesizer and voice

The excerpt begins at the end of a low drone on A that has been playing on the synthesizer for one minute. The saxophone introduces a two-bar reflective melodic pattern, which forms the basis of the work and to which the singer gives a melodic response. There are no lyrics; rather the singer uses neo-syllables[2] to complement lyrical sounds on the saxophone. The format of the piece, which is a free improvisation, is constructed through the shaping of volume and texture from soft to loud, the excerpt concluding mid-way through the improvisation.

The second excerpt is from Fran's piece dedicated to Bela Bartók. The cadenza-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

type passage that forms the bulk of the excerpt reflects her experience in classical performance. When she began the course, Fran thought her background was an inadequate preparation for a course of study in creative music-making. However, as the VCA staff constantly reiterated the importance of personal expression, Fran used her interests and abilities to transcend an initial lack of confidence. The unconventional material of the excerpt, as defined by the study, was seen as an example of a developing personal voice.

Example 2: Fran (piano): *Ode to Bela Bartók*. Piano, electric guitar, bass and drumkit

The excerpt begins after an impressionistic opening, with the pianist creating 'shapes' through clusters and whole-tone runs. The form begins with the piano and guitar setting a groove for eight bars, followed by the other instruments. The excerpt concludes as the bass player begins an improvisation.

Example 3 is performed by Gina who had previously completed a course that focused on the performance of the classical clarinet repertoire. She was attracted to the VCA because of what seemed to her to be an emphasis on 'a real search for self'. Her music presents a clear picture of her approach to improvisation, both in the type of performance material and her sound. This duo improvisation with Fran was typical of Gina's 'non-jazz' material while her centred soprano saxophone tone, which she believed was the result of her previous tuition on clarinet, was heard as the beginning of a personal sound.

Example 3: Gina (soprano saxophone): *Falling Awake*. Soprano saxophone and piano

The piece is built entirely of two-bar sections on the chords of C and A flat. Thus, it is a modified modal piece. The excerpt begins in the middle of a free piano fantasia that precedes a haunting sixteen-bar melody in an AB form. The saxophone plays an improvisation over the form.

That all the participants performed their own music in their final recitals affirms the notion that original composition offers a useful means of allowing musicians to determine their personal direction. Indeed, when people have control over their material and can choose the type of structure that facilitates their improvisational flow, the possibility of a personal voice developing is greatly enhanced.

Conclusion

The investigation of the improvisation students at the VCA produced a variety of results. The reader will find more details in other articles (McMillan 1996, 1997). However, the present paper aims to highlight the value of original composition in assisting the development of a personal voice. With a basis in African-American music and influences from a range of non-Western musics, classical music and rock as well as technological developments, these students showed how most had developed an independence from conventional jazz through the music they performed.

This independence also showed in the way that the participants' music reflected their cultural milieu, something that has been at the heart of each succeeding style of African-American music. Indeed, it was this verity that led to the renaming of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press

VCA Improvisation Studies course from Jazz Studies and the development of the view that students should respond artistically to their culture, thus allowing the greatest opportunity for personal expression.

Since the days when John Coltrane and Miles Davis shocked the jazz critics, there has been an enormous diversification of sounds within improvised music. Changes in taste have been so rapid that musicians today who play contemporary styles, including free jazz, are much more likely to be seen as interesting practitioners than iconoclasts. Indeed, many improvisers see the importance of taking listeners on an aural 'adventure', providing the freshness and vitality of sound that past styles had in their day, as a major means of keeping their art alive.

Notes

[1] The word 'contemporary' is a vague term, one which Coker (1980: 75) believed would eventually become obsolete because more consistent traits would develop in those styles deemed as such. However, nearly twenty years after Coker wrote this, the term is still used to denote most improvised music (apart from free) which is not in a conventional jazz style.

[2] 'Non-words' or invented word sounds. I devised the term to differentiate this type of sound from scat singing, which tends to be described as nonsense syllables and is much more jazz-orientated.

References

Bailey, D. (1992) *Improvisation: its Nature and Practice in Music.* New York: Da Capo Press.

Baker, D. (1980) *A History of Jazz* (16 cassette recordings). Adelaide: the University of Adelaide.

Berliner, P. (1994) *Thinking in Jazz: the Infinite Art of Improvisation.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Carr, I. (1982) *Miles Davis: A Critical Biography.* London: Quartet Books.

Coker, J. (1980) *The Complete Method for Improvisation.* Lebanon, Indiana: Studio P/R Inc.

Cole, B. (1974) *Miles Davis: a Musical Biography.* New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks.

Demichael, D. (1962) 'John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy Answer the Critics', *Down Beat*, 12 April 1962, pp. 20–3, quoted in E. Jost (1974) *Free Jazz.* Graz: Universal.

Elliott, D. (1996) 'Improvisation and Jazz: Implications for International Practice', *International Journal of Music Education*, **26**, pp. 3–13.

Graves, D. (1983) *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work.* London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Mcleod, J. (1994) *Jazztrack*. Sydney: ABC Books.

Mcmillan, R. (1996) 'A Terrible Honesty: the Development of a Personal Voice in Musical Improvisation', *Context: Journal of Music Research*, **12**, pp. 5–11.

Mcmillan, R. (1997) 'Finding a Personal Musical Voice: the Place of Improvisation in Music Education, *Research Studies in Music Education*, **9**, pp. 20–8.

Metheny, P. (1990) 'Pat Metheny – Straight Ahead'. In *Guitar Extra!* Première issue, interview by A. Aledort, 58–61.

Prevost, E. (1985) 'Improvisation: Music for an Occasion', *British Journal of Music Education*, **2/2**, pp. 177–86.

Small, C. (1987) *Music of the Common Tongue.* London: John Calder.

Sperber, M. (1974) 'Improvisation in the performing arts: music, dance and theatre', EdD thesis, Columbia University.

Taylor, B. (1989) 'Improvisation: Spontaneous Composition'. Proceedings of the Suncoast Music Education forum on Creativity, Tampa, Florida, March 1989, pp. 90–2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051799000352 Published online by Cambridge University Press