
ENSEMBLE PLEEBLAND: A MODULAR ENSEMBLE AND COLLECTIVE

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1 Introduction

Ensemble Pleebland is designed to be a modular ensemble and collective, meaning that there is a roster of involved people, who are members of the collective. The purpose of the ensemble is:

- To develop non-idiomatic,[1] group improvisation practices;
- To explore structured, seeded, and composed improvisation and composition practices of its members;
- To explore interactions between electronic technology and acoustic instruments;
- To undertake practice-led, or practice-based research in composition and improvisation adhering to the above and below, and;
- To undertake research-led practice in the performance of composition and improvisation adhering to the above and below.

The name “Pleebland” comes from Margaret Atwood’s *MadAddam* trilogy of books, as Cooke summarises:

Atwood manifests this divide between rich and poor, haves and have-nots, in the splitting of urban environments into the Pleeblands – places of filth, disease, poverty, bioterror and chaos; and the Compounds – walled, secure, tightly-controlled and policed districts of biotechnological and capitalist production.[5]

suggesting a degree of political engagement in the ideology of the ensemble. Indeed, the notion of improvisation in this context is informed by a notion of freedom. As Barrett says:

I prefer to think of contemporary art music not as another convenient category but, from a more idealistic standpoint, as describing those musics which refuse to be categorised, in other words as a phenomenon which is collectively not smaller but actually larger than the profit-friendly musics which seem to surround it, because of the breadth of its imaginative horizons, and the freedom we have, both as musicians and as listeners, to explore them. This is one of the few real freedoms available to us, after all.[2]

2 Principles

The ensemble draws influence from Cornelius Cardew’s *Ethic of Improvisation*, and John Butcher’s *15 Simple Statements on Free Improvisation*.

In the *Treatise Handbook*, Cardew outlines an ethic of improvisation, which was part of the guiding principles of the *Scratch Orchestra*.

Virtues that a musician can develop

1. *Simplicity* Where everything becomes simple is the most desirable place to be. But, like Wittgenstein and his ‘harmless contradiction’, you have to remember how you got there. The simplicity must contain the memory of how hard it was to achieve. (The relevant Wittgenstein quotation is from the posthumously published

'Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics': "The pernicious thing is not, to produce a contradiction in the region where neither the consistent nor the contradictory proposition has any kind of work to do; no, what is pernicious is: not to know how one reached the place where contradiction no longer does any harm".)

In 1957 when I left The Royal Academy of Music in London complex compositional techniques were considered indispensable. I acquired some-and still carry them around like an "infection that I am perpetually desirous of curing. Sometimes the temptation occurs to me that if I were to infect my students with it I would at last be free of it myself.

2. *Integrity* What we do in the actual event is important-not only what we have in mind. Often what we do is what tells us what we have in mind. The difference between making the sound and being the sound. The professional musician makes the sounds (in full knowledge of them as they are external to him); AMM is their sounds (as ignorant of them as one is about one's own nature).

3. *Selflessness* To do something constructive you have to look beyond yourself. The entire world is your sphere if your vision can encompass it. Self-expression lapses too easily into mere documentation - 'I record that this is how I feel'. You should not be concerned with yourself beyond arranging a mode of life that makes it possible to remain on the line, balanced. Then you can work, look out beyond yourself. Firm foundations make it possible to leave the ground.

4. *Forbearance* Improvising in a group you have to accept not only the frailties of your fellow musicians, but also your own. Overcoming your instinctual revulsion against whatever is out of tune (in the broadest sense).

5. *Preparedness* for no matter what eventuality (Cage's phrase) or simply Awakeness. I can best illustrate this with a special case of clairvoyant prediction. The trouble with clairvoyant prediction is that you can be absolutely convinced that one of two alternatives is going to happen, and then suddenly you are equally convinced of the other. In time this oscillation accelerates until the two states merge in a blur. Then all you can say is: I am convinced that either p or not-p, that either she will come or she won't, or whatever the case is about. Of course there is an immense difference between simply being aware that something might-or might not occur, and a clairvoyant conviction that it will or won't occur. No practical difference but a great difference in feeling. A great intensity in your anticipation of this or that outcome. So it is with improvisation. "He who is ever looking for the breaking of a light he knows not whence about him, notes with a strange headfulness the faintest paleness of the sky" (Walter Pater). This constitutes awakeness.

6. *Identification with nature* Drifting through life: being driven through life; neither constitutes a true identification with nature. The best is to lead your life, and the same applies in improvising: like a yachtsman to utilise the interplay of natural forces and currents to steer a course.

My attitude is that the musical and the real worlds are one. Musicality is a dimension of perfectly ordinary reality. The musician's pursuit is to recognize the musical composition of the world (rather as Shelley does in Prometheus Unbound). All playing can be seen as an extension of singing; the voice and its extensions represent the musical dimension of men, women, children and animals. According to some authorities smoking is an extension of thumbsucking; perhaps the fear of cancer will eventually drive us back to thumbsucking. Possibly in an ideal future us animals will revert to singing, and leave wood, glass, metal, stone etc. to find their own voices, free of our torturings. (I have heard tell of devices that amplify to the point of audibility the sounds spontaneously occurring in natural materials).

7. *Acceptance of Death* From a certain point of view improvisation is the highest mode of musical activity, for it is based on the acceptance of music's fatal weakness and essential and most beautiful characteristic-its transcendence.[4]

Here is Butcher's 15 Statements in full:

1. Group improvisation involves an attempt to make music that no one player could imagine. It should force the musicians beyond their own conceptions.
2. Each player should equally be able to affect the content, form and direction of the music at any moment.
3. The physicality of sound production is inescapably connected with the creation, not just the execution, of the music.
4. Free improvised music is necessarily spontaneous, but is built on a background of years of study, experiment, thought and experience.
5. There exists the possibility of trying to play a music with no history.

6. Free improvisation shows that complexity is actually very natural.
 7. Contemporary music seems to operate within a continuum - from the often refreshing ideas of "sound left to be itself" to the sometimes grotesque extremes of "self expression."
- Free improvisation can operate anywhere within this. Often, most interestingly, with ambiguity - even at different points simultaneously.
8. The listener hears the reasoning behind musical choices in real time.
 9. Regular improvising means engaging with that Derek Bailey has described as a "search for whatever is endlessly variable."
 10. In most of the free improvisation I enjoy, decisions are made and techniques developed for "musical" rather than for "instrumental" reasons.
 11. Improvising musicians are continually modifying their intentions in response to each other. This happens at the actual point of creation and execution - sometimes against an individual player's own preferences.
 12. Tim Hodgkinson has written "Improvised music grips human beings because it is illuminated by the vivid presence of myriad possibilities that were not taken."
 13. Most performers are aware, moment by moment of only a few things they can do which will sound "right" compared to hundreds that will sound "wrong." Free improvisation is very constrained and probably shouldn't be called free improvisation.
 14. Players intuitively choose the actual music content according to the unique circumstances around each performance. The room's acoustic, the day's travel, the nature of the audience, their last few concerts, what they ate for dinner.
 15. In improvisation you can hear the human beings behind the instruments.[3]

So while these two sets of principles inform this, as a group we must find our own way and formulate a constitution, however based on these.

3 Current Members

- Vincent Giles (founder)
- Sophie Rose
- Josh Kyle
- Alice Bennett
- Nick Freer
- Carlos Lopez
- Brae Grimes
- Kevan Atkins
- Sean Quinn

References

- [1] Derek Bailey. *Musical improvisation: its nature and practice in music*. A spectrum book. Prentice-Hall, 1982.
- [2] Richard Barrett. *The possibility of music*, 2002.
- [3] John Butcher. *15 simple statements on free improvisation - with illustrations and contradictions*, 1998.
- [4] Cornelius Cardew. *Treatise handbook*. Peters London, 1971.
- [5] Grayson Cooke. Technics and the human at zero-hour: Margaret Atwood's oryx and crane. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 31(2), 2006.