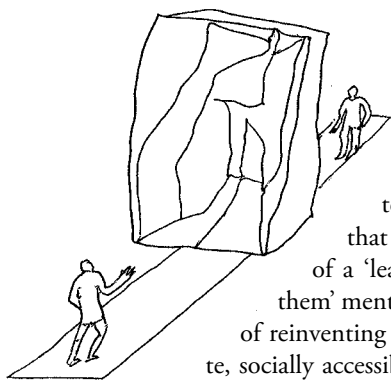


Too important to be left to the Musicians: un-Musical activism and sonic fictions

von Charles Bramley, Newcastle upon Tyne (GB)



OK, so today I'm going to be talking about ways of using improvisation as a form of social activism in which we try to obliterate notions of professionalism that lead to the archaic insistence of a 'learn the rules before you break them' mentality. Instead, we pursue means of reinventing music-making as an immediate, socially accessible activity for those who have been absurdly labelled 'non-musicians' or 'unmusical'. To begin with some context, I'm going to read out a quote from music writer Kodwo Eshun, who is criticising the state of music journalism as a 'giant inertia engine', but in doing so, actually gives a very useful context for the wider critique of music discourse in general:

A giant inertia engine to put the brakes on breaks, a moronizer placing all thought on permanent pause, a futureshock absorber, forever shielding its readers from the future's cuts, tracks, scratches... The fuel this inertia engine runs on is fossil fuel: the proper album, the Real Song, the pure, the true, the proper, the intelligent... the musical... all notions that... maintain a hierarchy of the senses, that petrify music into a solid state in which everyone knows where they stand, and what real music really is... When music is praised as real, pure, proper and true, then it's too late: decay has set in and the maggots aren't far off' (Eshun, 00[-006])¹

Readily swap the topic of journalism for musicology, for music education, for music, or for improvisation, and the point remains the same. There is a stubborn blockage that consistently prevents music in its various forms from extending beyond the professionalism and specialism that stratifies its participants into those who **can** and those who **cannot**. We're told we can't play it, unless we do x y and z first. Learn the rules before you break them etc. The ossified solid-state of music congeals in this misanthropic blockage: saturated, bloated and elite. Un-

Musical activism seeks to bypass this conception of music and hopes instead to pursue real-time-based conceptions of music, in which music is available immediately in various socially accessible spaces. The problem for an un-Musical activism comes from within, because the idea of improvisation as being revolutionary is being damaged by those so-called 'alternative' organisations who claim to be 'experimental', yet beneath the surface of their own myths, expose the completely orthodox and socially redundant substance of their outputs.

For instance, organizations such as the 'Dutch Impro Academy' who despite having a huge promotional poster that simply says PLAY on their website, somehow convince people to pay €400 for the chance to PLAY with a select group of improvisers such as Han Benink Or, how about the experimental music magazine *The Wire* who describes itself in the following terms: "*Passionate, intelligent and provocative, The Wire wages war on the mundane and the mediocre*". In my home-town of Newcastle, England, the organisation who labels itself 'A Better Noise', regularly promotes its performers in the following kinds of terminology:

"He has collaborated with many of the finest European & international musicians".

"Three major figures in contemporary music".

"Celebrating 21 years of the best of free-improvisation".

"Extraordinary musicians with extraordinary skill sets creating an extraordinary and revelatory language!"

"Three sets of heavyweight improvisation"

Does it not stink of a betrayal hearing improvisation described in these terms, hearing how apparently 'revolutionary' it is, yet improvisors are billed consistently on the basis of what their status is, or how many other 'renowned' players they have played with, not to mention that the vast majority of players are highly trained musicians, and that most of the practices of these organisations happen in isolated cultural spaces for connoisseurs? This culture is what Eshun might refer to as 'Maggot Improv', that heavyweight improvisation, the finest international improvisers, who are fed up of being told improvisation is easy and 'anyone could do it', and so return to their reserved seats at the top table where they perceive belonging, assuring us that no

¹ Kodwo Eshun's book is paginated according to its own distinctive format throughout.

matter how 'experimental', we are safe in their hands, it's not 'just noise',- they really know what they are doing because they are **professional** musicians playing **professional** music. This I feel, chokes the life out of the music and its potential for activism and revolution.

Ok, so let's now look at approaching music from an un-Musical perspective. As an untrained musician myself, someone who has never learnt any chords, keys, scales, or anything like that, my initial motive for pursuing improvisation was in response to a compulsory performance at a university, which at the time was a centre for 'music and inclusivity'. I failed, and the assessment report read:

Charlie is totally unable to deal with musical responsibility... he appears to be completely frozen... his contributions were severely out of time, and were considered to be unmusical...



Workshops for people of all ages: children and adults playing music together.

Fotos: Charles Bramley

Inevitably bruised by this experience, an already insecure relationship with music-making exploited further by the assumption that there is such a thing as 'unmusical' and that such a term can be justified by the legitimating hierarchy of professional musicianship who seek to uphold the structural orthodoxies of the past. I was told the term 'unmusical' was justified because the assessment panel were experienced, professional musicians with great standing. There was an unmistakable truth to the fact I was frozen to the stage, petrified, heart thumping out of my chest with palpitations, adrenaline through the roof, terrified. The problem I continue to have with this situation is not to do with the performance itself, or the judgement of it, but more, how institutions can help foster a musical discourse that allows this extreme fear of music performance in the first place, and how apparently 'progressive' music departments remain deeply embedded within fossil fuel orthodoxy.

Through the following 4 years, a dedicated commitment to what became known as Felt Beak, an organisation developed in Newcastle by improviser Will Edmondson, radically altered my potential to make music by turning away from restrictive values of musicality. The idea of Felt Beak being a record-label platform for the hyper-proliferated output of a network of impro-

visers playing in various groupings, recording at least 3 albums a week, with no other guidance. The ethos of this atmosphere provided me with enough confidence to explore this approach to music-making through a kind of practice that I have been following ever since:

Felt Beak seeks through example to emphasise that the only way to make 'good' (meaningful, relevant,) art is to do, do, do, do, do, even to the extent that consciously reflecting on and prescribing what you do becomes an impediment to the doing.

Applying this to un-Musical activism then revolves around creating multiple outlets for newcomers; workshops, recording sessions, performance events, etc. I recruit participants by advertising via social media and other avenues, specifically asking for people who either identify as 'non-musicians', 'unmusical',



or just people who have had minimal music-making experience. With all of the workshops I do, I try to be careful not to repeat what can often happen with non-musicians in improvisation workshops, as Paul Hegarty discusses: *'non-musicians can often undergo an initiation ritual where their innate musicality is to be brought out. If they seem incapable of following the implied rules of a band... they will be shuffled back to the ranks of the non-musical'* (Hegarty, 93). For me, the aim is not to show how **you were musical all along**, but instead to craft a non-fixed existential musicality by unraveling ideology that had restricted the participants' willingness to define their own music. Deep pest excavation is often required for this stage. Instruments laid out all over the floor, no instruction, no guidance, retrieving misplaced memories of the fun of musical exploration. When we do exercises, they are geared towards this kind of unselfconscious exploration of music. Once people feel sufficiently freed up from whatever constraints they felt beforehand, we regularly engage in unguided collective improvisation. I'll quote at length from one of the participants, Nicola Bushell:

By the age of 30, I'd lost all nerve and given up on playing music. Even just being near an instrument in the company of a 'musician' dried my mouth and scared the hell out of me. I'd tried so hard and

failed! The first [unmusical] workshop was terrifying! A room full of instruments. Once I learned how to relax [however], and realised there was no wrong way to do this, I began to completely enjoy the experience. Each week we became more relaxed and attuned to the The MUSIC WE were making! Our first performance was immense! As soon as we started playing, all doubt drained from my body... We were doing it... I have never been so wired in my entire life as I was after that gig.

In terms of the the particular model of improvisation typically deployed then, this has emerged from the micro-groups themselves and the broader Felt Beak aesthetic - an anarchic mode of operation which allows each group to decide for themselves how to proceed with no external restrictions, such as those that come from European 'non-idiomatic' or 'free-improv' models, in which for example, a 'famous' European free-improviser can tell a group of music students that initiating a short rhythm is 'shutting everyone else out of the group' and makes things 'banal'. I've found this approach doesn't offer anything in terms of un-Musical activism.² In reaction against this absurdity, the content of un-Musical improvised practice can be as chaotic or coherent as the groups decide, with particular enjoyment of electronic beat-based styles, avant-garde jazz and free-rock forms typically deployed, drawing significant influence from the thought and practice of artists such as William Parker and Hamid Drake. This more Afrological model seems to get closer to a much talked about ideal, having a collective hyperaware attitude combined with a bold expressiveness on an individual level. What I have found incredibly liberating about it, is that when people get together, they don't even use the word 'improvisation', they tend to just say 'let's play'. Importantly though, it also departs from the idea of a 'jam session', in which there is an implied inferiority from the 'real thing'. On the contrary, this is the suggestion that the 'real thing' will always be improvised. In this way, on a micro-scale, it doesn't feel like an separate alienated and isolating musical scene, but a potential redefinition of Music itself, in which anyone and everyone can join in. I'll play a short video medley to show you the kind of stuff people get up to.

What I'm trying to suggest with all of this then is not just that there are significant activist potentials to improvised practice and that this music can be accessed immediately by people from various different backgrounds in open-public settings, but that any such potential is being kept out of view by either the strict parameters applied to the musical approaches themselves under the guise of 'freedom', or the way these musics are operated socially to preserve the hierarchy, privilege and exclusion of high-art musical culture.

What are we pursuing here then? Jacques Attali says it, probably most directly:

² Possible question/criticism: 'free-from' free-from a lifetime of musical habits, and therefore someone who is highly trained, therefore doesn't lend itself well to newcomers, nothing to relate to from their current situation. I think you have to start from where people are, and then they are more willing to go on a journey with you, rather than imposing something from outside onto them.

A resurgence of music for immediate enjoyment, for daily communication, rather than for a confined spectacle. No study is required to play this kind of music... It is thus accessible to everyone, breaking the barrier raised by an apprenticeship in the code and the instrument (Attali, 140). It heralds the arrival of new social relations (Attali, 20).

Such new social relations though would need to expose the hypocrisy of using terms such as 'freedom', 'experimental' or 'revolution' in improvisation discourses that flagrantly disregard the power relations involved with who **can** and who **cannot** participate. I'll finish with this quote from Christopher Small, which is where the title for this paper comes from:

Music is too important to be left to the musicians, and in recognizing this fact we strike a blow at the experts' domination... we control our own musical destiny, provide our own music rather than leaving it altogether to someone else to provide. (Small, 1977, 214)

.....

Charly Bramley I am a researcher, performer and workshop leader based in Newcastle upon Tyne, England. My work explores the extent to which improvisation can be utilised as a type of socio-musical activism, which widens access and participation by inviting so called 'non-musicians' who may consider themselves 'unmusical' to engage in various open-access workshops, recording sessions and performance events in socially accessible community settings throughout Newcastle. I want to obliterate the negative effects of professionalism and specialism that obstruct and hinder access to music, and in doing so, change the typical perception of music from an out of reach 'specialist' art only for 'experts', into a radically accessible and irresistible practice, available immediately to anyone and everyone. I specifically propose an 'un-Musical activism' that reflects the need for a fundamental dismantling of fixed ideas on what musicians are and what music can be. un-Musical activism reinvents an originally pejorative term, in order to devise means by which so-called 'non-musicians' and the apparently 'unmusical' can reclaim music through regular music-making opportunities. As a completely un-trained musician myself I have benefited hugely from the accessibility of improvised practice. I am a regular performer in various improvised music activity in Newcastle, including the monthly performance event 'Blue Rinse', the record label 'Felt Beak' and my own weekly improvised music series which are open-access.