



Participative Inquiry and Group Musical Improvisation

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The Common Ground Report (CGR) (Network Review 98, pp. 24-27), exhibits similarities with reports of outcomes of group musical improvisation modalities developed within the Music & Psyche Network (M&P). This work is outlined, and quotations from M&P participants and the CGR are used to draw parallels. Some related experiential arenas are touched on.

Music & Psyche

On reading The CGR I was struck by the resemblance of several comments to certain outcome experiences of a particular approach to group musical improvisation, which was developed a decade ago within the Music & Psyche project jointly by Sarah Verney Caird (music therapist), Rod Paton (academic and improviser), Susan Nares (musician and therapist), Maxwell Steer (composer and initiator of the M&P project), and myself. The essence of the approach is to place improvisation work in the middle of a spectrum of group interactions ranging from the thoroughly therapeutic to the more or less impersonally musical. The intention was to generate an authentic experience of intersubjectivity, even transpersonality, through improvised music making while avoiding clinical therapeutic action. This intention formed clear theoretical description slowly through the process of building the process: initially our intentions were more musical and intuitional than verbal, that is, right brain oriented, to use that convenient metaphor.

One end of this spectrum is characterised by the work of the music therapist, which itself covers a wide range of approaches. On one side of this range the belief is held that the therapeutic effect residing in the relationship developed between therapist and client, as in talking therapies, is more important than the actual musical soundings, felt to be ancillary though crucial to the processes. A somewhat opposing view is that the musical components themselves form the important part of the work, allied to a view that words can be used to escape or hide behind, whereas musical sounds cannot. And indeed psychological/emotional stresses too tender to be represented in speech do find expression among the music therapist's instruments (including percussion), or with vocalisations. The Nordoff-Robbins School exemplifies the latter view: Sarah Verney Caird was tutor and practitioner there at the time we are discussing.

There is much recent work on the power of sound (*inter alia* Campbell 1989; Leeds 2001; D'Angelo 2005). Googling 'neurological effects of music and sound' produced 31,800 hits. Googling 'music sound and pain management' produced 313,000 hits.

At the other end of the spectrum lies what I named above 'the more or less impersonally musical'. By this I refer to the common way in which classically trained musicians, particularly, come together for joint music making focussed

solely on the music as organized sounds to be projected at audiences in coherent and co-ordinated ways. Most such musicians come to practices and performances with little thought of the way in which musical sounds (indeed all sounds) are capable of mediating profound changes to psyche and soma. The so-called 'Mozart effect' is pertinent (Rauscher 1993). I have taken part in improvising groups exhibiting this impersonality, and find them lacking at some deep level of experience, however satisfactory the music becomes *qua* music, compared to improvising with the group named above. However it is probably safe to say that, among other traditions, jazz musicians tend to be rather more aware of psychic effects, and to be fair to the so-called 'classical' music world (which I inhabit myself) there are signs of growing conscious awareness of deeper affects among some practitioners.

One such is the American musician Pauline Oliveros, pioneer of a more holistic view of what it is to be a musician, who has critiqued the impersonality discussed here:

'The study of music needs to include the inner development of musicians as well as the acquisition of skills and theories.'

When I was a student of French horn playing I was encouraged to play long tones in order to develop my embouchure. The reason given was excellent, but my instruction also could have included ways of listening and observing my own psycho-physical responses to the long tones I practiced. I could have been guided to notice how my breathing effected physical and mental changes, how different tones resonated in me and in the surrounding environment, however subtle the results might have been. Such observations might have served to encourage my inner development ... I could have been responding to guidance that included a dedication to the intention of sounding for well-being as well as for purely musical purposes. I could have been encouraged to see how my desire to be a musician could have a larger meaning and purpose than solely the attainment of skill.' (Oliveros 1990:viii)

Musical improvisation and the Coming of Love

Oliveros' words bear affirmatively on our intentions of a decade past. In the working out of our way our practice became a method of informal participative investigation, as well as a pleurably meaningful activity in itself. The developed habit of that awareness informs what we severally do still, whether together, or facilitating others.

Improvisation has its own idiosyncratic formalities, not least with regard to preparation before playing, at a personal and interpersonal level. Experienced performance improviser Tim Hodgkinson reports spending time, with his partner Ken Hyder, in silence and darkness before performing in order to empty their minds of every-day trivia, then heightening their non-visual senses by moving around in the dark around each other, putting chairs in each others way and similar strategies to effect disorientation and sharpen responses, which are then taken on stage with benefit to the work (Hodgkinson 1996:61). Other performance improvisers choose to share their preparatory silence with their audience, to aid attunement (Scheiby 1995:200).

The M&P core-group, not a publicly performing ensemble, habitually now begins each session in meditative silence, for similar practical reasons, but also to prepare to be open to transpersonal dimensions. Here we note again the absence of words in the meditation and in the music which follows: Jung considered music an expression of the archetypes, and George Steiner reluctantly in my reading argued himself into an understanding of music as closer to the divine than other art forms, owing in large part to music's insubstantiability, and its untranslatability (Steiner 1989).

Not only the interpersonal preparation, but also interactions during improvised playing 'suggests the existence of an improvisational state—a continuum of not knowing, abandoning the certainty of prescribed form and entering into a period of transitional form where participants become only partly conscious of what is happening'. (Paton 2001:15—his emphasis)

CGR: 'The sense of keeping going through a time of not knowing ...'

'... our dark not-knowing ...'

There is not space here to elucidate fully the essentially non-verbal interactions occurring within improvising groups. Suffice to mention that various modalities of sensing are employed, and the absence of words tends in my perception to shift consciousness to more holistic regions, at least in part, where there is more balance between activities in the brain hemispheres. Petsche (1993) elucidated with brain imaging, and wider psychological studies of musicians generally find more balanced masculine and feminine qualities in both genders.

The 'transitional form' period tends to develop, in the words of Even Ruud, into 'an intense comradeship in which... [ordinary] distinctions disappear or become irrelevant'. (Ruud 1995:95) In the safe environment necessarily established for an improvising group by its facilitator(s), the positive mutual regard develops when the group itself takes on mutualised facilitation. The parallel in the Participative Spiritual Inquiry is noted by Joycelin Dawes: 'Participants learn the method and skill of inquiry with two experienced initiating facilitators, who, as the inquiry progresses, 'die' in the facilitation role in the group, as the group learns to self-manage and self-direct.' (p23)

During three day M&P core-group only meetings (that is, no inexperienced persons, because the process can

be overwhelming in its penetration into the psyche), we habitually now banish spoken word interactions for a period of perhaps 24 hours, in order to heighten (or deepen) musical encounters during and after that period together with the correlative 'intense comradeship'. When such works in this way the group achieves a collective experience of the numinous, which can be seen (or felt) as an impersonal love akin to 'falling-in-love', thus profoundly moving, but unobstructed by the projections of ego.

M&P: 'I'm suddenly filled with that joyous feeling again, and have a big smile on my face!... I have changed, and the world has changed...'

'I am different and it all feels different. I/we have to learn how to fit in differently...'

'Thank you for an amazing and deeply moving weekend, a new reality indeed...'

CGR: '... collectively, we surrendered the rational through a painful and frustrating struggle through which we found a place beyond where knowing was replaced by meaning ... there is a great sense of love and joy ...' (p. 24)

'When I stopped trying to make this event into the 'head' experience that I had been expecting and instead went with the group's flow, I then got from it instead a heart experience - a powerful feeling, which has also stayed with me so far since, of love for the group, for my life and for life, and a gratefulness that all is very well.' (p. 26)

This 'intense comradeship' exhibits affinities with the central period of transition in cultural rites of passage, which Ruud summarises as a 'transition, in which the ritual passenger is neither in the old life nor yet in the new one. This is a situation marked by rolelessness, ambiguity, and perceived danger', against the pressures of which the participants develop that 'intense comradeship' (Ruud 1995:95). A similar situation occurs in the routine processes of intentional temporary community building. 'Pseudocommunity, Chaos, Emptiness, (and) Community' are the stages listed by M. Scott Peck, the initiator and theoretician of the experience, where 'Chaos' and 'Emptiness', the releasing of psycho-social demands, needs and competitions, are the stages exhibiting similarities with the 'transitional form' described by Paton, and the ritual transitions noted by Ruud (Peck 1993:37). 'Pseudocommunity' occurs at the start of Peck's community building groups when participants are striving self consciously to be 'nice', paralleled in the inexperienced improvising group by the stronger egos attempting to impose musical order on unready others, strategies in both situations to get things going instead of patiently allowing the group feeling, or ethos, to emerge. A CGR reporter describes it precisely: 'I got exasperated by what I perceived as middle class politeness and little peer accountability holding up the group's progress, but this turned out, I think, to be useful.' (p. 26) Peck considered it an inevitable, possibly necessary, stage.

Concluding Thoughts

In this note I have tried to illustrate the commonalities of two different modalities of co-operative action, each leading to similar experiences of inter-connection at a deep (or is it elevated?) level. I concur with the CGR comments that this represents, or can represent, a possible way of working together for a future beyond our present dying so-called civilization, centred as it is on individualistic self-seeking, competition and greed, and I believe I may speak for my fellow M&P founders in writing that.

Heidegger commented on great art that 'the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a

passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge.' Substitute 'individual' for 'artist' and there we have concise description of the developing group, where 'inconsequential' is comparative, not pejorative. However, the differences between the two modalities need to be drawn out a little here.

Participative Spiritual Inquiry (PSI), as I understand it, desires to create 'deeper levels of knowing and community' which can be built on in subsequent inquiries, with the purpose of generating working structures for a future more co-operative society. Hence Joycelin Dawes' warning that what has been achieved so far 'is only an initial phase, not the end point. If participative inquiry is really to demonstrate how groups can work collaboratively, from a transpersonal and shared field of experience, this has to be grounded and anchored.' (p23)

M&P intentions were not so wide, arising from a desire to find a musical experience in improvisation which touched transcendent realms, thus our end point stopped at PSIs 'initial phase' and has not had any further ambitions, though we do find that, in our rare business meetings, an initiatory improvisation creates harmony and respect in the ensuing verbal discussions. I venture to claim, though, that 'common ground' is reached more readily with music and sound, because words can be and commonly are used to hide behind, whereas music and sound cannot be.

In reading through the quotations selected for this note, I was struck that only one included the word 'beauty', though much else could be said to infer it, taking 'beauty' to have a wider connotation than the visual. Remembering the more painful stages of the journey to 'common ground', this line from Rilke may produce a spark:

'Beauty is the Terror we are only just able to bear.'

Finally, picking up the theme of modernity as adolescence addressed by Oliver Robinson in the same issue of Network Review (98:11-15), I speculate that the mutual group regard and feelings of love discussed above may parallel the arrival of individual maturity with respect to loving oneself, thus then being able to love others without neediness, and to live in harmony with the world rather than fighting it.

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A view from Dhanakosa Buddhist retreat at Lochearnhead, by Andrew Stone