Review

David Borgo, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age*. London: Continuum, 2006.

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When jazz pianist and broadcaster Julian Joseph asked Daniel Barenboim at his 2006 BBC Reith Lecture in London what he thought of the status of improvisation within contemporary music, Barenboim replied that improvisation was the highest form of creativity. The very next day, while watching *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Johnny Depp incarnation) with my two daughters, I heard Willie Wonka, when asked how the Oompa-Loompas could sing an impromptu song about the fate of greedy Augustus Gloop while that fate was unfolding and he was being sucked up a tube, describe improvisation as a parlour trick that anyone can do. These are two radically different but equally problematic conceptualizations of improvisation. If you push me to come down on one side of the fence, I am closer to Wonka than Barenboim. David Borgo's ambitious and provocative book is a much-needed new perspective on improvisation and undoubtedly helps mediate between Barenboim and Wonka's conceptualizations. The text is a thoroughly researched, highly nuanced and sophisticated attempt to place improvisatory practices within a contemporary artistic landscape that integrates seemingly disparate theoretical approaches into a completely cohesive and entirely convincing thesis. The title itself is not a cheap play on words but signals something of the substantial, complex and multi-layered arguments presented within the book. The notion of multiple meanings is a constant theme and each chapter heading can be interpreted in a variety of ways, each one providing a rewarding analytical approach for the chapter that follows.

Improvisation, famously described by Derek Bailey (1980) as the most widely practised but least understood element of music making, is often viewed as the preserve of elite jazz musicians with well-honed technical skills that pay homage to the pantheon of jazz greats. However, this narrow definition of improvisation sidelines vast swathes of improvisatory practices and perhaps more importantly creates an elitist construction of improvi-

sation that serves to make many people (sometimes highly trained musicians) feel they cannot improvise. Moreover, this argument often results in a mudslinging match across the garden fence between mainstream jazz aficionados and free improvisation protagonists. Borgo's book does much to short-circuit these hackneyed battle lines by offering a new conceptual framework for understanding and analysing improvisation, a framework that can equally be applied to Louis Armstrong or Peter Evans. By the same token Borgo is no mouldy fig and his allegiances lie with a jazz influenced contemporary approach to free improvisation.

Key points of interest within the book include a concise, clear and innovative overview of improvisation that incorporates a multidisciplinary and comprehensive post-modern perspective on music. Particularly impressive is the use of ecological theory to define music making (or musicking) as it gives salience to the social, cultural and contextual aspects of music. Perhaps it is possible to assert that music cannot be defined through structural aspects, but that it is a socially constructed phenomenon with improvisatory practices at its heart. Indeed some theorists now view improvisation as a fundamental life process (Lewis 2008). Not only are we all musical (MacDonald, Hargreaves and Miell 2002) but we are all improvisers and the earliest communication between a parent and child is essentially musical and undoubtedly improvisatory (Trevvarthen 2002).

The book presents key concepts in an overview of the role of improvisation within modern contexts, and discusses a number of players who have helped shape modern improvisation practices around the world within a jazz context. Chapters on Evan Parker, Peter Brötzmann, Sam Rivers and The Art Ensemble of Chicago use fractal analyses of these musicians' recordings as a vehicle for developing an analytical framework that moves beyond ii-V-I progressions, tritone substitutions and other such conventional notions.

The book is divided into seven chapters with the opening chapter, 'The Sounds and Science of Surprise', neatly outlining an approach that encompasses thinking in both science and the arts, and beginning a compelling overview of improvisation with the modernist jazz tradition. The second chapter, 'Reverence for Uncertainty', develops this overview into a very concise and clear summary of contemporary issues for improvising musicians that includes a focus on aesthetics and critical writing within improvised music. These two chapters by themselves are an important contribution and will prove a rewarding read for anyone interested in improvisation. This is not least because jazz education all too often ignores wider

cultural, social and theoretical ideas, and this chapter in particular challenges readers to place improvised music within a number of broad theoretical perspectives. The key point is not whether you agree with Borgo's analysis, which is undoubtedly persuasive, but rather how you respond to his challenge to step outside the aesthetic of technical mastery that pervades much jazz teaching within higher education. Chapter 3, 'The Embodied Mind', focuses upon a number of key psychological concerns for the improvising musician and in particular discusses the relationship between instinctual and intellectual aspects of playing. Jazz musicians will often use two differing types of discourses when describing their practice. A *mastery* discourse emphasizes the importance of technical command of the instrument, while a *mystery* repertoire emphasizes the more ethereal, soulful and less quantifiable aspects of playing (MacDonald and Wilson 2006). Drawing extensively on an interview with Evan Parker this chapter shows how a sensitive combination of both instinctual (*mystery*) and intellectual (*mastery*) approaches can be thought as one ideal contemporary linguistic repertoire for an improvising musician. Chapter 4, 'Rivers of Consciousness', introduces the reader to the work and words of Sam Rivers and investigates the dynamics of group improvisation using an impressive array of approaches that draws heavily on phenomenology. Chapter 5 presents chaos theory and its 'poster child', fractals, in considerable detail and offers these concepts as an innovative theory and methodology for the analysis of improvisations. The chapter focuses on the dynamic moment to moment organic development of improvisations, and a number of improvisations are subjected to fractal analysis. The resultant graphic printouts are discussed in considerable detail, emphasizing such concepts as complexity, density, group interaction and momentum. Not only does the fractal analysis offer an innovative computational account of improvisational collaborative creativity, but there is also considerable metaphorical utility in chaos theory as a new approach to conceptualizing improvisation. Chapter 6 returns to the title of the book and offers detailed delineations of the concepts of synch and swarm within broad social psychological frameworks that investigates group behaviour. Chapter 7, 'Harnessing Complexity', returns to a wide-ranging theoretical discussion of improvisation, utilizing the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who was a pioneer of research into interpersonal communication, as a vehicle for further exploration of collaborative improvisational practices.

This book is challenging; the diversity and depth of theoretical material covered is hugely impressive, and I particularly enjoyed the demands

of trying (and sometimes failing) to keep abreast of Borgo's constantly evolving theoretical arguments that do much to highlight the vast potential of improvisation as a key process within contemporary artistic practices. Moreover, the text is also hugely topical and timely. I unreservedly recommend this book; I found it both highly intelligent and refreshing and I believe it is an important addition to the growing body of work that is highlighting the central importance of improvisation for contemporary music making.

References

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