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Review

David Toop. 2016. *Into the Maelstrom: Music, Improvisation and the Dream of Freedom: Before 1970*. New York and London: Bloomsbury. ISBN 978-1-5013-1451-3 (hbk), 978-1-6289-2769-6 (pbk). 330 pp.

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Free improvisation can be just about anything. Everybody improvises now and then in everyday life and in artistic work, with relative freedom. However, in music, free improvisation in the 1960s became a concept not just about coping with temporary situations but an attitude with a value of its own, a genre deconstructing all genre conventions, a performance independent of any pre-conceived formats. Many improvising musicians started from a position in jazz, but also contemporary art music, rock and other arts were starting points for contributors. Some changed modes of expression quite soon; others made free improvisation their permanent artistic profile.

A topic like free improvisation is a scholarly challenge. The conventions of academic writing would never show their stagnation tendencies as clearly as when dealing with people trying seriously and sincerely to avoid the pitfalls of relying on musical conventions. But how to address the topic without reducing it to a set of general patterns of a socio-cultural epoch, or fan-writing on personal favourites? And since there is a historical dimension, how to avoid the risk of making a linear narrative where canonic masters and works succeed each other according to an evolutionary logic?

David Toop's take on the problem is both personal and dialogical. He has lifelong experiences of making, thinking, writing, teaching and speaking about music from different positions, and draws upon them in order to make a text that is both substantial and inviting, authoritative but non-authoritarian. 'This is a book about beginnings', he states on page 3, and qualifies this by referring not only to the starts of music scenes, but also to free improvisation as beginnings without prescribed continuance. As he describes:

> My original intention was to scrutinize and contextualize a music that has been misunderstood and disparaged since its inception. As the writing progressed I found myself increasingly fascinated by its elusive origins and the way in which fundamental questions about the nature and limits of freedom, control and self-organization have been addressed by musicians and non-musicians of sharply contrasting backgrounds and philosophies (4).

The wealth of interesting material made Toop decide to publish his survey in two parts; the second part will deal with 'after 1970' but also go into the German, Dutch and Japanese scenes during the sixties.

The book does not so much try to establish a linear development but rather contains an attempt to make a genealogy where many predecessors across the arts, mostly independent of each other, are brought to light. Toop brings together programmatic pamphlets, theories, concert descriptions, recordings and musicians' own reflections. The 'Before 1970' chapters are intersected with self-reflections on recent concerts by Toop and his fellow musicians. Together with the introductory chapter they address general topics such as: what it means to improvise, how to write about and analyse improvisation, the status of recordings, solo or group improvisation, myths of anti-authoritarianism, who can speak, and the interaction with an audience. The main chapters proceed in a roughly chronological order moving from the twenties to the sixties, but sometimes chapters restart from a new angle and thus avoid a strict linearity.

There are many interesting earlier attempts to 'think otherwise' that Toop presents, from James Reese Europe's depiction of WWI trench warfare (1919), Percy Grainger's music for four theremins (1935), Erroll Garner's apartment recordings (1944), Baby Dodds' Folkways recordings of drum rhythms (1946), and artists Jean Dubuffet and Asger Jorn's *Musique Phénoménal* (1960). The influences from modernist literature and abstract painting are visible, as is the importance of the inter-artial Fluxus movement.

Aside from the many varied examples there are some longer parts that give a richer picture. Joe Harriott's pioneering free jazz in the early sixties, the collective AMM, John Stevens and Derek Bailey are presented, the latter two with more biographical presentations. This points to the author's British perspective—a consequence of the personal style of writing. As said, this will be balanced in Part 2; however, this is not a flaw but rather points more to the need for several books to be written on the subject from different geographical contexts.

It is a shame the publishers have spoiled the cover illustration by placing a text blot over the most significant detail, a man desperately clinging to a barrel while being sucked down into a whirlpool (the *maelstrom* of the title), which Toop refers to as a metaphor for the improvising musician, but also for the scholar writing on improvisation. Perhaps Part 2 will make up for this.

I think Toop has made a strong contribution here to the understanding of the concept of free improvisation and how it functions as a catalyst or a nodal point for many individual attempts to find a personal stance on the many questions of public artistic practice. I am looking forward to Part 2.