

Making Music

Creating an Audience: "Intentionality" & Free Improvisation

BY MICHAEL SMOLENS

Long before there were printed pieces, people spontaneously created music for every occasion. They usually shaped an idea that arose in the moment or set up a structure in advance. A convenient label for this is called free improvisation. This is not really a "style" of music per se, but rather an approach that can create a wide variety of possibilities—from very simple folk-based melodies to very angular non-tonal excursions. Free improvisations can not only stand on their own, but also serve as segues between two pieces or be interwoven into an existing work. Their length is very flexible as they are a "response to the moment."

Part of the beauty of free improvisation lies in the fact that beginners receive equal (though different) benefits as do experienced musicians. It can reveal how much internal censoring is going on as well as the willingness to use extra-musical sources as inspiration (literary or visual themes, emotional states, etc.) Most importantly, free playing greatly increases your awareness and sensitivity to all styles of music.

Michael Smolens nurtures his students' ability to use a wide variety of approaches and techniques in free improvisation. This kind of music making is not only a powerful statement of self-expression, but is also great source material for original works or even completely finished pieces. Michael brings his performing, recording, and producing experience to this fascinating journey. See Michael's Musical Creativity listing on p. 53.

There's something special that seems to happen when one creates a completely spontaneous piece of music for a live audience. It may be for a large group, a small intimate setting for a half-dozen friends, or even an audience of one. No matter how many or few people are there, an attentive audience has a way of subtly focusing the performer to become truly present in the moment. This usually results in greater concentration throughout the piece and a heightened sense of "intentionality." By this we mean that the world and the essence that the performer is trying to convey comes across clearly and is not merely reflective of an internal state or set of thoughts or feelings.

Now, there are many skill-related factors that can affect

the outcome of a free improvisation. One's knowledge of harmony, the sensitivity to timbre and dynamics, clarity of pulse and rhythm, and the ability to monitor the progress of a piece, are just a few examples of very useful skills to have (or be in the process of developing) in the world of free improvisation. Whether a free improvisation is ultimately successful, however, is most often determined by the willingness of the performer to commit fully to putting their ideas forward purposefully, vigorously, and without apology.

So, how can we create on a regular basis this sense of intentionality for ourselves as free improvisers? The prospect of assembling a real audience several times a week, let's say, is daunting for even the most ardent free player. Listed below are just a few ideas for you to use to create the feel of a real audience; they also suggest other possibilities that can raise your sense of purpose and clarity while freely improvising.

- 1.) Imagine yourself performing for a special friend or loved one.
- 2.) Tape record or videotape your pieces and listen or review them with others present.
- 3.) Open the windows while improvising to your neighbors. You'd be surprised how people actually enjoy your playing!
- 4.) Create each piece as an offering to a special artist or spiritual leader who you greatly honor.
- 5.) Imagine your improvisation contributing your part to the unfolding of the universe, or it being a "deposit" to the harmony of the planet.
- 6.) Determine in advance the length of free improvisation.
- 7.) Consciously make up a piece that uses a means of



organization that you've never played before and experiment with it.

8.) Attempt to seduce your pet (or another human) with a free piece.

9.) Reward yourself with a treat (flowers, a recording, etc.) for every free improvisation that had a clear sense of intentionality.

10.) Imagine yourself with only a week to live. What would you most want to communicate and to whom?

CE