

We are at one with ourselves. We are heedless. To get back to the question of notation. “Improvisation” is a without-which in composing music in a traditional style.

(Try at the piano to get something down that is in your head; try again; try again; make a few notes; try again; keep adding things, most of the time hoping for the best, but without knowing in which direction the best is to be found; try again; recognize some “form” emerging; make a few mental notes about the “form”; try again; keep adding things, etcetera.

This is not, technically, “improvisation”, but there is no other word for it. In fact, it is exactly the activity of involuntary speech.

Go into your studio. Lock the door [COMPOSER AT WORK]. Sit down at the piano, blank paper on the stand. Same process. Same pain. Get something nice to listen to. Poof! you’re a composer. (Lenny Bruce)

Try this on the street with words. Notice how the traffic avoids you. Keep an eye peeled for the police. No wonder there should be no musicians or poets in the ideal republic.

Difference is: those pencil marks on the paper are your excuse. Problem is: those pencil marks on the paper are musical notes, and sometimes musical notes just won’t do.)

(Another kind of composing is to make a plan and stick to it. Stick to it is the important part. I mean a plan that instructs the performers, but doesn’t control the piece, doesn’t control what the listener will hear.

Some composers are very fond of this approach, because the plan can seem so beautiful. I have tried this a few times myself, but my imagination gets away from me.

I have performers out in the desert, miles apart, with dozens of automobile horns each and some sort of keyboard that can handle the high amperage of the car horns, each performer making up patterns that are a kind of message to the other players, miles away, and who can barely hear the signal, and who are making messages themselves.

This is a violation of the environment. My imagination gets away from me. Miles and miles of desert are violated by the sound of hundreds of car horns, miles and miles apart. Very beautiful to the listener. Probably hard on the lizards and insects and birds and mammals, who were, presumably, happy before the music started.

But, it is a plan, and were I of that persuasion now, I would stick to it. This kind of composing has a name, but I have forgotten what the name is, because it doesn’t lend itself to telling a story. Sorry, I got off the track.)

Scene Two: Go into your studio. Lock the door [COMPOSER AT WORK]. Slump around the studio muttering things to yourself. Make yourself a

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drink. Make yourself another drink. Let the words come out. Let the story come out. Let the sounds come out. Who’s running this show, anyway?

Finally, something begins to emerge. (Make sense is a different idea at the moment.) Make a few mental notes about the “form”; try again; keep adding things, etcetera. It is the activity of involuntary speech. It is the activity of composing, as we know it.

Same as in social speaking. You are talking to someone “about” something. You open your mouth and something comes out. You are as surprised at the meaning as is the other person.

If the meaning is not what you hoped for (what would convince, what would make you sound intelligent, what would make you sound interesting socially), you revise immediately. “I mean, . . .”. Try again.

Among the great speakers (lawyers in front of a jury, preachers in front of a congregation) success is called “genius.” Some have it, some don’t.

Of course, there are guidelines: what you are talking “about.” Away from “about” just won’t do.

Statement: “The role of the United States government in support of the arts is pathetic and primitive.”

Response: “The ermine is a very dirty animal. In itself it is a precious bedsheet, but it has no change of linen, it does its laundry with its tongue.” That just won’t do. The Surrealists were onto something.

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Finally, then, (same process, same pain) there is the “text” (or libretto for the opera.) It is a “song.” It has many voices or “characters.” The room is filled with people, all singing beautifully. You are, technically, insane. But that’s ok. The door is locked [COMPOSER AT WORK]. Now what?

The pitch range is typically an octave. (Who knows why?) The rhythm is beyond the capacities of notation (actually, it is not, but if you take the pains to try, two things happen:

(1) You distort the rhythm in trying to make it fit; you distort it because the conventions of rhythmic notation make you think it is what it is not. You want to make it readable. Strong habits, thinking, talking, eating, drinking, smoking, are not to be changed without extensive rehabilitation, which at the moment you don’t have time for. And who would help? Where would you turn? The Clinic for composers.

(2) You revert to the iron rule of intelligibility. You exit the mysterious area wherein speech and singing are inextricable in the wrong direction.

You have given up on music in favor of speech. You should go into politics where

the speech is written, rewritten, agreed upon, memorized, read from the teleprompter.

The pitch range and pitch speed are a problem, solvable (above) in electronics, but not solvable in the habits of the listener.

We are used to imitations of the pitch change of speech at a very slowed-down rate. Starting with Monteverdi (they say), the Europeans began imitating the pitch change of speech at a slowed-down rate, because the pitch change of speech was so beautiful. And because, otherwise, it could not or would not be heard.

(Note that here we have a sociological problem: the rich and the poor, etcetera.) (Note, too, that British Music Hall pitch change never slowed down, and the British still like it.) (Note, too, that, musicology to the contrary, Monteverdi is always played at half-speed.)

Historically, then, the musical potential of half-speed became a big deal. Put aside intelligibility, put aside urgency of plot. Put in embellishment. Put in Maria Callas and Patsy Cline and Billie Holiday (They must have listened to each other’s records with admiration.). Put in Elvis and Lennon.

Put in everything we know up to the recent African-American thing, where nobody understands the words (except, after many hearings, the African-Americans.)

But it doesn’t work for me. I love all of the above (maybe more than you do), but the ideas are not discursive. The ideas are symbolical. (“She’s got a ticket to ride.” The whole song.) And there is only one character. So, you can’t enact a story. It can be told (Dylan), if the listener has the patience, but there are no characters on stage.

(It is a wonderful form, actually. The characters blossom in your imagination, but there are too few of them to satisfy one’s imagination of the moment when one’s life is changed.)

Put aside the Irish and Jewish new-comer’s Broadway musical parody of America. Really intelligible. Straight-ahead parody of the American dream. Comedy. Lloyd-Weber. It will be around forever. I don’t like the howling. I don’t like the vibrato. I prefer the old “Saturday Night Live.”

Harmony doesn’t matter, except for where you come from. Forty-one tones to the octave: great. One tone to the octave: great. Just intonation:

great. Unjust intonation: great. Chinese opera: you have to be Chinese.

First time you hear a mariachi band, you think they are playing out of tune. Those Mexicans. You hear twenty mariachi bands (one of my records), they are all out of tune in exactly the same way. They must hear it differently. Maybe it’s me.

Country music: impossible to imitate. Try it for yourself. (Not in public, please.) European conductor won’t conduct American orchestras: they don’t play in tune. Harmony: it comes from the music. It comes from people making music together. When it’s right, it’s right. Everybody knows.

It can’t be said in words. Forget the books. They lie. Well intentioned, but provincial. From a time before we all knew each other and how different we can be.

Keep the speed of speech, because it is so beautiful. Keep the pitch range of speech. (It can be exaggerated, if you can do it without sounding like British Music Hall. Let the microphone take care of the details.) Keep the urgency of the story telling. Then, you have become a character. You could be in an opera. Like me.

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PRACTICAL ANARCHISM
On Walter Marchetti

Generous
Vivacious
Full of humor
(a recording contract for me in Italian
I don’t understand a word
A large lawyer behind a grand walnut desk
I don’t know what I am signing
Maybe my life
Walter is with me
He is smiling
The lawyer doesn’t speak very good English
Walter says to me softly
“Sign it
A piece of paper doesn’t mean anything
You are an anarchist
Sign it”
Good advice
A true friend)
Modest
Too modest
Enclosed in a large sphere of solitude
The boundaries of the sphere are tangible
I penetrate the sphere with caution
As though approaching a rare animal
Long thought to be extinct
A person of civility and elegance
Perhaps truly extinct
Elegance that is perhaps truly extinct

John Cage said to Mimi Johnson
"You must bring Zaj to America
These are the only composers of genius and dignity”
Mimi calls me in California
She says, “Well?”
I say, “Of course”
Genius and dignity radiate for thousands of miles
I know of Walter Marchetti because of the radiation of the genius and dignity
Weeks later he and Juan Hidalgo and Esther Ferrer appear at the bus station in Oakland California
Genius and dignity light up the humble landscape of the bus station in Oakland California
I have never felt such presence
They give two concerts

The American audiences are baffled and arrogant
Hostile to brilliance
An hour of almost silence
The most modest and sweet sounds in my experience
Then Walter’s piece a roar
The audiences are baffled
Maybe the most important concerts of my life
A kind of dignity long lost
Perhaps truly extinct

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We stay together for a week
I cook terrible Italian food
Walter says, “It’s delicious”

Robert Ashley + Walter Marchetti October 25, 2001 Merkin Concert Hall NYC

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YES, BUT IS IT EDIBLE?

Robert Ashley

This piece was written for Thomas Buckner.

Notation systems in any language, and particularly in music, refer specifically to a family of instruments or even to a particular instrument.

The more precise, coherent and descriptive the system, the more specific and limited the relationship between the notation and the instrument becomes.

These simple observations have become so selfevident in the era of computer languages that they hardly bear repeating, except for the didactic purposes of explaining my work in music.

The notation system produces a certain kind of music, the limitations of which are built into the music to be heard, and the notation system will not produce any other kind of music.

There was a lot of experimenting that ended about thirty ago based on the “hypothesis” that “space” equaled “time” in musical notation. These were experiments, because in the traditional notation of western music space had never been equated with time except in transcription.

The experiments were designed to determine if musicians could learn to “read” space (on paper) as time. The experiments were not a “failure.”

Apart from the simple fact that an experiment cannot “fail” — it may be shown to have been inadequate, mis-designed or specious, but it cannot “fail” — even in a metaphorical use, such as the use of the term “experimental” to apply to musical notation, the results were spectacularly successful in teaching musicians that what they knew was not all of what could be known.

Western music had reached a state of arrogance that was an embarrassment to everybody. Even to discover that “space” could not be related to “time” in notation was a great achievement spiritually for us all.

What largely got thrown out (or put aside for time being) was “space” as a notational ingredient.

But what accrued as a result of everybody using the word “space” as a part of a musical idea

was, gradually, the realization of the importance of “space” as a simple, physical reality for sound (apart from “time”), which notion had more or less been forgotten for its importance since the 18th century when concert halls were designed to make concert hall music sound like concert hall music.

It is surely no coincidence for a musician that John Cage proposed that space equals time in notation during the same decade that architects discovered that they couldn’t design concert halls anymore.

So, now we have “space” as a fully distinct concept in music as exploited in the extraordinary works of Alvin Lucier (and many others), and separately we still have “time,” which we (still) haven’t fully come to grips with.

One might observe that as a result of those experiments — a result entirely unforeseen, I think, while the experiments were being carried out — there was a kind of retrenchment. I know that many composers feel that a form of reaction came into music rather suddenly around 1970.

(The so-called “lost” 1960’s are, of course, not lost at all. They exist in the file cabinets of composers everywhere in America. What is lost is the musical thrill of the ideas being thrown around and the continuity between those ideas and what is happening now.)

The reaction came as a “return” to traditional notation. When the reaction happened, composers were very divided — divided among themselves as a group, and divided within themselves as individuals — and there was actually a lot of suffering of feelings and political bitterness. One feared that we were on the road of old-fashioned modernism, where one generation violently “replaces” its predecessor. I was personally scared.

But in the last thirty years that seems to have healed. I see move diversity now than I could ever have imagined when all the experimenting started. So the experimenting was definitely a success.

But we still do not have a notation for what we have as music. We invented a new kind of music in many forms, but we did not get a notation for it.

As regards notation we are about in the situation of the computer linguists who for one reason or another invent languages that cannot be commonly read among computers.

We all know the most distinctive qualities of the music that is important to us now, we know how those qualities differ from what was important before (and, may become important again), we know extraordinary things, but we are unable to communicate them in a general way. We cannot generalize about them.

We can offer an enormous number of specific examples (David Behrman, Philip Glass, Alvin Lucier, Gordon Mumma, Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, “Blue” Gene Tyranny, Paul DeMarinis, Peter Gordon, Maggi Payne, David Rosenboom, Fast Forward, Tom Hamilton, Sam Ashley, Chris Mann (all friends of mine) —

The names could go to a thousand without getting into differences among the works of any composer), but we cannot generalize this knowledge in a notational system. Thus, we shouldn’t look for child-prodigies in our time, and equally we are all dizzy about what’s going on.

Personally, I think this is wonderful. I have an instinctive sympathy for anarchy at this moment, which I trust to be some form of self-preservation that I should take seriously.

In the meantime, though, I have to compose music. That is, I have to figure out some way of writing things down so that I can have them around long enough for them to “form themselves” into some weird organism that didn’t exist before and that gives me a lot of pleasure. That’s why I do it.

I am by-passing entirely the question of communicating with another musician and focusing on the question of communicating with myself, so that I can think.

Nothing that I say, then, has anything to do with writing music that other musicians can read (I am totally happy with “teaching” people what my intentions are by making the sounds myself) or with the idea of preserving the music historically.

(I think that I am being honest to say that I am not interested in sounds that I will not be able to hear because I will not be “around.”) Or with the idea of contributing a “model” for other composers. And I will try to say, as simply as I can, how I write” music.

So, this is where it gets boring, because it’s just about me.

I write words. Like these. I write notes to myself about how those words are to sound. I write words until there is a story. I write opera. Period.

Robert Ashley + Walter Marchetti

October 25, 2001

Merkin Concert Hall NYC

Choose

The problem starts in how to make sounds out of words. My attention shifted strongly about thirty years ago to a barely recognized resolve to get words into music in a way that pleased me.

The musical fact was that I liked all kinds of new music that was just instrumental, but when I heard the use of words in my own work or other work I didn't like it much.

This way of saying it makes the feeling sound more hostile than it was. I am just trying to explain how I discovered this need in myself, why the sudden shift was "strong" and the resolve "barely recognized" at the same time, and why I have not been able since to let go.

I haven't written very many purely instrumental works in the past twenty years, some instrumental works have been recorded that were intended to be heard in the presence of voices, but were not. (They were composed to be able to stand alone, as a kind of code, but that is hard to explain.)

The technical problem, as every composer knows, is that as a result of electronic amplification the sound of speech has gotten much faster.

That is, we are able to get to the point of a sound/word much quicker than in the past and we are increasingly impatient with the tempo of meaning that was designed to be heard in huge or small acoustical chambers.

The good side is that the sound of speech lends itself to an enormous range of speeds and, even better, almost everybody speaks (as opposed to playing the flute, for instance), so we are definitely deeply into the vernacular.

I am trying to not make a distinction yet between "speech" and "singing."

The practical result is that now, increasingly, we are able to "teach" ourselves and other people to make sounds out of words that are very exciting musically and that we don't have a way of writing down on paper.

I read about thirty years ago in the newspaper that Bell Labs had officially given up on the possibility of speech synthesis. Research was being discontinued for the time being.

Even if this news was a military-intelligence ploy (lie), one's first reaction was: well, it's about time (note that this is spoken sotto voce). Who needs talking machines, when there's so much to be said among humans and there is so little time.

So, let's just think of speech, for the moment, as very fast singing. Or, more generally, very fast

music. Let us appreciate the sound of the flute for its natural speed, the sound of the piano for its natural speed, the sound of the synthesizer, etcetera. And the sound of speech for its natural speed.

And imagine hearing that sound just-as-sound, divorceable from meaning, but more agreeable and thrilling when not divorced from meaning. Forgive for a moment whether that sound can reach the heights of late Beethoven or Bud Powell.

Be generous. Just think of the sound of "speech" in its abundant manifestations and be content that the pleasure of hearing those sounds has been given to you.

Then examine the "speech" carefully with your ears — as though you were a composer of music — and notice the great similarities to every one of the formal aspects of music that we so cherish: its variety of pitch, inflection, dynamic range, information rate and everything else.

Note, too, that in speech you think in the language of music (e.g., you are conscious of, for instance, "dialect", or how the sounds differ from what you expected.) There are so many examples that every choice is a truism: The kid on the street corner with the box is listening to something that he obviously really appreciates (he dances, smiles and sings along — every sign of a real and deep musical experience) and you can't understand a word. But the music is nice.

You talk to somebody from another dialect and you can't keep your mind away from the pure musicality. A madman on the street rants to himself and you experience music.

Finally, you start hearing yourself. Like the person who must figure out what he/she looks like in motion in order to become a dancer, you have become a musician.

Sorry, I have really gotten into explaining too much of this idea.

The transformation of attention that I spoke of before can come from any direction, of course. It can occur to humorists, crackpots, very serious composers. It cannot occur to people who have a tin-ear.

At the risk of boring even myself and not being able to finish I have to tell an anecdote in order to give credit where credit is due.

The transformation occurred to me because I found myself for a period of about twelve years in the presence of an amazing group of people who

could really talk: the infamous and now legendary ONCE Group.

It might have happened to me anyway, but histo-rically it didn't. Between the years of 1957 and 1969 — the concentrated period — we talked every day and every night in various combinations for many, many hours.

Gordon Mumma, Jackie Mumma, Mary Ashley, Anne Wehrer, George Manupelli, Betty Johnson, Harold Borkin, Milton Cohen, Joseph Wehrer, Cynthia Liddell, Nick Bertoni, "Blue" Gene Tyranny and a bunch of other people who either had less stamina or just had something better to do.

And I should mention, among the great ones who didn't live nearby but who were cherished as guests, Alvin Lucier and Mary Lucier in particular.

I could hardly exaggerate the obsession with talking and what developed as a virtuosity that everybody in the group became conscious of. I didn't cause it. It just happened in front of my ears and I was there.

Luckily, unlike many bands that break up after the first successful concert (or rehearsal) because everybody in the band thinks that he/she alone got the key and something has to be done about it quick, nobody in this group was particularly interested in exploiting the mutual musical experience, because everybody had something else more important to do.

So, it was pure fun. And, as one result of the pure fun, the on-going of it became extremely sophisticated.

The ONCE Group could do solos of any length, the most amazing dialogues, and finally, preferably, all at the same time.

Because few of them were affected by musicalism as a profession, there were incredibly few affectations of style. (Joe Wehrer, for a while, tried a kind of stuttering, but everybody made so much fun of that bad idea that he stopped.)

The emphasis was on ensemble sound and, ultimately, on speed. The whole thing sounds sort of sentimental now to think of it, but in truth I have found very few people since (Bill Farley, Sam Ashley, Jacqueline Humbert come to mind) who have thrilled me so much with the sound they make when they talk. It sounds like singing to me. (And, of course, Jacquie and Sam sing, too.)

A transitional anecdote is that one day I talked to Anne Wehrer for fourteen hours straight. Mostly she talked and I listened.

I noticed that at around the seventh hour she repeated verbatim a very long idea that she had said hours earlier. This is a transition in that what developed in the ONCE Group technique could easily reproduce what might be called "ranting," but without any of the fear that comes when you suspect that the person you are listening to is out of control.

The legendary ONCE Group learned to make the sound of "ranting" simply as one part of a huge vocabulary of sounds (and, a huge repertory of performance pieces.)

Eventually, we broke up. I'm not sure what the other people in the group took from that experience (except the joy). But for me as a musician I was permanently changed. I had finally found what music is for me.

I rested for a few years; I really needed it. And then I realized that I was a new man.

And like the new man in the old joke about the man who stopped drinking and became a new man only to discover that the new man wanted a drink, I picked it up right from where they had left it off. I didn't have the ONCE Group anymore, but I had the idea.

Jump ahead in time to what's been going on in the last few years: the "real" operas. With a plot ("such as it is": thank you, Mr. Rockwell, and bless you, too.)

Two hours a year for the last twenty-two years on average (22?), and I'm just beginning to get the hang of it. I age, but I don't grow up. Too bad.

I got to the technique of these pieces through a fascination with involuntary speech. I mean, specifically, the speech of people who are, for worldly purposes, out of control and doing it only for themselves.

It happens to all of us (I think) some of the time and to some of us all of the time. It is associated with sickness and real suffering, and I don't mean to romanticize those parts of the pheno-menon, but musically it can transcend sickness and suffering, and formally it is astounding.

I watched the tendency in myself. I studied. I watched it in other people. I thought about it as music, thanks to what I learned from the ONCE Group. It is the one thing that the ONCE Group did not do, because it is impossible to fake. The ear is so untrickable in certain things.

There is an area in human behavior whose boundaries are clearer than I would have

imagined. In this area speech and singing are inextricable.

You exit the area in one direction toward the simple goal of making sense. You exit in the other direction toward making music. In the academic study of music this area is acknowledged, but treated gingerly.

In the mythology of music as a sublime human activity the mysterious "area" is more highly and honestly regarded. Its importance is fully understood even if the mapping is not complete.

In involuntary speech the speaker is solely concerned with how effectively what is intended as meaning comes out as sound. This involves not only moving words around in their order, as in literature, but also moving sounds around, as in music.

In its tamest form we rehearse the "tone" of how the conversation is to begin, even as the telephone is ringing. In a more complicated form we rehearse a joke or an anecdote without any scheduled intention of sharing it with another person, as if simply to come to understand it better.

The plot thickens when we start explaining our motives to ourselves with an honesty that can never be shared with another person. In the extreme, we stop hiding this amazing urgency to make sounds. Then the sounds take you away.

A structural analysis of involuntary speech would produce a thick book that with a slight change of jargon could be mistaken for a book on music theory.

To take a simple example, in involuntary speech there are no rules about efficiency, no rules about wasting other people's time in repeating yourself. Repeating yourself is of the essence of the activity: to do it (often enough) until the effect has been accomplished. As in music.

Another part of involuntary speech, very important, is that the action and its motives are simultaneous. It is entirely unpremeditated. It cannot be rehearsed. It is without caution or discretion.

In involuntary speech we can all experience one of the deepest mysteries of music (and of great athletic achievements, coincidentally): the action that can be accomplished only at full speed, the action that is prepared in trying and trying again, but never realized except in execution, the action that can be understood only in retrospect, because total involvement of being is required and there is nothing left of us to stand aside and observe.

