Creating Space Where Music can Happen: Methods for Composing for Improvisers

Abstract

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This article examines the role of pre-composed musical material as the basis of a band's output, from the perspective of composer-bandleaders who direct ensembles of improvising musicians. The article proposes five distinct methods by which composer-bandleaders can navigate the 'space' of their band's output and musical direction. The categories are described originally as follows: Setting a Mood, Call to Arms, Bookend, Elements in Free, Composition as Destination. These proposed methods—or approaches—are discovered through the analysis of existing recorded materials and reflection on practice.

Recommended Music to acompany this article

Led Bib – 'Fields of Forgetfulness' – Live

Led Bib – 'Fields of Forgetfulness' – Studio Version

Ornette Coleman – 'Peace'

Roscoe Mitchell – 'Chant'

Webster / Holub – 'Chant'

Led Bib – 'Call Centre Labyrinth'

Dave Holland – 'Four Winds'

Perlin Noise – 'Barocco'

Tim Berne – 'Hong Kong Sad Song: More Coffee'

Led Bib – 'Fold'

Led Bib – 'Fold' – Live at Porgy & Bess, Vienna 2020

Creating Space Where Music can Happen: Methods for Composing for Improvisers

The term bandleader describes the role of the musician who fronts and organises a musical ensemble, typically within the realms of jazz and popular music. In this capacity, bandleaders are musical directors; they may also be composers, generating the musical material that will form a band's repertoire and identity. In comparison to, say, the conductor of a chamber orchestra, the role of bandleader might typically involve working with improvising musicians. A bandleader/composer is focused on not just what they compose on paper, but also on how those compositions can affect the band's improvisation.

Historically, in jazz, this meant supplying a melody with a set of chord changes, which would then be improvised on after the melody was played. In this setting, the composer has a large impact on the overall sound of the ensemble, as parts of the composed material, namely the harmony, run through the entire piece. This method of improvising existed from the earliest jazz through to the innovations of the free jazz pioneers of the 1960s such as Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, and John Coltrane. In their various approaches, the improvising was no longer based on predetermined chord sequences, but was 'free', and was merely influenced by the compositions, such as in the music of Ornette Coleman and Roscoe Mitchell, as I will discuss later. Beyond the 1960s, composers and improvisers then produced hybrids of many previous methods, some preferring to improvise freely, typified by many of the early British adop-

ters of free improvisation such as Derek Bailey and Evan Parker, but others preferred to find new ways to utilise composed material, such as members of the so-called New York 'downtown scene' of the 1980s, including John Zorn, Tim Berne and many others.

This essay sets out five different methods that I have developed in practice as a composer-bandleader. The work of this essay lies in articulating these approaches as a result of reflective creative practice in this area. The methods that I define here are not proposed to be original or unique ways of working—I illustrate them using examples from historical recordings and recordings of my contemporaries. Yet, while composers and bandleaders working in improvised music all devise their own strategies to solve the problem of composition-for-improvised practice, this knowledge is not widely shared, and so it tends to be an informal and heuristic path of discovery for each individual composer-bandleader.

My work as a bandleader and composer for Led Bib and new ensemble Anthropods, as well as working in collaborative projects such as Blueblut, and purely as a drummer in various other projects, has helped to illustrate both the problem of what role a composition has in a setting with improvised musicians, and some methods that composers can utilise to produce the best outcomes.

Why do we bring compositions to improvisers?

When working with experienced improvisers, they will be adept at improvising without any composed material whatsoever. This means that if one brings compositions to them, it is important that the compositions enable the music to go in directions that it perhaps would not go if the players were left to improvise freely. Guitarist/Composer Mary Halvorson adds, 'that's what separates (playing a composition) from free improvisation, that these improvisations are serving the composition. I would hope that the improvisations are different than if you're just playing free.'[1]

As composers, we are looking to balance our own need to bring a

[1] Daniel Blake, "Space Is The Place: Composition In New York City's Improvised Music Scene," American music review 45, no. 2 (2016): 4.

completed piece to other musicians to play, with the improviser's need to feel like everyone is equally involved in creating music together. Bassist and composer Simon H Fell, spells out a significant problem here, in that there is a 'general unease with hierarchy which is felt by many involved in creative activity, and which often raises significant problems in (ideally egalitarian) creative music making.'[2] In order to achieve this balance, we need to allow the musicians to bring as much of their voice to the music as possible. We do this through using composition as an inspiration to improvise. The composition needs to add something which we couldn't have without its presence, as Daniel Blake states 'compositions open up spaces for new kinds of interaction to occur in the course of performance'.[3]

This problem of balancing the improviser's need or desire simply to improvise, and the needs of the composer to create some sort of structure, affects the role of many contemporary composers. Composers like John Zorn have created the so-called 'game pieces' to deal with this problem, creating structures where improvisers are enabled to 'do their thing'. Here, the role of the composer is to create a structure for musicians to do what they would do in a free improvisation but within a predetermined structure. In the context of this essay, I am not looking at structuring improvisations per se, but at how we can use composition to inspire an ensemble to improvise in new ways.

The role of the composition in improvised music settings is not something that I—or, I believe, many of my contemporaries—would necessarily think about in such detail during the composition process. The way that compositions then affect the musician's improvisations is often something which is only clear after performing the composition numerous times.

Five Methods of Composing for Improvisers

In terms of methodology, I have arrived at these specific five methods—of which there are many more—through systematic repeat-listening to my own recordings, as well as recordings of my contemporaries, and a process of reflection on what role pre-composition plays within the overall piece. The work of this essay lies in articulating these approaches, as a result of reflective creative

[2] Simon H. Fell, "A More Attractive Way of Getting Things Done: Some Questions of Power and Control in British Improvised Music," Contemporary Music Review: Music and Politics 34, no. 2-3 (2015): 192, https://doi.org/10.1080/07494467.2015.1094217.

[3] Blake, "Space Is The Place: Composition In New York City's Improvised Music Scene," 2.

practice in this area.

Composition used to set the overall 'mood' of the improvising

In this method, pre-composed material is used to set a particular 'mood' for the entire piece. This is often done through having the composition set in a certain tonality, but it could also be created through the style of melody writing, both of which are demonstrated here:

Led Bib – 'Fields of Forgetfulness' – Live

Led Bib – 'Fields of Forgetfulness' – Studio Version

In a composition like 'Fields of Forgetfulness', where the tonality is set and there is a simple diatonic melody, it is hard for the improvising to go anywhere other than somewhere that is rather reflective of the tune. This is especially true when we are working in this traditional jazz approach to improvising (with the composition played at the beginning and end), where we are aware as players that we will need to play the tune again at the end of the improvising. Above are links to two versions of the same piece: one the studio version and one a live version. There are clear differences, but the general trajectory of staying vaguely around tonality and having it be a solo feature is clear in both versions. This was not something that was discussed, but by the nature of the composition and the need to have it at the beginning and the end, it ends up calling naturally for a certain sound-world in the improvising.

One of the masters of this approach is Ornette Coleman. In this composition 'Peace', the band was still playing in the 'time no changes' style which was typical of Coleman's band at the time. That meant that the improvisation has no set chord changes or structure, but the tempo is constant, and the harmony is essentially dictated by the walking bass. The mood of the improvising never ventures far away from the composition itself, with its lyrical melody and almost melancholic harmony, whilst not being played during the improvising, leaving the

improviser to play spacious melodic solos while staying roughly around the tonality of the composition.

Ornette Coleman – 'Peace'

The 'Call to Arms Approach'

This approach is typified by having a simple theme which is then repeated. This approach gives the improviser a lot of freedom to then interpret the small amount of composed material in the way they see fit in the moment, while also giving the composer a large impact on the overall sound of the composition.

Here are two versions of Roscoe Mitchell's 'Chant'. The composed part only consists of four notes, repeated over and over. By hearing this simple melody constantly repeating, somehow we can hear it in the improvised sections when they are not playing it. In Mitchell's version, they are also making little references to the melody within the improvising and then leaving it again. It also serves for them as a signpost to switch solos and move into something else.

Roscoe Mitchell – 'Chant'

Webster / Holub – 'Chant'

The version I did with saxophonist Colin Webster was from a session of fully improvised music. This was the only composition in the session, and if I remember correctly, we only played it one time. I had never heard the piece; this was something which Colin brought to the session and said he wanted to try. We perhaps approach the tune in a slightly more aggressive way than in the Mitchell version, and we also stick to the tune for a little bit longer, but the shape is still similar. Even though the improvising is not connected to the tune, it somehow still permeates what we do after, and colours the improvising through its insistence at the start.

The composition as a bookend to improvisation

In this method we use composition to bookend various improvised sections. This sometimes means that the composition can be a cue for a new soloist to begin, but it can also be used to signify that a new sub-group should improvise, or that the improvisation should change in some other way.

In 'Call Centre Labyrinth', this method was conceived with the composed material coming in after each improvisation to signal that it was time for the next improvisation to begin. The order of who improvised was also preconceived in both the recording and in the subsequent performance, leading up until the point when the whole group would improvise and then play the tune together. This type of playing means that all the players must be quite attentive, as they do not know when the soloist is going to bring the tune in. This helps to give structure to what is otherwise mostly non-idiomatic improvising.

Led Bib – 'Call Centre Labyrinth'

This Dave Holland composition, 'Four Winds', uses a similar approach. As this piece is coming from an earlier period of 'free-jazz', the improvising adopts a slightly loose 'time no changes' approach. Here, the tune functions to separate the solos of the two saxophonists (Anthony Braxton and Sam Rivers) but the tune, with its joyful major melody and rhythmic shifting, also seems to affect the soloists in the piece. The soloists start the improvising directly from where the tune leaves them, and they then take it in a similar direction to the way that the composition functioned.

Dave Holland – 'Four Winds'

Using compositional elements within free improvisation

In this method, some members of the ensemble are freely improvising, while other members are playing composed material. This has the effect of allowing the composer to have quite an impact on the overall sound,

but also allows the improvisers to use the composition to inspire what they do in their free improvisation.

In this piece by Perlin Noise, the composer Alessandro Vicard directed me and the pianist (Villy Paraskevopoulos) to improvise intensely and hectically. For me as a player, the backings from the rest of the band helped to keep the energy going through the improvising, and it is a way to keep the improvising fresh, particularly in this sort of setting where we are having to play at a very high dynamic for a long time.

Perlin Noise – 'Barocco'

Tim Berne is a composer who uses a myriad of different compositional techniques to influence improvisers, and this piece from *Fractured Fairy Tales*, 'Hong Kong Sad Song: More Coffee', runs the gamut of different techniques. On the first solo, it seems that probably the only written part is the drum part, and everything else is fairly open, though based vaguely around the composition's tonality. Then, towards the end of the solo, a new composed section comes in underneath, helping to give shape to the trumpet solo. This is then followed by what sounds like completely free improvisation in the strings, which is then joined by composed material in the horns, giving the strings a chance to interact with the composed material until eventually everyone joins the composed material again, which then leads into a more groove-based saxophone solo. Berne has created something here which has open improvisation at its core, but which is structured through the will of the composer.

Tim Berne – 'Hong Kong Sad Song: More Coffee'

Composition as destination

In this method the improvising begins completely free and continues that way for the majority of the piece, with the composition being a destination for the improvisation and ultimately where the piece will finish. This approach is one that I find perhaps the most difficult as a player, as it is very hard to improvise with the idea that you are going to have to eventually get to the tune in the end. With the studio version of 'Fold', we did not actually play this as a complete improvisation, but used various different improvi-

sations which we recorded and then pieced together to make the finished composition which can be heard here:

Led Bib – 'Fold'

For the live performances, we decided that we would follow roughly the shape of the studio performance: keyboards and bass improvise first, then we have a sample, which is the sign that the sax improvisation should start. However, we did not want to be too restrictive, so while this was the conceived shape of the improvisation, we also allowed for it to happen differently in the moment if it felt right. As you can hear, the drums enter before the sample, and the first section is quite stretched out, while in the second section the bass also comes in much earlier. The challenge, as always with this approach, is making sure that you are all going in the same direction. Once one person starts thinking about the tune that we need to arrive at, you can end up losing the spontaneous aspect of the improvising, and it can feel like filling time before you eventually play the tune.

Led Bib – 'Fold' – Live at Porgy & Bess, Vienna 2020

Conclusion

Whenever one is working with improvising there is an element of learning on the job. As a composer, I am not always aware of how a certain composition is going to affect the ensemble until I actually perform it live with them. I am also often surprised to discover which compositions are difficult for the musicians to incorporate within improvisation, and which turn out to be easy. When working with improvisers, you must somehow nurture the fact that the thing they really want to do is improvise and interact with other musicians. This means the composer's job is not just about bringing great material, but also about bringing a variety of material which encourages the music to go into a different place. With these methods, the composer is looking to bring new material that inspires improvisers to do what they do best, namely, improvise.
British saxophonist John Butcher perhaps explains the improviser's role best when he states,

> The freedom that comes with improvisation is actually the freedom to recognize and respect the uniqueness of each individual playing situation. Doing this entails making specific and restricting choices, intimately connected to thoughts about whom you are playing with (and what you do and don't know about them), the acoustics of the environment and your own personal history. Most decisions relate to concerns that have evolved over many years but some are truly formed in the moment. Part of this means continually addressing the question of how to keep your own musical personality without bringing too fixed an agenda to each performance—how to get the right balance between playing what you know and what you don't yet know.[4]

Butcher is referring to completely free improvisation, but what he says here also pertains to working with free improvisation within composition. The composer's role is about creating the unique playing situation that helps the musicians partaking to know what directions the improvising can go in. When it works effectively, it helps the musicians bring the music to a place they would not go when simply improvising freely. Looking reflectively at some of my previous work in the context of this essay, as well as working with my current project Anthropods, I am struck that perhaps my approach to composing for improvisers has not been quite as well conceived as it could be. I have always valued allowing the improvisation to be as free as possible, but it is clear in looking through these methods that even with little pre-consideration, the composition is heavily affecting where the improvisers go. More reflection in the composition process could help to ease the transition from the composer's table to the ensemble, as well as providing a more satisfying playing experience for everyone involved. It would also allow me, as a composer, to be reflective of the overarching direction of set construction in concerts, as well as the general variety of current material within an ensemble.

[4] John Butcher, "Freedom and Sound - This time it's personal," Aspekte der Freien Improvisation in der Musik (2011), www.pointofdeparture.org/PoD35/PoD35Butcher.

The ideal goal of a composer in this setting is to allow the musicians to be fully guided by what they are hearing around them and respond to that. When these methods are working fully, we are able to hear musicians truly expressing themselves, and the composer is able to able put their own stamp on what happens musically. Nothing is ever definite in an improvised performance, and sometimes one method of working as a composer seems to be useful while another does not, but then on a

subsequent tour the opposite is true. That is actually where the fun is. As improvisers, we are doing it all ‘without a net’, and as composers we are sending written music out, trusting other musicians with it, and waiting to see what comes out the other end. As is always the case with improvised music, whether it turns out to be good or bad can be as much to do with the weather, or the lighting, or what the band had for dinner before the concert, as it is to do with the actual written material. As composers, all we can do is enjoy the process and keep searching.

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