

## Empathy

What is the place of empathy in improvisational music practice

Empathy; 1. the power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings. 2. the attribution to an object, such as a work of art, of one's own feelings about it. (From the Greek *empathia* affection, passion.)

Imitation as a signal of empathy

In this document I will argue for the usefulness and validity of an 'empathetic intent' as not only a creative device, but as an essential ingredient in making the performance ritual, including the music, a potent social experience full of possibility for personal transformation and for an unusual and fertile experience for the participants.

There is a common criticism leveled at the beginning improviser (that is also seen as taboo for the aesthetic of any improviser); don't imitate! Imitation is seen as indicative of lacking in one's 'own' musical ideas, that is; you can only come up with material if you copy someone else's. Imitation is viewed as cloying, it does not contribute to an assertive self-projection, it shows the performers lack of 'substance' and strength of an original, independent musical idea. Imitation is seen as an expression of weakness and dependence, considered negative attributes.

To demonstrate we are in fact listening to and working with our co-performer, we commonly ape another's textural activity, continue another's phrasing, or in some way signal that we are hearing and able to respond to another's sounds. These actions, whilst worthy abilities, can tip the music over into a saccharine nightmare, where there is little contrast or dynamism and perhaps a sense of timidity. Conversely, this behaviour may create great unity and clarity of purpose or form. Composer and Fluxus artist Dick Higgins writes:

To sum up, it has become almost a hallmark of our mentality to accept the

possibility of boredom and danger; a work which is without these possibilities only decorates life and so is merely a commodity; the most intense art is necessarily involved with these things, boredom and danger, not as a new mode, but because they are implicit in the new mentality of our time. This mentality is one in which total success is impossible, total victory inconceivable, and relativism idiomatic.<sup>1</sup>

An imitative response, within a musical conversation, will never be an exact replica of the original offering anyway, but the attempt to bounce a sound idea back with its inevitable variation; this intent is the thing that leaves a trace of an energetic feeling. The quality or nature of reciprocation may not be clearly evident to the co-performer or audience, but the impulse that arises in me when I hear sounds from my co-performer, stimulates an urge to reply, to extend, to compliment, to contrast and so on, this is the main ingredient in my connection, my engagement with my own action and in our sharing.

I experience the 'urge to imitate' what I hear from another player as an urge to participate, to support, to embrace, or at the least to establish a sense of 'being-with' the other. My urge to respond is a 'sounding out' across the performative space where I signal my presence and acknowledge the other. Together we define a listening and relationship space.

The attempt to imitate is not the problem but rather it is the lack of experiential depth and comprehension behind the imitator's action.

Now, in the most potent musical work, I hear an embracing of an empathetic intent as an overriding mode of being. Even when there is strong independence of material or a subversive reaction, it is done with a desire to enrich the group's work, to produce a whole of greater distinction, it does not act as a force of separation. Empathy is not a direction of sameness, of equalisation, it is rather toward a 'being-in', 'being-for', 'being-with' in difference.<sup>2</sup>

Opening myself up to the other becomes a most fruitful activity in improvisational music practice; "to play for the other and by the other, to exchange the noises of bodies, to hear

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1 quote from Dick Higgins essay *Boredom and Danger*. L. Austin, D. Kahn, eds., *Source: music of the avant-garde 1966-1973*, (Berkeley, L.A., London, University of California Press, 2011), 182.

2 "It is reasonable to suggest that to extend one's awareness to the intention of the ensemble as a whole, and have an empathy for those around you, is essential for effective ensemble. As discussed earlier, this is not a negation of individuality, expression of personal opinion or a state of non-tension." Anita Dana Hustas, "An investigation of communication and perception within an improvising ensemble" (Master of Music Performance, VCA, University of Melbourne, 2008), 46.

the noises of others in exchange for one's own, to create, in common the code within which communication will take place.”<sup>3</sup>

I do think these abilities of imitation, are an important skill set to seek out. In my work as a tutor in improvisation studies I ask students to attempt to imitate and to compliment each other in improvising music. If asked, without preparation to freely improvise with another, inexperienced improvisors tend to play to a concept of improvisation based on what they've heard about it. They may also be so lost in their own dilemma of what to play and how to think, that they do not really hear what they or the other are playing.

How to draw out the musician from this self-referential state or conceptual prison to engage in play with another, with the external?

To resonate with a fellow musician requires coming out of our internal space and going toward the other.<sup>4</sup> In listening, we have begun to be aware of the other. Now the expressions of the other can act as our palette of improvisational source material, to extend or subvert or our own proclivities, thereby offering more possibilities for a fresh, distinctive work and experience.

To a degree (depending on personality type), to play down the importance of one's own sonic utterances helps to lighten the 'burden' of expressing an idea or feeling of 'substance' (the burden being our expectation or desire for a peak experience). Mucking around, trying things out with each other (particularly in the intimacy of duo format), giving each other the permission and trust; where we allow a space to try things out with good will, in a mode of play, of fun, of care and respect; this is a place where we can cultivate an architecture of empathy. Here, we have the capacity to contain, to accept, individual processes that might jeopardise the integrity of a discreet musical experience, but we are also accommodating life, as life (in the experience of the author) is not controlled, it is chaotic and all kinds of unpredictable creative results or processes can emerge from anywhere, in any manner.

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3 Jacques Attali, *Noise: the political economy of music*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 143.

4 During a lesson my student, Sam, said to me 'I wondered why I sounded so good and why it was I enjoyed my playing with you so much and then, when I played with others, it never seemed quite the same. Then I suddenly realized that it is because you (Ren) are playing to me' (Sam McAuliffe, October 2012). Upon hearing this, I also had a sudden realization, I had never quite thought of it so directly and simply but this is indeed what I aim to do; play to the other.

## Empathy as presence

Working with empathetic intent over time has led me to a performative space that seems an evolutionary step forward. I will call it a space created by presence.

This is an inclusive space, where the effort to distinguish between what sounds are musical and what are not is shifted to one of acceptance of a sound's characteristic; experiencing the sound's innate quality, its unique contribution to the sonic environment and its contribution to the experience of those making the sounds.

Working with THAT for close to two decades has allowed the group to refine the process of music making to a condition of presence. A group consciousness is brewed by thoughts of actual music making, which then may or may not occur. This consciousness is a fecund state where listening and awareness are creative and dynamic potencies. In our collective presence things are as they are, but there is another hovering dimension of theatricality, of performance, available. When we come together to make music, our collective presence creates a field and a force of awareness and integration. Increasingly, I am experiencing this as an individual as well, with others outside of THAT.

Through this field of awareness, unintended or accidental sounds are included into the art making space or consciousness and the boundary between music making and the sounds of life becomes indistinct and at times imperceptible. Empathetic intent becomes empathetic presence and our activity broadens into a play with the subtleties and nuances of the music of life.

In this condition of flow experience we listen to a sound as a quality of energy, which allows us to admit environmental, unintended sounds and even vibrational energies from any source into the music experience. At times this has proven to be at our own peril in that sonic or energetic contributions from the performance environment can overwhelm our efforts at creating a discrete aural space (outside of working with environmental soundscapes). But sensitivity to conditions of the performance site, as sensitivity in general is a faculty we cultivate, and being overwhelmed by chaos is something we must face.

Autotelic is a word used by author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book 'Finding Flow' to "denote an individual who generally does things for their own sake, rather than in order

to achieve some later external goal.”<sup>5</sup> This is a reasonable description of an improvising musician, one who is primarily interested in the act of making music. Autotelics are predisposed to an empathetic attitude as “they are more involved with everything around them because they are fully immersed in the current of life.”<sup>6</sup> An autotelic person is less concerned with themselves and therefore has more free psychic energy “to participate in the world on its own terms, to be surprised, to learn new things, to empathize, to grow beyond the limits set by our own self-centeredness.”<sup>7</sup> The autotelic personality is well placed to cultivate an empathetic musical interaction on the way to the flow experience articulated by Csikszentmihalyi; “Because of the total demand on psychic energy, a person in flow is completely focused. There is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts, irrelevant feelings ... When a persons entire being is stretched in the full functioning of body and mind, whatever one does becomes worth doing for its own sake; living becomes its own justification.”<sup>8</sup>

“The important point is that the interest (of an autotelic person) be disinterested; in other words, that it not be entirely at the service of one’s own agenda. Only if attention is to a certain extent free of personal goals and ambitions do we have a chance of apprehending reality in its own terms.”<sup>9</sup>

In aspiring toward ‘the power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person’s feelings’ the keyword is *imaginatively*. To empathise is an activity of the imagination, it is a creative activity useful as a stimulant to the performing artist. The improviser who is susceptible to, and welcoming of the conditionality of time and place, can interpret the fellow performer as part of the performance site.

Conviviality and good will toward each other, being acknowledged, supported and understood by our co-performers will help us feel good about ourselves. Acting confidently in the knowledge that our co-performers give us permission to bring to the music whatever is within our current state, sets the scene for risk taking, stepping out of bounds, reaching for something at the edges of our perception.

In phenomenological psychotherapy empathy is expressed as epoché and whilst therapy is not performance, it does point out the usefulness of empathy in creating trust and good will helpful in risk taking; “epoché means abstaining from or putting out of action

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5 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding flow: the psychology of engagement with everyday life* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 117.

6 *Ibid.*, 118

7 *Ibid.*, 123

8 *Ibid.*, 32

9 *Ibid.*, 125

preconceptions, theories, and ideas that would interfere with listening to and hearing the person in therapy from her or his own perspectives and views. This requires setting aside interfering moods, attachments and concerns that intrude on the development of an open and fresh relationship, that interfere with immediacy and spontaneity.”<sup>10</sup>

Carl Rogers has focused on three values that foster learning within a relationship. These values have been confirmed again and again in extensive research studies. The three values are *empathy*, *unconditional positive regard*, and *congruence*. All three depend on listening - sensitive, perceptive listening and hearing. Rogers (1969) illustrates this conviction:

So the first simple feeling I want to share with you is my enjoyment when I can really *hear* someone. I think perhaps this has been a long standing characteristic of mine. I can remember this in my early grammar school days. A child would ask the teacher a question and the teacher would give a perfectly good answer to a completely different question. A feeling of pain and distress would always strike me. My reaction was, “But you didn’t *hear* him!” I felt a sort of childish despair at the lack of communication which was (and is) so common. (p.222)

*Knowing how* to listen means placing oneself in the learner’s world. Listening means hearing *what* is being expressed just as it appears and responding accurately and compassionately. This moves learning to deeper and higher levels of meaning.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

As an initial position for a satisfactory and empathetic improvised musical experience, I aim to give full and close attention to the sounds my co-performer is making. If I then respond instinctively and intuitively without the degree of reflection that invites

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<sup>10</sup> Clark E. Moustakas, *Being-In, Being-For, Being-With*, (Northvale, NJ, USA, Jason Aronson Inc. 1995), 191.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

my preoccupations and considerations to predominate, there will be a *present* stimulation drawing a *present* response. If this is reciprocated, we have the chance of playing music that we've never heard or experienced before.

Through the process of my research I have come to consider my fellow performer as the (to borrow a term from visual art) 'site' of the production of the work, the music, and as such he/she requires my attention. The site contributes fundamental parameters for creation of the artwork. As an improviser I improvise with the ingredients of my context, my situation. I am aware of all the elements at play (including my own desires and needs) and I work with these to enable a unique experience. Sometimes I may be less expansive, open to influence or empathetic than others, but this will come from my own needs in relation to the demands of the music and its process, co-performers, environment and context at the time.

To generate thoughts and energies conducive to empathetic musical interactions and generally to set the tone of a regular Improvisation Materials class, I speak these words as an introduction:

'In this space we seek to develop mutual trust, courage in presentation of vulnerabilities, a mood of testing and experimenting, of risking and discovery. Leaving preconceptions at the door, we give each other encouragement and permission, challenging ourselves to reach beyond what we already know and have experienced.'