

NOTICE & CONTRIBUTE

collaborative negotiations between
improvised music and dance

by Mike Vargas

Recently I listened to a recording of a concert I presented this past July in London. I played piano, and David Leahy played upright bass. I found myself tracking the sounds we were making in a surprising new way. Rather than evaluating our actions as *music*, I realized that I was focused primarily on the *collaboration itself*. I wasn't that interested in the style or meaning of the music we chose, or in the effects our music might have had on the audience.

This led to a profound insight about my own motivations as a "career" improviser—a professional composer guessing what kind of music to make. I realized that from the beginning, I have been very concerned with the study of real-time creative *negotiation* among improvisers—as an activity in itself, quite distinct from making music. This concern is completely separate from the refinement of the aesthetic qualities of the music.

I share a fascination with many other improvisers about decision making in general, and especially with decision making more specific to the arts, ethics, group dynamics, and co-evolution. I am especially interested in the ongoing process of balancing individual freedom against the freedom of the group, as well as one group's freedom against another's.

I believe improvisers can help one another balance these freedoms

by paying very close attention to where they direct their focus at any given moment. The rigor in improvisation lies in the agility and versatility of both body and mind.

The ideas and lists offered here were gleaned from years of teaching, performing, experimenting, and conversing with improvising dancers and musicians. The people in these situations all shared an interest in "getting under the hood," to isolate for study the most significant factors leading to effective action in an improvised setting involving dance and music. What is "effective action"? Let's call it *our best guess* for how to proceed given the circumstances and intentions of the people involved.

The following materials sprang from my interest and research into the realm of creative, primarily *nonverbal*, negotiations involving sound and movement. They address some of the challenges inherent in combining improvised music with improvised dance (including, but by no means limited to, contact improvisation), from casual jams to proscenium performances.

In 2011, on the last day of a workshop I was co-leading with Nancy Stark Smith at Arlequi (a studio in northern Spain), I came up with this summary of what in fact, at root, I think all improvisers are doing:



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Mike Vargas improvising with the Extended Underscore Workgroup at Roehampton University in London, June 2012.

We are working in a physical and metaphorical ecology. Everybody's actions and ideas impact everybody else's. It's a complex environment full of ambiguous, unlabeled experiences. We seek a healthy tension between order and disorder. We are cultivating our sensitivity, to know where to focus our attention and to select an appropriate response. We dance between our old and new brain.

In my article in *Contact Quarterly* from 2003, "Looking at Composition Is Like Painting the Golden Gate Bridge: 86 Aspects of Composition" [*CQ* 28:2, Summer/Fall 2003], I proposed: "Composition is deciding what to put next to what and in what proportion, and it is also choosing when to do this," and, "It is extremely useful to practice finding the one or two specific things that must be attended to NOW, and NOW, and so forth." These are challenges in group improvisation as well.

The following lists are organized in an open-ended way to provoke unexpected correlations and meanings among the elements. Jump back and forth between the ideas, and read through them in any order you please.

My intention is to provide a platform, a point of departure, to be used to clarify and refine your own work, based on your accumulated experiences with these issues *in the field*.

A POINT OF DEPARTURE
suggestions for any improviser

- Be aware.
- Be available.
- Be responsive.
- Be clear.

COMBINING IMPROVISED MUSIC AND DANCE
examining assumptions directly

These questions arose about ten years ago at a workshop in Seattle, in a context of improvising dancers inviting musicians to join them. I wrote them down, intending to call attention to many of the unspoken or underdiscussed issues in the air (as I saw them), especially when contact improvisers were adding live improvised music to the dancing—either in a jam or in a performance. Most of these questions could also apply to recorded music.

First Questions

- Do you want to learn to work with a wider variety of unpredictable musical collaborators?
and/or
- Do you want to examine and better understand your preferences, and choose potential collaborators more effectively in advance?

Next Questions

- Do you want both the dance and the music to be improvised?

- When you improvise, are you interested in stretching beyond your habits and preferences?
- Are you interested in adapting to unfamiliar or surprising musical choices?
- Are music and dance co-leading, or should the music follow the dancing, vice versa, or both? always? sometimes? never?
- Are you aiming for something other than, "I have to like the music to feel like dancing" (and, for the musicians, "I have to like the dancing to feel like playing")?
- How much counterpoint/tension is o.k. between the dancing and the music?

Questions about the Music: Preferences and Expectations
an honest look at your desires

- What % of the time should there be music?
- How much live? How much recorded?
- Which musical styles, paradigms, traditions?
- What % of the music should have a beat?
- How much familiar music? unfamiliar?

continued →



drawing © Mike Vargas

- How much variety (stylistic or otherwise)?
- How loud should the music be?
- How influential? How supportive? How invisible?
- Are songs with lyrics o.k.? How often?
- What % of the music should be upbeat? sad? humorous? introverted? extroverted? ambient? etc.
- What qualities in the movement or the sound (or the interaction) would make this collaboration most inspiring for you?

DANCERS AND MUSICIANS ASKING EACH OTHER QUESTIONS

Here the questions are designed to tease apart some of the issues relevant to a gathering of improvising dancers and musicians who are intending to study and refine the options for making their improvisation as satisfying as possible *for all*. What are the things that both parties could examine *together*?

- What is the nature of the relationship between dancers and musicians when their gestures are not simultaneous or similar?
- How much diversity is desirable? How many different intentions, how many kinds of sound or movement can coexist in the same space?

- How important is freedom? What is it in this context? How free can the musicians be? the dancers?
- How can dancers and musicians best support one another's imagination and concentration when there are multiple agendas and energies?
- When are the dancers not supporting the musicians? vice versa? How important is this support?
- How difficult or challenging is too difficult or challenging when offering contrasting materials "against the grain"?
- Can there be too many musicians in a given gathering? too many dancers?
- What's the best way to ensure that musicians and dancers in this situation will be satisfied and glad they came?

ONE POSSIBLE MODEL FOR A COLLABORATIVE IMPROVISATION

This is a description from 2012 of an improvisational situation that I think has great potential to yield a spirited and emancipatory experience for all concerned, the kind I personally love to participate in. It came up at a time when I was reading a book by psychologist and psychoanalyst Michael Eigen, *Contact with the Depths*. There was a phrase in that book that really struck me: "Wordless, imageless faith in an unknowable reality, and wordless, imageless transformations that go on in reality."

I am picturing a multiparadigm situation, a nonverbal improvisation involving a diverse range of intentions, histories, and worldviews. These proposals still have music and dance in mind, but they point to something broader, what I would call *embodied critical thought*.

For the Individuals

- Gesture per se is not necessarily the main focus, yet there is an awareness of gestures—and in this environment, a broad variety can coexist comfortably.
- Deliberate, personal movements and sounds are essential to each individual's engagement, providing collaborators with specific information to respond to.
- A sense of sparring, of exchanging friendly challenges, is part of the process.
- Each person is striving to stay on "the creative edge of his/her personality" (Michael Eigen, from a 2009 Vimeo interview discussing his book *Flames from the Unconscious*) and to accommodate others' attempts to do the same.

Between the Individuals

- It is not a priority to indicate relationship among the participants through simultaneous or similar actions, though these are of course valid options (leading to unison, for example). The coherence and depth of the relationships are based instead on a shared process.
- The embodied discourse among the participants is an open-ended composite at any moment. It's created through the physical and metaphorical sharing of weight and touch (metaphorical, in the sense, for example, of the "weight" of the music's cultural associations or the pressure of influence coming from the rhythm).
- Critical judgment and individual intelligence are operative at all times. At the same time, an open-minded spirit is encouraged by focusing on the inherent beauty

and delight in the stream of ongoing surprises and unforeseeable outcomes (rather than pursuing only strategic moves with specific goals).

- The participants enter the collaboration committed and prepared—both individually and collectively—to aim for mutual satisfaction.

For the past few years, I have been steeping myself in books written by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek. He often discusses issues related to what he calls “collective emancipation.” I have found many correlations between his thoughts on this topic and my own experience in the field of group improvisation. For instance, he suggests “establishing...a shared framework for the co-existence of incompatible ways of life.”¹

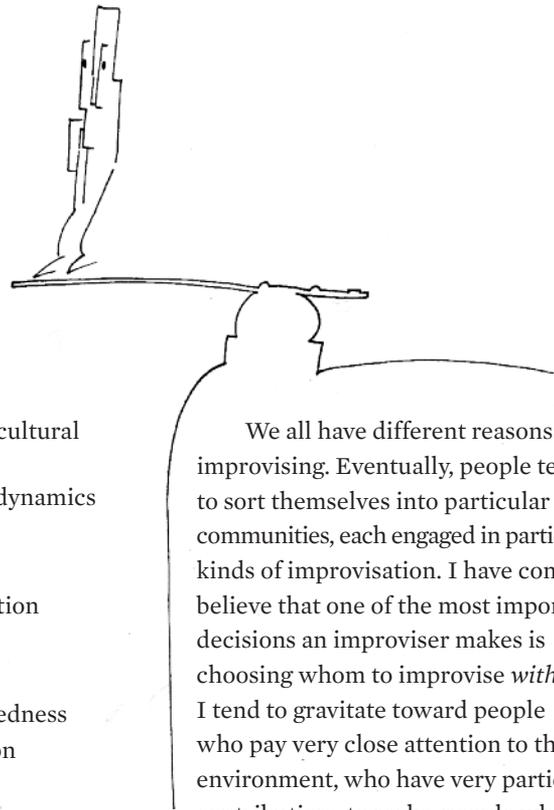
Also, “[The] blossoming of idiosyncracies can only thrive against a background of a shared ritual”² and “arguably civilization’s greatest achievement [is] the growth of our spontaneous moral sensitivity.”³

These ideas add a philosophical framework and a broader cultural context for my work.

CONTRIBUTING MUSIC

Finally, here is a collection of guidelines that represents the kinds of strategies I use when making music on the spot—with improvised dance and sometimes with other improvising musicians. These ideas usually shape my music both *in advance*, say, by choosing which instruments to bring or imagining some musical scenarios before I arrive at the site, and *on the fly*, during the improvisation itself. With some adjustments, dancers could try these on for size as well.

- Allow more silence
- Avoid too many easy cultural associations
- Balance the range of dynamics
- Be inconclusive
- Be well-organized
- Change physical location
- Contribute freshness
- Emphasize subtlety
- Encourage open-endedness
- Include contemplation
- Include multi-layer, multi-energy collages
- Indicate connection with dancers/room
- Less overt emotionality
- Less pulse
- Less pushing
- Less theme and variations
- Maintain stylistic variety
- Make eye contact
- Match intentions in room
- More unfamiliar material
- More unpredictability
- Mystery (unknowability)
- Occasional humor
- Occasional surprises
- Offer challenges
- Pepper in friendly discontinuity
- Play quietly often
- Provide contrast
- Respect self and others
- Sometimes “non-music”
- Sometimes less perfect
- Subtract narrative content (not all “saying” implies saying something)
- Support concentration
- Support imagination
- Take an extra moment
- Use different rates of change



We all have different reasons for improvising. Eventually, people tend to sort themselves into particular communities, each engaged in particular kinds of improvisation. I have come to believe that one of the most important decisions an improviser makes is choosing whom to improvise *with*. I tend to gravitate toward people who pay very close attention to their environment, who have very particular contributions to make, people who are nevertheless ready to drop their agenda at a moment’s notice in order to adjust to new circumstances and new information.

I think of the improvising I do, the music I make, the situations I prefer, as extensions of the wilderness—a place where a person can rest from understanding. What motivates my art and my life is the desire to drive a wedge of unknowability into the situation, to restore a modicum of not knowing.

Of course, this does not mean that I can’t be conscious in my participation and deliberate with my contributions. And yet, as Samuel Beckett wrote in *The Unnamable*, “It’s easier to build the temple than to make the deity appear in it.”



I used to draw a lot in the 1980s. I still feel very close to these images. I was very invested in every mark I made (and didn’t make); as such, I thought these drawings might serve here as echoes of my music. [M.V.]

To contact the author:
Mike Vargas, mike@mikevargas.net;
www.mikevargas.net

¹Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London: Verso, 2010, p. 468

²Ibid, p. 379

³Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, London: Verso, 2008, p. 50