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“Noise to Signal: Instrumentalization and Self-Idiom”

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Introduction

The growth of a consumer electronics culture in the home – specifically audio electronics and widespread access to the Internet - has contributed to a radical reorientation of the means and site of music production. Electronic audio technology enables musicians and non-musicians alike to create sound when and where desired. This activity contributes to a growing form of musical engagement, which I term self-idiomatic improvised music. In this paper I discuss some of the roots of self-idiomatic music in the popularization of consumer audio electronics, and the subsequent growth of a global self-idiomatic music culture.

Self-idiom, operation, and alienation

“Music was,” according to Jacques Attali, “and still is, a tremendously privileged site for the analysis and revelation of new forms in our society... alienation is not born of production and exchange, nor of property, but of usage: the moment labor has a goal, an aim, a program set out in advance in a code - even if this is by the producer’s choice - the producer becomes a stranger to what he produces.”¹ *In advance* is the operative phrase: the producer of self-idiomatic improvised music engages in the operations of his or her personal musical usage from moment to moment. I argue that since self-idiomatic music is primarily concerned with processes and operations rather than the realization of a foregone conclusion (a composed piece of music, or a the expression of a genre for example) practitioners may experience less of this alienation than musicians in many other contexts.

Instrumentalization

For my purposes, I define instrumentalization as the activation of an object into a process of music-making; that is, in a way that is driven by the intention and attention applied to music creation. A user of consumer and prosumer audio technology has access to a level of control that can be turned into a creative act: a practical action on a turntable, cassette machine or CD player can slip into a creative one by a barely perceptible shift of intention. Self-idiomatic music - new musical practice that is idiosyncratic to that user and that object - can arise from instrumentalization. Like de Certeau’s description of how people customize their use of cultural forms in their everyday life, this practice “...invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.” In this case by the repurposing of consumer electronics and other objects not originally designed as instruments of musical performance.²

Recording and playback of sounds also instrumentalizes those sounds. Consider a pipe organ in a cathedral being tuned: a musical instrument, fully integral to its environment, yet engaged in a sounding process that was not intended as performance. Recording these sounds, they became resources for composition and performance. Sound can start from a musical instrument pass through a filter of extra-musical purpose - namely, the actions of the tuners - and by recording they become available to the composer to be instrumentalized.

Figure 1. The performer of this particular apparatus, Howard Stelzer, refers to it simply as “tapes,” prioritizing the cassettes. But not their recordings - the tapes are used as noise sources, their spindles manipulated by hand, rather than for accurate playback.



1 Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977). Minneapolis, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006, pp. 133-134.

2 Certeau, Michel de. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. xii.

Built environments of interdependent sounding objects; practitioner as environmental engineer

What does one call the following arranged on a table: four portable cassette tape machines, a portable CD player, a small mixer, a couple of guitar pedals, a PZM microphone, and a small analog synth? The items are connected to feed their audio signals into one another. One term for such an instrumentalized collection is apparatus.³ Looked at another way, it can be considered a built environment of interdependent sounding objects.

A performer of an apparatus has taken on a new role of managing how the components of the apparatus interact, finding new intersections, and exploiting the potentials of those interactions. The performing musician's domain shifts from tool user to tool maker to environmental engineer.

Minimalist composer and instrument builder Tony Conrad points out that the history of music instrument development was not just in the hands of professional instrument builders.⁴ In fact, according to Conrad, a history of technological innovations relating to non-traditional musical instrument development can be traced as an alternative history to advancements made for military purposes. Over the past century, "...with recording and contemporary tools, we have an immense diversification of the system" of musical instrument development. Conrad believes it's this return to diversity of resources that goes hand in hand with increased diversity of musical expression.

Sites of Sound, Bodies of Noise

The sites of sound production and reception extend out to virtually any location, and inward to the body and its gestures: the primary site of sound creation. Jean-Luc Nancy wonders "... if musical instruments are actually 'instruments' and not really amplified bodies instead, excrescent, resonant,"⁵ or are all instruments, our bodies included, simply materials we act upon with music-producing processes? If the human body is the original site of sound production, are musical instruments and assemblages an attempt to extend our bodies to increase their sound making abilities?

Self-idiomatic improvised music

Composer and improviser Scott Smallwood identifies three main areas of contemporary music making that he considers sound-based above all: phonography, noise, and free improvisation. Smallwood's assessment of these areas suggests that the methods of their production, as well as the people who produce them, often situates all three of these categories under the umbrella of self-idiom. For my study I focus self-idiomatic improvised music.⁶

Self-idiom and autonomy

The term "self-idiomatic" is my attempt to develop a sufficiently broad term that addresses modes of autonomy among many contemporary musicians. Most of the time the music I refer to is also known alternately as free improvised or non-idiomatic music.⁷ What really distinguishes self-idiomatic music - and its cultures on every level from local to global - is how it synthesizes new approaches to musical engagement *and* social engagement into an approach to music making and reception that respects the individual as his or her own, complete musical system. By contrast: "Idiomatic improvisation," writes the late British guitarist Derek Bailey, one of the most well-known free improvisers since the 1960s, "...is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom - such as jazz, flamenco, or baroque - and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom. Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is mostly found in so-called 'free improvisation' and, while it can be highly stylized, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity."⁸ It is important to point out here that Bailey is credited with coining the term non-idiomatic to refer to free improvised music. I don't object to the term, and for the most part the music he is referring to falls squarely within my definition of the self-idiom. However, in spite of this overlap, the terms are not interchangeable. Bailey's intention with his term was a political one, in that he was declaring independence from contemporary music genres that used improvisation, such as jazz and psychedelic rock. In discussing self-idiom, my intentions are more anthropological. I am interested in examining how musicians find their way into self-idiom as an aesthetic and as a culture, to clarify both their individual autonomy and, concurrently, the elasticity of collaboration among these improvisers.

3 I am using this term based the common practice among several French musicians to refer to such groupings as *dispositif électronique* (electronic apparatus). In future studies, I plan to relate this usage to the extensive body of literature on the term "apparatus" as it applies beyond musical production.

4 From a conversation with Tony Conrad on 4 November 2006 at the Sonic Focus Conference, Brown University, Providence RI USA.

5 Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening* (2002). New York, New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. p. 78.

6 Smallwood, Scott. *Toward sound*. Dissertation. Princeton University, 2008.

7 Bailey, Derek. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (1992). New York: Da Capo, 1993. p. xii

8 *ibid.*

Self-idiomatic improvised music, ideally, is music created entirely from within the personal practice of an individual practitioner or ensemble. Self-idiomatic improvising musicians attempt to free themselves from various familiar music structures: most notably, repertoire as a referent, source, and instigator of music making. Rather than drawing on a written or memorized repertoire of discreet pieces, a self-idiomatic improviser develops a catalog of approaches, processes and preferences.⁹ This catalog can be enormously flexible and for most practitioners is constantly evolving, though often a core set of attributes (such as instrument choice, avoidance of tonality, or preference for drones) may remain constant. The practitioner also develops a range of musical approaches and structures that determine where he or she places sounds in time and space.

Global Growth and the self-idiomatic career

Art historian Howard S. Becker says, “to analyze an art world” - or a music culture - “we look for its characteristic kinds of workers and the bundle of tasks each one does.”¹⁰ The self-idiomatic musician - whose scene lacks both the financial foundation of large record labels and, often, the backing of educational and arts institutions - must do most of the tasks himself, but as a result has more total control over the nature of his performances, recordings, and publicity.

Composer and self-idiomatic improviser Pauline Oliveros gave me a sense of how the Internet age has revolutionized travel and networking for musicians.¹¹ Before the internet, booking performances had to be done by letter-writing and long-distance telephone, two things that required more time and money than is available to most improvising musicians. As a result, travel for musicians outside of popular music was generally restricted to long-term engagements in one place or otherwise restricted to one city at a time.

All that has changed completely in the past ten to fifteen years. “Now,” as saxophonist Jack Wright told me, “all it takes is a certain chutzpah and a MySpace page, and you start signing yourself up for gigs. ([...]I don’t deplore this at all, because I’ve seen so many start this way and later go on to the harder work of figuring out what to do.)”¹²

Conclusion

Instrumentalization in music is the act of making music with an object not generally considered a musical instrument. This is true even in the case of consumer audio playback technology, which is not designed as tools for musicians’ performance per se, yet very often becomes instrumentalized.

Self-idiomatic music is an alternative to received, familiar music structures, such as written or transmitted repertoire pieces, or tonal and rhythmic conventions. Self-idiomatic music is not free of its own conventions, but those conventions are fluid and contingent. Self-idiomatic improvisers are characterized by their exploration of the field of sound possibilities afforded by their instruments. One way to do this has been to revise their approaches to standard musical instruments and repurposed consumer and prosumer audio electronics. The autonomy of modern improvisers allow artists to create environments of sound; the apparatus becomes an ecology of its own, and the musician is no longer simply a performer, nor a composer, but an environmental engineer.

Starting in the 1990s, the global growth of self-idiomatic improvised music intercultural - geographically dispersed individuals and communities connecting to each other in an expansive, emergent network - has been fueled by Internet networking. Affinities can be shared easily, and discussions can unfold casually and continually. Networking with other practitioners and listeners became easier, thanks to the instantaneity, and increasing ubiquity, of Internet access.

9 Such catalogs exist for practitioners in other music styles which involve improvisation, of course: a jazz musician will have a recognizable, personal “sound” while playing a jazz standard. The difference is that in self-idiomatic improvisation, a practitioner creates entire performances structured on elements from this mutable catalog.

10 Becker, Howard S. *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. p. 9.

11 Oliveros, Pauline. In conversation at the International Society for Improvised Music Conference, Evanston, IL, 15 December 2007.

12 Wright, Jack. Email Correspondence, 22 January 2008.