GENERAL NOTE

Self-Idiomatic Music: An Introduction

Michael T. Bullock

ABSTRACT

The term *self-idiomatic music* is introduced as a practical tool for discussion of current directions in music that are otherwise termed free improvisation, non-idiomatic music, meta-music and electroacoustic improvisation. The work of self-idiomatic musicians (including the author) is characterized by exploration of the sound possibilities afforded by musical instruments and sounding objects. The author discusses some characteristics of self-idiomatic music, some of its roots in the popularization of consumer audio electronics, and how the music's flexibility and widespread Internet access have facilitated the recent global growth of a self-idiomatic music culture.

I propose the broad term *self-idiomatic music* to address processes of increasing autonomy among improvising musicians. Most of the music under discussion in this paper is also known by two other, overlapping, terms: *free improvisation* [1] and what British guitarist Derek Bailey called *non-idiomatic music*.

Bailey, a well-known free improviser from the 1960s until his death in 2005, deployed the term "non-idiomatic music" to refer to music either mostly or completely improvised. In his seminal 1980 book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music,* Bailey draws a contrast with

> idiomatic improvisation . . . [which] 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 [2].

Bailey's term is potentially thorny: It could be argued that no music completely lacks idiom. In a sense I am doing just that, but more precisely I am proposing that each improvising musician becomes his or her own idiom. However, I do not object to Bailey's term, and for the most part the music he describes also fits my definition of a self-idiom. Bailey's intention with his term was political, or at any rate social, 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 wish to examine how musicians find their way into self-idiom as an aesthetic and as a culture. My desire with the term *self-idiomatic music* is not to define a genre but simply to make a practical tool for talking about certain kinds of music-making and the subcultures that result from these modes of operation. I wish to attach a handle to a slippery subject, hoping to make it easier to grasp for both practitioners and outside observers.

There is a third term, *meta-music,* used by British percussionist Eddie Prévost in his 1995 book *No Sound Is Innocent.* Prévost's intentions with this term, I believe, are similar to Bailey's and therefore have a similar familial relationship to, if slightly different perspective from, my term. In fact, my development of the term *self-idiomatic music* (hereafter used without italics) can be traced in part to this imperative from Prévost:

> The musician must be changed by the improvisation. No idiom is secure in the spell of such an engagement, because an idiom is a set of pre-ordained responses. Each meta-musician strives to create his own evolving idiom that has an inner capacity to transform itself [3].

I will start by discussing some of the common sonic and musical mechanisms of this music, and how these mechanisms shape its performance and reception; I will then touch on some of the implications of the global growth of self-idiomatic music communities through the Internet since the 1990s.

Noise, Extended Techniques and Instrumentalization in the Development of Self-Idiom

> *Just as each instrument implies a sound space, an artistic field, an imaginable universe, each future must be thought with its own tools.*
>
> —Jacques Attali [4]

Self-idiomatic improvisers often redeploy traditional instruments, techniques or musical forms in ways that are unfamiliar

Fig. 1. Linda Aubry Bullock plays a mixing board, April 2008. Aubry Bullock is a self-idiomatic improviser from Boston, MA, U.S.A. (Photo © Michael T. Bullock)

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to most idiomatic music-making. These new uses can become self-contained, and the summation of these approaches, such as a vocabulary of extended techniques, can come to constitute the center of a musician's approach to music-making.

Rather than drawing on a written or memorized repertoire of discreet pieces, a self-idiomatic improviser develops a vocabulary of sounds, rhythms and figures upon which he draws. This vocabulary can be enormously flexible and, for most practitioners, is constantly evolving, although often a core set of attributes and preferences—such as choice and preparation of instruments, or how to react to the musical actions of collaborators—remains constant. The practitioner also develops structures and processes that offer ways of mapping the sonic potentials onto a sense of time. Extended techniques often become the core of a practitioner's improvising vocabulary, rather than simply an addition to standard techniques. A practitioner's vocabulary takes the place of standardized repertoire; the nature of its sounds, and the practitioner's experience in exploring those sounds, impacts how he or she builds musical structures. The self-defining sound vocabulary and structural sensibility are mutually sustaining.

A vocalist may make extensive use of breath sounds, screams and gibberish; a trumpet player may focus on the sounds of saliva bubbling in the tubes.

This in itself is not necessarily different from practice in idiomatic improvised music; what distinguishes self-idiomatic music is the concentration on sound-making actions for their own productive potential rather than in the service of representation of an external, received idiomatic identity.

Extended Techniques and Noise Operations

Self-idiomatic music involves projection of gestures and actions into sound. Extended instrumental techniques may suggest bodily expulsions: A self-idiomatic vocalist may make extensive use of breath sounds, screams and gibberish syllables; a trumpet player may focus on the sounds of saliva bubbling in the instrument's tubes.

The creation of noise is an operation in the sense used by Yves-Alain Bois in his discussion of Georges Bataille's *informe:* "neither a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept" [5], but an operation that resembles only itself. Noise operations undermine the customary mode of music reception (for much of Western idiomatic music) in which the audience looks for proof that the musician is a virtuoso or master. "First, abandon aesthetic criteria borrowed from other kinds of art," says Prévost. "It will be no use looking, for example, for technical confirmation of the artists' prowess" [6]. Extended techniques in self-idiomatic music are uncanny; they resist familiarity, partly because they are operated only in the context of the sounds they produce and not the realization of a composition or program.

Still, it is not enough to suggest that extended instrumental techniques in improvised music are abject bodily expulsions or convulsions. Improvisers develop a discipline over these techniques that rivals or exceeds their mastery over their "traditional" techniques. Resemblances to the abject may be superficial or they may be real; regardless, they arise organically from the musician's praxis. While they may start as excretions (and many new techniques arrive by accident during the course of performance rather than rehearsal), the new techniques and sounds are incorporated into an ever-growing vocabulary.

Sounding Processes as Both Form and Content

Forms in self-idiomatic music arise from three main factors: sound-making processes themselves; the deployment of those processes in time; and, in an ensemble setting, the generally non-hierarchical relationships among the musicians.

Cultural theorist Dick Hebdige's application of the term *bricolage* to his study of subcultures is useful in considering how form arises in self-idiomatic music. Bricolage, he tells us,

> can be seen as implicitly coherent, though explicitly bewildering, systems of connection between things that perfectly equip their users to "think" their own world. . . . [These systems] are capable of infinite extension because basic elements can be used in a variety of improvised combinations to generate new meanings within them [7].

Similarly, the self-idiomatic improviser makes intuitive connections among his or her many influences and synthesizes them.

Rhythm

Sounding happens through space and time, and the actions of sound moving through space have their own rhythms, as do the actions of making sound. "[S]onorous time," says French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy,

> is present in waves on a swell, not in a point on a line; it is a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that is enlarged or ramified, that envelops or separates, that becomes or is turned into a loop, that stretches out or contracts, and so on [8].

In other words, sounding has a contingent sense of time.

Self-idiomatic music often eschews any metric grid or tempo, opening up its sense of time to these contingencies of sounding. Self-idiomatic improviser Vic Rawlings, who performs on cello and a custom-built open-circuit electronic instrument, has often described his sense of improvised rhythm as that of hands moving over a work bench. The rhythms of self-idiomatic music are often directly related to the practical actions of the sounding operations. The music's time sense comes not simply from how long it takes the practitioner to pick up an object and apply it to the instrument, but more precisely, the kinesthetic sense derived from such practical actions.

Electroacoustics in Self-Idiomatic Improvisation: Building a Sound Environment

What does one call the following, arranged on a table: four portable cassette tape recorders, a portable CD player, a small mixer, two guitar pedals, a microphone designed for theater floors and a small analog synthesizer? The items are connected to feed their audio signals into one another. The performer creates sound by using each element instrumentally. In concert programs or on CD liner notes, the performer, Howard Stelzer, has himself credited as playing "tapes." However, although sounds derived from the cassette machines are the central ele-

ment of his music, and the act of manipulating the tape machines with his hands is central to his instrumental approach, his sound palette relies on every element on the table. He will often develop sounds from his apparatus that have nothing to do with the tapes. In fact, although the cassettes on which he draws contain a range of pre-recorded sounds such as Vietnamese pop, spoken word and recordings made on the spot during the performance, he never allows recognizability to escape. When playing a cassette, he presses his fingertips down firmly on the turning spindles of the machines, slowing them to a low-pitched, warbling crawl. Alternately he punctuates this attenuation with bursts of higher-pitched noise from the fast-forward button or sudden chops of silence from the pause button.

As I described it in my liner notes for the CD *Songs* by Stelzer and turntablist Jason Talbot: "Stelzer and Talbot play sounds that are palpable outgrowths of the manipulation of household electronics; concretions of gesture, not abstractions of memory" [9]. The self-idiomatic music of Stelzer and Talbot—and many others who instrumentalize audio electronics—approaches *musique concrète* from a kinesthetic angle. Brandon LaBelle's framing of *musique concrète* is fitting to electroacoustic self-idiomatic music: "*Musique concrète* arises from that space where the hand presses the record button, inside the point of contact between the signal and its reception onto magnetic tape—where the world surges against the diaphragm of the microphone and leaves its mark" [10].

A performer of such a built sound environment 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 (see Fig. 1). A performer is no longer expected to be the master of one tool and has taken on a new role of managing how the components of the built environment interact. The performing musician's domain shifts from tool-user to tool-maker to environmental engineer.

Global Growth of Self-Idiomatic Music Communities

"Music was," according to French economist 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 [11].

The producer of self-idiomatic improvised music creates 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 foregone conclusions (a composed piece of music, or the expression of a genre, for example), its practitioners may be hindered less by alienation than musicians in other contexts.

It is not unusual for self-idiomatic musicians to perform together having never met or discussed performing.

Furthermore, this heightened level of autonomy gives self-idiomatic musicians an advantage when networking with each other across the world over the Internet. Self-idiomatic musicianship means fewer stylistic restrictions and therefore greater flexibility to connect with other musicians artistically. It is not unusual for self-idiomatic musicians to perform together having never met or discussed performing beforehand.

Composer and improviser Pauline Oliveros gave me a sense of how the Internet age has revolutionized travel for improvising musicians, self-idiomatic or otherwise [12]. 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 was 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, traveling to festivals or otherwise restricted to one city at a time.

All that has changed completely. Starting in the 1990s, the growth of a global self-idiomatic music culture—geographically dispersed individuals and communities connecting to each other in expansive, emergent networks—has been fueled by Internet networking. Networking with other practitioners and listeners became easier thanks to the instantaneity and increasing ubiquity of Internet access; affinities can be shared easily, and discussions can unfold casually and continually. Self-idiomatic music communities are not unique in this sense, but self-idiomatic music's open-ended nature is especially fitted to this context.

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" [13]. 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 jobs of production and distribution him- or herself, but as a result has more total control over the presentation and distribution of his or her music.

"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.)" [14].

Conclusion

The term *self-idiomatic music* describes current direction in music that emphasizes autonomy of the individual musician, improvisatory exploration of unique vocabularies and a high degree of adaptability in collaborations. The work of self-idiomatic musicians is characterized by exploration of the sound possibilities afforded by their instruments and sounding objects and the forms that result both from a kinesthetic sense of sound production and open-ended interaction. Communities of these musicians have developed across the world, enabled by the spread of Internet access and facilitated by the music's process-oriented flexibility.

Acknowledgments

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References and Notes

Unedited references as provided by author.

1. Regarding the term *free improvisation:* While free improvisation is almost by definition self-idiomatic, an individual practice can be deemed self-idiomatic without being freely improvised, so long as the practice is not creating a repertoire in any traditional sense. Additionally, free improvisation—as a term—obscures the highly contingent and consensus-based nature of improvising ensembles, which may play with no written or spoken score but certainly develop many expectations about their own group.

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

3. Prévost, Edwin. *No Sound Is Innocent: AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention, Meta-Musical Narratives, Essays.* Matching Tye, near Harlow, Essex, UK: Copula, 1995. p. 145.

4. "Tout comme chaque instrument implique un espace sonore, un champ artistique, un univers imaginable, chaque avenir exige d'être pensé avec ses propres outils." Attali, Jacques. *Bruits: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique.* [Paris]: Presses universitaires de France, 1977. p. 204. I use the more recent French edition here because this particular wording is more useful for this part of my study, although a similar, but not identical, statement appears in the older English edition.

5. Bois, Yves Alain, and Rosalind E. Krauss. *Formless: A User's Guide.* New York: Zone Books, 1997. p. 15.

6. Prévost [3] p. 150.

7. Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* London: Routledge, 2002. p. 103. A more familiar and explicit connection can be made to hip-hop DJ culture and its use of record cut-ups; *musique concrète;* and plunderphonics, itself indebted to both of the other styles. Some electroacoustic self-idiomatic musicians are, in turn, heavily influenced by these styles, especially *musique concrète.*

8. Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening.* Trans. Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. p. 13.

9. Bullock, Michael T. "Why 'Songs'?" *Songs* CD (2003). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Intransitive Recordings. From the liner notes.

10. LaBelle, Brandon, and Steve Roden. "Architecture of Noise." *Site of Sound: Of Architecture and the Ear.* Los Angeles, CA (PO Box 931124, Los Angeles): Errant Bodies Press, 1999. p. 52.

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

12. Oliveros, Pauline. Interview at the International Society for Improvised Music Conference, Northwestern University, December 2007.

13. Becker, Howard S. *Art Worlds.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.

14. Wright, Jack. E-mail correspondence, January 2008.

Glossary

noise—for the purposes of this study, noise is defined as sound of no specific pitch or harmony.

traditional instrument—any musical instrument designed specifically for music performance (i.e. not originally designed for another purpose); generally speaking, instruments for which a repertoire, genre or performance tradition pre-exists the earliest era addressed in this study (i.e. the 1960s).

extended techniques—modes of instrumental or vocal sound production that are not derived from the standard practice of mainstream music genres.

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