

**“The Kind of Music We Play”: A Study of Self-Idiomatic Improvised
Music and Musicians in Boston**

By

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Professor of Music Theory, New England Conservatory of Music

Improviser, microtonalist, composer, poet

And:

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Founder of STEIM

Instrument inventor, composer, improviser

Listening is a creative act, performed not only by musicians but also by those sitting in the audience or providing support backstage. Improvised music requires the complete investment of everyone involved, from performer to audience; even a solo improvisation is conditioned by the contingency of the moment, the environment, and the open mindset of the listeners. I am indebted to many people on many levels for this work. While in many ways it was one of my most difficult solos, involving great amounts of both careful composing and meticulously attentive improvisation, it was also an ensemble performance in the way that can only be achieved when both performers and audience are creatively engaged.

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Abstract

This study focuses on the musical life of a community of improvising musicians, both on a local level and on a globally networked level, around the Boston, Massachusetts area between 1996 and 2010. It draws primarily on interviews with the individual participants - both musicians and supporters - who acted as my informants, as well as descriptions of my participant observation as a musician and audience members.

I introduce the term *self-idiomatic music* to describe an approach to musical improvisation born at the nexus of material contingency and the practitioner's management of unpredictability within a range of practical control. Conceptually, self-idiom is simply "you are your own musical idiom." I also take up the term *instrumentalization* to demonstrate that self-idiomatic music develops from a combination of resources.

I start this study with an examination of the term *self-idiomatic music* and how it applies to free improvisation; how self-idiomatic music is influenced by diverse approaches to instruments; and how this music manifests in the work of Boston-area improvisers during this time period, with a focus on several particular individuals.

“The Kind of Music We Play”:

A Study of Self-Idiomatic Improvised Music and Musicians in Boston

Michael T. Bullock

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

This study focuses on the musical life of a community of improvising musicians around the Boston, Massachusetts area between 1996 and 2010. It draws primarily on interviews with some of the participants, both musicians and supporters; descriptions of my participant observation as a musician and audience member; and musical analyses of several recorded examples. I start this study with an examination of the new term *self-idiomatic music* and its relationship to improvisation; how self-idiomatic music is influenced by diverse approaches to instruments; and how this music manifests in the work of several particular Boston-area improvisers – including myself - since 1996.

For many Boston free improvisers, improvisation is a compositional tool; their primary – often sole – means to an end. I interviewed individual musicians in the Boston and New England scenes about their motivations for getting involved in the improvisation community, about the development of their personal aesthetics, and how those developments have been encouraged and challenged through time.

1.2 Chapter Summaries

1.2.1 Chapter 2

Introduction to *Self-Idiomatic Music* and *Instrumentalization*

“Self-idiomatic music” is a broad term that addresses the processes of autonomy and flexibility associated with free improvisation. Self-idiomatic music is born at the nexus of material contingency and the practitioner’s management of unpredictability within a range of practical control.

Self-idiomatic music frequently refers to music otherwise called free improvisation; I use the term to investigate the highly individual nature of musicians’ personal experience and development. I will take a closer look at some of the people and events that make up the Boston area self-idiomatic improvised music scene and how they create their music. I will use the concept of self-idiomatic music as a practical tool for talking about current musical directions that are often variously termed free improvisation, non-idiomatic music, meta-music, and electroacoustic improvisation. I do not intend to establish a self-idiomatic music genre; in my experience, practitioners and supporters of self-idiomatic improvised music have never used this term, instead using various other terms such as ‘free improvisation’ and ‘noise’ depending on a particular context. My use of the term is simply to create a channel for discussing the confluence of musical, local, and personal conditions that create a community and an aesthetic.

For the purposes of this study, I define *instrumentalization* (hereafter used without italics) as the act of making music with an object in a way that diverges from its design intention, whether it is a musical instrument or a non-musical object. This is frequently the case with consumer audio playback technologies, which are not designed as tools for

musical performance, yet are often used as such. The instrumentalization of such materials and objects is, and has been, central to the development of the contemporary aesthetics of improvised music in Boston and elsewhere.

1.2.2 Chapter 3

The Evolution of Self-Idiom through Individuals, Ensembles, and a Scene: Greater Boston, 1996 – 2010

Chapter 3 consists of several essays drawn from in-person interviews I conducted with some of the region's improvisers. I wish to shed light on the development of the matrix of aesthetics, motivations, and histories of this community since the 1990s by analyzing the interviews given to me by its participants.

In 1996, freely improvised music in Boston was performed largely by musicians with backgrounds in either jazz or rock, playing familiar musical instruments such as saxophones, contrabasses, guitars, and drums. Many of the musicians interviewed in this study were, at the time, part of a community of improvising musicians in their twenties, thirties, and forties who were learning from an older generation of musicians and educators. These mentors themselves had been strongly influenced by the free music of the 60s and 70s, as well as Eastern European and Asian musics. They included – among many others – saxophonist Joe Maneri and percussionist Masashi Harada, based at New England Conservatory of Music (NEC); as well as trombonist Tom Plsek, bassist John Voigt, and Rhode Island drummer Lawrence Cook.¹

In spite of the fact that many of these older musicians were associated with educational institutions, this particular education in improvisation happened outside of

¹ Prof. Joseph Gabriel Esther Maneri (1927-2009) was a composer, saxophonist, clarinetist, and microtonal theorist. Maneri passed away in August 2009.

institutions more than inside, and largely took the form of musical collaboration, with the younger musicians brought into ensembles by the older ones. In particular, Voigt frequently collaborated with young improvisers who were not Berklee students, such as trumpeter Greg Kelley and saxophonist David Gross (who attended Berklee briefly). Many musicians from outside NEC attended Maneri's classes on microtonal theory. Through his performances with his trios and quartets,² Maneri may have contributed more than anyone else towards the positive development of a sense of community among Boston improvisers, both through the intimate and energetic performances of his microtonal free improvisation and his kindly, intimate banter with an audience always full of friends and students.

1.2.3 Chapter 4

A Framework for Analysis of Self-Idiomatic Music

In chapter 4, I lay out my analytical methods and why I chose them. The chapter begins with a discussion of ethnographic fieldwork methodology and a definition of participant observation. The challenges and advantages of participant observation are laid out, and I contextualize them for this study with my own experiences as a participant observer. The chapter continues with a discussion of how my own musical background led me to self-idiomatic music, and subsequently to my interest in studying this music from a scholarly perspective.

I also discuss some texts that were helpful to me in developing my methodology. Texts on the analysis of free improvised music are relatively scarce, but a few stood out.

² At the time, Maneri had only recently begun performing live again after a hiatus of many years, at the encouragement of his son, violinist Mat Maneri. Joe performed almost exclusively with Mat and drummer Randy Peterson, and frequently with bassists John Lockwood, Ed Schuller, and Barre Phillips.

From them and from my own experience I derive models for the analysis of musical selections, and for synthesizing data in the following chapters. The chapter ends with a description of how I used graphic techniques to analyze my music samples.

1.2.4 Chapter 5

Major Themes

Four themes stood out prominently in my analysis of the musical examples and the ethnological data from my interviews. Chapter 5 addresses these themes in detail, with examples drawn from audio and video interviews and the musical selections.³ I primarily draw from the video interviews and musical work of three particular participants in Boston's self-idiomatic music scene: cello and electronics player Vic Rawlings, tape player Howard Stelzer, and vocalist Liz Tonne. These three primary informants were chosen mainly for the level of detail about their work that they were able to reveal, and their availability for video interviews.

1.2.4.1 Theme 1: Breakthrough Moments

Many of the musicians I interviewed, when asked about their musical origins, described breakthrough moments: events that took them outside of their previous musical lives, foiled their expectations, and gave them permission to pursue a self-idiom based on idiosyncratic forms and sounds. For some, the breakthrough moment came from listening to a certain influential musician; for others, it was encountering a supportive musical community for the first time.

³ The video and audio examples appear in Appendices C and D on the accompanying DVD 1, and are cited throughout the chapter.

1.2.4.2 Theme 2: Material Contingency

Each of my three primary informants, along with several of my other informants, told me about musical and material decisions they have had to make on the fly that are both the result of, and a driving force behind, their self-idioms: whether it be Tonne's choice of resonant vocal ranges, Rawlings' decisions to include or leave out a fickle electronic component, or Stelzer's last-minute dashes to buy a replacement tape deck for one that fails minutes before a performance.

1.2.4.3 Theme 3: Ranges of Control

The most prominent recurrent theme in the video interviews was the range of control exerted by musicians over their processes of sound production. Each musician's demonstration revealed varying ranges of unpredictability. The musicians gave up certain controls willingly, but always within limits that could be more carefully controlled. They find these blurry areas between control and uncertainty inspiring.

1.2.4.4 Theme 4: Shape, Duration, and Transformation

I observed that the music examples I studied consisted of a combination of characteristics that were in constant flux, resulting in a variety of shapes over their durations. The constant transformation of these characteristics was the result of the confluence of many discreet contributions by the individual musicians. In my musical analyses, I emphasized two levels of detail: prose descriptions of decisive or influential contributions by the three primary interviewees, and graphic analyses.⁴ My prose descriptions focused on a fine grain of detail, while in the graphic analyses I took a broader view of the shape of each piece over time, and how that shape arose from the constant flux of three factors: loudness, density, and texture.

⁴ Please see graphic analyses in Appendix A at the end of this paper.

1.2.5 Chapter 6

Self-Idiom: People, Motivations, and Methods

Chapter 6 returns to the theoretical constructs from Chapter 2, which I attempt to synthesize with the themes developed in Chapter 5. I cover concepts that reach further afield into their broad implications for contemporary improvised music making.

1.2.6 Chapter 7

Conclusion

In the conclusion, I consider the implications of my work for both an understanding of current practice and the future of the music itself. The conclusion attempts to distill the lessons learned through the research to investigate the scope of self-idiom as a term and as a practice, and to understand its shifting limitations. It also addresses the usefulness of the terms and themes I have developed, both for current and future music, and spends a little time speculating on some of the changes currently taking place in the self-idiomatic music scene.

Chapter 2: Self-Idiom and Instrumentalization

2.1 Self-Idiomatic Music

The term self-idiomatic music refers to music created entirely from within the personal practice of an individual practitioner or ensemble. Self-idiom most strongly manifests itself in music that is freely improvised; however, since self-idiom is an idiosyncratic set of behaviors, it can be a part of almost any musical situation. It is the motivation behind the improvising that identifies it as self-idiomatic.

For an individual, the motivation may include political or social change, or rebellion against a musical establishment, but it may just as easily include none of those things; but the primary motivation is always an open-ended engagement with one's own music-making resources. For ensembles, the motivation behind the music is to mesh these open-ended engagements into an emergent field of possibilities.

In using the term *self-idiom*, my intentions are ethnographic. 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, hopefully making it easier to grasp both for practitioners and outside observers.

Conceptually, self-idiom is simply "you are your own musical idiom." I have found it productive, both for this study and for my own musical work, to think about improvised music as a meeting place for sets of processes enacted through the use of instruments and sound palettes, and through the interactions of individuals. This has been

a useful way of thinking about how musicians find their way into their own self-idiom, and how self-idiomatic musicians come together to create pieces of music in ensemble settings. Self-idiomatic music and improvised music are complementary concepts that can contain each other. Trombonist, composer, and scholar George Lewis calls improvised music a “sociomusical location,”⁵ a concept that I find supports my concept of self-idiomatic music as a confluence of social conditions, personalities, and decision-making.

2.1.1 Processes

Self-idiomatic practitioners develop ways of mapping the sonic potentials of their instruments onto a sense of duration. The summation of these approaches, such as a vocabulary of extended techniques, can come to constitute the center of an individual musician’s approach to music making.

Musical form in self-idiomatic music generally arises from two main factors: sound-making process and the deployment of these processes in time.

These processes can include the preparation of musical instruments, the intentional or accidental discovery of new techniques, and the rehearsal and refinement of those techniques. Vic Rawlings builds his electronic instrument out of guitar effects pedals, which he must prepare by removing their backs to expose their circuit boards, permanently attaching them to a Plexiglas board and connecting them together electronically. Liz Tonne discovered her primary vocal technique through a teacher, and

⁵ “Improvised music may be usefully characterized as a sociomusical location inhabited by a considerable number of present-day musicians, from diverse cultural backgrounds and musical practices, who have chosen to make improvisation a central part of their musical discourse.” Lewis, George. 2000. “Teaching Improvised Music: An Ethnographic Memoir.” In *Arcana: Musicians on Music*, edited by John Zorn, 78-109. New York: Granary Books. p. 78.

has refined it both at home through careful practice, as well as in performance through intuitive means.

Processes can also include the setting in motion of technologies or actions that are not under the complete control of the performer. Rawlings performs his pedals by placing metal objects in the circuits; but many factors, from humidity to battery power levels to the cleanliness of his hands, influence the instrument and make it impossible for him to control the results precisely. Therefore his performance on this instrument consists of deciding what metal object to place on which part of his instrument and when: each action is setting a process in motion and allowing it to run itself.

Even performers of unaltered traditional instruments deploy many processes and techniques that are unique to their individual self-idiomatic practice. In instances where the practitioner has altered his or her existing instrument, or built one based on a unique design, the techniques and processes he or she applies will necessarily be idiomatic to that instrument. The video interviews of my three primary informants provide rich insight into this aspect of their self-idioms. The ranges of control, and the ranges of unpredictability – both intentional and unintentional – that result, are covered in depth in Chapter 5.

The temporality – a term I use to refer to the gestalt of factors contributing to time-sense and movement – of a piece of self-idiomatic improvised music emerges from a matrix of sound events. The complex system of musical decisions can create changes that are either gradual or sudden. The emergent nature of these performances is explored in more depth in Chapter 5.

Self-idiomatic improvised music eschews – but does not entirely exclude - written or transmitted repertoire as a referent, source, and instigator of music making. Rather than drawing on a written or memorized repertoire of discrete pieces, a self-idiomatic improviser develops a catalog of approaches, processes and preferences. This catalog can be enormously flexible and for most practitioners is constantly evolving, though often a core set of attributes and preferences remains constant: choice and preparation of instruments, or how to react to the musical actions of collaborators.

For self-idiomatic musicians, extended techniques often become the core of their improvising vocabulary, rather than simply an addition to standard techniques. A practitioner's idiosyncratic vocabulary takes the place of standardized repertoire. The nature of the particular sounds in the improvising vocabulary, and a practitioner's experience in exploring those sounds, in turn impacts how he or she builds musical form. Variations and new sounds continuously evolve in the practice of improvisation and are added to the improviser's vocabulary. The sound vocabulary and structural sensibility together form a physical manifestation of self-idiom.

2.1.2 Terms

2.1.2.1 Idiom

For this writing, an idiom is a set of pre-ordained or pre-determined of musical behaviors or responses. Self-idiom does not lack such sets, though they are more correctly characterized as pre-determined by the performer rather than ordained from the outside. The word 'idiom' is related to the Greek words *idioma*, meaning private

property; and *idioustha*, to make something one's own.⁶ In this way, a musical idiom can be thought of as both personal and acquired from somewhere else. Both idiomatic music and self-idiomatic music are built on sets properties that may have been acquired from outside forms, and which come to bear the mark of the current owner – namely, the performer, composer, or improviser.

2.1.2.2 Self-Idiomatic Music and Free Improvisation

Self-idiomatic music manifests most fully as freely improvised music. Because of this, much of the music under consideration in this paper – though usually referred to as self-idiomatic – might be more familiarly termed free improvisation; neither term is inappropriate, nor do they exclude each other. But I feel that the term *free improvisation* oversimplifies the highly contingent nature of improvised performance. It also obscured the tension between the individual-as-idiom and the consensus-based nature of improvising ensembles, which may play with no written or spoken score but nonetheless develop many musical expectations within their own performance practice.

Most of the music that falls under the umbrella of self-idiom is also known by other, overlapping terms, among them: British percussionist and writer Edwin Prévost's term *meta-music*,⁷ and what British guitarist Derek Bailey calls *non-idiomatic music*.⁸

⁶ Self-idiomatic could be considered a redundant term, since 'idiom' refers to the collection of one's personal properties. But the use of 'idiom' in music is often synonymous with 'genre' or 'style,' so I therefore feel comfortable using self-idiom to describe something distinct from established genres. 'Idiom' is also related to 'idiot' – in the sense of one whose properties and ways of being are entirely idiosyncratic. Thanks to Christian Wolff and Michael Century for pointing out this connection.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Bailey, Derek. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. New York: Da Capo, 1993. p. xi-xii.

2.1.2.3 Derek Bailey: Non-Idiomatic Music

Bailey, an active proponent of freely improvised music from the 1960s until his death in 2005, deployed the term *non-idiomatic music* (hereafter without italics) to refer to music either mostly or completely improvised. Like Bailey, I consider my term to overlap primarily with free improvisation. Bailey differentiates between non-idiomatic and idiomatic music thus:

Idiomatic improvisation... 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.⁹

2.1.2.4 Edwin Prévost: Meta-Music

Prévost, coined the term *meta-music* in his 1995 book *No Sound is Innocent*. Prévost, along with guitarist Keith Rowe and saxophonist Lou Gare, founded the seminal improvising group AMM in 1965, and is its only continuous member.¹⁰ AMM’s shifting membership has also included pianist John Tilbury¹¹ and the late composer Cornelius Cardew. Prévost also leads a regular improvising workshop in London that has cultivated many young improvisers.

In meta-music, says 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.¹²

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The presence of AMM (which is not an acronym for anything) at the Autumn Uprising festival of improvised music in Boston in 2000 had a strong impact on the Boston scene.

¹¹ AMM is currently a duo of Prévost and Tilbury.

¹² Prévost, p. 145.

Prévost defines a musical idiom as “a set of pre-ordained responses.” Is meta-music supposedly free from idiom, with none of the responses pre-ordained? Is that even possible? But he goes on to point out that the meta-musician indeed has an idiom – his or her own. Specifically, the musician creates an inherently mutable aesthetic. So Prévost is not claiming that the musician is empty of pre-ordained responses, but rather that those responses are subject to constant evolution as a result of the very act of responding to an improvised situation.

It is the act of improvisation that can, and does, engage the capacity for transformation. Even when the music can be perceived as being made of discreet chunks placed in measurable time, the music is better understood as a continuous emergence rather than in a sequence of quantifiable events and transitions between them. The framing of time as the substance of evolution and transformation is called *duration* (or *la durée*) by philosopher Henri Bergson. Music and sound art scholar Christoph Cox sums up Bergson’s term thus: “[Duration] is the very flow that produces beings and events by which they constantly become-other.”¹³

Prévost’s and Bailey’s intentions with their terms were political, or at any rate social: they were declaring independence from music genres of the 1960s and 1970s that used improvisation - such as jazz and psychedelic rock - as well as from the power exerted by their associated business structures. Their terms, especially Bailey’s term, are negative definitions inasmuch as they are designed to illuminate the borders - albeit flexible, contingent ones - between their music and the musical establishment.

¹³ Cox, Christoph. 2006. “From Music to Sound: Being as Time in the Sonic Arts.” In *Sonambiente Berlin 2006: Klang Kunst Sound Art*, edited by Helga de la Motte-Haber, Matthias Osterwold, and George Weckwerth, 214-223. Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2006.

I object to neither non-idiomatic nor meta-music as terms; and for the most part the music described by those terms also fits my definition of self-idiom. Prévost's meta-music has a familial relationship to my term; I trace my development of the term self-idiomatic music in part to Prévost's imperative about the musician experiencing ongoing transformation through the act of improvisation. Rather than rejecting the idea of idiom in self-idiomatic music, I propose that the idiom is defined by the musician him or herself, by his or her actions. It is therefore redefined with each performance and each record release. Further, a self-idiomatic improvising ensemble defines its collective idiom through performance, as an intersection of the idioms of all of its members.

2.1.3 A Repertoire in the Moment

A musician playing in a traditional idiom always has the repertoire piece at any given moment as the focal influence. His or her primary influences generally flow from, and towards, the genre's repertoire. The self-idiomatic musician, in his or her musical life as a one-person idiom, is primarily interpreting his or her own musical intentions, which draws from all of the individual's experiences.

In place of a written or memorized repertoire, an individual practitioner develops a vocabulary of sounds, rhythms, and figures upon which he or she draws. This vocabulary can be enormously flexible, and for most practitioners it is constantly evolving, though often a core of favorite sounds will remain constant. The individual practitioner also develops a range of musical approaches and structures that determine how he or she places sounds in a musical structure. This range of abstractions can also change over time.

Self-idiomatic free improvisation music ensembles exhibit similar tendencies in

their evolution of sounds and approaches, but change generally takes place more slowly than with individuals. As an ensemble's distinctive approach develops, it can resemble a single piece that refreshes itself each time it is performed, rather than a repertoire.

2.2 Instruments and Instrumentalization

Just as each instrument implies a sound space, an artistic field, an imaginable universe, each future must be thought with its own tools.¹⁴ [Jacques Attali]

In this paper, I define “instrumentalization” as the activation of an object within a process of music making; that is, in a way that is driven by the intention and attention applied to music creation. For example, a user of consumer audio technology has access to a level of control that can be applied to a creative act: a practical action on a turntable, cassette machine or CD player can transform into a creative one by a barely perceptible shift of intention.

2.2.1 Terms

2.2.1.1 Instrument

I use the term *instrument* to refer to things known commonly as musical instruments, as well as many other musical tools. The category of ‘traditional’ instruments includes the gamut of instruments found in idiomatic musics. It also includes a number of instruments that are not widely familiar but nonetheless have histories of their own, and were designed to be deployed as self-contained musical tools. Best known among them is the theremin, one of the instruments developed in the earliest days of electronic sound production. The theremin and its cousins, such as Michel Waisvisz’s

¹⁴ “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.

cracklebox, were at the time of their invention entirely new electronic instruments, neither required to transmit prescribed content (like broadcasts or records) nor expected to resemble existing acoustic instruments (such as the piano or the guitar).

2.2.1.2 Extended Technique

I use this phrase to denote three kinds of operations on traditional instruments:

1. *Customary techniques* derived from canonical techniques or from the physical reality of interacting with the instrument as it is, without extra devices or objects. Many seemingly new sounds are derived this way, all of which are inherent to the instrument with no significant modification.

2. *Adding foreign objects* to an instrument for the purpose of causing it to resonate differently. The most famous example of this is the so-called ‘prepared piano,’ an invention usually credited to John Cage. Small objects such as springs and pencil erasers are inserted between the closely aligned strings of a piano, changing the way they vibrate when struck by the piano’s hammers.

3. *Intermediary or hybrid approaches* that combine the two above approaches, including modifications of existing instruments without adding foreign objects or extensions. A well-known example of this approach is Pauline Oliveros’ just-intoned accordion, which is a standard keyboard accordion with the reeds re-tuned to fit a just-intonation system. Pianists who prepare their pianos in this way also often reach inside the piano to play the strings directly, thus combining the first two categories of extended technique.

Extended techniques in self-idiomatic music are operations in the sense used by Yves-Alain Bois in his discussion of philosopher and writer George Bataille’s *informe*

(formlessness). The *informe* is “neither a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept,” but an operation that resembles only itself.¹⁵ The formless operation of extended techniques, then, originates noise in the body of the instrument – or instruments, or apparatus – and the body of the performer as part of the operation of reorienting sound to noise, and reorienting sound production away from received hierarchies.

At times extended instrumental techniques may suggest bodily expulsions, or in fact are bodily expulsions, such as breath sounds from voice or wind instruments. Their physicality may come through in other ways as well, suggesting modes of expression in other arts. Extended techniques on acoustic instruments often resemble sounds of electronic origin. But such similarities are generally incidental: the self-idiomatic improviser is projecting gestures and actions into sound, rather than the other way around.

2.2.1.3 Bricolage

Cultural theorist Dick Hebdige’s use of the term *bricolage* is pertinent to the development of self-idiomatic music’s resources:

[Bricolage] 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.¹⁶

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

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

¹⁶ Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). London: Routledge, 1997. p. 103.

Hebdige borrows *bricolage* from pioneering anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who also coined the term *bricoleur* to designate the user of *bricolage*. “The rules of [the *bricoleur*’s] game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand,’ that is to say with a set of tools which is... the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock” of resources and interconnections. *Bricolage* is highly personal, indeed idiosyncratic: “[H]e ‘speaks’ not only *with* things... but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities.”¹⁷ The self-idiomatic musician is often a *bricoleur* of physical resources such as audio electronics, or random objects repurposed for their sonic properties. More importantly, he or she is a *bricoleur* of musical moments: the sonic properties of a room; the unexpected behaviors of musical collaborators; conventional instrumental techniques combined with extended or unconventional ones.

Bricolage connotes redeployment of familiar objects (or instruments, or techniques) in ways that are unfamiliar. As these new uses can come to constitute the entirety of a musician’s approach to music making, the techniques are no longer extended, but are in fact the physical manifestation of a personal idiom – a self-idiom. This is made clear in my interviews with my three primary informants: vocalist Liz Tonne derives most of her improvisation techniques from an exercise designed to increase the flexibility of the voice. Or the strategies may be physical objects: Vic Rawlings and Howard Stelzer both make their instruments from consumer electronics. Rawlings opens guitar effects boxes and plays them from the inside, while Stelzer operates cassette decks in ways that work against their design. All three primary

¹⁷ Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1966. p. 21.

informants make *bricolages* from these resources by instrumentalizing them: diverting them from their original function, redeploying them tactically as musical resources.

The self-idiomatic *bricoleur* constantly redeploys his or her new connections and systems. I suggest that musical improvisation, and especially free or self-idiomatic improvisation, is properly characterized as a set of processes creating a constant turnover of its own forms, developed on the fly in performance. These processes determine, in significant part, the character of the next improvisation; and the constant turnover sets the stage for the constant renewal of sound and structure.

Chapter 3: The Evolution of Self-Idiom Through Individuals, Ensembles, and a Scene: Greater Boston,¹⁸ 1996 – 2010

Where does the self-idiomatic music culture reside? The term *scene* is often used casually to refer to a music community. The term is problematic and yet very useful, as art historian and artist Will Straw has pointed out. It is a slang term; “[I]t functions to designate face-to-face sociability and as a lazy synonym for globalized virtual communities of taste.”¹⁹

Self-idiomatic music venues in Greater Boston have historically had a high turnover rate. Venues can appear almost anywhere, though often for very brief periods. The Zeitgeist Gallery – usually known simply as the Zeitgeist – was the most notable exception, existing in several locales in Cambridge, MA from the mid-90s until 2006. It resided at the corner of Norfolk and Broadway from its founding until it was destroyed in a fire in the spring of 2002. During most of that period the Zeitgeist hosted the Playground New Music series every Friday. Managed for much of its existence by saxophonist David Gross, Playground was the center of the improvised music community in the Boston area and one of the primary performance venues for musicians who were, at that time, just learning to use the Internet to book tours to small venues.

¹⁸ ‘Greater Boston’ is a term denoting the urban geographic area of eastern Massachusetts that includes the cities of Boston, Cambridge, Somerville, Medford, Watertown, Newton, Allston, Brighton, and numerous smaller regions and neighborhoods. For simplicity, it is often referred to collectively as “Boston” both by residents and non-residents. I will follow that convention in this study, except when more precision is needed, such as in discussions of specific venues.

The term ‘Greater Boston’ is sometimes used to cover a wider area including Lowell, MA, and Providence, RI. However, Providence and Lowell have well established music scenes of their own and are usually thought of as separate from the Boston music scene.

¹⁹ Straw, Will. "Scenes and Sensibilities." *Public*, no. 22/23 (2002), pp. 245-257.

The ephemeral nature of venues in Boston is in sharp contrast to the perception that the strongest musical scenes, of any style, are to be found in the biggest cities.

“There was no [self-idiomatic] scene, as we understand it today, until the late 90s, first in Boston and then increasingly all over,” says saxophonist Jack Wright, a veteran of free improvised music who has toured the US and Europe since the 1970s. “One thing the Internet did help to do was decentralize the so-called *avant garde* such that there could be valid scenes virtually anywhere, not just the NY/Chicago/LA/SF centers of culture.”²⁰

3.1 Finding a New Way: David Gross

The self-idiomatic improvised music scene, which spring up mainly around the Zeitgeist Gallery, owes its existence in large part to saxophonist and organizer David Gross. His musical activities have often extended beyond playing improvised music, and he has put much of his effort into bringing musicians and audiences together - from curating series and festivals to running a small record label, Tautology.

In December 1996, the onset of focal dystonia – a neurological disorder of his left hand – eventually forced Gross to stop playing the saxophone for over a year.²¹ It was at this time that he started to throw all of his energy into giving structure to the improvised music scene, which he saw as a loose, scattered grouping of musicians and listeners who needed to be made aware of each others’ work. “That was one of my motivations: why don’t these people know each other?”²²

²⁰ Wright, Jack. E-mail correspondence, 22 January 2008.

²¹ Gross says he quit playing completely in February of 1997, then returned to playing in March of 1998 and has continued ever since. But, he says, “My hand is still fucked up. A lot of my playing [e.g. extended technique] comes from accommodating dystonia.”

²² Gross, Gordon David. Audio interview, 12 October 2009, Greenfield, MA.

To remedy this disconnect, Gross founded the annual Autumn Uprising Festival of improvised music in 1997. Gross organized the festival until 2000 when it hosted AMM.²³ From 1998 to 2002, Gross – along with periodic help from others – booked Playground New Music at the Zeitgeist in Cambridge, a weekly Friday night series of electroacoustic, experimental, and almost always freely improvised music.²⁴

3.1.1 Becoming Serious

In 1991, during his time at Hampshire College in Amherst MA, Gross had vague plans of becoming a music producer, not a full-time performer. But a Cecil Taylor²⁵ concert at University of Massachusetts at Amherst, near where Gross was studying at Hampshire College, was the first of two events that turned his life quickly and decisively towards a life of making improvised music. Yusef Lateef, saxophonist on the UMass faculty, was sitting in the front.

I'm thinking: here's a big deal jazz guy and he's sitting in front so he can watch what Cecil Taylor is doing. And I'm like, ok, this is important. It totally changed my life. I paid my five bucks; saw Cecil Taylor; and boom, life changed. But it wasn't really something I could use as a sax player.²⁶

Gross started listening to more jazz records, searching for a way into free improvisation through the alto saxophone; he soon found *The Shape of Jazz to Come*,²⁷ by pioneering saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman. There, Gross found a

²³At the time, AMM consisted of Prévost, Tilbury, and Rowe.

²⁴Gross has also booked countless shows at other venues around Boston and Western Massachusetts.

²⁵Playing with Taylor were bassist William Parker, an unknown drummer, and a dancer. Gross later discovered the dancer was Masashi Harada, who would go on to teach at New England Conservatory and whose students would include several Boston-area self-idiomatic musicians including myself. My own first public performance of free improvised self-idiomatic music was at the Zeitgeist Gallery on March 28, 1997, in a trio with Harada and Rainey. This trio was also featured on Gross' first Autumn Uprising in October 1997.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Coleman, Ornette. *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. Atlantic Records, 1959.

specific inspiration for his alto saxophone playing. “There was one lick on ‘Lonely Woman’ and it was like, oh yes, this is what I want to do!”²⁸

After finishing at Hampshire, Gross moved to Boston in 1995 to study at Berklee College of Music. “[I] totally hated it but it kicked my ass. At Hampshire I was a big fish in a small pond.” He quit Berklee after a year and spent the rest of 1996 practicing eight hours a day, and playing free jazz gigs whenever possible with Boston trumpeter Raphe Malik. Gross met Malik through San Francisco saxophonist Glenn Spearman, whom Gross had once hosted at Hampshire for a master class.

In December 1996, Gross developed focal dystonia and lost most of the control over his left hand. His inability to play saxophone troubled him; but he continued attending free improvised and *avant garde* shows whenever he could, meeting many musicians.

Gross started wondering why so many of the people he met, who had such similar aesthetics, did not know each other. He recognized that these musicians could form a mutually beneficial community built around self-organized performances and a shared social sense. The Boston self-idiomatic improvised music community was in its earliest stage. All the nascent community needed were some formalized structures on which to build a social scene based on self-idiomatic improvised music; “a sociomusical location,” to take George Lewis’ words quite literally.

Gross had recently started attending Joe Maneri’s microtonal theory class at New England Conservatory, though he was not a student.²⁹ Maneri, who in his seventies had only recently started performing live after a decades-long hiatus, was making a huge

²⁸ Gross, Gordon David. Audio interview, 12 October 2009, Greenfield, MA.

²⁹ Maneri allowed non-students, and pretty much anyone, to audit his semester-long class in microtonal theory; he also permitted students to take his class more than once or simply to audit.

impact on the nascent community with his microtonal free improvisation concerts. Maneri commented in class on the scattered status of Boston improvisers and said that Boston needed a festival of improvised music to bring the community together. Gross, searching for an outlet for his frustrated creative energy, threw himself into organizing the first edition of the Autumn Uprising festival in 1997 in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston.³⁰

In the spring and summer of 1998, after returning to the saxophone, Gross became involved in organizing concerts on the Friday night Playground New Music Series at the Zeitgeist Gallery. At first he shared the responsibilities with pianist Eric Zinman, who had founded the series in 1995; and briefly, trumpeter Greg Kelley. Zinman and Zeitgeist founder Alan Nidle felt that the series could not continue due to poor attendance. The cost to rent the room for an evening performance was thirty-five dollars; admission, at that time, was a suggested donation of five dollars. Gross insisted that he could get at least seven people to show up to each performance. “And then I just took over. That basically became my job. Booking shows and thinking of different combos.” Gross was the primary organizer of the series from 1998 to 2002, when the Zeitgeist was destroyed by fire.³¹ Though it did not destroy the community, the fire brought a long and fruitful period of hothouse growth to a close.³²

³⁰ Maneri’s trio was the headlining act.

³¹ The series continued for a short time after the Gallery relocated to nearby Inman Square.

³² The Playground at the Zeitgeist was a hothouse: a meeting place for experimentation in music that, within a controlled range of aesthetic, could be wildly unpredictable. Similar situations in other cities have led to the formation of their own unique, strong communities centered around venues: among them, The Red Room in Baltimore, MD; Eddie Prévost’s Workshops, and more recently Café OTO, London; Gallery Off Site, Tokyo; and ABC No Rio in New York City.

3.2 Scene and Aesthetic, Through the Eyes and Ears of Three Participants

The following sections briefly introduce my three primary informants from Boston's self-idiomatic music scene that granted me video interviews for this writing: tapes player Howard Stelzer, vocalist Liz Tonne, and multi-instrumentalist Vic Rawlings.

3.2.1 An Instrumental Approach to Live Electronics: Howard Stelzer³³

Howard Stelzer performs with a collection of cassette tapes, portable tape decks, a microphone, pieces of metal, a small synthesizer and a mixer. He has also released numerous recordings of music composed using computer-based editing, with material derived from the instruments he uses for live performance. He is almost entirely self-taught, using techniques derived from the portable cassette machines on which he performs. His original inspiration was noise music, which he discovered while in high school, and he began creating music on his own during this time.

Stelzer's tape decks and tapes are the heart of his self-idiom; for years, Stelzer had himself credited on performance announcements and recordings as simply playing "tapes." For the video, Stelzer focused on how he uses the tape decks and tapes.

Stelzer plays his tape decks by pressing down on the turning spindles with the tips of his fingers and manipulating the pause, rewind, and fast-forward buttons. His techniques place a lot of strain on his consumer-grade tape decks, causing them to fall apart gradually over months or – if he is lucky – years. The gradual destruction of his tape decks is an unavoidable consequence of Stelzer's instrumentalizing approach.

³³ Where appropriate, I will make references to specific video interview clips, as chapters of DVD 1, inline with the text. In other places, I will simply cite the video or audio interview in the footnotes.

Nonetheless Stelzer cherishes this natural decay process as integral to his self-idiom.

“When [a deck is] brand new and it doesn’t have a lot of character to it, it will do some things I want it to do and it’s great, but these things really start to get interesting to me as they start to break. And that area between really taxed and death is where I get a lot of musical inspiration.”³⁴

3.2.2 Extending the Human Instrument: Liz Tonne

Vocalist Liz Tonne is largely self-taught. Signing in choirs in high school, musical theatre in college, and professional rock and jazz bands after college, one of the most significant moments in her musical life came from one of her few teachers, a rock vocal teacher in Boston in the early 1990s. This teacher had an exercise that involved singing scales while rapidly shaking each pitch up and down between vocal registers.³⁵ “[It] essentially became the fundamental of everything I do, this exercise. I thought it was really cool and I could do it immediately. It usually took people a lot of lessons.”³⁶ Her quick affinity for this unusual, wordless sound texture led her to introduce it into musical situations, such as her improvisation-influenced rock band Mile Wide. It also started her on the path of developing her own vocabulary of extended vocal techniques, and a self-idiom of the voice.

Tonne first became involved with Boston-area improvised music in 1997 when she joined Saturnalia, a free-improvising rock-influenced jam band led by violinist Jonathan LaMaster. She followed fellow Mile Wide member Vic Rawlings to Saturnalia, and through that group met many of her future collaborators. That same year, she and Rawlings began working with trumpeter Greg Kelley and Saturnalia thereminist James

³⁴ Stelzer, Howard. Video interview, 28 January 2010, Boston, MA.

³⁵ See DVD 1, Chapter 1. Tonne, Elizabeth. Video interview, 1 January 2010, Greenfield, MA.

³⁶ Tonne, Elizabeth. Audio interview, 12 October 2009, Greenfield, MA.

Coleman in forming The Undr Quartet.³⁷ This group was one of the earliest manifestations of what later became known exogenously as ‘the Boston sound’ or ‘lowercase sound’: improvised, electroacoustic music that favors subtle sounds and periods of silence, while eschewing overt musical drama.

Tonne first arrived in Boston in 1985 to attend Boston College (BC), and was immediately unhappy with lack of musical opportunities there. Growing up in Pueblo, Colorado, she had sung with her high school choir, played piano, and socialized with the underground punk scene. By contrast, BC appeared to be short on musical opportunities, and Tonne was unable to access a piano in order to work privately.

She found the culture of BC alienating and only felt at home hanging out at WZBC, the college radio station. WZBC was a magnet for students who felt like outsiders at BC.³⁸ “[W]ZBC was a little cultural oasis, as it still is...I found that at the station I knew a little about what they were talking about, listening to; I felt like a freak [at BC] and they were all freaks [at the station].”³⁹

She attended rock shows all over Boston, and by the time she graduated she was sitting in on rehearsals for her friends’ rock bands, not singing but absorbing their discussions and learning all she could about music. Aside from some work with BC’s musical theatre company, she did not sing in public for several years.

³⁷ The term comes from this quotation from Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “Undr”: “He took up his harp and uttered the word ‘undr,’ which means ‘Wonder.’ In his chords I recognized my own verses. I took up the harp and sang to a different word. ‘You have understood,’ he said.” Jorge Luis Borges, Norman Thomas di Giovanni, (trans.), Fiction, “Undr,” *The New Yorker*, August 1, 1977, p. 18.

³⁸ WZBC 90.3 FM was a source of inspiration and comfort to several people I interviewed during the course of my research, largely because of its daily afternoon segment “No Commercial Potential,” which has featured improvised, experimental, electronic and noise music since at least 1980. “No Commercial Potential” is underwritten in part by two other significant contributors to Boston and New England improvised music and noise: record distribution company Forced Exposure, and Lowell, MA record label and store RRRecords. The significance of RRRecords and its proprietor, Ron Lessard, was a recurring theme in the lives of the musicians I interviewed and would make an interesting study of its own.

³⁹ Tonne, Elizabeth. Audio interview, 12 October 2009, Greenfield, MA.

Immediately after college, Tonne got involved in a couple of musical projects with fellow student Vic Rawlings; she claims she befriended Rawlings “because he was wearing a Ramones T-shirt,” identifying him as someone who would understand her punk leanings perhaps better than the other students. She started working in the Charlestown Working Theatre with Rawlings and theatre founder John Peitso. “I remember I sang this very atonal piece, hanging from the sky in a nightgown, and I had this huge harness around my body... So I started doing all these other musical things that weren’t directly related to the rock scene.”⁴⁰

Tonne was asked to join her friends’ rock band Mile Wide as the vocalist to resolve an internal conflict over the band’s singing duties. Tonne eventually became the lyricist while Ryan was out of the country. Tonne started introducing non-verbal vocalizations from an early stage. “Without Pete I never really felt very comfortable with writing the lyrics. I was never very good at it so I would rely on my improvisational vocalese way too much... I would mostly just do it in sound [without lyrics], as much as I could get away with it.”⁴¹

Between the vocalese and the vocal exercises, both of which she was employing more and more for Mile Wide’s far-ranging extended jams, Tonne was increasingly drawn towards unusual vocal sounds. She became increasingly frustrated with singing over the extremely high volume level of Mile Wide’s amplified guitars and drums. “I felt like I always had to belt out. Which taught me a lot about singing, but it was always like ‘turn up the vocals, turn up the vocals.’...So as a sort of personal antidote to the fact that

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

we were being bombarded, Vic and I started doing stuff at home” in Jamaica Plain, where they were housemates.⁴²

In 1997 Rawlings invited Tonne to a series of jams with him, Kelley, and thereminist James Coleman at Coleman’s Charlestown loft. She and Rawlings both wanted alternatives to the limitations imposed by the overwhelming volume level of Mile Wide. These private sessions at Coleman’s loft provided an opportunity to Tonne to explore quiet, nuanced sounds in an unstructured atmosphere where all contributions were on equal footing musically. All the music was improvised in free rhythm, with no time pulse and no reference to existing genres. The emphasis was on timbre, texture, and volume – almost always low volume – rather than traditional group hierarchies.⁴³ This group would go on to perform live as The Undr Quartet. Around that time Tonne also joined Saturnalia, a larger and louder all-improvised group with direct influences from rock and other genres. “With Saturnalia there was free jazz, rock, more recognizable forms and melodic references. But when it got into The Undr Quartet and The BSC⁴⁴ that was no longer the case.”

3.2.3 “Total squall”: Vic Rawlings

The sonic spaces between musical events, and the fringe artifacts of music making, fascinate Vic Rawlings. He recalls an early glimpse into one of these spaces

⁴² Ibid. Recently, Tonne has experienced almost a complete reversal of this problem: in several of her improvised music ensembles, she feels there is such a strong expectation to sing very quietly that she is restricted from exploring sounds at a loud or even medium volume.

⁴³ Self-idiomatic musicians often choose collaborators based on an individual’s particular sense of musicianship, and rarely choose collaborators based on orchestration requirements. Sometimes it is only after choosing to collaborate that self-idiomatic musicians decide what instruments to play.

⁴⁴ The BSC is an eight-piece ensemble of Massachusetts-based self-idiomatic improvisers, founded in 2000 by saxophonist Bhub Rainey (who now lives in New Orleans). The BSC’s sound has changed over the years, but has generally been characterized by exploration of timbre, deliberate pace, and frequently low volumes. At various times the name the name ‘The BSC’ has been represented as standing for ‘The Boston Sound Collective’ but at other times the members (including Rainey) have denied this, insisting that ‘The BSC’ does not stand for anything.

while listening to a live concert recording of Jimi Hendrix: “...before the song he turns up his guitar and it’s feeding back – just this total squall... those in-between pieces of feedback were totally killer.”⁴⁵

Multi-instrumentalist, instrument builder, and teacher Rawlings got his start in music playing electric guitar in rock bands during high school in Ohio, and later during college in West Virginia and Boston. After college his activities expanded to a range of styles and instruments, including *sarangi*, a *Hindustani* bowed instrument; cello; and the instruments he teaches privately: five-string banjo, mandolin, and bass guitar, along with acoustic and electric six-string guitars.

Largely self-taught on the cello, his main cello bears numerous modifications of his own design, including sympathetic strings similar to those on the *sarangi*. Additionally, Rawlings developed a series of instruments based on directly manipulating the exposed circuitry of consumer music gear to create raw electronic sounds, which are played through assorted loudspeakers stripped of their housings. The design and use of these noisy electronic systems, built through trial-and-error and self-taught soldering, defines much of Rawlings’ self-idiom. Rawlings has developed and adapted his instruments for use as investigative tools in his ongoing interest in sounds and temporalities on the margins of musicality. They are unpredictable, and unable to reproduce anything other than their own internal electronic complexity; and yet Rawlings has developed a combination of rational and intuitive techniques of control in order to play them with practicality and nuance, with what he has sometimes called “the rhythm of hands moving over a workbench.”

⁴⁵ Rawlings, Vic. First audio interview, 8 October 2009, Somerville, MA.

The Charlestown Working Theatre gave Rawlings his first opportunities to step back from the stage-center orientation of rock guitar. Peitso hired Rawlings to play “ridiculous, over-the-top”⁴⁶ electric guitar for a band that would accompany a rock opera. It also presented his first opportunities to apply the sounds that had been in his head since first hearing the squall of Hendrix.

In addition to the rock songs written by Peitso for the opera, the members of the live band were asked to create incidental sounds at various points of the production to accompany the action on stage. Rawlings was able to start using some of the abstract and noisy sounds he had been experimenting with at home: “I had already had several long nights [at home] with my digital delay... hooking up the guitar and barely playing it [in a standard way], just wiggling out with the effects.” With the rock opera, he was forced to figure out how to present those sounds in a way that fit into a performance in front of an audience.

Being an accompanist rather than the center of attention gave Rawlings more freedom to experiment with effects pedals, as well as a drum brush pressed to the magnetic pickup coil on the guitar. “The electric guitar with different effects was sort of the first stage of irony... stepping away from the guitar as this thing that cool guys did. It was a rather immediate and large step.”⁴⁷ Rawlings would continue to take large steps away from his point of origin and towards his self-idiom.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 4: A framework for Analysis of Self-Idiomatic Improvised Music

Ethnography is a culture-studying culture.
[James P. Spradley]⁴⁸

4.1 Fieldwork Methodology

My intention in this writing is to address how a performer or an ensemble takes a set of resources - musicians' instruments, bodies and skills, as well as personal and musical history - and puts them through a set of processes to arrive at a piece of improvised music. These processes are the aesthetic preferences and decision that arise from the use of the aforementioned resources. My musical analyses are contingent on my own internal understanding as a participant observer.

When I chose my focus for this writing, I realized I was placing myself, as a researcher, into the middle of a culture in which I was already deeply embedded as a participant. As this is a practice-based dissertation, I felt it made sense for me to launch an investigation into the musical and cultural context that has shaped much of my life. My subject cuts across social groups; realms of personal experience, both my own and others; do-it-yourself technology; and analyses of recorded music. Given the complexity of the subject, I felt I needed to use various research methods.

Self-idiomatic improvised music, for me, is a highly personal and interpersonal experience; I wanted to find out if other self-idiomatic improvisers felt similarly, and how that affects their music. Therefore I primarily used ethnographic methodology. As an insider in the community, participant observation was a perfect fit for my needs; it was, it

⁴⁸ Spradley, James P. *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980. p. 13.

turned out, a natural extension of my existing tendencies to be curious about the inner workings of my own scene. I consider my ongoing practice of performing to be part of my participant observation work. I took extensive field notes of concerts I attended, as well as ones I performed; I wrote thick descriptions of the location, made on-the-spot musical analyses, and conducted informal interviews with musicians and supporters. I found I was able to make more extensive observations of concerts where I wasn't distracted by the responsibility to perform. In addition to the informal interview information I gathered in the field, I also conducted several formal interviews with one or two musicians at a time. Of the interviews I conducted from June 2009 to January 2010, I made video recordings of three of them and audio recordings of thirteen others. I transcribed the recordings and analyzed their content for themes. From the three video interviews – with Tonne, Rawlings, and Stelzer – I created excerpts that appear in Appendix C on DVD 1, accompanying this writing.

4.1.1 Participant Observation

A participant in a culture engages in the active life of the culture; an observer gathers as much data as possible and attempts to synthesize it into a deeper understanding of that culture. Participant observation is the state of being engaged in a culture as an insider, while simultaneously collecting detailed information about it. A participant observer must maintain two perspectives at once. As ethnographer James P. Spradley points out, this is difficult and sometimes impossible:

On some occasions you may suddenly realize you have been acting as a full participant, without observing as an outsider. At other times you will... become a more detached observer. Doing ethnographic fieldwork involves

alternating between the insider and outsider experience, and having both simultaneously.⁴⁹

4.1.2 The Participating Observer / The Observant Participant

Active immersion can be an asset as well as a challenge. It is easier for an insider to obtain off-the-cuff information from participants in cultural settings such as concerts. Spradley calls this approach “informal interviews.”⁵⁰ A participant observer’s presence is normal and informal interview questions can flow easily with normal ‘insider’ conversation. Participants trust insiders in a way they – perhaps unconsciously – do not trust outsiders. This trust must be treated carefully; as a researcher I needed also to be aware of how this trust affected my relationships with the individuals and the community. For example, I wondered about the way my interviews and investigations would directly affect the scene itself, as news of my work spread through the community and into other communities. I was concerned that, by interviewing primarily people who are my friends, I would be biasing my pool of information. Also, my relationships with my interview subjects – who are longtime friends of mine – became temporarily formalized when I asked them for permission to include their video interviews in my writing. I was initially uncomfortable with this formalization. But I soon realized that the people I interviewed seemed to be enjoying the opportunity and challenge of talking about their music in an investigative way. Some of them have since mentioned to me that they found the conversations interesting and useful.

The participant observer can also interview him- or herself. An observer’s answers to his or her own questions may shed light on the analysis of others’ answers.

⁴⁹ Spradley, 57.

⁵⁰ Spradley, 123.

Introspection is one of the principles of participant observation outlined by Spradley: “In a real sense, you will learn to use yourself as a research instrument.”⁵¹ I needed to problematize my personal involvement in the community, and to ask myself two questions: what is my own self-idiom? And how does that inform my perception of the Boston area self-idiomatic music scene at large? One’s own perspective may be subjective, but that very subjectivity may provide the key to synthesizing fact with theory. At this point the researcher must be keenly aware of the principle of reflexivity.

Reflexivity is the effect that a researcher has on that which he or she is researching; and conversely, the effect that the culture under study has on the researcher. It is a feedback loop of two cultures: the one being studied and the “culture-studying culture” of the ethnographer. Simply by being present in a culture, a researcher has a position in that culture; therefore he or she must also look inward to his or her own position in the society, and the effect he or she is having on both the conduct of that society and his or her observations. This is true whether the researcher is a participant observer or merely a present one. One’s personality and preferences – and in the case of participant observers, one’s actions within the culture – can affect the culture by influencing the behavior of its other participants. Reflexivity is the understanding that no investigator can avoid the influence of his/her presence or personality on his/her observations.

Reflexivity can be an asset to a music researcher, albeit one that must be monitored closely. I found participant observation to be a valuable tool for understanding musicians’ individual and group behaviors in ways that may not be fully expressed in a traditional musicological analysis, no matter how thorough.

⁵¹ Spradley, 57.

“[F]ieldwork in music...” says ethnographer, musician and dancer Tomie Hahn, “can reveal how a community attends to the world and constructs its identity and art from shared sensibilities, shared sensual orientations.”⁵² It is these shared sensibilities, and how individuals use them to construct both their own identities and that of their culture, which interests me. As a longstanding insider of the music community, I have learned many of my deepest musical desires and motivations by heart, by rote, and by osmosis; my task as a participant observer is to use my motivations to help me better understand those of my colleagues.

Beyond the simple fact of being involved, I found that I needed to be explicitly aware of how my longstanding roles as musician and supporter within the self-idiomatic music scene affected my research focus and my ability to interpret my data.

4.1.3 Challenges of Participant Observation

A researcher can also be challenged by his or her active engagement in the subject culture. It is difficult to retain what Spradley calls a “wide-angle lens”⁵³ – the macroscopic view – while simultaneously maintaining the microscopic attention to detail and selective inattention that music making demands. As Spradley points out, participant observers more often alternate between insider and outsider mentalities rather than keeping up both at the same time.⁵⁴

Real effort is required to overcome selective inattention, especially when first beginning one’s observations. One of the biggest dangers for a participant observer is missing the obvious: an insider has trained his or her focus for so long on details, on the

⁵² Hahn, Tomie. *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture Through Japanese Dance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007. p. 5.

⁵³ Spradley, 56.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 57.

inner workings of a culture, that he or she has a hard time using Spradley's "wide-angle lens" to see the big picture. This is especially true for a participant observer in a position like mine: as an improvising musician in Boston since 1996, I was an insider on the scene for more than a decade before I began looking at it like an ethnographer. I found that I had to remind myself consciously to make wide-angle observations, and that it was difficult to overcome my tendency to take things for granted and to remember to write down observations during and after an event. Eventually I found it helpful to go back and forth between thick observation and more casual, familiar high-level observation to maintain a balance of my old and new perspectives.

It was hard for me to stop taking for granted certain major features of the scene and its music. For example, one of the many names for freely improvised music is *sound-based music*, and for a time I worked under the assumption that sound quality, or *timbre*, was the defining characteristic of most self-idiomatic music. Eventually, through my analyses of musical examples as well as scrutiny of my interview materials, I began to realize that most Boston-area self-idiomatic music is defined by its structural transformations over time – its temporality. This is even true of my own self-idiom, but I was not able to see this clearly right away.

During my research I became concerned that my researcher-self would displace my musician-self. I was also concerned about the possibility of alienating my colleagues through my analytical behavior. I was concerned that I my research would begin to direct and possibly eclipse my musical life and my interactions with others on an artistic level.

The first of those two concerns occurred to me periodically while analyzing and synthesizing my research – I'm a musician first, then a writer, I kept reminding myself.

But since then I have found that my dissertation work was best sustained by a continued – even increased – level of involvement as a musician, and that my music has moved into new directions as a result of what I have learned in research. In fact I feel my research has made me a more dedicated music practitioner with a clearer idea of my own aesthetics and professional priorities. If anything, by digging so deeply into the past decade of my pursuit of fully improvised music, I have found encouragement not only to continue with my music, but also to move it into other areas outside of instrumental improvisation. My recent moves into electroacoustic composition and multimedia work have not been a rejection of improvisation but rather an extension of my own self-idiom, egged on by an increased understanding of what it means to realize your own idiom.

As for the second concern – fear of alienation or disinterest among practitioners – the opposite has been true. I have encountered a great deal of interest in my research among my colleagues and other participants and supporters.

4.2 My Own Self-Idiom: Breakthroughs, Principles, and Settings

In this section I will discuss the development of my own self-idiomatic music. I start with some of my personal breakthrough moments, and then introduce some of the instruments and methods I use. I will discuss their material limitations as well as my deliberately chosen constraints on my own control, especially in my solo music. Finally I will discuss the roles I have created for myself in ensemble playing.

4.2.1 Breakthrough Moments

Many of the musicians I interviewed discussed moments in their musical lives that acted as breakthroughs, inspiring them to move forward with their self-idiomatic

identities. In reflecting on my own earliest experiences of playing freely improvised music, I found traces of it cropping up all the way back through my musical life. Self-idiomatic improvisation was already occurring to me in my first few years of piano lessons in elementary school. I brought my teacher a piece that consisted entirely of tone clusters that I had written down as I played them spontaneously at home. The teacher was horrified at my audacity as much as by my theory-free clusters.

I started playing contrabass in 1993, in high school. Through high school, college, and Masters' studies at New England Conservatory, I received training in jazz, classical, and various ethnic musics – including Klezmer, Greek, and Puerto Rican music. I began playing freely improvised music on acoustic contrabass in 1996. Although I have extended my self-idiomatic practice to include numerous other instruments, I regard the contrabass as the originating site of my self-idiom. To date I have performed the majority of my solo self-idiomatic music on contrabass.

My most important early breakthrough moments came on the contrabass. Three of them came in 1996, in my senior year of undergraduate studies at Princeton. My senior thesis advisor, composer and Music Department professor Steve Mackey, encouraged me to bring my bass into our weekly composition lessons. On alternate weeks we would improvise freely in his office. I recorded these sessions on digital audio tape (DAT) and would either review them alone or discuss them with him.

Meanwhile, as I worked on my final composition project for Mackey – a piece for eleven instruments, some of them improvising, and two tapes⁵⁵ – I found myself spending more and more time improvising freely on the compositional ideas I was supposed to be

⁵⁵ Bullock, Michael. *Flavor Country [for eleven instruments, DAT and cassette tape]*. Thesis for the A.B. in Music, Princeton University, 1996.

writing down. I had a hard time sticking to my written composition, and I found that I liked my improvisations better than anything I could write down. It felt very natural for me to develop ideas methodically but in the moment, and I felt that there was real value to that sort of spontaneous yet explicit and careful development. Even though I completed the piece as I had intended, I knew that the next stage of my work was going to be mostly or entirely improvised; that I was more comfortable with improvising my ideas into reality.⁵⁶

Also in 1996, a PhD composer at Princeton, Curtis Bahn – now an Arts Department professor at RPI and my academic advisor – suggested I record some freely improvised pieces to submit with my graduate school applications. Bahn recorded the session I played with two local professional jazz musicians. By this time I was becoming certain that I wanted freely improvised music to be a major part of my future work.

After arriving at NEC for Masters' studies in the fall of 1996, I soon discovered two recordings that permanently changed my perspective on my instrument. They instilled in me the idea that the contrabass alone could be enough to create a fulfilling musical situation. The first was a CD by French bassist Joëlle Léandre performing solo bass pieces by contemporary composers including John Cage and Giacinto Scelsi.⁵⁷ I later discovered that Léandre is better known as an improviser, with numerous solo bass improvisation recordings to her name.

⁵⁶ Two other pieces that I wrote while studying composition at Princeton were through-composed in a way that was mainly improvised. *Rapprochement* for solo piano was based on improvisations I made, exploring my forgotten skills and rusty relationship with that instrument. *I was scared mommy*, a musique concrète piece, was improvised (slowly) in the computer music studio at Princeton. Dutch composer Louis Andriessen, a guest of the music department during my senior year, told me that the concrète piece sounded much more “like me” than my more traditionally composed thesis piece.

⁵⁷ Léandre, Joëlle. *Contrabasse et Voix* [CD]. ADDA, 1987. In fact, the disc contains one track credited to Léandre herself; in retrospect, this track is most likely an improvisation.

The second was a DAT recording of a master class given by New York bassist William Parker. Percussionist and pianist Masashi Harada, an adjunct instructor at NEC who led improvisation ensembles, felt the recording would be inspirational for me. On the recording, Parker is heard discussing and demonstrating his approach to contrabass solo improvisation: when plucking the bass, Parker thinks of his strings as drums; when using his bow, he thinks of the strings as beams of light and his bow as a prism. It was my first exposure to a contrabassist playing alone with no composition and a formal structure that consisted of a direct engagement with the instrument's possibilities. These two recordings, from Léandre and Parker, felt like signals that I was heading in the right direction.

My first time playing freely improvised music in public was 28 March 1997, as part of the Playground New Music Series at the Zeitgeist Gallery in Cambridge, MA. I performed a trio with Harada and soprano saxophonist Bhub Rainey. Writer and artist Maria Klein projected scratched 16mm film on us as we played. I had been working with improvisers behind closed doors up until then. This public performance was a breakthrough for me not for specific musical reasons but for the strong impression it left. At one point the music became very slow and attenuated, like pulling taffy; at that moment a group of people in white robes appeared outside the big picture windows on both sides of the ground floor, street corner space that the Zeitgeist occupied. Part of a Good Friday celebration at a local church, they marched slowly, carrying candles and a glass coffin, and accompanied by police cruisers with flashing lights. I made eye contact with several of the marchers. The event left me with a sense of how people dedicate themselves to a practice that may seem unusual to outsiders, and solidified my conviction

on my musical path. The breakthrough for me that night was not a specific external influence, but rather a confluence of events leading to an internal realization.

4.2.2 Going Around the Volcano: Proto-‘Lowercase’

A very early shift in aesthetic took place in perhaps 1999 or 2000 – I and the other participants are unable to remember which year. The performance with Rainey, Harada, and trombonist Tucker Dulin took place at Twisted Village, a record store in Cambridge MA. Before the performance, Rainey, Dulin, and I discussed the common tendency of free improvised music to build to moments of volcanic intensity, alternating with aimless, dissolute passages. We decided that, for this performance, whenever we found ourselves building to such critical moments, that we would instead choose to “go around the volcano” and sustain more constant levels of energy and momentum rather than allowing the music to exhaust itself. The significance of that event resonated with me and with other musicians who heard it. A tendency towards quieter, more contemplative, or simply less manic improvised music was already in the air in Boston at that point, and this performance helped solidify that interest for me and my colleagues.

4.2.3 Electronics and Feedback

I have used an amplifier with my contrabass since I started playing jazz. But for many years I considered it the same way many jazz bassists did, as a necessary evil. Its presence should be as transparent as possible, and as a result I worked to make the sound of my amplifier as close as possible to that of my contrabass alone. However, over time my relationship to amplification has changed, and I have come to regard it my amplifier as a separate instrument from the bass, a distinct sound source with its own characteristics.

I frequently employ amplification when playing the contrabass, though not always. I amplify the bass through a combination of a small Underwood piezoelectric transducer, a Fishman bass preamplifier, and a small Gallien-Krueger combo amplifier/speaker.⁵⁸

After moving to Boston and becoming involved in free improvisation, I found myself occasionally playing my contrabass in rock clubs, requiring me to turn up my amplifier significantly. My amplified sound was no longer transparent, but I became interested in the different tone possibilities it presented. Around this time I saw contrabassist Charnett Moffett use guitar effects pedals live. I acquired a used fuzz pedal from a guitar shop, and soon found that the fuzz pedal significantly increased the risk of feedback with my amplifier.

Nonetheless, I brought it on my first tour in February 2000, in a quartet with cellist Vic Rawlings, violinist Jonathan LaMaster, and saxophonist Daniel Carter. Rawlings and LaMaster had also been experimenting with effects and amplification on their string instruments. As the tour wore on, Rawlings and I started to realize that the amplifier feedback we had been trying to avoid was actually ripe with possibility. By the end of the tour, more than half of my sounds were coming from amplified, fuzzed feedback. By the end of 2000 I was starting to experiment with contrabass performances wherein I never touched the strings, only using the controls on my electronics and the movements of the bass body itself to create controlled feedback. My first all-feedback performance happened in December 2000, at Casa Del Popolo in Montréal.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ This setup is a common one for contrabassists playing jazz and club gigs and other idiomatic music.

⁵⁹ This performance is documented on the 2002 CD *Initial* on my own label, Chloë Recordings.

4.2.4 Aesthetic

Certain core aesthetic principles drive much of my work and are closely related to my interest in improvisation. They have the potential to extend beyond improvised music, and I will discuss those extensions briefly as well. This is an important corollary of self-idiom. Though self-idiomatic music is almost always improvised, the key to a self-idiom is not simply the act of improvisation but rather the pursuit of core aesthetic principles with improvisation as the primary channel.

A frequent technique I use to develop a solo performance is to give myself a problem to solve. The problem may consist of limiting the number of sounds I could use, or trying to imagine what a solo bass piece by Morton Feldman may have sounded like. The most common problem I present myself is setting an absolute time limit and figuring out in the moment how I will build a piece of music that makes sense for exactly that amount of time. I have found this technique useful for certain ensemble settings as well, such as my duo with Vic Rawlings and for *rise|set|twilight*, my multimedia duo with multi-instrumentalist and visual artist Linda Aubry Bullock.

I also like to work with issues of comfort and discomfort as a performer. During the period of 1999 to 2005, I treated much of my solo events as meta-performances. Normally unremarkable aspects of performance became visible elements of the music that followed: preparing to perform, being unprepared, stage fright, awkward silences, awkward presence, the slapstick potential of the large contrabass, and the contingency of site.

Performance, especially improvised music, can have an instantaneous feedback. The performer can slip between deep concentration and intense awareness of his or her

surroundings. Although I endeavored to maintain concentration while playing, I set myself up to be distracted. Real, unplanned mistakes would be allowed to occur, which I had catalyzed by various means. For example: deliberate failure to prepare my instrument or myself properly; physically awkward playing positions like holding the bass off the ground and walking while playing, or laying the bass on its back.

I set the limits of my own control at a certain point and then deliberately exceeded those limits. My intention was to use the resultant slippage to reveal aspects of the structure of solo music presentation. The slippages contributed to, and often determined, the sounds and composition produced. A piece would end when I could no longer stand in a certain position; a certain bowed texture would be created by the motion of the bass body relative to a stationary bow; a musical tension would be released by a physical act and the music would have nowhere else to go. The meta-performance techniques caused a change in the relationship among me, the bass, and the space. The instability made me keenly aware of my immediate terrain.

I approach solo improvisation very differently from how I work in improvising ensembles. In general I put more prior preparation into my solo performances. This is not to say that I approach ensemble performance unprepared. But an important part of my ensemble playing, when working in a completely improvised context, is to allow the performance to flow from a confluence of the setting, the collaborators, and my state of mind in the moment. When working with an established group, there may be a bit of discussion beforehand to address common issues that arise in our work together. In rehearsal for such a group, I prefer to start with little or no discussion before beginning the first piece, play for about ten or fifteen minutes, and then discuss the issues that arose

during that first piece before proceeding to a second piece. For first encounters in rehearsal I think it is important for improvisers to start playing without discussion, and then discuss afterwards. The musicians will only have a real sense of what that group is capable of after having played a piece or two together.

In the eight-piece ensemble The BSC I play amplified contrabass, without effects, almost exclusively. In this setting I frequently approach the bass for the role it can play as a low-frequency instrument, providing a sonic grounding or a background for the other instruments; but I very often will shed those ‘traditional’ roles for more integrated and non-traditional ones. At times I punctuate, and at other times I create sculptural figures, or several figures in a short time to create contrasts over a continuous ground. I can also play in a very high register, where I may find myself inserting into clusters of tone created by the three high-range instruments – Bhob Rainey’s soprano saxophone, Liz Tonne’s voice, and Greg Kelley’s trumpet. In the midst of the larger ensemble context, I often spontaneously collaborate with thereminist James Coleman, whose instrument is similarly capable of a very wide frequency range. I also alternate between using the amplifier to magnify my sounds and create feedback, and turning the volume down on my amplifier to allow my acoustic sound to come through.

I feel the BSC is where I take the fullest advantage of the contrabass as an instrument. I regard the use of amplification as a natural addition to the identity of the contrabass, not integral but not foreign either.⁶⁰ I almost never use effects pedals with the BSC. I have found that, by keeping my amplifier available but not using it all the time, I can modify my role in the ensemble very easily from quiet background to dominant

⁶⁰ Although I also value the many other technological options available to me in other settings, I personally enjoy knowing that I can represent my musical self fully with only the gear a gigging idiomatic music bassist uses: bass in standard tuning, bow, pickup, preamplifier and small amp.

voice. There is a very interesting contradiction possible in an amplified contrabass, that I exploit frequently: sounds that are produced with a very light touch on the instrument can be made much louder than sounds made with a very heavy touch, by amplifying the former and not the latter.

Compared to the BSC, in this duo I think very little about my instrument's role as a bass instrument. I approach it mainly as a resonant body modified by electronics. I treat timbral changes in this duo as though I am placing 'lenses' over sounds. This is inspired in part by the nature of effects pedals as well as Rawlings' approach. Rawlings and I make a conscious effort to play as if the other is not there – or more accurately, to play without concern for the agency of the other sounds.

4.3 Listening in Time

The act of improvising is inseparable from engaged listening. In *Deep Listening Pieces*, composer Pauline Oliveros synthesizes these two facets, in describing how an improviser immerses her- or himself in a sonic reality simultaneously as audience and participant, with an engagement that is both abstract and physiological:

One can listen and perform simultaneously... Commitment to a sound involves focal attention. One hears the sound clearly whether listening only or producing the sound. In contrast the field of sound is present but not sharply in focus. It is possible to find a balance between these two kinds of attention, the internal world of memory and imagination and the outer world of sensation.⁶¹

In this part of the writing I will discuss my attempts to listen deeply into self-idiomatic music, in my ensembles and as a soloist.

⁶¹ Oliveros, Pauline. *Deep Listening Pieces*. Kingston, NY: Deep Listening Publications, 1990.

4.3.1 Duration, Emergence, and the Transformation of Sound Material

No single text that I consulted was able to give me a satisfactory ready-made methodology for analysis. However, a few methodologies related directly to the analysis of improvised music – albeit different music from what I was studying – or helped me understand the issues raised by my hybrid musical and ethnological approach to my material.⁶²

In his article “L’improvisation comme processus d’individuation,” author Christian Béthune frames the understanding of improvisation in the context of the reality of people improvising: “[M]usic does not exist independently from the act of music-making.”⁶³ Béthune’s statement is like musicologist and improvising saxophonist David Borgo’s statement in his book *Sync or Swarm*: “[M]usic only lives when it is heard and understood.”⁶⁴

In Béthune’s framing – drawing on another scholar, Filippo Bianchi – he refers to improvisation as a continuous flow of action in daily life, including but not limited to music: “In our daily practice, improvisation ultimately constitutes: ‘the only weapon in

⁶² To help me figure out how to use video clips, I consulted musician, dancer and ethnographer Tomie Hahn’s *Sensational Knowledge* book and DVD. Hahn’s analysis references specific events by means of chapter markings on her DVD, as well as giving broader prose descriptions of the setting and action. I make references to specific clips as chapter on DVD 1 that accompanies this study. Hahn, Tomie. *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2007. p. 131 (for example)

⁶³ “...la musique n’existe pas indépendamment de l’acte de musiquer.” Béthune, Christian. “L’improvisation comme processus d’individuation.” *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, Vol. 5, No. 1. 2009. p. 2. There has been an increase in writing about improvisation in recent years, in part due to the efforts of programs such as Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice, a joint effort of several Canadian universities: Its online journal, *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études Critiques en Improvisation*, has published several articles that may have an impact on future work relative to improvisation. <http://www.criticalimprov.com/> (last accessed 24 June 2010)

⁶⁴ Borgo. p. 82.

our possession against the caprices of chance.’⁶⁵ If self-idiomatic music is born at the nexus of material contingency and the practitioner’s management of unpredictability within a range of practical control, then improvisation in this context is not random or undisciplined action, but rather the controlled navigation of potentially chaotic fields of possibility.

Individuation is the becoming and becoming-other of musical material that occurs as part of a continuous, organic flow of action experienced in the flux of duration rather than in structured time. “[S]onorous time,” says philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy,

...exists 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.⁶⁶

In other words, the time of sounding is not rigidly structured according to abstract principles, even if – in the case of composed, notated music – a composer used such principles in the realization of his/her ideas. Sonorous time is treated by Nancy not as an ordered progression but as a material, whose behavior in time is experienced non-linearly.

Musicologist Christoph Cox’s approach to contemporary sound work – from free improvisation to sound art installation and more – has affinity with the organic flow of becoming that Nancy describes. He suggests that the analysis of freely improvised music and other contemporary sound work should “...not concern itself with the examination of *forms* (the organization of pre-given, pre-individuated entities: pitches, scales, meters,

⁶⁵ “Dans notre pratique quotidienne, l’improvisation constitue finalement: ‘la seule arme en notre possession contre les caprices du hasard.’ ” B ethune, p.1. See also: Bianchi, Filippo. “Improviser.” *L’art du Jazz*. Paris: Editions du F elin, 2009. p. 389.

⁶⁶ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening* (2002). New York, New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. p. 13.

works, etc.) but with the investigation of fluid matter distinguished by different speeds, forces and intensities.”⁶⁷ In my analyses, I attempt to understand the sound matter of self-idiomatic improvised music, and to discuss it in terms that give the reader a feel for both the emergent transformations on the waves of sonorous time, and the emergence of aesthetics for the individual musicians who are changed by their participation.

4.3.2 Timbre, Qualia, and Transformation

Timbre, variously known as sound quality or sound color, is a perception of sound based on both frequency spectrum and envelope. It is therefore contingent on both the existence of the sound in time and the phenomenon of its intensity and perception. In this study I will avoid as much as possible subjective judgments of timbre, and will therefore eschew the common synonym ‘sound quality.’

Timbre comes from the specific instruments and techniques developed by the individual musicians. My video interviews focus on the development of instruments and techniques of cellist and electronics builder Vic Rawlings; vocalist Liz Tonne; tapes player Howard Stelzer; and in my own work. For Rawlings and Stelzer especially, their decisions about how to develop their instruments are inseparable from the techniques they develop to play them.

Manipulation of timbre and the production of unusual timbres are central to the practice of most self-idiomatic musicians. For many musicians, timbral experimentation is their introduction to the practice of improvisation and the pursuit of their own idiom. But while discovering new timbres may be the window to new forms for many musicians, the central characteristic of this music is in fact its treatment of time:

⁶⁷ Cox, Christoph. 2006. “From Music to Sound: Being as Time in the Sonic Arts.” In *Sonambiente Berlin 2006: Klang Kunst Sound Art*, edited by Helga de la Motte-Haber, Matthias Osterwold, and George Weckwerth, 214-223. Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2006.

manifested in the stratification of sounds, their transformation and becoming-other, and the emergence of the whole shape over the duration of the piece.

With no regular, predictable grid, no abstraction of perfect repetition to depend upon, the music must depend on other relations among events. Frequently the music depends on seemingly static events, such as drones and repeated fragments or ones that resemble loops (even if they are not exact repetitions). In situations like this, normal time sensation can be suspended. The sound events themselves may no longer move a piece forward, but the transformation of sound events – or the relative stopping and starting points of approximately simultaneous events – may serve a much stronger role in determining the perception of time in a given piece.

I have found that the overall form that emerges from a given performance or excerpt is a constant transformation of the musical material – of sounds into other sounds, groupings into other groupings – and fluctuations of loudness, density, and texture. Nonetheless, individual moments and distinct, sometimes sudden, changes can be identified as influential moments that give momentum to the emergence of an entire section or piece.

To discuss specific experiential events, Borgo borrows the Latin term *quale* – plural *qualia* – from phenomenology. A quale is a unit of qualitative phenomenal experience that cannot be deduced from an analysis of quantitative data. A common example is the ‘redness’ of red, considered separately from the color’s intensity, frequency, and other measurable properties. Another example could be the various descriptors used to describe timbre, such as ‘thick,’ ‘hollow,’ or ‘cold.’ In applying this concept to improvised music, Borgo argues that qualia, far from being the leftovers after

all quantitative data are removed, should be regarded as inextricable from the experience of music making: “[Q]ualia are not atomic, nor are they discrete. Rather, they have complex internal structure, consisting of other qualia.”⁶⁸

Transformations may be gradual or sudden; it may be based around changes in one or several sonic or temporal parameters. They may involve a change in who is playing and who is not playing. They are almost never pre-determined, though they may reflect certain recurrent tendencies of the ensemble or individual.

The overall perception of time in a piece of self-idiomatic music is determined in part by the nature of the transformations: they may be mainly sudden, mainly gradual, or a mixture. The density of transformations also plays a role. In fact, the nature and density of transformation can have a greater effect on the sense of time of a piece than the nature of the sounds themselves.

In a given piece, a low number of transformations, separated by periods of several minutes or more, can create a perception of slow, dilated, or smooth time; on the other hand, many transformations in a short period can create a perception of rapid, looped, or unevenly textured time. For example, fairly rapid, sudden transformation across a series of otherwise static sounds – such as a rapid succession of non-simultaneous entrances and exits by individual musicians holding drone notes – may create as great a sense of forward time propulsion as would be created by a single, active sound event that continues without change for several minutes.

A single musician can initiate change across an entire ensemble, although another one playing in a similar or complimentary fashion may join that musician quickly. Once this new musical territory is established by one or two musicians, others may enter with

⁶⁸ Borgo. p. 66.

more complementary material; or, more likely, with a contrasting texture, register, or temporality.

4.4 Finding the Right Analysis Tools

A challenge in analyzing self-idiomatic music is deciding which tools and methods to use. There are no obvious choices, and very little in the way of pre-existing models from which to work. Considering my focus on the musicians' musical identities and their contributions to the total structure, I have decided to prioritize modes of analysis that can help me highlight those aspects.

I will attempt to adhere to language that can be understood by readers who are not necessarily conversant in musical pedagogy or theory, while not simplifying my language to the point of generality. This reflects the musicians' spectrum of backgrounds: many of them have little or no formal music training, while others have music degrees; and all have developed ways of discussing their music without using specifically musical jargon.

I ruled out traditional notational analysis, as very little of the music in question relies on fixed pitches, harmonies, or tuning systems. Furthermore, "notation is never value neutral," says improviser and musicologist David Borgo.⁶⁹ When used for analysis, it automatically prioritizes those aspects of a piece of music that are communicated most clearly by notation. In self-idiomatic music, the structural decisions made by the improvisers are generally not based on a fixed, agreed-upon set of pitch relations. Traditional notation would unfairly privilege easily notated sounds, which in many cases may constitute a minority of the total sound palette of a given piece.

⁶⁹ Borgo, David. *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age*. New York: Continuum, 2005. p. 70.

Starting with sound recording in the 19th century, “The synthetic production of frequencies combined with their analysis resulted in the new medium,” writes historian and musicologist Friedrich Kittler; a gap was growing between notational, grammatical representation and the site of music production and reproduction.⁷⁰ It is difficult to apply notation to improvised music effectively: while notations may exist for compositions tailored towards improvisers, the resulting music itself is rarely transcribable the way almost any tonal, modal, pitch-oriented or clearly rhythmic music is perceived to be. Kittler states that notation is

...based on a writing system whose time is (in Lacan's term) symbolic... Nevertheless, whatever ran as time on a physical or (again in Lacan's terms) real level, blindly and unpredictably, could by no means be encoded. Therefore all data flows, provided they really were streams of data, had to pass through the bottleneck of the signifier.⁷¹

The flow of improvisation does not necessarily have to pass through this bottleneck, and similarly, its best mirror is not the grammar of notation but the physical reality of audio recording.

4.5 Analyses: The BSC, the Rawlings/Bullock Duo, and Solo Contrabass

The two ensembles whose music I will analyze are my long-standing duo with Vic Rawlings; and the BSC, an improvising ensemble consisting of eight musicians: founder and soprano saxophonist Bhub Rainey; thereminist James Coleman; guitarist Chris Cooper; trumpeter Greg Kelley; cellist and electronics player Vic Rawlings; tapes

⁷⁰ Kittler, Friedrich A. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. p. 27.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 4.

performer Howard Stelzer; vocalist Liz Tonne; and myself, playing contrabass. In addition to these ensembles I will also discuss a significant aspect of my solo self-idiomatic music, namely contrabass improvisation. The musical analyses that recur throughout this study are based on four recordings:⁷² a live video recording of the BSC from 2002; a live audio recording of the BSC from 2008,⁷³ from which I drew two clips for closer scrutiny; a studio recording of my duo with Vic Rawlings from 2003; and a live solo performance of my contrabass improvisation from 2008.

The music of the BSC is a good starting point for understanding the self-idiomatic music of the Boston area because it synthesizes the work of so many individuals, all of whom are active participants in greater New England improvisation, noise, and other underground musics. Each member can be considered a self-idiomatic musician in her or his own right. While there is no single overriding theory behind the music of the BSC – aside from improvisation⁷⁴ – there are certainly tendencies, preferences, and at times clearly stated intentions behind structural decisions.

Each sample is drawn from a performance of completely improvised music, wherein no previously determined composition was used. I will use the word *piece* to refer to one complete improvisation, from the first sound till the last sound before applause. The word *performance* will refer either to the entire concert setting from which the piece is drawn, or simply to the act of performing music. In cases where I analyze a

⁷² Audio examples are in Appendix D, on the included DVD 1, Chapters 9-13.

⁷³ This performance was recently released as a digital download by Rainey, titled “23% Bicycle and/or Ribbons of the Natural Order.”

⁷⁴ The primary musical activity of the BSC is completely improvised music. On several occasions, the BSC has also engaged in performing written music as a side project, but has moved away from that since 2005, back towards entirely improvised performances. The BSC has performed written music by Cornelius Cardew, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Christian Wolff, and has acted as ensemble-in-residence for student composers at Princeton University and Wesleyan University. The BSC has collaborated with many guests, including Wolff, Pauline Oliveros, Stephen Drury, Otomo Yoshihide, Giuseppe Ielasi, Domenico Sciajno, Lionel Marchetti, and Jérôme Noetinger.

short excerpt from a longer piece, I will refer to this excerpt as a *clip*. Zooming in further, I will refer to specific sounds and phrases produced by an individual musician as *events* or *qualia*.

The audio samples I have chosen are far from fully representative of Boston area self-idiomatic music. To do justice to the entire scene would be well beyond the scope of this study. Rather, I chose several music samples that I felt were reasonably representative of the work of The BSC, The Rawlings/Bullock duo, and my solo contrabass music.

I chose my samples for several reasons. I analyze two examples from The BSC because its eight members represent a wide range of musical approaches. Their particular style of musical collaboration offers rich opportunity for insight into how self-idiomatic music is produced in ensembles. I further chose to analyze BSC performances from disparate time periods: 2002 and 2008. The former is from the end of the era of the original Zeitgeist gallery, when the BSC was only two years old. The latter example is from a more recent performance by the BSC, June 2008. Thus I can show how the ensemble's approach to live composition has evolved.

As the nature of this writing is practice-based, all of my analyses draw on music that I have, at least in part, created. In that spirit I will also analyze work by my duo with Vic Rawlings, a fellow BSC member. This duo is long-standing, having been founded in 2000, the same year as the BSC. We have performed together extensively since then, across the USA as well as in Europe, alone and in collaboration with other improvisers.

The final piece I analyze is an improvised contrabass solo I performed in 2008, also at Open Sound (on a different concert from the BSC event). All the music samples I

analyze are included in Appendices C and D, which are found on the included DVD #1. I have also included in this writing the video documentation of my PhD recital from 5 April 2009, on the included DVD #2.⁷⁵ I did not analyze any music from that recital for this writing; nonetheless I include it as a representation of some of my more current work in several self-idiomatic contexts. The recital consists of three performances: the first is by rise|set|twilight, my duo with my wife Linda Aubry Bullock, which involves video projection and improvisation on a collection of AM radios. The second set is a solo contrabass improvisation, and the third set features the BSC with Pauline Oliveros playing accordion.

4.6 Musical Analyses

Before analyzing any improvised music, it is worth asking: what does it mean to the listener that the music is improvised? Does it have to mean anything? It can be argued that a listener cannot know for sure if a piece of music is improvised, and to what degree. On one level it does not matter to me if a piece of music I am listening to is improvised – I do not consider the fact of improvisation relevant to the phenomenon of hearing or to the face-value perception of musical shape and structure. I don't use it as a way to decide whether or not I like a piece of music. As a rule, in this study I have attempted to set aside, as much as possible, my value judgments for any given piece of piece of music.

On the other hand, at times it is useful for me to assess what constitutes 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' improvisations. This comes from my position as a

⁷⁵ This performance took place at The Curtis R. Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC), on the campus of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY. See also Appendix B, program and publicity design.

practitioner, and is related to advice I received while studying composition at Princeton: to listen to music as a way to pick up ideas for one's own music. Rather than simply judging a given piece of improvised (or non-improvised) music as good or bad, I try to understand what makes it 'work' and also why other people might come to a different conclusion.

Even on this level it is not vital that the piece being listened to is improvised – rather what matters to me is if I can adapt some aspect of the piece, microscopic or macroscopic, to my own music. This kind of *bricolage* listening, gathering sonic materials and structural ideas, can be employed when listening to any sounds or in any sounding setting, and is indispensable to the development of self-idiom. Pauline Oliveros advocates this *bricoleur* usage of the sound environment in many of her improvisation instruction scores, such as the ones included in *Deep Listening Pieces*.⁷⁶

4.6.1 Graphic Analyses

I made six graphic analyses, which are included in Appendix A, on pages 64-67 at the end of this chapter. The musical examples I analyzed are on DVD 1, chapters 9-13.

Figure 1. A one minute, fifty-eight second excerpt of the same performance. DVD 1, Chapter 11.

Figure 2. The BSC: a live performance on the Open Sound series at Third Life Studios, Somerville, MA, in 2008. Twenty-two minutes, fifteen seconds. DVD 1, Chapter 10.

⁷⁶ Oliveros, Pauline. *Deep Listening Pieces*. Kingston, NY: Deep Listening Publications, 1990.

Figure 3. The BSC: a live performance at the Zeitgeist Gallery, Cambridge, MA, in March 2002. The first two minutes, seventeen seconds of a thirty-minute piece. DVD 1, Chapter 9.

Figure 4. The Rawlings/Bullock duo: “about the” from the CD *Fall of Song*. A one minute, fifty-six second complete track. DVD 1, Chapter 12.

Figure 5. A solo contrabass improvisation by me from the Open Sound series at Third Life Studios, Somerville, MA, in 2008. Twenty-five minutes, forty-one seconds. DVD 1, Chapter 13.

For each musical sample I made a graphic representation with five levels of information. From lowest to highest:

1. Clock time: the length of the clip in minutes and seconds.
2. Intensity: Representing relative levels of loud and quiet, with special indications for significant changes.
3. Texture: used to indicate the occurrence of three main characteristics, which are designated by letter symbols. Where pertinent, I also give short prose descriptions of finer details.
 - a. N = noisy, non-pitched, sustained material such as a sustained scraping sound or cassette tape warble.
 - b. L = linear sounds; mainly pitched, sustained sounds that are either static (as in a drone) or slowly moving.
 - c. SE = short events. They may be either pitched or non-pitched. They generally happen in groups of a few to a few dozen over a

period of a minute to several minutes, and may be produced by a single performer or several.

4. Density – generally represents the subjectively perceived thickness of sound material in a given region of time; also used to indicate the number of musicians involved, either a specific number (1 – 8) or a general indication (‘small groupings’ or ‘full ensemble’).
5. Shape – a graphic depiction of the Intensity, Texture, and Density timelines combined into a subjective representation of the entire clip or piece. The shape is an emergent quality that arises from the confluence of the various other qualities.

Graphic analysis revealed aspects of the music on every level, from fine detail to broad shapes. I found that, of the three settings I analyzed – The BSC, Rawlings/Bullock duo, and solo contrabass – the shapes of the examples were fairly diverse. The BSC piece from 2008 was characterized by generally smooth transformation across its duration. Certain events stuck out strongly here and there, but overall the piece emerged smoothly; entrances and exits of individual musicians happened organically; short or rapid events and more continuous, smoother events emerged from and balanced one another. The same was true on a microcosmic scale of the two short samples drawn from the larger piece.

By contrast, the 2002 BSC sample displayed some rather abrupt changes of volume and density in addition to smoother transformations. Events in the Rawlings/Bullock piece were primarily sudden in their emergence, with loudness going up or down in steps, usually simultaneously with timbral shifts. The shape of the solo

contrabass piece from 2008 primarily consisted of sections of roughly constant loudness and texture, with each section either surrounded by silence, or changing to the next section clearly.

There were also certain broad characteristics that all the examples had in common. Change was often defined by the contrast between noisy, non-pitched material (marked *N*) and linear, mainly pitched material (*L*). At times the change between *N* and *L* was completely instantaneous, but more often the two kinds of material overlapped, often for long stretches. In the BSC, *L* material emerged from *N* material more precipitously than the other way around, though that may simply have been a matter of perception. *L* material played by, for example, soprano saxophone or voice could be introduced very prominently over a ground of *N*, whereas *N* material introduced into a section dominated by *L* material tended to creep in from the background from tapes or guitar, or as a buzzing noise introduced by the trumpet by a piece of metal placed over the bell.

Appendix A: Graphic Analyses

Figure 1. The BSC at Open Sound, 2008 (audio clip #1)

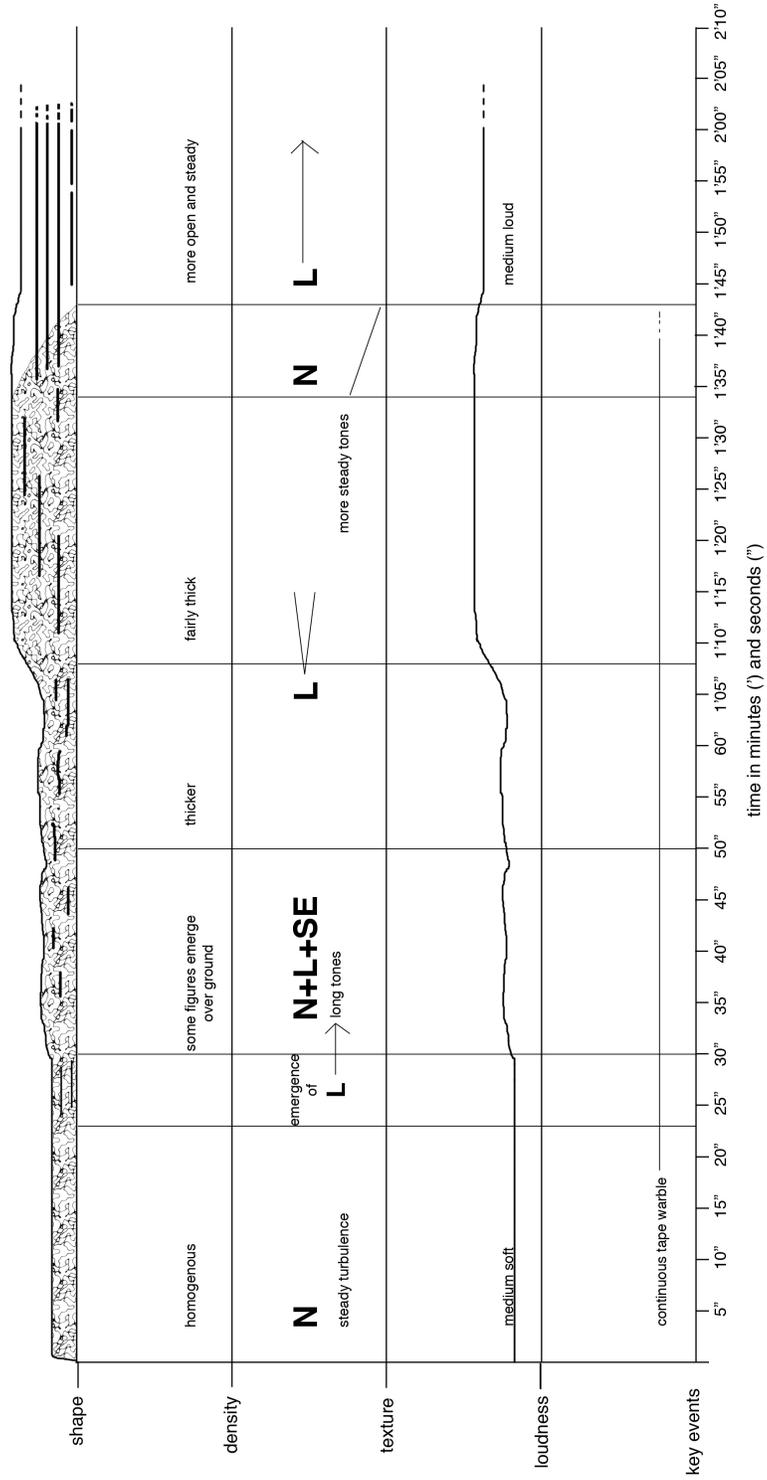


Figure 2. The BSC at Open Sound, 2008 (entire piece)

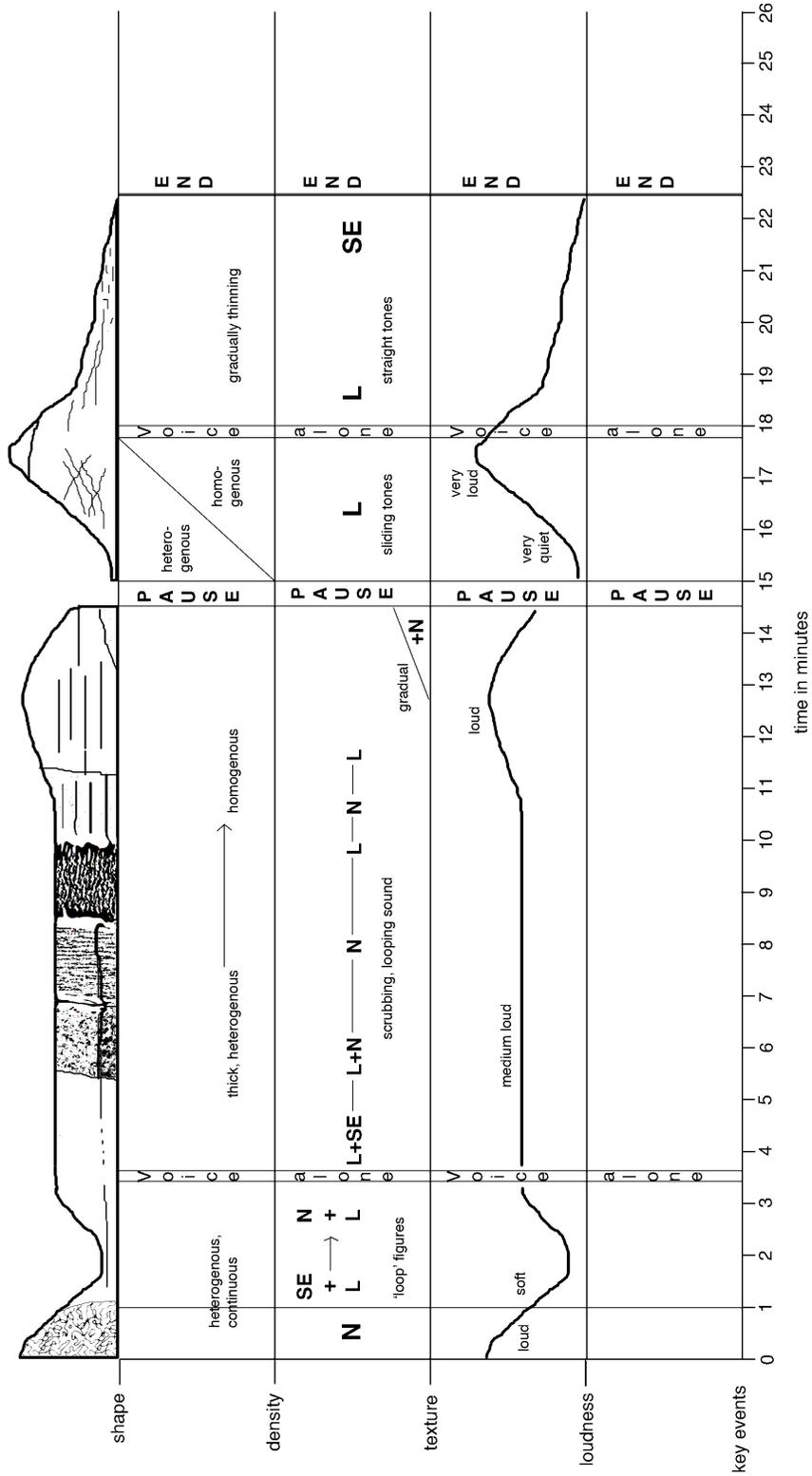


Figure 3. The BSC at Zeitgeist, 2002 (video clip)

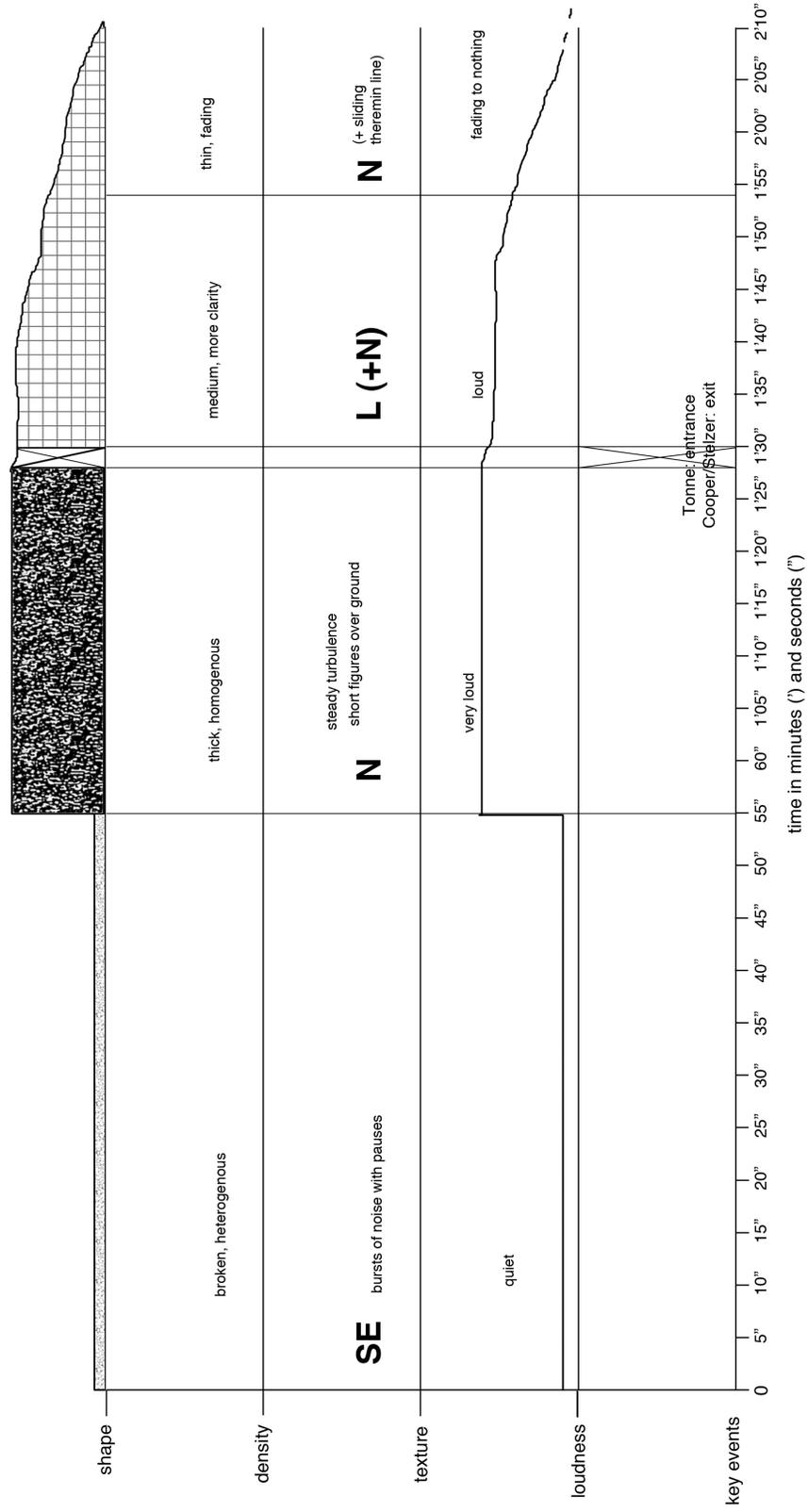


Figure 4. Rawlings/Bullock duo: "about the"
 From the CD *Fall of Song*

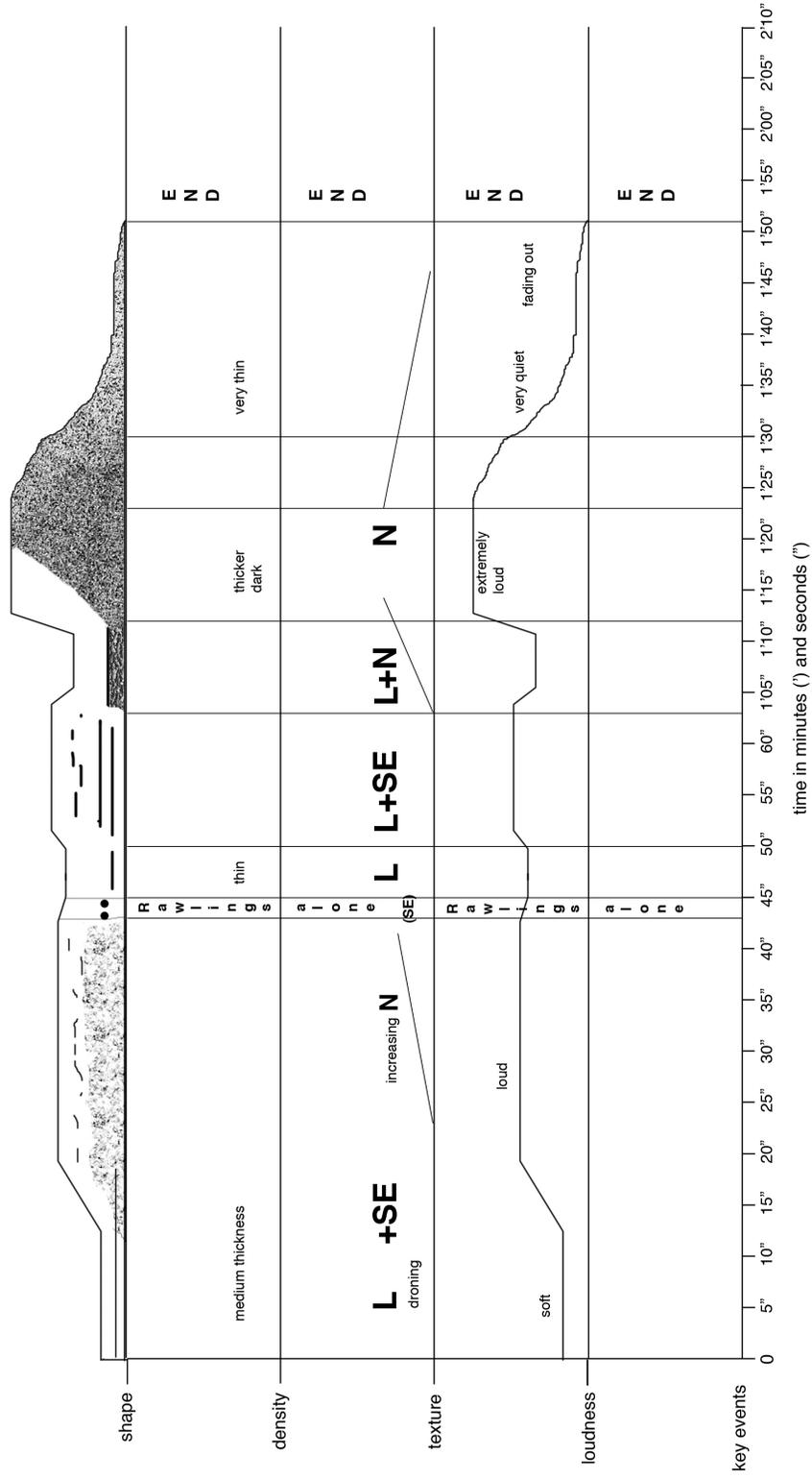
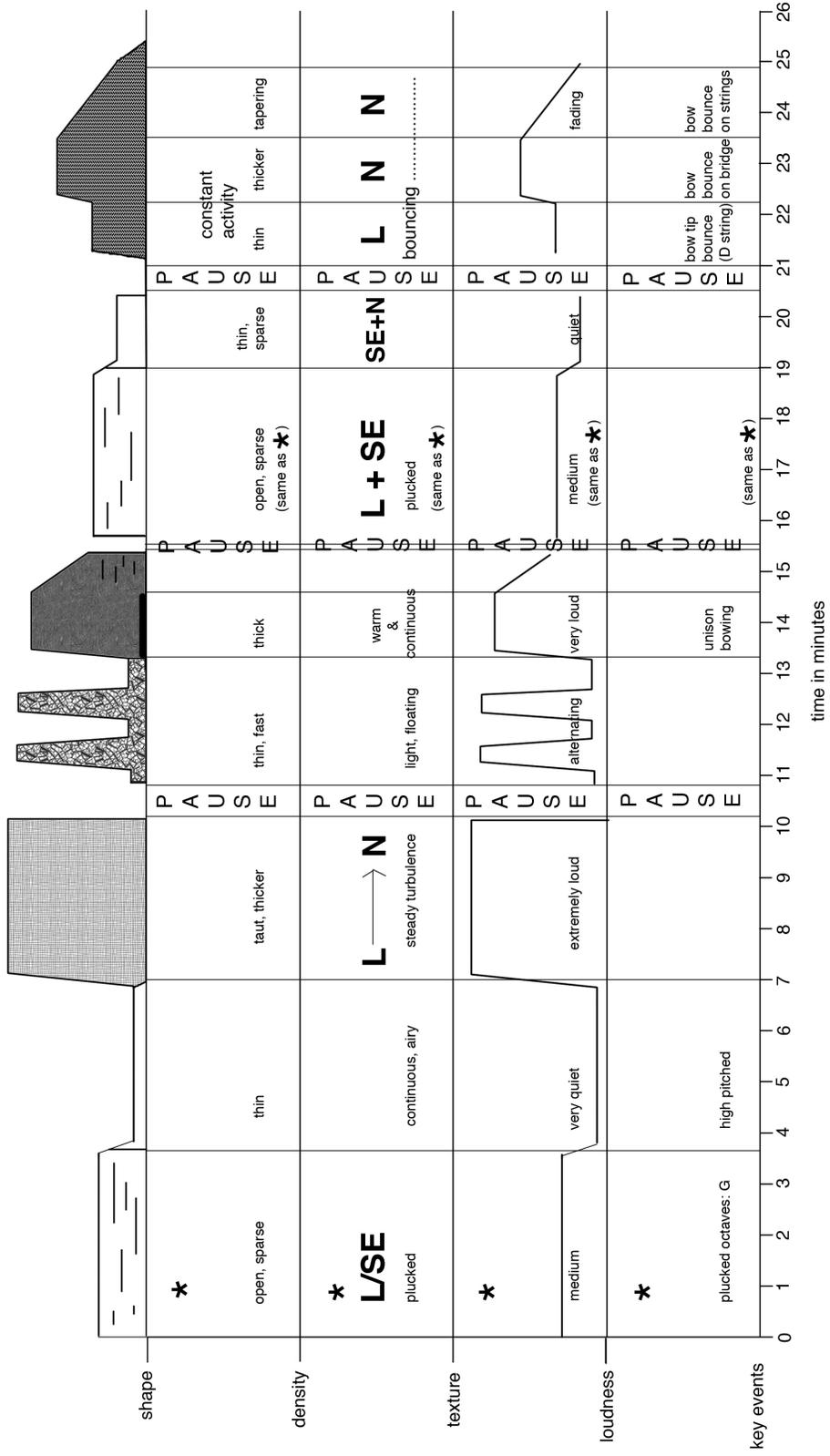


Figure 5. Michael T. Bullock, solo contrabass
Open Sound, 2008



Chapter 5: Major Themes

5.1 Theme 1: Breakthrough Moments

5.1.1 “Things are Happening Here”: The Solidification of Boston’s Self-Idiomatic Improvisation Community

Soprano saxophonist Bhub Rainey spent the period of 1995 until 2009⁷⁷ in the Boston area (except for a brief period in Chicago during 1999-2000). He has been a key participant in the Boston-area self-idiomatic free improvisation scene since the mid-1990s. Rainey and I performed together on the first Autumn Uprising Festival. Organized by David Gross, the 1997 Autumn Uprising was the first significant meeting of many of the participants who would go on to create a self-idiomatic music community at the Zeitgeist Gallery, until the Zeitgeist was destroyed by fire in 2002.

“The first [Autumn Uprising] really accomplished its goal of taking all these disparate scenes and bringing them into one space and getting people talking,” says Rainey. “It inspired people to try a little harder and to realize that ‘hey, things are happening here [in Boston]. You don’t have to go somewhere else.’”⁷⁸

At the time, Rainey points out, young Boston musicians, of any genre or style, commonly assumed they must eventually move New York City in order to find the best musical situations. “There was a feeling that you had to go to NYC to do music, and eventually that was not the case at all. Turned out [NYC, at the time] was not a great place at all for what we were doing. But it took a while for Boston to develop the self-confidence – it’s always seen itself as a sort of second city for this kind of thing.”

⁷⁷ Rainey, Robert. Audio interview, June 2009, Cambridge, MA.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Autumn Uprising helped give individuals and ensembles permission to pursue their nascent self-idioms.

Most of the people I interviewed had musical lives before they began improvising music and developing their self-idioms. Many started as practitioners of idiomatic musics: Liz Tonne sang in choirs, musical theatre, and club bands; Vic Rawlings played electric guitar in rock bands; Bhub Rainey and I both studied at New England Conservatory in Boston, while Greg Kelley studied classical trumpet performance at Peabody Conservatory.

Aside from playing tuba in his high school marching band, Howard Stelzer is entirely self-taught, using techniques derived from the portable cassette machines on which he performs. He has spent essentially his entire music-making life developing a set of instruments, techniques, and aesthetic tendencies that are self-idiomatic.

What unifies these musicians are the ways in which they came from a wide variety of musical backgrounds into the pursuit of a self-idiomatic, rather than idiomatic, music. Many of them described breakthrough moments that took them outside of their previous musical selves: an accident with an instrument that leads to a new sound discovery; suddenly hearing once-familiar music in a new way; being caught off-guard by seemingly incomprehensible music – and liking it; or simply being given explicit or tacit permission by another, more established musician.

5.1.2 “It Just Sounded Like Noise”: Howard Stelzer and Musical Confusion

As a teenager, Howard Stelzer realized he was attracted to confusing and uncomfortable musical experiences. Seeking out pop bands that employed extreme

tempos, layered synthesizers, and incomprehensible lyrics, Stelzer found Talking Heads, Art of Noise, and Fishbone. “The feeling of not understanding was really attractive,” he says. “I listened to Fishbone so much I broke the tape. Even then it just sounded like noise.”⁷⁹ Listening to that same music today, he realizes Fishbone were essentially playing reggae and ska, musical idioms that he no longer finds incomprehensible. But it was that feeling of entering uncharted territory – of seeking out confusing, surprising, even frightening musical experiences – which became a consuming passion and lead him into making self-idiomatic music.

After moving from Long Island, NY to Boca Raton, FL in high school, Stelzer continued seeking out unusual sounds. Talking with record store employees led him from fringe pop bands to industrial rock bands such as Front 242 and Einstürzende Neubauten, a German group known for using power tools, scrap metal, and jet engines on stage.⁸⁰ He took a fateful trip to Yesterday And Today, a record store in Miami with a section mysteriously labeled ‘Noise.’ There he encountered the already thriving subculture of noise music. In addition to now-rare releases by noise bands Nurse With Wound and Whitehouse, his most important acquisition at that visit was a catalog for the label/store RRR based in Lowell, MA, run by noise musician Ron Lessard.

At the time, RRR catalogs were photocopied lists of typewritten entries: band name, album name, and price, with no description. “The first thing I did was order the scariest looking stuff. What doesn’t look like a band name?”⁸¹ Among other things, Stelzer settled on P16.D4 and SBOTHI (Swimming Behavior of the Human Infant). The music on these recordings was composed of noise: electronics, metal scraping, and

⁷⁹ Stelzer, Howard. Audio interview, 29 September 2009, Boston, MA.

⁸⁰ Several of my informants, including trumpeter Greg Kelley, cited Einstürzende Neubauten as influential.

⁸¹ Ibid.

distorted location recordings. They contained no clear rhythm, tonality, or form that he could recognize as fitting with the pop, rock, and industrial music he already knew; they did not even sound like they used musical instruments. This was the first of several early turning points, changing Stelzer from a listener to a practitioner. “Around this time I started thinking, ‘I need to get involved. What can I do?’”⁸²

Stelzer and some friends turned to Einstürzende Neubauten for inspiration. They salvaged scrap metal from junkyards and spent summer days banging and scraping the metal in the Stelzer family’s concrete garage, immersing themselves in the din for hours. One day they recorded their metal noise to a cassette boombox.

When they brought the cassette inside to play on the stereo, they were surprised to find that it did not sound anything like what they recalled playing. The loud metal had overloaded the tiny built-in microphone on the cassette boombox, and the recording was thoroughly distorted.

Accompanying this surprise was the revelation of what it meant to create an object of recorded music. Stelzer recalled his thoughts from that moment: “But wait a minute, I just made a sound on a tape and I’m listening to it on a stereo, and that’s the same place where I put records and they come out. I can do that?” Stelzer started recording metal noise to tapes and playing them as backgrounds to his live metal scrapings and clashings.

That day, Stelzer realized two things that have informed his musical life ever since: first he learned that the act of recording a sound alters that sound, giving it a physical manifestation that is both repeatable and changeable. In particular, the cassette

⁸² Ibid.

tape format revealed to him its very specific limitations – recordings are easily distorted – which also exposed its potential as a format for altering sound in challenging ways.

Second, Stelzer experienced the sensation of having his musical product legitimized by the very repeatability of this physical manifestation. The paradox of having the momentary experience of an improvisation solidified into a repeatable form suggested to him that his sounds were not simply a pastime but a durable phenomenon, with the potential for evolution. It was a process he could use to reach other people, just like the commercially produced tapes and records of his favorite bands had reached him. Stelzer later founded the label Intransitive Recordings, which continues to release recordings of improvised music and noise by many self-idiomatic musicians.

5.1.3 Stelzer’s Instrumental Development: Aesthetic, Contingency, and Eureka Moments

Stelzer still uses several of his high school tapes in his live performances. But how he has used cassettes in performance has changed significantly since then, grown from a seed planted by another teenage breakthrough experience. When he was sixteen, he visited a professional recording studio where he saw noise musician Tom Smith⁸³ manipulating a cassette machine in front of a microphone. Smith was shaking the machine, pressing the buttons in rapid succession, and putting his fingers into the spindles to change the playback speed. He told Stelzer he was trying to make the tape deck “into a rock instrument.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Smith has led several significant noise projects such as To Live and Shave in LA, Boat Of, and Peach of Immortality, all of which Stelzer cites as influences.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

While impressed by Smith's ingenuity, Stelzer did not absorb this practice into his own growing self-idiom until years later. After moving to the Boston area in 1998, Stelzer started employing these hands-on techniques to his own cassette decks.

It was at that point, when he started manipulating the decks to do things they were not designed to do, that Stelzer says he felt like he was finally playing an instrument. Starting in 1998, it became increasingly important to him to think about his musical practice as playing an instrument, and he started to regard himself as an improviser. Prior to his arrival in greater Boston and his instrumentalizing behavior on the tape decks, he hadn't see himself as an instrumentalist. Though its effects were delayed by a few years, Stelzer's experience of seeing Smith playing his tape deck was a permission-giving moment that eventually became the final piece in the puzzle for Stelzer's unique self-idiomatic approach to the medium of cassette.

5.1.4 “Not About Music”: Vic Rawlings Steps Outside of Musical Expectations

Before joining any consistently improvising ensembles, while still playing with rock bands, multi-instrumentalist Vic Rawlings had begun to record improvised sessions with vocalist and guitarist Chrissie Chase as early as 1990. He described these sessions to me as “free form, getting away from the idea of music jam – away from musical gestures. There was music that happened but there was a lot of suspending the need for doing a ‘thing.’”⁸⁵ The ‘thing,’ in this case, was Rawlings' sense of what – to him - constituted a musical event.

⁸⁵ Rawlings, Vic. Second audio interview, 15 October 2009, Somerville, MA.

Rawlings does not object to the term *music* per se, but is careful with its use. In my discussions with him, both past and ongoing, he uses the term *music* to define his context. On several occasions during our interviews, Rawlings used phrases like “not about music” and “abstraction away from the idea of playing music.” This indicates a significant aspect of how Rawlings frames his work and situates it in a larger context.

By defining certain sound-making experiences – ensemble rehearsals, performances, and experiments at home – as being somehow *not music*, Rawlings indicates a critical lack of characteristics considered basic, even indispensable, to a conventional musical experience. Those missing characteristics include references to recognizable genres; familiar narrative sequences; tonal, harmonic, or modal pitch structures; clear rhythmic patterns; overtly reactive or interactive playing.

This opposition of *music* and *not music* is slippery, since it can change depending on the context. It can be used to talk about a deliberate sound-making effort that avoids the above characteristics; but in that case the opposition of *music* and *not music* is presumably being made simply to make a point about the newness and relative incomprehensibility of a supposedly non-musical event. This opposition does not draw a hard line between, for example, music and sound art, or music and noise; it is simply deployed to indicate a rupture in musical expectation. That same *not music* moment could just as easily be called music of a different kind.

In my own experience, to call something *not music* is often a preamble to incorporating that music into one’s life. In high school, upon first hearing the music of Ornette Coleman, I referred to it as *not music*. At the time it represented a rupture from

what I thought was acceptable. After repeated exposure, I came to accept Coleman's work as not just music, but some of my favorite music.⁸⁶

In 1998 – around the same time that Rawlings, Tonne, Kelley, and Coleman were exploring quiet, slow modes of playing in the Undr Quartet – Kelley invited Rawlings to join an ensemble led by drummer Lawrence Cook. Cook was looking to go in a different direction than the free jazz-influenced settings in which he frequently played. The Lawrence Cook Disaster Unit 2000 became a quartet with the addition of Kelley on trumpet, tape-loop musician Jason Lescalleet, and Rawlings. “[Kelley said] this is going to be a very aggressive band, it's not going to be jazz, it's not going to be improv; there is going to be another sense of violence to this.”⁸⁷

Rawlings decided the lopsided, outdated beats of a malfunctioning Electro-Harmonix drum machine would be a good foil for Cook's live drumming. But on the afternoon before the first performance, the drum machine stopped working. Rawlings removed the housing, hoping to find an easy repair, but discovered that a quick fix would be impossible. In desperation for some kind of sound – any sound – from the machine, Rawlings started crossing connections on the circuit board with his screwdriver. Suddenly the drum machine sprang to life, generating shrieks and crackles unlike any sounds it had made before. A metal drum brush elicited an even noisier reaction. Kelley, arriving at Rawlings house, eagerly endorsed the open electronics' howlings. “I showed Greg and I was like ‘what do you think?’ I was totally intimidated. And [Greg's] eyes

⁸⁶ *Ornette!* by the Ornette Coleman Quartet. Coleman, alto saxophone; Don Cherry, pocket trumpet; Scott LaFaro, bass; Ed Blackwell, drums. Atlantic Records, 1961. In fact, I listened to that cassette continuously for over a week – an indication of how quickly it took me out of my previous musical expectations.

⁸⁷ Rawlings, Vic. Second audio interview, 15 October 2009, Somerville, MA.

were big and he said, ‘Yes!’”⁸⁸ The failure of the drum machine led to a breakthrough moment, which eventually led to Rawlings’ development of his series of instruments based on open-backed electronics.

Thereminist James Coleman and vocalist Tonne were bandmates of Rawlings in the jam band Saturnalia. Both of them, wearied by the dense sound and genre mash-up aesthetic of Saturnalia, sought a more intimate, unencumbered improvisation setting for developing their nascent self-idioms. Together with trumpeter Greg Kelley, they began working together at Coleman’s Charlestown apartment and focusing on the careful, improvised arrangement of very low volume sounds. The early Charlestown sessions began in 1997, first with Coleman, Kelley, and Rawlings; vocalist Liz Tonne soon joined them.

The Undr Quartet’s music barely rises above a whisper. Events come and go slowly, overlapping gently, and are punctuated by frequent periods of complete silence. “I remember that first night [at Coleman’s studio] being like wow, now we are really doing something different, really coming out of silence, and really not about music,” Rawlings told me. “[In earlier improvising sessions] there was still that sense that it had to be important, some kind of excitement.”⁸⁹ Over the next few years, several groups and individuals in and around Boston would come to favor extremes of quietude and stillness – so much so that the term ‘lowercase sound’ became a label, both locally and abroad, for quiet, slow improvisation.

Boston’s so-called ‘lowercase sound’ was a local manifestation of an aesthetic bent that sprang up in communities in several parts of the country and world in the late

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

1990s. In Tokyo,⁹⁰ musicians were developing extremely quiet, low-density improvisation on the then-nascent Onkyo scene.⁹¹ In London, it started to be called ‘The New Nothing’ and was sometimes used pejoratively along with ‘lowercase sound.’

The real significance of this kind of improvising was not the quiet volume and slow temporality – though that represented a significant break from dense, active free improvisation. ‘Lowercase sound’ and its cousins represented a shift towards a contemplative approach to open structures and nuanced sound textures.

5.1.5 Liz Tonne: Getting Permission to Sing Freely

Around 1996, vocalist Liz Tonne attended a lecture, at Boston’s Institute for Contemporary Art, about a music festival in Macedonia; there she saw a video clip of Portuguese vocalist Maria João performing solo. “It was just free vocalization... I had no context for listening to it.”⁹² Later she learned that João’s music is closely related to jazz and Portuguese influences. But first hearing the music was an uncanny experience for Tonne: she had nothing else to compare it to, and the experience was liberating. She realized that freely improvised singing – independent of any immediately apparent genre or structure or lyrics – was something that could stand on its own at an international music festival. For Tonne, it felt like an official acknowledgement that free improvisation was worth pursuing. She had received permission to perform with the sounds with which she had been experimenting.

⁹⁰ For more on the Tokyo scene, visit the website *Improvised Music from Japan*: <http://www.japanimprov.com/> (last accessed 24 June 2010)

⁹¹ Onkyo (variously translated as sound, noise, or echo) was centered on the venue Off-Site Gallery, a small performance space in a residential building in Tokyo. <http://www.clivebell.co.uk/offsite.htm> (last accessed 24 June 2010)

⁹² Tonne, Elizabeth. Video interview, 1 January 2010, Greenfield, MA.

5.2 Theme 2: Material Contingency

A musician's material resources limit the range of sonic possibility available to him or her. For self-idiomatic musicians, these contingencies can be both limiting and inspirational. Musicians derive much of their self-idiom from tactically instrumentalizing these limitations and contingencies.

Liz Tonne's range of vocal timbres is rooted primarily in a single technique, which she originally learned as an exercise in vocal flexibility. "I try to let [my voice] be as loose as possible, and try not to have any judgment of the sound."⁹³ Essentially, the voice is allowed to relax in a way that reduces control over specific intonation but allows the singer to concentrate on the physical vibration of the body. A note is sung on whichever vowel sound is the most relaxed position for a given register. The note warbles and moves around the central note, rather than settling on a note, which would require more precise control from the singer. The intention is to feel the resonance in the abdomen constantly, while gradually adding resonances in the skull as her voice moves up the scale.

It is easy for Tonne to explore a given range of her voice using the exercise, but she must first choose the range, which is determined by the sensation of where different resonances happen in her body. Singing on different vowels will encourage different resonances in different parts of the body, and certain vowels are more appropriate to a given range than others. For the exercise, Tonne initially chooses the vowel that most encourages relaxation; in the lower part of her register she uses an 'uh' sound, but as she goes higher she changes to 'ah' or 'eh' sounds. It is no different, on a certain level, than

⁹³ Ibid. See DVD 1, Chapter 1.

the choices that singers of tonal or atonal music must make when moving up and down their range, finding the best physical resonance to sing in a given range with the fullest possible tone and without risk of vocal strain.

Tonne says that getting a resonant sound at home is not so difficult, with relatively few other sounds to work around;

...but in the middle of an improvisation, sometimes depending on what's going on, the beginning of my own tone is wishy-washy or it doesn't have as much resonance or as many different overtones as I would choose... But that is kind of how I come up with different [sounds], just having to cope in a performance context with the fact that the initial sound may not be what I intended it to be. So then I start changing it and in the middle of changing it, it leads into a phrase.⁹⁴

This is an important point that brings Tonne's self-idiom and the work of her colleagues into line. It illuminates a recurrent theme from my all of my interviews, and a strong determining factor behind much self-idiomatic music: pragmatic musical choices resulting from contingent, phenomenal experience in the moment. Some of Tonne's sound-making choices can only be made in the moment of performance, though those decisions are influenced by her prior experiences both in performance and in practice. The resonant properties of the performance's physical setting, the sounds played by her band mates, the range of unpredictability inherent in Tonne's technique, and even Tonne's physical state all create contingent conditions that both limit her options and provide inspirational possibilities. Material contingency – the set of conditions imposed by the physical characteristics of one's instrument and setting – is both a limiting factor and a springboard for all the self-idiomatic musicians in my study.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

5.2.1 Fitting Into the Spectrum: Audio Clip from *The BSC at Open Sound, 2008*⁹⁵

In the above quotation, Tonne refers to making choices to fit into the frequency range of any given musical situation: both the existing sounds that she is hearing in the moment, and the sounds that she knows her neighbors can make relative to her sounds. For example, at one minute, thirty-two seconds into the clip, Tonne's sound is enmeshed with those of several other musicians in a larger emergent texture. She begins singing a rapidly wavering sound. Other musicians – thereminist James Coleman, trumpeter Greg Kelley, and soprano saxophonist Bhob Rainey – play steady tones simultaneously with Tonne. Rainey's single tone rapidly develops into a loud multi-note cluster.

In her video interview, Tonne pointed out the importance of her physical position relative to other members of the ensemble in helping her determine what to sing. She almost always sits between Rainey and Kelley:

I think that it's always been really good that Bhob and Greg and I would sit [often] next to each other in the front. Because we're kind of all filling in the same role sometimes, in the high range. I can tell a lot of times from just sitting next to them, from their body language, what's going to happen... If Bhob takes a breath then he's going to do something that's probably in the exact same range that I would choose... Bhob is on the same wavelength a lot.⁹⁶

In this way, Tonne is still very much a part of transformation, but in this example she does so as part of an ensemble effort that is not pre-determined but grows from a mutual sensitivity. This helps decisive changes to take place, even instantaneously, across an entire ensemble. Tonne's decisions in the moment are influenced by the sonic

⁹⁵ See DVD 1, Chapter 9. The full piece from which this clip is drawn is available on DVD 1, Chapter 10.

⁹⁶ Tonne, Elizabeth. Video interview, 1 January 2010, Greenfield, MA.

characteristics of her neighbors' sounds in the moment, as well as her ability to predict their actions based on extensive experience – and prepare her own actions accordingly.

5.2.2 Howard Stelzer and the Instrumentalization of Consumer

Electronics

Since he first moved to the Boston area in 1998, Howard Stelzer has used many different portable cassette tape machines, which he refers to as tape decks. His playing techniques result in the gradual destruction of the decks over time, and are damaging to his tapes as well. Stelzer removes and discards the lids of each of his decks prior to deploying them in performance. This allows him to press down on the turning spindles with the tips of his fingers to slow them down. He also manipulates the pause, fast-forward, and rewind buttons with his thumb or other hand, often simultaneously with the pressure he applies to the spindles. When he is not playing a given deck, he will usually leave it stalled with play and pause pressed.⁹⁷ These techniques place considerable wear on the decks' motors and buttons, and can destroy his tapes.

Through the years, several of Stelzer's tape decks have joined his rig as the result of an older tape deck failing at an inconvenient time. During the video interview, he told me he bought one of his decks in Toronto in 2000, no more than an hour before a performance. "At that show, one of my tape decks died as I was sound-checking. I had to run out and just get something to work... I think [I went to] a Radio Shack."⁹⁸ Another of his decks, a tabletop deck shaped like a shoebox, was bought at a similar moment of crisis, at another Radio Shack. "Because what I do has to be sort of found" –

⁹⁷ See DVD 1, Chapter 2. Stelzer, Howard. Video interview, 28 January 2010, Boston, MA.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

sometimes at inconvenient times – “I’ll use things that are imperfect, and just try to make them work.”⁹⁹

Since Stelzer’s self-idiomatic approach has its origins in consumer cassette tapes and decks, the inherently unpredictable and unreliable nature of these decks determines the field of possibilities available to him – but also acts as a source of continual inspiration and renewal. Stelzer is forced into a constant negotiation with his gear, which results in a constant process of discovery and surprise. As discussed in the previous section, the process of discovery and surprise was Stelzer’s original motivating factor for making music.

Another key factor in Stelzer’s constant negotiation with his multifarious instrument is portability. Early in his self-idiomatic career, Stelzer set clear standards for portability. The influence Stelzer cites for this decision is Lessard, who befriended Stelzer shortly after the latter moved to Boston in 1998. Lessard saw Stelzer struggling to carry several large home stereo components to each gig, and suggested that Stelzer limit his instrumental needs to one moderate-sized suitcase. “[Ron told me] ‘if you can’t carry it in one go, you don’t need it.’ I ended up paring it [my gear] way back. [After that] I started thinking about what I did as an instrument.”¹⁰⁰ By setting certain practical limits, Stelzer found a way to identify more fully with his music.

5.2.3 Extremes of Volume: Vic Rawlings

During the 1990s, Vic Rawlings and Liz Tonne played together in the band Mile Wide. In spite of its exploratory, improvisation-influenced approach, Mile Wide was

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Stelzer, Howard. Audio interview, 29 September 2009, Boston, MA. Significantly, Stelzer added, “I don’t know if I do right now.” Stelzer’s view of his role as an instrumental improviser has changed, and perhaps been de-emphasized, in favor of composing music on computer – with his own cassette performances as compositional material.

first and foremost a rock band. It shared a major characteristic with many rock bands: very loud volume. This became a source of discontent for Tonne, as well as for Rawlings, who was playing cello and various other acoustic string instruments in the band. Rawlings' acoustic string instruments were difficult to amplify properly, but were inaudible otherwise. Even playing through a guitar amp, he found he was barely able to hear himself over the huge sound created by the electric guitar, electric bass, and drums.

Rawlings sought an amplification system that would help his cello overcome the formidable volume level; he settled on a large powered speaker designed for use in outdoor public address systems. "I remember the first time I brought that thing in [to a Mile Wide rehearsal] and I shut the guitar player down... At that point I had figured out how to dial in something that was crushingly loud."¹⁰¹

Suddenly, the cello had gone from being the quietest to the loudest instrument in the room. This ability to magnify the cello's sound immensely would serve Rawlings well in several subsequent groups, including the Lawrence Cook Disaster Unit 2000. Rawlings continues to use this speaker to amplify his cello, even in very quiet settings – like me, he has come to incorporate its tone quality into his self-idiom. At low volumes, the large speaker gives the cello a deeply resonant quality, and magnifies previously inaudible gestures to audibility. Rawlings had been forced, by the material contingency of the rock band, to choose between being heard or not; and by choosing to be heard, he opened up a range of tonal options previously unknown to him.

Rawlings' Electro-Harmonix drum machine eventually died from too many crossed circuits. Also, its AC power connection was potentially dangerous; Rawlings' current practice with exposed circuit boards involves an assemblage of battery-powered

¹⁰¹ Rawlings, Vic. Second audio interview, 15 October 2009, Somerville, MA.

objects, most of them guitar effects with their backs removed. Though designed to process incoming audio signals, Rawlings makes them into audio sources by crossing their circuits with pieces of metal.¹⁰²

In playing the circuit board, Rawlings could control his physical actions but could not predict the sonic results. It was an approach created accidentally, in a moment of material contingency, when his equipment failed to do what he expected. Nonetheless this approach has become a cornerstone of his instrumentalization of exposed circuit boards from audio electronics: sounds of unpredictable timbre and volume, created through controlled and timed gestures. Through many hours at the workbench and on stage, Rawlings develops general sense of what parts of a given circuit board will tend to create loud or soft, continuous or discontinuous, low or high sounds. As the electronics age, their tendencies change; he can never control them precisely. A certain tension is created in his performances by the sudden, unpredictable starts and stops, and the sometimes rapid changes between low- and high-pitched sounds. But he has established the limits of his own control. It is central to his self-idiom that he controls some aspects of his music with great precision, and other aspects are left to the contingent nature of the materials.

5.2.4 We are Sitting in a Room: Material Contingencies and the Phenomenal Realities of Self-Idiomatic Improvisation

Generally speaking, a self-idiomatic improvisation ensemble is a collection of self-contained musical entities – the musicians are self-idiomatic, and so they choose to associate based on each musician’s idiom. The malleable, open-ended self-idioms

¹⁰² See DVD 1, Chapter 5. Rawlings, Vic. Video Interview, 20 November 2009, Somerville, MA.

brought by each musician can mesh organically with the other idioms and the environment in which that interconnected musical activity is being realized.

British composer, writer, and improviser Cornelius Cardew described his earliest experiences playing with the self-idiomatic ensemble AMM in the 1960s. He discovered the almost absurdly simple formula of being a person making sound in a place can be enough to break down one's musical habits and inhibitions and lead to new discoveries. Guitarist Keith Rowe, then playing with AMM, told him, “‘you get legs dangling down there and arms floating around, so many fingers and one head’ and that that was a very strict composition. And that is true: not only can the natural environment carry you beyond your own limitations, but the realization of your own body as part of that environment is an even stronger dissociative factor.”¹⁰³

A self-idiomatic musician's radius of action extends beyond him- or herself to both give and receive influences from outside factors: physical environment, audio spectrum, and fellow musicians. This environment's structure is open-ended and emergent, conditioned by the contingent realities of materials and people.

5.3 Theme 3: Limits of Control

My informants were concerned with the degrees of control they could exert over their sound production. Many of them were specifically interested in the grey areas in their instrumental practices where they reached, or exceed, the limits of their own control. In my interviews with Stelzer, Rawlings, and Tonne, they revealed to me how their self-idiom incorporates ranges of unpredictability within predictable, controllable parameters. They all gave up certain aspects of control, but always within limits that could be more

¹⁰³ Cardew, Cornelius. “Towards an Ethic of Improvisation.” *Treatise Handbook* (Edition Peters). Found on UbuWeb (www.ubu.com). (Last accessed 24 June 2010)

carefully strategized. They find these blurry areas between control and uncertainty to be inspiring, even defining, for their self-idioms.

Many new sounds and new forms develop during performance. This is not a sign of lack of preparation; on the contrary, new sounds and approaches are likely to endure in the performer's vocabulary, and to make sense in the network of sounds and forms.

Cardew compares the continuing practice of improvisation over a long term to the feeling of moving to a new city: When one first arrives, everything appears new; but as days and years pass, nuances and details of one's surroundings become more apparent; one begins to see the buildings from the inside and understand them, and eventually one comes to identify with the city rather than merely inhabit it.¹⁰⁴

5.3.1 “Families of Sounds”: Howard Stelzer

Creating a continuously variable landscape sound is characteristic of Stelzer's self-idiomatic behavior in ensembles. These sonic grounds are unpredictable, but he maintains the parameters that govern them in order to keep them under control. The other musicians, who create shorter events on top of it without interacting with it or reacting to it directly, treat the sound as a landscape.

Stelzer uses the phrase “family of sounds” to describe the sonic resources of a specific cassette tape; for example a commercial pop music tape that he uses frequently. “Everything is sort of in the same frequency range; it doesn't suddenly burst out with loud noise or there's not a lot of silence on the tape. So I know if I want a continuous

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

sound I can put this tape in, and no matter what I do to it it's going to be kind of in the same family of sounds."¹⁰⁵

His choice of wording indicates a certain conscious limit to his control, not only relative to his tapes but also his decks: He can choose to play a given tape in a given deck in order to access sounds with certain characteristics, but he cannot control with complete exactitude all the details of the specific sound event that will result: its timbre, its pitch, and its temporality are predictable only within a range.

Stelzer uses three tape decks and two tapes during the interview. The three decks all run on batteries; Stelzer has removed the lid covering the tape bay on each one.

1. A flat, 'shoebox' style desktop tape deck from Radio Shack, with buttons on the front and a built in speaker facing upward.
2. A mid-size, portable tape deck with a worn-out motor, which Stelzer refers to as "this guy."
3. A small portable tape deck with a built-in speaker on the back, which Stelzer holds in one hand.
4. Two cassettes: a pink one containing pop music in an unidentified language, and a black one containing continuously wavering sounds dubbed from another, long-gone tape deck.

I have identified three primary families of sounds Stelzer gets from these decks and tapes.

Gestural sounds originate in Stelzer's hand gestures. The sounds themselves are not necessarily perceived as musical gestures, though in certain cases they may be.

¹⁰⁵ See DVD 1, Chapter 3. Stelzer, Howard. Video interview, 28 January 2010, Boston, MA.

Gestural sounds can act as members of two other families, discussed below: continuous sounds or rhythmic sounds.

Stelzer talks about his handling of the tape decks as being “just so natural to me... I’m pressing rewind while also pressing on the reels of the tape, which makes it really unstable sounding, and a little less harsh [than the fast forward or rewind sounds alone].”¹⁰⁶ He cannot, however, control the speed of reels precisely; he can only impede their normal, electromechanically determined movement, adding an indeterminate character to the sounds. Nonetheless, over years of practice Stelzer has developed a fine kinesthetic sense in his interactions with his tape decks, pushing the limits of his control further and further.

Stelzer produces rhythmic sounds one of two ways: allowing a tape deck to create spontaneous clicking noises, or playing rhythmically through gesture. “The fickleness of [deck number 2] lends a rhythmic element sometimes,” since the motors are failing and only respond sporadically and unpredictably to his manipulation of the buttons. “If I’m waiting for it to make its next sound, then it kind of becomes something rhythmic in the piece.”¹⁰⁷ In other words, those rhythmic sounds are not rhythmic in a controllable, predictable sense, but spontaneously created by the intermittent failure of the deck. Stelzer knows he can’t control this intermittent failure, but he can choose when to insert this sound into a performance and how loud to make it. He can frame a chaotic process and determine the manner of its presentation.

Continuously variable sounds – such as Stelzer’s deployment of the sonic resources in a pop music tape – may be steady, but often they waver in register. As a rule

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. See DVD 1, Chapter 2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. See DVD 1, Chapter 4.

they are relatively long, often lasting a minute or more, with few pauses or peaks in activity. The family of continuously variable sounds can be used by Stelzer to fill various roles in his ensembles. For example, Stelzer often uses them to create a relatively steady-state, grounding effect. Other musicians may play more actively over this ground, or it may serve as a base layer around which other layers of continuous sound can coalesce into a group drone.

Stelzer will also generate continuous sounds using the rewind or fast forward buttons on his tape decks to make the tape play back at higher speeds; usually he mitigates this sound by pressing on the spindles with his fingers. “If I have [a rewind or fast forward sound] going quietly underneath a section, then it’s a nice way to undergird something else that’s happening in the composition.”¹⁰⁸

5.3.1.1 Continuously Variable Sounds in Context: Audio Clip #1 from The BSC at Open Sound, 2008¹⁰⁹

At the beginning of this clip, Stelzer creates a warbling sound caused by pressing down on the spools of one of his tape decks with his fingertips.¹¹⁰ This sound is both continuously variable and rooted in gesture. It changes over time from where it starts at the beginning of the clip to where it ends, at 1 minute 40 seconds. At first the sound remains in a roughly consistent register and at a roughly consistent density – a constant, rapid scrubbing sound. As the clip progresses, the register rises and falls in waves that

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Sometimes Stelzer may use the word “composition” to mean an improvisation; at other times he uses it to refer to the somewhat more pre-conceived practices of his duo Skeletons Out with turntablist Jay Sullivan.

¹⁰⁹ See DVD 1, Chapter 1.

¹¹⁰ I cannot identify by ear which deck and which tape are being used, but most likely, the tape deck has its play and pause buttons pressed, and Stelzer is also operating either the rewind or fast forward button simultaneously with his thumb while pressing on the spindles.

can be seen on the spectrograph; at the bottoms of these waves, the sound almost disappears, but never completely stops.

5.3.2 A System Too Complex: Vic Rawlings

Vic Rawlings combines a “traditional” instrument, the cello, with an entirely idiosyncratic set of resources. I have collaborated with Rawlings in many contexts since 1997.¹¹¹ For his video interview, Rawlings walked me through his electronics setup and the extensive modifications he applied to his cello.

The current state of Rawlings’ open circuit electronics is the product of several years of experimentation, some of it happening live in performance, and technical development carried out at home in his workshop. It consists of two main stages, the input stage and the output stage. At the input stage, audio signals are generated from an assemblage of electronic components with exposed circuit boards. The signals from these components are mixed into a single channel of audio using an altered, commercially available mixer. At the output stage, the signal from the first mixer enters a second, handmade output mixer that can route the sound to a variety of loudspeakers. Rawlings has two such handmade mixers, that he can use separately or together: one is connected to five speakers, and the other can connect up to fifteen speakers. These mixers are all built with several kinds of intuitive touch controls.

The first stage is made up of several electronic effects pedals. These pedals were originally designed to alter the audio signals of electric guitars, but Rawlings has repurposed them to act as audio sources themselves. Rawlings removes their rear covers, exposing their internal circuitry. These pedals are attached face down to a Plexiglas

¹¹¹ Our duo was established in 2000.

board, with their exposed electronics facing up. Though each pedal is capable of taking audio input, the boxes themselves have become audio sources when, by touching the circuits with pieces of metal, they spontaneously generate unpredictable audio signals.¹¹²

5.3.2.1 Touch

In keeping with his desire to play with “the rhythm of hands moving over a work bench,” Rawlings’ instrumentalizing behaviors and gestures grow out of this pragmatic aesthetic combined with subtlety of touch.

Rawlings designed the input stage of his electronic rig to be a touch-based instrument. In this way it is similar to some of the work demonstrated by Nicolas Collins in his book *Handmade Electronic Music*,¹¹³ as well as the work of pioneering electronic instrument inventor Michel Waisvisz, founder of the Studio for Electro-Instrumental Music (STEIM) in Amsterdam. His work is also reminiscent of the movement known as circuit bending, though Rawlings rejects that term for his own work.

Rawlings creates sound by placing small metal objects on the open circuit boards of his pedals, which causes them to create unpredictable buzzes, squeals, and crackles. Most of these are found objects, recovered from other broken machines or in some cases picked up from the road. “I use different types of metal on the board, and it’s going to make a different connection.” The objects are variously shaped, and are made of different kinds of metal. Some are capable of standing on their own, or even making continuously variable connection changes while Rawlings is not touching them, such as with light pieces of wire that can vibrate. Beyond simply placing these items on the

¹¹² See DVD 1, Chapter 5. Rawlings, Vic. Video interview, 20 November 2009, Somerville, MA.

¹¹³ Collins, Nicolas. *Handmade Electronic Music: The Art of Hardware Hacking*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Rawlings has used Collins’ book to help him design and build parts of his instrument. He and I have both contributed demonstration videos of his electronic instrument to the second edition of Collins’ book.

surface of the electronics, Rawlings will manipulate the objects in various ways with his hands, by pressing down or making subtle movements with them.

Rawlings expresses a preference for certain parts of his electronics based on their feel. Among the metal objects, he singles out a spring from a clock: “I very much like the feeling of working with this spring... a lot of it comes down to just creating a gesture with my hand and that makes something happen. And then if I like it, I do more of it, and if I don’t like it, I change it.” Rawlings’ instrumentalization of his little pieces of metal is intuitive, kinesthetic, and constantly fluctuating.¹¹⁴

The signals from these pedals are connected to a small mixer that combines five input signals into one monophonic signal. The output stage starts with another mixer, which divides this monophonic signal from the first mixer among a variable number of loudspeakers. Rawlings has two versions of this output mixer, a five-speaker version and a fourteen-speaker version, and can use either one or both as desired.

All of Rawlings’ speakers have been removed from their housings, and are usually laid out bare on a board or on the floor. Many of them are damaged, and all of them were either sourced from discarded consumer electronics or purchased from thrift stores. As a result, the speakers are all different, and all have radically different responses to a given audio signal.

Rawlings chooses his speakers based on their sound characteristics, but he does little to pre-determine or alter the characteristics of the speakers themselves. He favors damaged or unusually shaped speakers, and speakers with unpredictable responsiveness. In other words, he deliberately chooses speakers over which he has little exact control.

¹¹⁴See DVD 1, Chapter 5. Rawlings, Vic. Video interview, 20 November 2009, Somerville, MA.

He sets the limits of his control at the selection of speakers, and deliberately sets himself up for surprise.

5.3.2.2 Decay of Electronic Components

Rawlings talks about knowing generally, if not specifically, what kinds of sounds his electronics will produce. When Rawlings chooses to activate a given element of his electronics, he knows it will most likely produce a sound of a roughly predictable timbre, intensity, and rhythm, but he cannot know exactly what will be produced. Furthermore there is always a chance that the system will respond chaotically, with a completely unexpected sound; or that it will not respond at all. Rawlings is in constant negotiation with material contingency that continually redefines the limits of his control. This negotiation is a key element of his instrumentalizing approach, and a welcome one: limitations of choice, both self-imposed and arbitrary, are central to his self-idiomatic aesthetic.

During a demonstration of one of his audio input devices, it failed to operate as he expected. Rawlings pointed out,

...what just happened there is a moment of the impracticality and the improbability of what happens with this instrument overall. If it's either because of the really low-grade switches that are being used that are malfunctioning, or something... elsewhere, the instrument doesn't always do what I want it to do.¹¹⁵

In this case, the audio signal source was not an altered guitar pedal but a small tone generator. Regardless, the component didn't react the way it "should," no doubt due to the tone generator's enmeshment within a very chaotic system.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

In fact, it would probably be impossible to predict what kind of signal is created by such a chaotic system. He can predict within a certain range what will most likely happen; but even in those cases, the system will surprise him with an unexpected response, or unexpected silence.

Another aspect of unpredictability within a range of control is the spatial field created by the many speakers in Rawlings' electronics rig, up to 19 total when he is running both output mixers.

No matter where they are in the room, even if I leave them in the box like that, just because of the different frequencies that are being put out and because they are in a slightly different place, it will tend to locate the sounds. So there's a spatialization thing that happens with that. It's actually accidental...sometimes in performance... I'll hear sounds that are coming from behind me, and it's nothing that I could predict. I don't know how or why that's happening.¹¹⁶

In performance, Rawlings will arrange his speakers relative to the performance space, and will sometimes take advantage of architectural details in a space to place speakers at various points and heights around the room. But even when all of his speakers are in one place – say, in their carrying case, a converted hard-shell guitar case – the different timbres created by the different speakers create unpredictable spatial effects within the range of control that Rawlings has exerted by his placement of the speakers.

5.3.2.3 Cello

Rawlings' cello is a plywood student model that has been heavily modified by Rawlings. He plays it with amplification through a fifteen inch JBL powered speaker. A Memory Man Deluxe delay pedal, mounted on a modified music stand, is always part of

¹¹⁶ Ibid. See DVD 1, Chapter 6.

his signal chain, as well as a volume pedal and another effects pedal modified to act as a signal cutoff switch.

5.3.3 Beyond “Cool Sounds”: Liz Tonne¹¹⁷

Liz Tonne’s remarkable range of vocal timbres is rooted primarily in a single technique, an exercise in vocal flexibility. Tonne found early on that she took to the exercise faster than the average student; and that furthermore, she liked the sound of it. At the time, she was not singing freely improvised music, yet found this unusual sound compelling: “... I thought it sounded cool so I just kept doing it, practicing just doing that exercise up and down the range.”¹¹⁸

Since she started developing her own improvised idiom, this technique has become the source of the majority of sounds she makes while improvising. She emphasized that the exercise is based on the physiological reality of how the voice produces overtones:

The overtone series is a physiological phenomenon where, even with doing these [vibrations and disturbances], you’re getting a fifth, you’re getting an octave, you’re getting certain resonances. It’s biological; it’s physics. Then I think that when you kind of are exploiting that part of the physics that doesn’t have the nice little pattern to it... it puts more of a noise aspect into it.¹¹⁹

The material, mechanical reality of her vocal chords is both a limiting contingency and a resource of new sonic material. She deliberately chooses a vocal technique that limits her control in certain ways – the inability to settle on a specific pitch – in order to access a new range of sounds.

¹¹⁷ Tonne, Elizabeth. Video interview, 1 January 2010, Greenfield, MA.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. See DVD 1, Chapter 7.

For Tonne, sacrificing specific pitch control also means sacrificing a certain degree of specific control over timbre, but that also gives her a wider range of timbral possibilities, as well as a wider range of pitches. In tonal music, a singer's effective vocal range is limited to where she can sing with specific pitch control. "If you're not needing to focus [your voice] on a single pitch you can get away with a lot higher," because most people's voices can reach much higher and lower ranges when specific pitch control is given up than when they must sing an exact pitch. "Sometimes I just choose to do a really high note and I can't always control what comes out."¹²⁰ Therefore, as an improviser, Tonne is choosing to let go of control over very precise intonation, and in exchange she gets a wide range of registral and timbral options. Sacrificing certain kinds of control was the way for her to discover, and maintain, other kinds of control that define her self-idiom.

Tonne speaks frequently about the necessity of making choices. The difference between the kinds of choices a classical or jazz or pop singer makes, and the kind that Tonne make, are a matter both of taste and of the requirements of the music. For example, lyrics require a singer to find compromises between the best possible resonance – including mouth shape and vowel sound – and the need to make the lyrics comprehensible. Since Tonne never uses lyrics in an ensemble improvisation,¹²¹ she is freed from that initial restraint. Tonne's improvised music also does not have a tonal center or harmony. Freed of the requirement to control her precise pitch, Tonne focuses on producing sound in performance the same way she practices the exercise: by following the physical sensation of resonance in her body and ear.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ In her solo, unaccompanied music, Tonne has been using lyrics, exploring the use of her self-idiomatic vocal techniques in the context of American folk songs.

“I think when you first start out doing [improvising] it’s about the cool sounds... but after a while it’s like, I don’t think I need any more cool sounds. I have enough cool sounds and I need to select their use very carefully.”¹²² Tonne says the techniques she uses can be used by anyone, regardless of whether or not they have traditional vocal training or experience singing in a genre. In spite of her command of jazz, rock, country and classical singing, Tonne doesn’t regard her sound resources as a special privilege. “That is not really my artistry... getting good at the sound is one little craft, but it’s just sort of a preliminary adjunct craft” to the more significant art of choosing where to place sounds in time and space.¹²³ For Tonne, this defines her self-idiom: the ability to define the structure and temporality of her music even though she cannot completely control the sounds themselves.

5.4 Theme 4: Shape, Duration, and Transformation

A unifying characteristic of the improvisations I analyze is their shape in time: They consist largely of stratified layers of sonic qualia,¹²⁴ often static or attenuated in nature. Transformation between and among qualia may be clear and decisive, or it may be a constant flow of becoming and becoming-other; either way, they are often initiated by a single musician. The result is a time sense, or temporality, that is moved forward primarily by constant transformation.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Singular *quale*. Borgo, David. *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age*. New York, NY: Continuum, ©2005. p. 66.

5.4.1 Musical Analysis through Vic Rawlings' Cello and Electronics:

Rawlings/Bullock Duo¹²⁵

The aesthetic of the Rawlings/Bullock Duo is based on two principles: layers of sound with clear stopping and starting points, and the pursuit by each musician of his musical ideas, his “own thing,” with little deliberate interaction between us. The result is a stratified, attenuated temporality; and strong shifts from one player to another. Our ensemble self-idiom has developed through a coordination and co-existence of our individual self-idiomatic approaches. The limits and expectations we place on our group sound are not compromises of our individual approaches, but rather context-specific manifestations of self-idiom.

I analyzed the fifth track from the Rawlings/Bullock Duo CD *Fall of Song*,¹²⁶ entitled “about the.” It demonstrates our duo’s blocks of sound creating strong shifts of balance by their clarity of form and complexity of texture. Often a transformation is created by one of us switching suddenly from one of his instruments to the other. I play an amplified contrabass and a pair of audio test oscillators. Rawlings plays his cello and electronics described earlier.

5.4.1.1 Transformation

This track, as with the other examples, can be analyzed in terms of its transformations, and how the musicians bring them about. Transformations can be produced by two players or a single one, by strong changes in loudness and by moments

¹²⁵ See DVD 1, Chapter 12. See also page 66, Appendix A, Figure 4: graphic analysis of the Rawlings/Bullock duo.

¹²⁶ Rawlings, Vic, and Mike Bullock. *Fall of Song*. CD ©2003 Chloë Recordings.

of silence. Transformation can also come about as the result of shifting relationships between layers.

The most major changes in the Rawlings/Bullock example were achieved in moments where the density was decreased to a single musician playing a single, relatively simple sound. The rest of the body of the piece is characterized by significantly dense, clearly defined periods of mainly continuous sounds and gestures.

- 0” The Rawlings/Bullock example¹²⁷ begins with Rawlings and Bullock both playing electronics, a stable drone tone. I am using a test oscillator. Rawlings is sporadically active with his electronics. The uneven rhythms and sudden silences are the result of the unpredictability of his system. These events ride on top of the relatively motionless droning tones, which act as the center of gravity. For the next thirty seconds, the thick, stable drone is the most salient element, and the other sounds are layered on top of it.
- 14” I switch off my oscillator and immediately begin drawing the stick of my bass bow along the bridge of my amplified bass, creating a less stable, but still continuous, sound.
- 24” I start to make some feedback with my amplifier that colors my contrabass sound.
- 30” I return to a stable tone on the oscillator.
- 40” The first major change. The structure of the piece pivots on this moment, made through a radical reduction of density and cessation of the previously established time sense. From the opening until 40” is somewhat stable but not static, with a gradually accumulating density of activity. At 40”, the density drops to almost nothing. The lead in to this change happens when all other sounds drop out except for a single mid-low tone from my oscillator, which lasts three seconds. It is the same character as the drone sounds that came before but now it is alone.
- 43” The previous sound stops and is instantly succeeded by two short, sharp bursts from Rawlings, which he creates by bowing the bridge of his cello. This moment is strikingly different from the first part of the piece, both in temporal sense and in context: two momentary sounds surrounded by silence. The temporal flow is radically

¹²⁷ See DVD 1, Chapter 12.

altered by the sudden absence of continuous sounds; the density has been reduced to one instrument. This difference is enough to force the music into a new direction and create a sense of time moving forward.

- 45” The piece returns to a single tone drone from my oscillator. The stability of the oscillator tone creates a sense of time flow that is stable, almost motionless or looping.
- 50” Rawlings begins bowing his bridge again, creating a series of short pops. The continuous tone from the oscillator and the pops from the bridge are now of roughly equal prominence. What differentiates this section from the one at 0”-40” is a more accelerated sense of time. Rawlings’ bridge bowing creates an unsettled rhythm similar to the unpredictable one he established in the first section with his electronics. The electronic continuous sound, while still a droning tone, continuously breaks up with slight changes in timbre and microtonal pitch shifts due to the unpredictable nature of the electronics. The two sounds are on more equal footing in terms of timbre, loudness, and event density.
- 1’03” The early stages begin for the next major transformation. Rawlings once again stops using his electronics and starts bowing his bridge. I begin mixing distorted feedback from my bass into the sound of my oscillator.
- 1’12” The dense feedback sound has taken over entirely and becomes the most salient quale, since it is the only sound until 1’23”.
- 1’23” At that point, Rawlings starts bowing a piece of metal strapping clamped to his bridge.¹²⁸ He starts inaudibly, but the sound gradually becomes more present.
- 1’30” The final transformation occurs. My feedback ends and Rawlings’ continuous bowing of the metal strap becomes the only sound until tapers away at 1’47”.

¹²⁸ See DVD 1, Chapter 8. Rawlings, Vic. Video interview, 20 November 2009, Somerville, MA. Rawlings found the metal strap on the road while walking to a performance. “I got really lucky with it. I’ve tried other pieces of metal... I haven’t found anything that compares to this one.... It held bricks down to a palette in the mid-90s. I’d love to have more of that material, but when I look at [modern palette straps] they’re plastic.”

Throughout its duration, the piece is moved forward by transformations of one section to another. While there is movement within some of the qualia, and others are static, it is the shifts in saliency that create a shifting focus and a progression of events.

The timeline analysis describes a fine level of detail, showing how sound events replace each other and emerge out of one another. Each subsection had its own sensation of how time moves: pure electronic tones feel almost motionless, while fuzzy, noisy textures and quick, choppy motions create a sense of rapid, directed activity.

When viewing the graphic analysis for this piece, however, I was struck by the organic quality of the progression of the piece. At no point did Rawlings or I return to exact repetitions of certain material – given the nature of Rawlings’ electronics and my use of feedback, exact repetition would be almost impossible. Nonetheless, the piece suggests a strong sense of control, probably as a result of the sudden nature of the transformations and the careful framing of unpredictable sounds within clearly defined events.

5.4.2 Liz Tonne as Instigator: The BSC at Zeitgeist, 2002¹²⁹

The first example represents the opening two minutes, seventeen seconds of a thirty minute improvised piece¹³⁰ from a live video recording of The BSC at Zeitgeist Gallery in Cambridge, MA, in 2002.

Tonne does not enter into this clip until one minute twenty-six seconds, more than halfway through. She only creates two sounds during the entire clip. Nonetheless, her contributions are very prominent, especially at her entrance when she single-handedly

¹²⁹ See DVD 1, Chapter 11. See also page 65, Appendix A, Figure 3: graphic analysis of the BSC at Zeitgeist, 2002.

¹³⁰ This piece was, in turn, the second of two during this March 2002 performance. The two pieces were titled “Intensity” and “It;” but their titles, announced at the beginning of the performance, may have been chosen in advance without an associated composition.

initiates a change between two prominent and coherent blocks of sound. Her contribution changes the direction of the whole ensemble.

Tonne sings a fairly high-pitched, rapidly wavering sound for five seconds. The sound does not have a fixed pitch, but wavers around an approximate central pitch that sinks slightly over the duration of the sound event. Tonne easily projects her unamplified voice over the amplified sounds of Stelzer and guitarist Chris Cooper. Cooper and Stelzer stop at one minute twenty-eight seconds, two seconds after Tonne starts her sound. There is no pause where Tonne is singing alone; rather, Bhub Rainey starts playing a quiet, steady tone in the same instant that Cooper and Stelzer stop playing. By the time Tonne finishes the sound event, other members of the ensemble have returned with their own sounds, but the larger qualia that they build consist primarily of strata of steady notes.

Other musicians do not imitate Tonne in this section, and her sound stands relatively alone in terms of both timbre and loudness. Nonetheless, Tonne has created a strong quale that acts as a pivot point between the dense, active noise block of Cooper/Stelzer and the more tonal, acoustic section that follows.

5.4.3 Howard Stelzer's Varying Temporality

In this section I discuss two musical excerpts that illustrate two different ways in which Stelzer deploys his sounds to create different temporalities. The first is the same two minute seventeen second excerpt of the BSC from 2002 discussed in the previous section. The second is audio clip #1 from the BSC 2008 performance.

5.4.3.1 The BSC at *Zeitgeist*, 2002¹³¹

Stelzer's contribution to this clip can be analyzed both in terms of its transformations and in terms of the structure of its larger qualia. One is up front and prominent, and one is enmeshed within a dense, dominating sound initiated by Cooper.

Seven seconds into the recording,¹³² Stelzer makes the first move, a quick gestural sound from a tape deck. Stelzer continues playing short gestural sounds irregularly from then until fifty-four seconds, with frequent long pauses. Stelzer engages in call-and-response playing as other musicians start entering with short gestural sounds of their own; the first to respond is trumpeter Greg Kelley.

Stelzer's sounds in this section are not continuous in nature, nor does he play continuously to establish a ground or a stratum. Rather, his playing initiates a disjointed temporality of short, quick moves that create short-lived momentum but little forward motion. Stelzer is pressing his fingers on the spindles of his tape decks to alter their speed, creating quick changes in register. Simultaneously he manipulates the transport controls and pause button to keep the sounds short and sudden, with silences in between.

This section is replaced by a sudden transformation at fifty-four seconds, initiated by Cooper, who is joined by Stelzer at fifty-six seconds. In this case Stelzer employs gestural sounds but in a continuous manner – he is no longer stopping the sounds frequently. But his sounds change constantly and rapidly, creating a temporally dense space quale.

¹³¹ See DVD 1, Chapter 11. See also page 65, Appendix A, Figure 3: graphic analysis of the BSC at *Zeitgeist*, 2002.

¹³² The musical beginning of this clip; I have left in seven seconds of silence starting at the zero-seconds mark.

5.4.3.2 Excerpt from the BSC at Open Sound, 2008¹³³

At the beginning of this clip, Stelzer creates a warbling sound with the pressure of his fingertips on the spools of a tape deck. This sound is both continuously variable and rooted in gesture. It changes over time from where it starts at the beginning of the clip to where it ends, at one minute, forty seconds.

Other musicians place musical figures on top of Stelzer's relatively stable landscape, but most of them are emergent events individuating themselves from the total musical material. They do not initiate transformations for the whole passage. As other musicians add their figures to this landscape, Stelzer's continuous sound maintains its prominence up until one minute thirty-two seconds.

The emergence of the next section takes approximately eight seconds. one minute thirty-two seconds is the first time that other musicians' contributions start to become more salient than Stelzer's. Other musicians enter one by one in quick succession around one minute thirty-two seconds. They play continuous tones. Liz Tonne is not the first to enter but her contribution is perhaps the most prominent, as it is somewhat louder than all the others as well as being unstable. Stelzer continues playing until that phase is over at one minute forty seconds.

What effect does Stelzer's playing have on temporality in this section, and in the BSC's sound overall? Stelzer's contribution established the overall temporality, but not alone. His sounds, while continuous, are also gestural and unpredictable. The register of this sound rises over the course of time. Stelzer is able to move easily between kinds of

¹³³ See DVD 1, Chapter 9. See also page 63, Appendix A, Figure 1: graphic analysis of the BSC at Open Sound clip.

playing in order to create different textures and time senses. Stelzer's different modes of playing are often strongly related to the different temporal senses of a quale.

5.4.4 Returning to Forms: Solo Contrabass¹³⁴

A common characteristic among the examples is that none of the pieces return to earlier sections of themselves. There is no clear recapitulation of earlier material or structures. The forms emerge organically; and rather than returning and repeating sections, a piece may fluctuate through areas that may loosely resemble earlier areas but do not reconstitute them.

An exception to this was my solo piece from an Open Sound performance in 2008. The material from the first four minutes – slowly plucked G octaves with the occasional D, and pauses in between – returns at fifteen minutes thirty seconds and lasts until nineteen minutes. The material is not repeated exactly, but the pitch material, articulation, slowness, and use of space are the same.

The two occurrences of this material have very different contexts. The first, which is the opening of the performance, is followed by very fast sliding overtones on a bowed string. The second occurrence happens after a short pause and is followed by very different material: choked plucking with the bow pressing on the strings. Thus the two nearly identical sections can be considered to stand on their own. The material – the plucked octaves – does not inherently dictate anything about the material to follow.

My intention in the moment was to bring the piece back to its starting point as a way of commencing the final stage. I could sense that I was about halfway done (though I was not using a stopwatch), and in fact the piece ended at twenty-five minutes so I was

¹³⁴ See DVD 1, Chapter 13. See also page 67, Appendix A, Figure 5: solo contrabass graphic analysis.

actually more than halfway done. Also, the piece had just come out of an active, dense, and loud portion. The return of the initial material was a sort of palate cleanser.

Going into this performance, I had not specifically planned on reiterating this particular material during the performance; the choice happened spontaneously. But I had expected to reuse some of my material at some point. When preparing for a solo performance, I often plan in advance what material I will use to start the piece, and to keep in my mind a few other kinds of material that I will most likely use during the performance.

During the solo performance I treat this material in chunks, addressing the chunks one at a time; then the goal of my performance becomes finding a way to transform these materials, to cause them to emerge from one another organically, while creating a structure that is compelling enough to draw the ear through the piece. Reiteration of material is a practical technique that allows me to start a new set of transformations from familiar ground while planting some landmarks in the flow of the piece.

Chapter 6: Self-Idiom: People, Motivations, and

Methods

6.1 Self-Idiom, Operation, and Alienation

“Music was,” according to economist Jacques Attali, “and still is, a tremendously privileged site for the analysis and revelation of new forms in our society.”¹³⁵ But as with any form of labor, the creator of music can become alienated from his or her own creation.

... 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.¹³⁶

In advance is the key phrase here: the producer of self-idiomatic improvised music engages in the operations of his or her personal musical processes, both prepared and spontaneously created, from moment to moment.

Attali uses alienation in the same sense that Karl Marx uses it: The reduction of the worker to the role of a tool, and the severing of the relationship between the worker and his or her labor. Self-idiomatic music is primarily concerned with processes and operations rather than the realization of a foregone conclusion – a composed piece of music, or the expression of an idiomatic genre for example. I offer that practitioners of self-idiomatic music are at significantly less risk of becoming strangers to what they

¹³⁵ Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977). Minneapolis, Minnesota: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006, pp. 133-134.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

produce, since in the moment of performance, the processes of production and any perceived product of that labor are indistinguishable, even inseparable from each other.¹³⁷

6.1.1 Tony Conrad: Diversification of Resources and Reconciliation of Alienation

I spoke with composer, filmmaker, and instrument builder Tony Conrad about his violins – which he customizes to accommodate various tunings and bowing techniques – and about the underground history of musical instruments from outside the mainstream. He gave me an historical context for the recent flourishing of interest in non-canonical, non-traditional instrument building, as well as instrumentalization of objects for their sounding potential.

Conrad argues that the “command structure” of the Western classical music tradition helped maintain the codification of instruments from the mid-18th century through the mid-20th century.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, outside of this structure, in folk music contexts, various instrumental developments flourished briefly and then were generally lost to history for lack of codification in notated music.

Conrad believes the history of mechanical development from the Renaissance to the 18th century was influenced as much by local developers of everyday items, such as clocks and musical instruments, as by the theoretical models of early physicists:

[I]t’s not the instruments of professionals necessarily, as much as that infrastructure that we can only understand by looking at the honest things that pop up in music instrument museums and so forth. And when you go to this resource you find that up until 1750 or so, there was an incredible

¹³⁷ This is not to say that self-idiomatic musicians cannot become alienated from the fruits of their labor at some point; the act of recording and playback can estrange them from their production. But even then the alienation may be mitigated, in cases in which self-idiomatic musicians control every step of production.

¹³⁸ Interview with Tony Conrad at the Sonic.Focus conference at Brown University, Providence, RI, 4 November 2006.

proliferation of peculiar timbres and strange designs and different modifications of instruments, borrowings from all quarters, incorporations of Celtic traditions and other subaltern peoples' traditions. So the idea that instrument making, or instrument usage, is something that's standardized and normative is really the product of the last couple hundred years and the processes of the development of a unified state – nation states – and industrial culture. And I think that it's important then for us to try to understand how this somewhat more stable condition, this more regimented condition of instrument design and usage was sustained, and why it has also begun to collapse.¹³⁹

Since the end of World War II, the advancing availability and complexity of recording and broadcasting tools has resulted in accelerated diversification and differentiation of that same technology. This diversification leads naturally to a greater diversity of expression; and that such developments go hand-in-hand with ever increasing diversity of social structure. Conrad sees this as an antidote to the alienating effect of the commercial production of instruments, which also brings musicians closer to their own production.

6.2 Breakthrough Moments, Material Contingency, and the Limits of Control

Many of the musicians I interviewed spoke about breakthrough moments – events in their lives that defined some aspect of their self-idiom in one way or another. These responses led me to ponder my own breakthrough moments, which I described earlier. Breakthrough moments tended to fall into one of two main types: Eureka moments, which often arise from the material contingency of the moment; and permission moments, which sometimes result in the musician expanding her or his notion of what

¹³⁹ Ibid.

constitutes control. Both kinds of moments led the musicians in directions they may not have found through mainstream musical experiences.

Eureka moments arise from accidents or unexpected circumstances. Vic Rawlings' discovery that touching the open circuits of his drum machine created exciting new sounds is an example of such a moment. The first time I found I could control feedback between my amplifier and my acoustic contrabass was another such moment. Eureka moments are often directly related to the reality of the instruments involved: Rawlings' drum machine was broken and he was under time pressure to fix it. But rather than fix it he accidentally took it in a new direction that has influenced his work ever since.

Permission moments usually happen when a musician has already begun to develop an interest in working with certain self-idiomatic sound material on his or her own, perhaps working on the material alone at home in practice sessions, exploring the material for pleasure. At this point the musician may not be aware of anyone else engaging in this sort of home practice. The permission moment comes when the musician sees or hears another person making music in a similar way – using similar sounds, or related techniques – and doing so in a more 'legitimate' context, such as a concert or recording studio. Liz Tonne got inspiration from Maria João in a concert video; Howard Stelzer from watching Tom Smith play a cassette machine in the spirit of a rock guitarist. Both Tonne and Stelzer understood in those moments that they could access new sounds and techniques by changing their notions of what it meant to control their instruments. Tonne, who had already been working with the vocal exercise that eschewed pitch control and clarity in favor of looseness and resonance, realized that she

could bring this different kind of control to a musical performance. Stelzer learned that he could exert *more* control over a tape deck by touching the spindles.

In order to experience these moments, the musicians had to be ready for them, even if they were unexpected. By putting themselves in positions where these events could even take place, the musicians were following their intuitions about what kind of music they wanted to make and what felt natural for them, intuitions that led them outside of mainstream idiomatic music structures and cultures. But in the case of permission moments, self-idiomatic musicians are somewhat dependent on the previous work of other musicians. The permission moments I heard in the interviews, as well as the ones I experienced myself, were created by encounters with an established subculture of self-idiom.

6.3 Transformation

Self-idiomatic musicians share a love of exploring sound possibilities through both deliberate and accidental discovery; assembling *bricolages* of resources and musical ideas, based on material contingency; and synthesizing all of these into artistry built on the continuous transformation of material and operations within negotiable limits of control. The overriding characteristic of the music I analyzed – continuous transformation, made of a combination of clearly marked events and attenuated emergence – is a result of these aesthetic bents.

The musicians I interviewed often limited their active sound vocabularies in performance – the range of sounds they actually used, out of the whole range of possibilities available to them – in order to increase their control in the moment of performance. A deliberately limited range of techniques and sounds helps a musician

give additional significance to each sound, and focuses the attention on transformation of sound material within that more limited range. Tonne's entire self-idiomatic practice consists of two techniques: the loosening exercise and a technique based on stuttered, babbled phonetics. In spite of this self-imposed restriction, or perhaps because of it, Tonne's contributions to an ensemble setting are frequently significantly prominent, and lead to transformations of the entire shape of a piece.

Several of the musicians I spoke to indicated that their primary musical priority is not to expand the range of sounds they can use, but to place those sounds in space and time, and relative to any collaborators' sounds, in the strongest way. In performance, their sensitivity to context – their musical collaborators, or simply their own sounds in a room – tends to manifest in subtle ways. Turn-on-a-dime reactivity less prominent. Changes are more often either slow, attenuated transformations, or clear and decisive starts and stops. Rather than being constructed, pieces are encouraged to grow organically.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this study I have attempted to show a cross section of the musical and cultural life of a community of Boston-area improvising musicians, including a taste of my own role in this community. I have introduced the term *self-idiomatic music* to describe an approach to musical improvisation born at the nexus of material contingency and the practitioner's management of unpredictability within a range of practical control. I also took up the term *instrumentalization* to demonstrate that self-idiomatic music is often a *bricolage* of a combination of resources.

Self-idiom is present in practically any given musical manifestation by degrees, even if it is mixed into an existing idiom. Such a discussion would be beyond the scope of this study, but it would be interesting to address the issue of self-idiom as it manifests *within* clearly idiomatic musical situations: moments of noise liberated from saxophones and guitars during otherwise easily-defined rock or jazz concerts. Self-idiomatic music does not exist outside of the act of making or listening to music; thinking about it is just a preparation for understanding musical motivations.

7.1 What is *Not* Self-Idiom?

Trying to define what is *not* self-idiom is ultimately a fruitless pursuit, since traces of self-idiom can be identified in so many different musics. But I feel I must make an effort to delineate what is *usually not* self-idiom, in order to further contextualize this study.

When is one *not* playing self-idiomatically?¹⁴⁰ Any command structure for musical

¹⁴⁰ This is not intended as a judgment against any music or musicians for being 'insufficiently self-idiomatic.'

creation is not the self-idiom of the musician who did not create that structure. This is not to say that one's self-idiom stops completely when one enters a musical command structure – such as an orchestra or rock band, or reading from a notated score. But performing from a score is primarily not self-idiomatic, unless the performer wrote it for him or herself to play, or the score involves more free improvisation than anything else.

This is not to say that a musician performing from a score is not playing his or her music. That performer's musicianship comes out in his or her interpretation, and the voluntary decision made to interpret the composers' intentions. But an original realization of a score is not the origination of an idiom. Two interpretations of the same notated score may be recognizably the same piece. Two performances by self-idiomatic musicians, or even the same musician, are not the same piece.

7.2 Command Structures

Command structures exist in self-idiomatic improvising communities and ensembles, as well as within the musical lives of individual practitioners. Improvising ensembles that have directors may still be self-idiomatic, but a certain degree of that self-idiom is dependent on how much or how little that director imposes his or her musical will. Any time one plays in a self-idiomatic ensemble, one is putting one's self-idiom at the service of the ensemble's idiom. No ensemble music is one hundred percent self-idiomatic for individual participants, but neither are the members expected to play sounds and forms that are unoriginal to them. So in a sense an ensemble is just an elaborate environment to which the self-idiomatic improviser reacts.

During the BSC's ten-year history, Bhub Rainey has been primarily responsible for organizing rehearsals and performances. The group sound has been influenced by his

aesthetic preferences, but also very much by the preferences of everyone else in the group. Rainey declines to set hard and fast rules about what can and cannot be played, and in rehearsal,¹⁴¹ open discussions are encouraged.

The BSC engaged in rehearsals on an irregular basis for the first 6 years of its history. Rehearsals most often took place after hours at Twisted Village, a basement record store in Harvard Square in Cambridge, MA. Usually the ensemble would play a short piece at the beginning of rehearsal, followed by an extensive discussion of what various members considered the strongest or weakest aspects of what was just played. Then sometimes a member, often Rainey, would suggest a simple instruction exercise for the next piece, or simply summarize the discussion to keep in mind while playing the next piece.

The BSC has no rulebook about its sound, and yet a strong musical profile has emerged. It is generally understood that certain ways of playing are not appropriate to the group sound: for example, overtly reactive playing is usually avoided, as are references to or quotations from other idioms.

7.3 Why a Handle? And Why is it Slippery?

I developed the term *self-idiomatic music* purely to attach a handle to a slippery subject. I attempted to develop a better understanding of what developed in a particular music scene over a fifteen year period, and to find ways of communicating about it that involved neither recourse to familiar genre terminology nor a plethora of musical jargon.

I started by wanting to understand all improvised music better. I succeeded a little in that direction, but soon I was faced with more questions than answers. As my research

¹⁴¹ A full discussion of BSC rehearsal technique would make an interesting study in self-idiomatic collaboration.

went on, I found I had to put a finer point on the subject: each self-idiomatic musician could be the subject of an entire study, as could each ensemble and each city.

At this point the concept of *self-idiomatic music* is not widely used. In fact, the musicians presented here usually refer to their music as simply ‘the kind of music we play’ or simply ‘this music.’ Self-idiomatic music is constantly shifting with each new participant, each performance, and each new ensemble. To classify self-idiomatic improvised music as a genre – or collection of genres – is to privilege its final products such as recordings and performances. It also raises the vague and possibly misleading question of how much improvisation went into a piece, in an effort to determine if one or another piece fits some kind of genre. Yet relational definitions are problematic. It is a tricky proposition to attach a genre name to fully improvised music that eschews intentional borrowings from other idioms.

7.4 Findings

I found that musicians thrive in the grey areas between certain control and unpredictability. “Placing that point of departure,” says composer and improviser Stephan Moore, “where my volition and constraint ends, is, for me, something that defines each new piece I work on.”¹⁴² Further, I found that musicians gain a lot of their self-idiom not from concepts (freedom, interdependence, self-idiom) but from practical considerations (how do I consistently get sounds that I like; how do I use this sound that I discovered accidentally) and the desire to create a break from pre-existing musical styles rather than a remix or mashup.

¹⁴² Moore, Stephan. E-mail correspondence, March 2010.

7.4.1 Limitations of Analysis

*The act is its metaphor; the act overrules its description.*¹⁴³

[Michel Waisvisz]

STEIM founder Michel Waisvisz's own music was based entirely on electronic instruments of his own design, and incorporated improvisation extensively; it can easily be considered self-idiomatic. His statement implies that a satisfactory discussion of his music and that of his colleagues may in fact be impossible; that the music only references itself. Any attempt to apply words to it – or any other form of description – will ultimately be trumped by the phenomenal experience of the process of hearing and making self-idiomatic music.

I have also found that many of the self-idiomatic musicians I interviewed avoided genre terms. I chose not to introduce the term *self-idiomatic* during my interviews because I felt that would either bias the informants towards speaking on my terms, or to distract them into defending against the term.

7.4.2 The Music is Not Limited by the Term

A major limitation of the concept of self-idiomatic music is that the music is not easily contained by the term. At this point the musicians themselves don't use this term; they use more casual ones, if anything at all. Self-idiomatic music, by its nature, doesn't *need to be called* self-idiomatic music. The name of the idiom is the performer.

Very often, any music with an apparently high level of responsiveness and reactivity gets called 'improv;' anything loud and electronic with no clear tonality or rhythm gets called 'noise.' Usually, because the community is so small, it is easier just to

¹⁴³ Waisvisz, Michel. <http://www.crackle.org/> (Last accessed 25 June 2010)

refer to the self-idiomatic music of their community and the global scene simply ‘this music’ or ‘the kind of music we play.’

7.5 Self-Idiomatic Music in Context

7.5.1 “Bundles of Tasks”

The creation and reception of art is contingent upon the many factors that support its creation; the artist is dependent upon a network of other people and resources, and many layers of past and current craft and labor practices. “To analyze an art world,” says sociologist Howard Becker in *Art Worlds*, “we look for its characteristic kinds of workers and the bundle of tasks each one does.”¹⁴⁴

Becker uses the music world to illustrate the importance of support networks, stating that a piece of music must always be mediated by performance or playback. He uses the example of rock musicians who gradually began to work in the control booth of recording studios: “Sound mixing, once a mere technical specialty, had become integral to the art process and recognized as such.”¹⁴⁵

The artist-as-genius stereotype, which once permeated popular culture, was created by the extreme specialization of tasks within the mainstream art worlds; specialization is a privilege of the mainstream, but one that removes a level of control from the individual artist. By contrast, the self-idiomatic musician – whose scene lacks both the financial foundation of large record labels and the backing of educational and arts institutions – must do most of the tasks him- or herself, but as a result has more total control over the nature of his or her performances, recordings, and publicity.

¹⁴⁴ Becker, Howard. *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982. p. 9.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 18.

7.5.2 Touring, Recording, and Publicity

The impact on music subcultures of the spread of Internet access since the early 1990s continues to evolve. This impact on self-idiomatic music in Boston and abroad has been strong, partly because of the scene's relative youth, and partly because of the open-ended and emergent character of its aesthetic.

The ability for scenes to connect with each other over the Internet, and the subsequent increase in self-made touring, gives the self-idiomatic music interculture a unique sense of community across great distances. Not only is affinity shared on principle, but affinities can also be discussed in real time. Networking with other practitioners and listeners becomes less formalized and business-like when it is ubiquitous and instantaneous.

Pauline Oliveros, who has faced the challenges of presenting her own self-idiomatic music for fifty years, told me that the kind of extended touring which musicians currently book for themselves was much more difficult before the spread of the Internet. Booking had to be done by letter-writing and expensive long-distance calls; only the mass-market music industry could afford the dedicated workforce required to book extensive tours. 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.¹⁴⁶

7.5.3 Sustenance and Transformation: the Makers are the Audience

How improvisers view their place in the world most likely varies from person to person and from time period to time period. However, there is a generalized sense that

¹⁴⁶ From a personal conversation with Pauline Oliveros at the International Society for Improvised Music Conference, Evanston IL, 15 December 2007.

this musical subculture, while not closed, is not for the casual fan but the active listener. As sociologist Antoine Hennion puts it, it is "... the formation of a specific competence, increasingly well-defined and self-sufficient, that makes us appreciate the works according to a regime of connoisseurship – a format that we stop seeing as we come to belong to it most naturally and intimately."¹⁴⁷

Self-idiomatic music practitioners and supporters exist in nearly complete communion. A significant proportion, often the majority, supporters are themselves practitioners. Those supporters who are not practitioners embed themselves in the community of producers and supporters as friends and peers rather than as fans orbiting around a closed community of star practitioners. Non-practitioner supporters often find ways to assist production of the music directly, such as forming booking organizations, founding small labels, and creating radio programs and podcasts.

Self-idiomatic music ensembles can be regarded as groups of empowered, autonomous individuals who self-organize into musical collectives, both spontaneous and durable; furthermore, they do not rely on the established music industry for music-making opportunities. A given ensemble will form for the sake of mutual professional aid, as well as the desire to formalize a temporary social connection. It is a community of mutual support and non-hierarchical learning and teaching.

At any performance of self-idiomatic music, it is common for half or more of the audience to consist of active practitioners. The customary fiscal relationship of performer supplying a product and audience supporting a product is largely replaced by a relationship of mutual respect and support. The individual is the idiom, ensembles are

¹⁴⁷ Hennion, Antoine. "Music and Mediation: Toward a New Sociology of Music." From *The Cultural Study of Music: a Critical Introduction*. Edited by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton. New York: Routledge, 2003. p. 87.

collections of idioms, and the community is the medium by which the idioms are expressed.

This community model predates the Internet, and was nurtured from numerous earlier technological advances.¹⁴⁸ The cassette tape allowed easy sharing of one's original music through the mail: ethnographer P.L. Manuel refers to the cassette tape as part of "...a set of interactive, accessible new media capable of 'democratic-participant' patterns of media use."¹⁴⁹

In recent years, the cassette tape has made a return as a medium of choice for self-idiomatic musicians. Tapes are cheap to produce, about as portable as iPods, and physically manifest music in a fundamentally different way from CDs, LPs and downloaded files. Part of this return may be nostalgia, or the desire to hold onto musical objects in the face of pervasive virtualization. But looked at another way, cassette tapes are an excellent companion to virtual media: cassettes tapes were the first to allow not only easy music sharing, but easy music creation on a (semi-)permanent medium. Their propensity for *bricolage*, their inherent noise, and their portability make them natural candidates for rebirth in a scene that values tactical redeployment and constant change.

7.6 Expanding a Narrow Field: The Future of this Study

At the time of this writing, a large body of scholarly work specifically engaged with the analysis of free improvisation and its communities was not available. That is not to say it does not exist; but I hope that one of the results of my work can be to make headway to creating more literature and bringing together dispersed elements of research

¹⁴⁸ In practice, the supposed equality of the Internet is contingent upon access to computers and Internet connections.

¹⁴⁹ Manuel, Peter L. *Cassette culture: popular music and technology in North India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. Pp. xv-xvi.

on the subject of freely improvised music.

To do justice to the entire scene would be well beyond the scope of this study. My research into the work of my three primary informants could be a springboard to studying other self-idiomatic musicians and their group dynamics. It is my hope that in some way the work of elucidating this unique approach to music and community will continue, not only for Boston, but also for cities and towns all over the world where these communities and aesthetics have sprung up and continue to transform.

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Appendix B: Program and publicity designs for PhD recital at EMPAC, 4 April 2009

Figure 6: Front of program

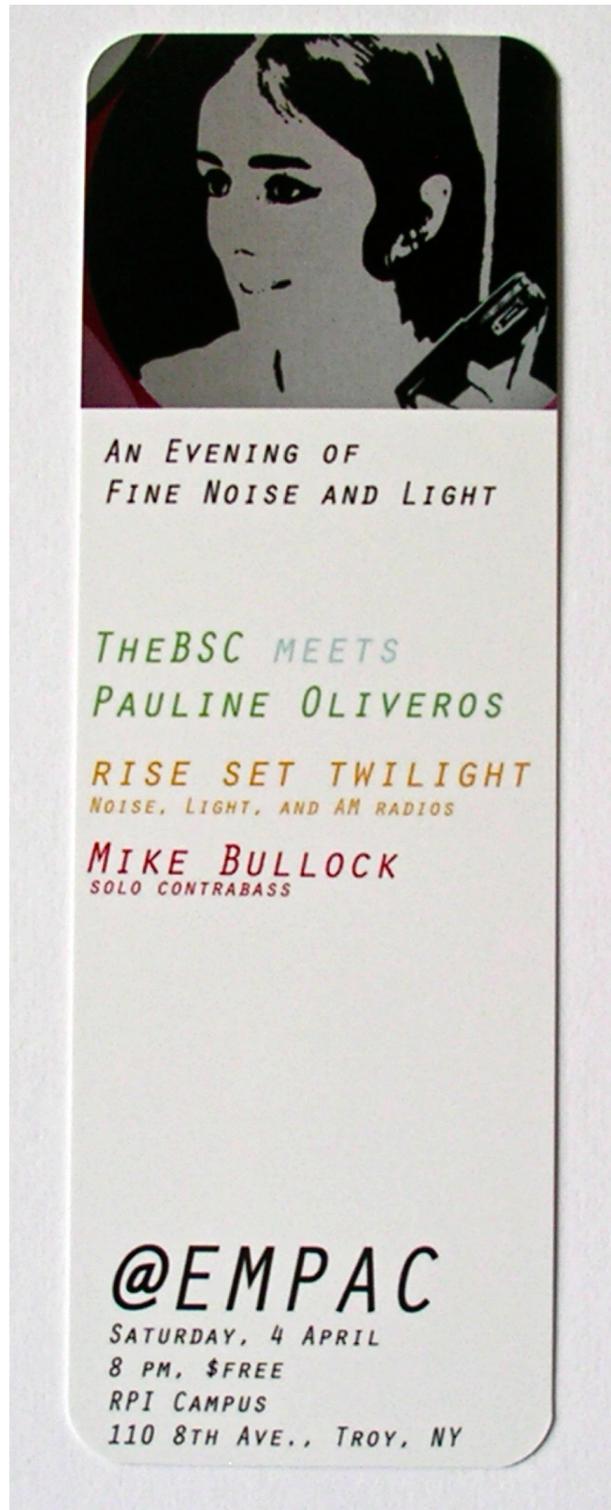


Figure 7: Back of program



Figure 8: Publicity poster

