

Interview with Warren Burt by Nina Sofo – Box Hill Institute – 26/06/11 - Improvisation

NS: What is free improvised music?

WB: This semester I taught a semester long course on free improvisation with students who were, I thought, die hard jazz improvisers. Turns out they weren't - some of them were but not a lot. I was using a technique developed by the Melbourne choreographer Al Wunder called Positive Feedback.

Al runs Theatre of the Ordinary in Fitzroy and he's taught generations of Australian improvisers in music, dance, drama etc. His technique is called positive feedback where somebody goes out and does something. He may give them a score beforehand like 'work with your fingers and toes' or 'initiator and responder' for two people but nothing really directorial. At the end, people sit down and tell the other members of the seminar what they enjoyed doing. They can't make any negative comments.

Negativity is entirely forbidden. You can only make positive comments. 'What did you like about that thing? Even if you felt terrible, find one thing you like and talk about that' and then the audience actually has to feedback but they can only make positive comments too.

The strategy here is that you have to look inside yourself as audience or performer and find out what it is you like and you're actually examining yourself, your tastes. You're really straining: 'in my tastes, is there something there I liked?' It really develops people's perceptions very quickly.

So in this improvisation seminar, now that I have read all the final papers, the papers almost unanimously had the same form. They all began: "When I first started with no changes, no rhythm, no chords to guide me, I was terrified and then the first time we did positive feedback, I wanted to cry because no one has ever said anything nice to me about my music making ever before in my life." As a teacher, I realised, yes, even though we've got modern educational methods, music education in Australia is still pretty much informed by the image of Sister Mary Magdalene with her steel ruler over the fingers while you are playing the piano droning 'thou shalt not bear false witness,' and psychologically she is still there even if physically she is not there anymore.

The papers then continued: "Once I settled into the routine of working with people, I found I really enjoyed it and by the end of the semester, I was listening more carefully to my fellow performers than I had ever done before." So on the basis of those reactions, I've decided to do this again next semester with a different group of people. We've got all the third years divided into two groups, one taught by Craig Schneider who's teaching modal improvisation, "play in dorian mode in 3/4" and I'm doing free stuff.

In the first semester we had one group with me and one group with him and now the groups swap so he's getting people who have been free and really listening to each other for six months and I'm getting people who have been doing modal improv ala Miles Davis, 1955, for six months. We're both curious to see how that transition is going to work. So that's where we are with so-called free, so-called improv.

I started off in 1968 as a music student and at that point, the genre-isation of music hadn't happened to the extent it has now. This is when total serialism was still respectable. John Cage and Milton Babbitt were not hoary figures from the past, they were middle aged men who were doing their thing. In fact, I met and talked at length with both of them at various times. You're a young kid in New York, you talk with who's around - John, Milton, and whoever else.

When I went to school at the State University of New York at Albany, the composer there was Joel Chadabe. Joel had this strategy where if a guest came to Albany and you were in the composition class, you were then that guest's technical assistant/slave for the next few days. "So, Warren, this is Alvin, he needs sixteen tape recorders, can you get them for him please?" "Sixteen tape recorders?" So struggle, struggle. That was Alvin Lucier with his premiere of his piece, "The only talking machine of its kind in the world." "Warren, Randy and Peter, this is John (Cage) and he is doing a very big piece in two weeks and we need to get everything together for it". "What's everything?" "Everything is forty eight tape recorders and twenty five slide projectors and ten movie projectors. Oh, and between 3 and 7 harpsichords." "Sure, we can do that". That was the performance of HPSCHD - the second performance of HPSCHD. You were just apprenticed and that was some of the best training I had ever had in my life. You go to work with people and they didn't become gods, they were just folks. My best memory of that is how incredibly picky John Cage was with technology, taking a loudspeaker and moving it five centimeters to hear the difference. Man, the guy knew his acoustics. Just amazing.

So we had everybody from indeterminists, total serialists, computer people to free improvisers coming along and you did it all. There was no specialisation. I wrote pieces for orchestra and, as a young composer, got it played which is more than has happened in Australia where historically there has been absolute apartheid between all the musical genres. I hope the word apartheid is offensive. I mean to cause offense with it to show idiotic the division is here. Why should one person write for orchestra, one person write for chamber forces, one person improvise, one person play electronics? With the younger generations fortunately, this is not so much the case anymore.

Also, when you're dealing with technology, one of the interesting issues I have had for years working with improvising dancers and actors is I'll bring along a piece of technology and I've had to program it beforehand. I'm still improvising with it but I've had to invent my instrument. They go out there and the only thing they have is their body. They improvise with their body and I'm improvising with my instrument and it's like I have to rebuild a guitar, or build a new guitar for every performance. Some of them had a problem with that. Is this really improv? I would say yes it is, I am improvising with an instrument I built. Sometimes the reaction was, "Oh, you're the gadget man."

There is man in Tasmania named Leigh Hobba who started off as a composer and then morphed into a video and visual artist. He had this idea that musicians have a real psychological problem that they can't relate to the world directly so they relate through their instrument. So to show this as a metaphor, he had himself buried alive with only the clarinet sticking above the ground as his breathing tube. He stayed underground for several hours and this was recorded. They got him out but it was psychologically terrifying. He was making the point about musicians that relate to the world thru their instrument, and not as human beings. Shortly thereafter he gave up the clarinet, he was liberated from it and now, mischievously, I think maybe he could buried alive with a video camera! You know, that continual quest to 'get out of whatever cage you are in'.

Improvisation is when you make it up on the spot. For example, in San Francisco, there is an interesting composer, performer, improviser called Phillip Greenlief. He will sit down with his clarinet and there will be a number of contemporary scores in front of him and he will improvise taking one measure from this and one measure from that and treat the whole thing as a non-directional maze through which to travel. That's an interesting combination of a performer and all his note reading skills, improvisation and a collage-based sensitivity.

NS: What attracts you to Free Improvised Music that you find motivating to create in this way?

WB: At the moment, I have three compositional projects on the boil. One is an improvised piece that I'll perform at the Australasian Computer Music Conference next week (July 6, 2011) where I have made a whole bunch of sounds modifying bird calls. ("The Bird is the Word") I'll have my little netbook and little box of sliders and I'll be improvising a mix with twenty eight different long sound files of thirty seconds to two minutes each. There is more material that can be played in ten minutes so every time I go through it, I'm improvising a mix.

Secondly, I am working on an algorithmic thing where I have a computer program that is generating drawings and those drawings are realised as spectrograms - as little sound shapes. Another computer program then tells me where to place them on the score, and whether they'll be high or low, long or short. So that is working in a very refined way with say, a Xenakis or Cagean idea of the found object and the tightly controlled found object. A lot of it is out of my control, but I'm also being very particular about the processes that generate the found objects. ("20 Sounds for Kenneth Gaburo (After Herbert Brun's Mutatis Mutandis)")

The third thing I am working on is a twelve tone piano piece. ("Isopathologus I", by Yellow Hippo) There is nothing improvised at all about that. I'm doing a whole series of pieces which are not done by me but by a little imaginary character who writes 12 tone music as if he were a child. For example, take one note of the tone row and make that every other note in the piece! Why not? So at the moment, I'm working on three different things. I like to do it all.

Free improvisation is one more way, and a particularly efficient way at that, of making sound. There is also that moment of live performance where you are in front of an audience and absorbing their energy as well. That's fascinating. I worked for ten to twelve years almost as a musician in residence at Al Wunder's Theatre of the Ordinary. That also involved dance and dramatic improvisation. I've always had a bit of a theatrical hack aspect to my personality and improvisation is a good way to indulge the theatricality whereas it is much harder to indulge theatricality when you are putting a dot on a page.

NS: Who and what has influenced you in your arts practice?

WB: In terms of improvisation, Pauline Oliveros. She was a mentor of mine in San Diego and was very important to me in terms of improvisation. Also her teacher who was my teacher as well, Robert Erickson. He actually had one of the first free improv groups in the U.S. in the late fifties/early sixties working with people like Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley and Loren Rush who were all his students.

Another person in terms of improvisation would be a friend from San Diego, Ronald Al Robboy, who's a cellist in the San Diego Symphony and was one of the leaders in the Klezmer revival in the U.S. He's also quite an amazing Yiddish scholar, has a series of papers coming out pointing out the role of Yiddish musicians in New York in the foundation of Broadway and jazz. We think that jazz is where you have black music and European marches, however he's pointing out that it is much more complex than that as we have to include the Klezmer musicians who played with everybody in the equation

I was in a band with him in San Diego called Fatty Acid. We played the popular classics badly. (Popular classics such as Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" and Wagner's "Tristan Prelude and Liebestod.") We were made up of violin, mandolin and accordion, usually. I had been a very

good accordion player, but forgot to practice for a few years. Being in this group was very influential on me because we were learning to play in a funny way but also taking our scores seriously. Our performances were basically comedy but then we listened to them as if they were a new form of neoclassicism. Our take was that as Stravinsky had taken classical music and then refined it through the lens of his European modernist sensibility, we were taking pieces and refining them through our lack of technique and skill. That was actually liberating for me as I lost a lot of my inhibitions of being a total idiot in public with that.

Then also influential are people I've worked with: Chris Mann, Eva Karczag, Ron Nagorcka, Ernie Althoff, Ros Bandt. All of us were involved with improvisation and composition, as was another person I met in the 1970s, David Tolley.

Al Wunder is critical and there is also an actor who teaches improvisatory theatre, now in England, who was in Melbourne for many years, John Britton.

NS: Have there been any community structures in place for the intentional development of Free Improvised Music in Melbourne that you have been involved with? Where?/How?

WB: I was a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego and Ron Nagorcka was there that same year. On the Faculty at UCSD at that time was Keith Humble. Keith had been involved in Paris with the Centre de Musique which was funded by the American Centre for Students and Artists in 1959. This was set up as a community resource. He'd been working with people like Jean-Charles Francois, Joel Chadabe and Giuseppe Englert, all in Paris at the time, who were the non-establishment. Boulez and friends were the establishment.

In the same spirit in which they founded the Centre de Musique in Paris, Humble and Francois set up the Atomic Cafe at UCSD as a resource for the Graduate Students. They said there should be a forum where the postgrads could perform. So he gave me, Nagorcka and Tom Nunn (who has since become one of the major forces in improvisation and instrument invention in the US) the task of setting up the Atomic Café. We did so, and it featured regular performances of improvisation, composition, performance art, etc.

This was in 1973-75. In late 1974, Humble recruited me to teach at La Trobe. I arrived in Australia in July 1975, on the same plane with Ron Nagorcka, who shortly began teaching at Melbourne State College which existed as a separate institution then. Ron had also been involved in Melbourne in 1970-72 with setting up the New Music Centre which had a place out in Flemington Road. That had broken up with all sorts of rancor and acrimony over various issues, so Ron was concerned that we set up a new place that didn't have the problems that the New Music Centre had. So the first rule was that no money was to be involved. We're talking anarchy here. No money paid to performers, composers and can we get space that is free? It was free at first - the Organ Factory at Clifton Hill. Then, they eventually charged rent so we had to charge admission. It was a buck per person and over the course of the year, you got a jar of coins that could pay the rent but we didn't regard that as too much of a compromise.

The whole idea behind of Clifton Hill was not to make careers for people but to give a lot of opportunities. Then we had other rules. We had minimal equipment so people had to bring their own gear. I think we had loudspeakers that nobody wanted to use.

In 1975, early 1976, we did a test run both at La Mama Theatre and the Student's Church (the Armenian Apostolic church) in Carlton. We also did an electronic music festival down there in early 1976 called Gardens and Galleries, an international electronic festival. Those venues worked so we knew Clifton Hill would be viable.

Clifton Hill didn't have anyone in charge but had a co-ordinator and it was a good example of anarchic organisation which meant someone had to do the work and the co-ordinator's position

shifted around to various people. It ran from 1976 to 1983. Coincidentally, Clifton Hill got their first grant from Arts Victoria in 1983. That was the year that Ernie Althoff and Robert Goodge were the coordinators along with Andrew Preston, and they couldn't get enough people to fill the season. They said the momentum of Clifton Hill has gone so they returned the grant and closed it down.

It's a great example and more organisations should copy it. The whole purpose was to be outside the economy and it worked successfully and like all things, it came to an end. It had done its job, time to put it to bed, and so it was.

A couple of years later there was a artist/sculptor named Geraldine Temple who at the time was living in a very large house in Caulfield which had a 19th century music room with big glass windows looking out into a garden. She offered her living room as a place to do concerts and for two years we did a bunch of things there. It was called the "Geraldine Lounge Room Series".

Then Ernie Althoff, Caroline Connors, Brigid Burke and myself approached the City of St Kilda to see if this new place called Linden Gallery would be available, so we were there from 1986 to 1994. We got to use it on Sunday once a month for free. Then they got a new administrator who ran things strictly by the book. Within three months we decided to discontinue the series. That was o.k. because, again, it had fulfilled its purpose.

With Clifton Hill, people were invited to do half a concert of their own stuff; however, at Linden we put together programs that would be six people with ten minute sets, three first half and three the second half with five minutes to set up between acts. We tried to mix it up as much as possible. So, for example, we had Jas Duke, the sound poet just before Darryl Buckley played a Milton Babbitt piece on his ten string guitar just before a free improv group. We wanted to have the whole variety of contemporary music, mixing it up and that went on for seven or eight years once a month.

At that point, other things were also starting to happen. The Melbourne Improvisers Association, in the mid-eighties, maybe around 1983-84, had already begun doing a series of things in various places around town. The demise of the Linden Series just meant there were other things to do and at that point, I became very involved and worked intensely with Al Wunder and the Theatre of the Ordinary. So for ten years, that was my main place, originally in Richmond, and it then moved to Cecil Street in Fitzroy.

I made a point in an essay of mine in the early 2000's, I was doing things at the Make It Up Club and also with the Cecil Street dancers and I pointed out that the predominant influence at the MIUC was tobacco and alcohol and the audience talking during the performing whereas at the Cecil St studios, there was a holier than thou attitude towards the body and yoga and Pilates, and the audience listened to, and watched, the performance very intently. I found it much more rewarding aesthetically to be involved with the yoga and Pilates crowd than the "higher, faster, louder," tobacco and alcohol crowd even though I played there. Today, I like Bar Open more than The Planet Café, where the MIUC started, across the road. The Planet had much worse acoustics than Bar Open. Bar Open has a cuddly feel in comparison.

These various venues come and go and have their own lifespan. Sometimes a new generation takes over and continues a series in the same place and sometimes a new generation goes off and does something on their own. I'm old enough now not to be emotionally attached to any particular place but also because of personal circumstances, mostly health problems, I haven't had the energy to organise things, currently I'm now relying on other people to organize things.

I do have an idea, now that I am living in Daylesford. On the top of Wombat Hill in Daylesford is the Botanical Garden and it has a nineteenth century rotunda. The Metropolitan Opera in New York is doing "The Met live in HD" where a number of their operas are videoed and then those videos are sent live via satellite to theatres all around the world including Her Majesty's in Ballarat, the Cinema Nova in Carlton, and The Sun in Yarraville. I had an idea of something a little more low tech like "Daylesford Live in HD." You get a whole group of friends who come and do a ten minute unannounced guerilla performance in the rotunda which is videotaped, then these recordings are edited and put on YouTube. We send a glossy brochure, which is actually just a pdf, to everyone about these performances on YouTube. (I wanted to do this in the Summer of 2011-2012, but it didn't happen, alas. Maybe next year.)

About the music scene, this is an artist-driven scene, not curator-driven scene. In fact, one of the problems that Clifton Hill had was when the curators discovered it, and began promoting any particular performer at the expense of the others. To sound Marxist (and intentionally so) about it, Clifton Hill was workers providing their own means of production, dissemination, and performance and I think that is still a set of principles that is really valid.

Mind you, if an organizer with a big fat grant came along, I wouldn't say no. I actually made my living from grants from 1981 to 2001. I was a freelance composer and very involved in applying for grants and being on grant panels. The Australia Council has an awful statement in their book: 'fairness and the appearance of fairness must be paramount'. As hypocritical as that statement is, the Australia Council actually works and runs very well. In the mid 1980's I was invited to be on the Australia Council panel and there were a couple of people there that I thought would be enormously biased towards their students. Not surprisingly, they had the same opinion of me. When we got there, it turned out that nobody was biased towards anybody's students. I was amazed and delighted at how fairly the process runs.

NS: How progressive/conservative has Melbourne been in supporting and promoting your music?

WB: The answer is both. The Melbourne establishment: the Lord Mayor and that crowd; the management of the symphony, historically has been enormously conservative and resistant to change. Mind you, we're talking about people who put on the Metropolis Series so they're no longer that conservative but in general, one can fairly say that they're to a greater or lesser degree, conservative and resistant to change. On the other hand, the Melbourne underground and middle ground is enormously adventurous and progressive. Let's be parochial: Melbourne is the best city for the arts in Australia. One of the reasons is that we never had the real estate disaster that Sydney is. In Sydney you really have to work hard to find someplace to do things. It may be in the future that real estate is harder to find here. Yet you see people with no money renting garages in Brunswick and turning them into venues and that's happening all the time. The City of Melbourne has created venues like the Meat Market and the North Melbourne Town Hall. You have to get a grant to be able to afford those places but the cost is not that great and the City of Melbourne wants things to happen in their venues. Sydney City Council sent people to meet with Melbourne City Council to ask how we make it so populist based and vital.

They didn't realize that since the 80's Melbourne has had an underground artist culture. By the way, I mean the 1880's. It's been a continuous thing. For example, there was a water engineer named Alfred Deakin and before he got into politics, he was a poet and a psychic. He sat down every week, put himself into a trance and channeled a one act play. He was involved at this time with what became the Victorian Spiritualists Union. Every Friday night, he would get his friends and perform this play. Some of his friends who performed were people like Tom Roberts, the artist. This happened for a year or two, every Friday night! In the Deakin archives at the National

Library, apparently there is a pile of blue books. Every morning, Alfred Deakin would put himself into a trance and channel a prayer. There is a pile of blue books filled with a lifetime of psychic research by the Prime Minister of Australia. This is the culture of Melbourne. In the 1920's-30's, there was a woman who came back from studying overseas called Margaret Sutherland. She organized concerts everywhere, playing her own pieces and the classics as well as pieces as pieces by her friends in Europe: people like Francis Poulenc, Arnold Bax, etc.

In the 1950's Felix Werder, Margaret Sutherland, Dorian Le Gallieine, Keith Humble and George Dreyfus were all organising concerts which were at the Assembly Hall in Melbourne. Felix remembers staying up with Margaret until two in the morning arguing the toss between continuing neoclassicism or investigating the twelve tone system. This led to Sutherland's twelve tone work of the late 1950's and 60s and also Felix's very little known neo-classical works of the early 1950's. Between all these diverse composers there was a spirit of co-operation.

Felix has a poster in his studio advertising a concert at the Assembly Hall in 1953 and the poster is painted by Leonard French. The arts at that time were connected like crazy! (They still are, as far as I can see.) Like I said, Melbourne has had a radical underground culture since the 80's, the 1880's. No city council intervention can buy that. You can't legislate that from the top down. What you can do is to make sure things are in place so that art will happen when opportunities become available. There will always be the younger generation with fire in their belly that will want to do something.

NS: What do you think is required in approaching Free Improvised Music pedagogically for primary, secondary or tertiary institutions to assist in developing it's creative practice?

WB: As an undergraduate student at the State University of New York at Albany in the late 1960s, we had a course called something like "The Arts: 1600 to 1950." It was taught by a composer, a sculptor and a poet and every week we studied a work of literature, a work of visual art and a work of music from a particular period in fifty year increments. There's the birth of tonality, the birth of the novel and the birth of perspective all happening at the same time around 1600. Then there's the death of the novel, death of tonality and the death of perspective in 1900 taking place at the same time.

Finally it comes to the point where you say that there is no such thing as music, literature, dance, drama. There is only art and you can choose to realise it in various ways. Some people will be better physically at dance than others for example. Your mind can range freely and you don't have to be limited between one particular thing or another.

On another tangent, Al Wunder of Theatre of the Ordinary and John Britton are both genius teachers and mentors of free improvisational ideas. John Britton got absorbed by The University of Huddersfield in England. (Although most recently, he seems to be doing mostly freelance teaching once again.) Al Wunder has been outside the academy all his life. I got him to do a workshop here at Box Hill last semester and the students just loved it. I think that sort of training needs to get more into musical thinking and giving people the chance to just do it. Educationally, improvisation should be treated as a source of joy and material rather than a source of terror.

Educators generally pick up on ideas that are thirty, forty, fifty years old. There is a friend of mine who is very much involved in radical education. He's got a whole screed, a manifesto poem of what teachers get wrong in terms of the education biz and the last line is "Fuck, I hate teachers." You can see what he means because of the frustration of someone who goes through the education process.

At the moment, I am forced to take a course in the Diploma of Vocational Education Training Practice. (I've since completed it.) I was mentioning to the teacher that a friend found this three hour lecture by Milton Babbitt given in 1974, converted it to mp3 and I've been listening to it and everything the education teacher says not to do, Babbitt does and it is thrilling to listen to. The teacher said "the techniques we are teaching you are for everyday normal people. If someone is a genius then you are going to listen to them"

I thought it sad that we are being taught to teach normality. This can be viewed as teaching mediocrity in a mediocre manner. What's wrong instead with finding ways of teaching to raise everyone up to a level as if they could be geniuses?

I don't things have gone backwards but what I do notice, in just about every aspect of society, the market mentality has become predominant. You play a weird sound to a person and they say it is 'like this movie' or 'it sounds like Brian Eno'. The only reason they know it is from that movie or it is by Brian Eno is because they are the people who have had economic success and so their product has been available. (Mind you, I'm not putting down movies or a fine artist like Brian Eno.)

When are we going to teach music students, especially people involved in music business studies, to free their mind from the shackles of the market? Labor party policies today are to the right of what the Liberal Party policies were in the 1970's and that is sad because it shows to what degree the market has taken over. That means narrow minded middle class businessmen are calling the shots, or are trying to. They control the media, control what people think, control the languagebut people still have the ability to make their own culture.