

The Future of Improvisation

In music, there is analysis of how the art form has evolved over time, and occasional predictions of where it may go, but this is largely limited to the arena of composed musical forms.

We've seen diatonic harmony evolve into chromatic harmony, and then into 12-tone systems, microtonal systems. We've seen blues evolve into rock and jazz. We've seen R&B and gospel evolve into rap and hip-hop. We've seen them all blend, incorporate world music elements, electronic music, and also fragment into dozens of genres and styles and niches.

But one kind of music, from which it can be argued all music descends, evolves only on a much different level, and that is improvised music. I would posit that if music improvised by humans should evolve in some fashion, it must be because the human that generates the improvisation has himself evolved.

On a recent visit to the wonderful and unique Musical Instrument Museum in Scottsdale, AZ we toured the amazing collection of noisemakers from around the world. Every human culture has made and played musical instruments. There, you could obviously see that primitive man made primitive instruments, sometimes capable of only one or two notes, and only one or two possible timbres. Using whatever materials was at hand to make them. And you can see the evolution of musical instruments through time.

As craft, engineering, creation, industry, and manufacturing evolved, so too the kinds and range and abilities of the instruments made evolved. Most recently, in the industrial and computer age, we evolved instruments that do not need humans to play them at all; indeed they could generate music with little human intervention beyond the initial programming.

One should acknowledge that the influence of the tool-makers (and we increasingly look at our musical instruments as tools to make music with) is not just on the tools themselves. Good design and innovation evolves the tool, and in return the new abilities afforded by the tool evolves the tool user.

An example of this is the use of MIDI. If a piano player embraces and learns how to effectively utilize MIDI potential, they can now orchestrate in the very real sense of the word, playing all the other instrument parts. But MIDI doesn't teach the pianist how to articulate notes like a guitarist or a flautist—the pianist must become more knowledgeable in all instruments' abilities and peculiarities if he is to effectively emulate them via MIDI.

As a result of evolving technology, the musician seeking to take advantage of the new tools must also learn new technical abilities. A lot of musicians now learn computers, programming, and technical troubleshooting of software and hardware, in addition to practicing and studying music and its creation.

So, the tools have evolved, and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Also, musicians have incorporated elements of other culture's music, and musical traditions into their own musical expression. So as these influences gain hold on the musician's panoply of modes of expression, they must also come out in their improvisations.

There are obvious benefits to this for all concerned. The improvisations a musician is capable of expressing gain depth, nuance, cultural variety, and by virtue of the technology available, greater tonal and expressive abilities. You can, at almost any time nowadays, hear spectral elements and timbres no conventional instrument has ever made. If texture of sounds is as large a part of musical enjoyment as any other aspect, then we are truly in a golden age regarding this. Synthesizers make any sound conceivable, and many sounds that are inconceivable!

But where might all this take us next? That's what we will explore in the next section.

If improvisation is all about expression, then enhancing or expanding modes of expression should positively affect improvisations.

But this has not really been the case for all improvisers. Many of the tools in use today, like computers and software, are really not geared at all towards spontaneous creativity. If you have the time and inclination, you can program your synth and configure your software and hardware to make the sounds you want to use, but there is no good way to do this on the spot.

The following may get technical, and I apologize in advance to the layman reader, but it must be said: choosing preset sounds, pre-programmed rhythms, and pre-created sample and loops imply pre-meditated preparation, and are not really pure improvisation in the sense of making EVERYTHING up spontaneously.

In fact, due to current technological limitations, this will always be true. The age of pure improvisation has not yet come, if you take this stance, and will only be here when the actual man-machine interface is perfected reality. If I can instantly think it, and then my musical tools can do it as I think it, then we will have the perfect melding of technical abilities and musical expression.

But right now, this is science fiction. If we allow for the possibility that a little premeditation can be allowed into our improvisational milieu, then there is quite a bit that can be done quite handily in the now and near future.

For instance, if we don't know what sampled items we are going to use, and we choose spontaneously based on the musical moment we are in, then this justifies having a whole collection of random samples to choose from when playing live improvisations, in the same manner a percussionist may bring all manner of things to bang on, not knowing which he will choose to play until the moment comes and

the selection of instrument is made. If you consider samples, presets, parameters and such digitally available items to be fundamentally no different choices than which guitar to pick up, or stomp-box to select, or even note to play, then these are all valid improvisational choices. The only difference is one of layered complexity—you could be randomly spontaneously choosing a single tone from a single instrument, or randomly spontaneously choosing a multi-layered ambient bed of sampled tones to be your expressive munitions of choice.

But again, where is the future of this going? Will it just be more complexity in choices, delivered faster and faster? Where is the sense of improvisation's evolution itself going to occur? This, I would argue, is not a moot or rhetorical question with no real answer, rather, it is demonstrably shown that throughout history the complexity of emotion that the improviser learns to express is the key evolving element, not the technology, or even the individual notes themselves.

For example, up until chromatic harmony became the norm, many chords were considered too dissonant to play. Music teachers suggested certain chords and progressions be avoided, lest the audience find the music unrelatable to their common experience. Common experience was the facet that popular music addressed. When searching for ways to express less common or more complex emotions non-verbally, the musician composer had to reach for less common and more complex chord voicings.

Emotions of joy and sorrow are commonly easy to express in music, using major and minor chords. But how does one express a complex or conflicted emotional state? The flip answer is you play Jazz. But the truth is that complexity in emotion required complexity in musical elements. Thus, chromatic and extended harmony, longer and more complex melodies, intricate and even polyrhythmic metrics became more common until universally accepted as part of the well-rounded musicians' available vocabulary.

The word 'vocabulary' is particularly apt, since if music is about communicating expression, then the conversation may need much more nuanced complexity than knowing only few words can provide. Indeed, the more musical vocabulary a musician possesses, the easier it is for them to frame and submit a complex musical idea to the audience.

So, as spoken language evolves by adding words to our vocabulary for things that never existed in earlier times, so too will musical vocabulary potentially add elements that can more effectively render the newer ideas and emotions that may enter the cultural landscape and the zeitgeist of human ideas. This must happen for music to keep pace with the artistic temperament of it's times.

That is not to say old music is unneeded—that would be like saying old ideas or old books are unneeded. Instead, we build new music on the shoulders of the musical giants who came before us, taking their concepts and ideas and sounds to new levels by virtue of the contemporary outlook and available technologies.

For the listener this is pretty transparent—new music is said to be only 30% truly new or listeners find it too strange to digest; it must be 70% like things they have heard before in order for them to relate to it well. That's pretty cynical, but its also largely accurate. Truly innovative music often finds few listeners when it comes out—sometimes not finding general acceptance until years after it's creation.

For the creative improviser really looking to say the newest of new things with their expression, this is depressing news. It means that just like with language, you cannot walk into a room of English speakers and speak a whole new language to them and expect to be well understood. Maybe if 70% of your words resemble others they already know, you can maybe get your point across. If you are an improviser, you are communicating non-verbally, but you are still trying to communicate in a way that the audience can relate to. Improvisers have had to take the method used by parents of finicky children throughout time, and sneak the kid the veggies by hiding them inside a more familiar and well-liked dish, if they are to have any success in feeding new things to the audience at all.

So, while no one can predict the future, one can safely say that as long as humans evolve, their modes of communication will likely evolve as well. If you take as a given that music is a form of expressive non-verbal communication, in other words one of the common modalities that humans routinely use, like language or representational art, then music should evolve too.

For improvisers, then, the job is ushering musical change into the world, feeding the evolution of the forms of music into people's ears, showing them that they now have a new item of vocabulary in the ancient human language of musical expression.

This is our challenge as improvisers. We are supposed to be at the cutting edge of expression, saying something vital and new every time we open our mouths, hearts, and minds to express in some way today a thing that could not be expressed yesterday. Some people like to think that everything that can be said or written or expressed has been expressed already, but this is observationally proven wrong. As long as there is evolution, there will eventually be new things to say as well.

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