Andrea Neumann's reflection text #1

Improvising with humans and improvising with machines

Reflections seven months into the project

How I got to improvisation

After my education as a classical piano player it broadened my horizon to uncover a form of music in which one's own vision—that is to say, one's own hearing—accounts for the foundation, the source, the impulse for everything that makes a sound; a music that makes it possible, under the name 'improvised' music, to create the kinds of sounds one wishes, under one condition: the decisions made must be responsible to one's own feel for aesthetics. Hence, it is a musical practice in which musical interrelations come into being because of the free decisions made by participants regarding what sounds they would like to make and when, while being exempt from any higher authority; a practice in which a 'master plan' lies *between* the participants—not over them, not forced onto them from the outside, not determined in advance—but between them.

Improvising with self-developed material

Playing with self-developed material arising from sound research presupposes a high degree of presence as regards listening while performing. I am more sure of the 'legitimacy' of the result when striking a chord on the piano than I am when I rub against a bamboo rod stuck between the strings. The sound of the bamboo rod is legitimized first and foremost by my considering it presentable. Therefore I must generate it each time in such a way that is convincing to me. Since it sounds a little bit different each time, I have to pay close attention and modulate the sound so that I like it (depending, of course, on the context in which it is made). Furthermore, the deviations of the resulting sound have an influence on how the further course of the music will take shape. If, for example, the loose bamboo skin emanates a higher frequency, it could perhaps inspire the addition of another high frequency, different than if a deeper frequency had been emanated.

The music shows me what I want.

This way of listening to oneself while playing and having the freedom to take what one hears as inspiration for the next musical decision is a great quality of the open form of playing. In the best case, the presence of the performers, their 'forming in the moment' is transferred to the mode of listening amongst the audience, which thereby can also enter a state of 'listening to the now'. This 'trusting oneself while forming the now' is, in my opinion, the best prerequisite for this music.

When does music/improvisation "work"

I think it is great when each action by each musician is perceived by every participant. It is possible that an event, as quiet as it may be, changes the total musical arrangement, as is the case with a mobile, where the movement of every element entails a change in every other element. The feeling that emerges from such a musical arrangement, a feeling of 'hearing and being heard', is, for me, one of the exceptional qualities of this direction in music.

How do I want to improvise now

For me an ideal condition to improvise was wakefulness: being at any moment able to change material, context, form. I didn't want to establish a certain style of playing (for example playing mainly with long notes, or mainly with harsh noise) and to stick to it without listening/without "alert" but wanted to be able to interrupt it at any moment. That leaded to a practice that before a material/a theme got completely established it got already replaced by another. At this moment of my musical live I'm questioning that way of playing. I'm looking for a way to combine wakefulness with exploring *one* musical area and to be aware of changes that can happen inside this musical field without feeling forced to jump to another area.

Musical interests (beyond improvisation)

My interest is about musical collaboration that find over time their own musical language, about research what kinds of music I can create with the mainly abstract material that I developed on my instrument (how "concrete", how close to other genres of music - songs, minimal techno, noise,…. it can get), about how I can use it in different contexts such as music theatre, audio drama, reading, opera.

Another interest of mine lies in the physicality/performativity /theatricality of performing music – how the body is involved in playing music, what kind of physical posture you chose to play your instruments, what does it tell about your music, …

Playing with humans

I like to communicate through music, to negotiate different ideas and different aesthetic preferences among musicians – the friction that occurs and how to deal with it.

I like the challenge to be aware of my own wishes and to be able to follow them as much as being aware of what others do. I like the closeness that emerges by playing music together that is completely different from closeness created by talking. The very unique encounter with the personalities of musicians that might not be apparent outside of the music.

Playing with machines

When I was asked to take part in GI project I assumed my role to be a sort of guinea pig that would feed the researchers with experiences from the practical field. I was interested in being part of an artistic research project; interested in experimenting under certain circumstances, documenting the outcome, documenting my thoughts, feelings about it, reflect it, experiment again….

After several meetings with the group I found out that the project asks me to be researcher *and* guinea pig – that I have to follow my genuine questions and interests; that the four of us will work with our individual agenda that is different for everyone and that we would meet to exchange our experiences of our different approaches.

Encountering

Until now I found out that one of my crucial motivations playing music is "encounter". Improvising together means to meet each other in a non-rational way. My plan is to encounter my three colleagues by playing with their archives through Kim-Autos filter. For sure this is an encounter around the corner.

Playing with Kim-Auto –at the moment- increases my wish for fixed structures. I want to find out what kind of material works with Kim-Auto's responses and compose a piece with that. What seems to me relevant playing with humans (meander together and try out different materials to find out what works, …) doesn't feel satisfying with Kim-Auto because there is no development respectively there is only development on my side; there is no joint process.

Wishes towards the machine
I would like that Kim-Auto's output makes me aware of possibilities in sound that I didn't hear/know yet and that this would change my way of playing/of looking for sounds.

Challenges
In theory, I'm intrigued by G. Lewis argument (in his article *Why do we want our computers to improvise*, chap. 9 in *The Oxford handbook of Algorithmic Music* edited by A. Mclean and R. Dean*)* that machines don't have identities (gender, race, status in live,….) and playing with them deliberates you from a fixed identity. Practically on the other hand, I have to find out in what *way* this can be advantageous for *my* music.
In human encounters there are always expectations and projections and even feedbacks of projections. I can project into Kim-Auto but I will project into emptiness and it won't project anything back. I will be confronted with my own projections. Playing with Kim-Auto might be like being reflected by a mirror. Or it suggests that you interact with the emptiness (where you send your projections) as it was your partner.

Sometimes when we phrase our visions of Kim-Auto (it should learn to listen, it should be on the same eye level) I get scared and ask myself if I really want a machine being as human-like as possible.

Andrea Neumann, June 2018