

# Improvising with humans and improvising with machines

Reflections seven months into the project

*Kim Auto, the machine, records random bits and pieces of what I play when improvising with it. It can alter pitch and playback speed. It can cut up the recordings into small pieces and switch quickly between materials. It can play on random volumes. It does not listen yet. It does not take into consideration what I am doing. It does not judge. It is a non-caring machine at the moment. But we still play together.*

My musical identity? I write songs and lyrics. I improvise, meaning I change songs on the spot, add new parts, different instrumentations, other sounds. In the playing situation I let the preconceived material and my improvisational practice meet. They oscillate. This is how I compose the present moment. I use improvisation as a tool to develop or transform compositions, to create new material and to develop compositions in an interplay with other humans. Our music spans from very simple to complex and abstract, and we often use improvisation to move on that axis.

In periods, I have been varying between anxiety-driven and anxiety-paralyzed in my life and work. My anxiety has acted as a driving force, my music has tried to describe it, understand it, analyze it, open it up. I have lots of strategies trying to soften the anxiety or avoid it. In my musical work, having the anxiety as a sort of ubiquitous carpet or mist around it all, I came to a point where I no longer saw it as nothing but dangerous and unpleasant. The dull stomach-feeling or restlessness can act as a gentle push to explore something, a sneak-peak into the unknown or a slight insecurity that makes me question what I am doing. Improvisation is a tool to explore this uncertainty, this mixture of void and ant's nest that I don't understand. I explore my songs when I improvise. I improvise to move the music towards something that resonates more with the nature of anxiety, something unstable, risky, sometimes powerful, sometimes vulnerable.

In two periods of my life I have had heavy panic attacks. These attacks were in no sense productive for me on any level. Playing concerts and trying to work in the midst of this dizziness was nothing but dreadful. Yet, these phases pointed me towards some sort of peace with the fact that this do exist in my life and that I will try to coexist. I am trying to use this uncertainty and the

loss of control somewhat constructively. To move on the axis between control and no control in my music I am improvising.

Ideas, textures, sounds and structures emerge through interplay with humans. After a while of playing with the same humans, their musical solutions or personalities bleed into mine and become a part of my intuition when I play. I learn. My main learnings have come through human-human interplay based on an improvisational attitude. I improvise with humans because I am fascinated by the instant musical exchange and the effort made by everyone to create one shared musical output in the moment. I like the notion that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, the intuitive communication that sometimes feels like magic. We experience a match with the other musicians, the music is developing without friction. We share the same goal. Some of us call it flow. We experience that the music is *working*, and we often talk about it after. What caused this flow to happen? We want to preserve the state so it can work also next time. But it seldom does, at least not in the same manner. Sometimes it is like the stuff we try to preserve, refuse to be preserved and something else happens instead. This elasticity and instability is interesting.

In improvisational interplay between humans, we tend to develop an expression showing each other our likes and dislikes through music or through conversations about music. An aspect that I don't like about improvisation groups in the human domain is that the aesthetics or rules in a group, or of a certain style or genre in improvisation are overpowering or blocking the potential for development. The aesthetic boundaries often seem too strict or safe. I believe that tight frameworks are fruitful to generate new material, but the frameworks in a group of improvising humans need a constant revision for the music to stay fresh. The framework should be questioned AND nurtured. We must also give some credit to the non-working music; the music that is not going anywhere; the music that results from not finding a common direction in a group. The concert where all the performers said: "we just struggled and nothing really happened". What about treating the non-working music or the difficulties we share as new knowledge? I have experienced that the points where I have shifted my aesthetic attitude radically have come from musical situations where I have worked with performers with a different standpoint than myself. Then the musical development has had lots of friction to it. This friction could induce radical changes on areas of thinking about music which in its turn could gradually shift a musical intuition or focus. We cannot say Goodbye (to our own) Intuition but we may develop it...

In my project *The HyPersonal Piano*, I augmented the grand piano quite heavily with midi controllers, processing, my voice, different sorts of loudspeakers and external sound sources. This became a complex setup which I have never been

able to control fully. The lack of control has steadily created new material through my improvisations with the instrument, something that made me aware of the fact that it is not only me contributing with material when I improvise using technologies. The technologies also contain music, a sound or a logic which contributes to the musical output. I work in an interagency with the technologies, as I work in an interagency with humans when we improvise. We are pieces of a system trying to create one single common output.

Our project Goodbye Intuition resides on the idea about technology containing a potential of other music, interplay and a different logic and knowledge. Technology totally lacks the aesthetic preferences, it will not judge and it will never discuss good or bad. The machine's total lack of judging music in a pre-conceived aesthetic framework is very refreshing and inspirational to me. In the human-human relationship the distribution of responsibility tends to spread out quite evenly between the musicians. It is a silent contract that everyone is responsible of moving the music somewhere, to create a form or a musical stream. Very seldom, maybe too seldom there are sabotage from one or more of the musicians. Situations where a musician in improvisatory interplay takes no responsibility or too much initiative are often described as negative and unmusical. To me, these notions on when music works or when an improvisation with humans are going somewhere, tend to be somewhat restrictive and I regard it as a problem that we often end up with the same distribution of initiative, and often the same patterns of durations, sounds, timing, density etc. Music may also work when it does not work. Maybe a more autonomous machine may have something to offer?

*When KimAuto records bits and pieces of what I play when improvising with it, I am becoming aware of what my input is and I try to adapt my input to how KimAuto is working at this stage in our project. I am also reminded of how I responded to it in earlier improvisations when KimAuto scans through my archive. My playing gets more focused. I choose from a tinier palette of sounds. Because if not, all the musical entries become unrelated. It sounds random without any context. And as a consequence there are no direction. But sometimes I just let go, because it doesn't listen to me so why should I listen to it? The sound of total random also attracts me. Others would maybe call it non-working music. How far can I go before the context is gone? Won't the listener create a context anyway? I like the rehearsal of letting go, of recklessness, of random volumes, of stopping, taking a break, not caring so much, of leaving the everlasting aesthetic dialogue for a little while. It shows me how to be more reckless in my improvisations.*

I find *too safe* to be boring. My work wants out of this self-centered atmosphere and go other places. The tensions that my anxiety induces are coming into the scene as questions, as trying to do things in other ways, as deconstructing a composition, as tearing down a technical setup and

rebuilding it. New material appears. On the way to the point of chaos, through the state of losing control, I believe that there is a great potential of discovering things.

The complex and partly baffling algorithms, the total chaos, breakdowns, the trying to understand what's going on in the machinery, the complexity of a technical setup... These are some of the main attraction points to why I like improvising with machines. To use machines for music will constitute an axis between knowing exactly what the machines are doing (as in total control) and an extreme complexity or a breakdown. Working on this axis generates new material.

In my musical education I never tried to copy performers, yet I tried to understand their mentality or archetypical things they did and import elements into my own playing. It could be certain timing aspects, feeling, an emotion or tonality that I tried to understand and use. I was merging what I heard with what I already knew. I like to discover what a machine-musicality or machine aesthetics sounds like and acts out in interplay, and I would like to learn and import elements from the machine just like I have done from humans. I learn from our reckless machine with limited listening skills and no moral. We could get situations where the machine takes no initiative whatsoever. How do we handle that? The machine might play non-stop for 5 minutes leaving no room for us. It might play so loud that we can't be heard or so soft that we can't hear it. The machine will hopefully play like a machine, not a human. An interplay situation with algorithms may change our musical handling skills also in a human-human interplay because the machine will show us other ways or force us to do other things. It is a mix of being pushed and informed. The complex machine does things that I cannot do myself, and I cannot comprehend fully what is going on. This wondering makes me add stuff, I fabricate and poeticize, create.

*My anxiety never listens like I want it to, and I never completely understand it. Like KimAuto. Start/stop/start/stop. Glitches. Without any formal consideration. Since it doesn't listen, I try to take the whole responsibility for the music, but is it really necessary? I stop and listen to how KimAuto is playing, I learn from the cold cut-up aesthetics and the non-human way of distributing sounds, the timing, the robotic pitches and the other ways of playing together.*

Morten Qvenild, June 2018