

Improvising with humans and improvising with machines

Reflections seven months into the project

For the past 25 years I have worked almost exclusively with so-called «free» improvisation (no improvisation is ever free!) both solo and in various collaborations; and with extended vocal techniques with particular focus on smaller sound-cells and their inner logic and needs and potential.

I prefer to work in a non-puristic, taboo-free zone where any reference and input is valid and allowed, as long as it makes sense in the moment: when, what, how.

Why do I improvise - with humans?

:Improvisation represents for me the possibility of being surprised - of surprising myself - and of having my musical behaviour, aesthetics and habits challenged.

:It gives me the possibility to discover and define my own music to a greater extent than when working with pre-organised material.

:I am a better real-time maker of music than a pre-organising one.

:It makes me a far better listener.

:Through improvisation I have a more direct access to a greater, more unfiltered source of my musical ideas and possible material.

:Improvisation represents an open door to all my musical references.

:Improvisation has been a catalyst towards investigating my own instrument.

:I enjoy the process of creating music that I have no, or very little, previous conception, perception or knowledge of.

:I enjoy simultaneously creating and performing music together with other musicians: creating imaginary scores - our interdependency - our developing of a common musical language and of trying to make sense.

:The happy schizophrenia of improvising: humility and ruthlessness, discipline and freedom.

:I cherish the bottom line mutual trust and respect needed for any such collaboration.

:I like the experience and the freedom of responding to real information and of being forced into a situation where I have to relate to what is happening here and now - and my altered state of mind when not being able to adjust or make better in the moment.

Knowing that I cannot stop time or step out of it, makes me braver, less self-sensorious, more alert and ready to come up with solutions to problems as they appear.

:The relief of not having to repeat or reproduce previous efforts or successes.

:Improvisation enhances my interest in and humility towards what others are playing and my ability to say «yes» to what is offered.

:Improvisation is a continuous learning experience. We educate each other, bring each other up, as we play together.

:Nothing is ever the same and neither am I.

:The true danger of it all.

I have, during the past 25 years, gradually become more interested in the actual process of improvisation, and far less concerned with the effective outcome or result of it. I live quite happily with letting all the seams be exposed, including any breakdown, failure, bad communication, being lost and clueless, etc. «Failure» is interesting. I find that it opens up towards new discoveries and possibilities. Likewise I enjoy listening to other musicians' concerts and recordings which are not made effective or edited, but where I can be privy to the whole working process.

Why do I want to improvise with a machine?

Although I collaborate with many musicians who use computers, electronics, effects, pedals, samplers, etc as integrated parts of their instrumentarium - I have never made use of any of the above technology myself.

So, initially, when being invited into this project, - I was attracted to and very curious about the idea of collaborating improvisationally with an algorithmic machine with its non-human logic and make-up upon which it makes its musical output.

Just numbers, codes, patterns.

The machine doesn't want anything - has no self-evaluation - no sense of responsibility towards an end result - no listening abilities (so far?) - no communication skills - no sociality - no aesthetics - no sense of self - no sense of me(!) - no expectations and therefore no disappointments(!) - in short: none of the qualities and implicit, corresponding considerations and problems associated with playing with humans.

So the initial attraction for me was actually to see *how* and *if* working with such a cold and indifferent partner, who would never be tempted to consider or cater to my needs, or have any perception of shared efforts towards making sense musically (make the music work), would change my musical behaviour, my aesthetics and my philosophy. And how it could represent a less prescribed treatment of any musical material.

It seemed to promise many things: new skills, a change of my habits, a challenge of my role as improviser and of relieving me of many intuition-based choices and responsibilities.

I sometimes suffer from what I can best describe as intuition fatigue, or maybe just a faltering trust in the concept of creating music intuitively altogether: Seeing that my intuition is so heavily informed by my experience, the range or limitations of my abilities, my references, my repertoire of solutions, the familiarity of many long-term collaborations, the term intuition becomes at times almost meaningless.

I do believe that our musical intuition needs to be continuously fed by our intellect and experience («intelligent intuition»), and that our musical intellect needs to be fed by our

intuitive, spontaneous musical self («intuitive intelligence»), but sometimes these ideal concepts remain just that: ideal.

Therefore I welcome any outside decision-makers and habit-breakers, like KimAuto.

Now: Seven months into the research - and after some hands-on work with the machine - I still hold an optimistic and positive view. However, the consequences for me as an improviser in this dialogue are already more far-reaching than expected and my questions are multiple!

I think my choice of human co-musicians, outside of needing to really like how they play, has always been about their «otherness» from me - and the implicit promise of satisfying my wish for danger and surprise, resistance and challenge.

So the machine, with its «otherness» from me, should therefore be a near-perfect partner?

In many practical aspects this collaboration has already fed into and changed my musical behaviour in what I consider a positive sense:

I am mostly totally surprised by its dispositions, particularly regarding time, which makes me very alert, refreshingly unprepared and void of my usual «repertoire».

It has changed my vocal input per now towards stricter, very economical, less expressive elements - simply because I think this works better musically with KA's output.

Although this may, (and should?) change in my future work with KA towards also checking out input areas of high density, high energy, continuous activity, melody, rhythm, words, lyrics etc.

Still to be explored.

However:

I presently feel very alone in this duo and I miss the sense of sharing that I have with humans.

I have problems with the lack of the usual forms of communication during/before/after.

I have a problem with the absence of physical gestures from the machine, from which normally much information is passed between human musicians.

I often do not even like what KA does.

Also most of the usual inbred terms, perceptions and ways of understanding improvised interplay are non-valid in this duo: shared listening, communication, democracy, shared agency and responsibility for the outcome, instant mutual learning and tacit understanding of what is at hand as we play, our roles and functions, our frameworks, joint expectations, shared sense of form/structure, etc.

I need to reevaluate all of the above in this duo.

So: what language am I speaking here? What mutual codes (may) exist? What is my relationship with KA?

-Do I need to understand the machine? (how could I possibly?)

-How can I get closer to perceiving and investigating my interplay with the machine as a discourse: subject-subject? Instead of a stimulus/response relationship with me as the main agency / the «superior» creator?

In other words: how can I, ethically, relate to and play with KA with the same kind of trust and respect as when I play with humans?

-How can I change the feeling of being a victim of the machine's dispositions/output?

Meaning: that I have no bearing on its choices as we play together. I have the power to turn it on and off. But once it is engaged, I have no control.

-What can I learn from the machine?

What if I, like the machine, stop taking responsibility for the result - and become more interested in what is actually happening at any point in time ?

What if I, like the machine, let go of concerns regarding achieving any preconceived sense of «satisfactory» form/structure?

What possible new and unknown forms/structures may then appear?

Sidsel Endresen, June 2018