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The Aesthetic Priority of Improvisation: a Lecture

The following is the lecture I gave as part of the Actual '81 Festival of Improvised Music at the ICA in London in August 1981. It is an interim formulation of ideas and a contribution to the continuing debate. Despite its incompleteness, I have been persuaded to publish it because of the apparent disparity between the information given and the information received: some reports bear little resemblance to what I actually said, so it is necessary to establish the truth as well as to assert the emphasis of the thoughts expressed. I have also replied to some of the points raised in the discussion that followed the lecture; these replies are printed in light face in the body of the text. As this lecture was not prepared with publication in mind it is almost devoid of bibliographical references, for which the reader's forbearance is requested. Before passing to the text of the lecture itself I would like to refute Hanna Charlton's assertion¹ that the title of my lecture is inappropriate and that I 'side-stepped the affective aspect of the music'. I can best answer Hanna and alert my readers to my general perspective by quoting from Raymond Williams:

An essential hypothesis in the development of the idea of culture is that the art of a period is closely and necessarily related to the generally prevalent 'way of life', and further that, in consequence, aesthetic, moral, and social judgements are closely interrelated.²

Introduction

Locating the determining impetus of an art form is as difficult as it is necessary. When an art form is intimately involved with social experience, as I believe contemporary improvised music is, then the aesthetic enters an exacting and controversial dimension. It is imperative, however, that an understanding is sought, if only to observe how easy it is for a form to be diverted from its original course or diluted to insignificance. Assessment is bound to be elusive, especially while a form is active, because the analysis enters the life of the aesthetic. With these considerations in mind I am offering an analysis of a music to which I have devoted over 20 years—and there seems to be some playing in me yet.

As a category improvised musics do not readily lend themselves to analysis, largely because their numerous manifestations—which span many cultures—are not necessarily compatible. And while improvised music might usefully be contrasted with music more formally structured, such a comparison is not an adequate guide to the integrity of the improvisational element. No music that recognisably persists over a long period can qualify, in a precise sense, as being improvised. Continuity implies that some kind of consensus has been achieved. While it is possible to point to manifestations that resemble contemporary improvised music, for example in folk forms, tribal musics, religious chants and even in contemporary 'serious' music, these resemblances are not proof of any categorical continuity. The

difficulties experienced by zoologists and botanists in establishing genus ought to be warning enough. Not all creatures that live in the sea are fish.

I intend to show that a very distinct ethic is generated by the structural basis of contemporary improvised music. (This may seem a forlorn hope, since it is thought to be a lack of structure that marks out improvised music making. My analysis will be more readily understood if the reader recognises the holistic sense I give to the word 'structure', according to which musical configurations are seen as manifestations of sociological forms.) The best general description of this ethic is socialist, because it exemplifies the ideal of full personal expression located within, and made possible by, a sympathetic collective environment. In order to illustrate the accuracy of this description I propose to contrast contemporary improvised music with the form most favoured by capitalist society and with some of the musics generated by pre-industrial social formulations. I shall show, I believe, that contemporary improvised music reflects neither the romantic utopia nor the mystical revelation but legitimate aspirations which arise as a specific and revolutionary response to the world as we find it now. I shall try to corroborate and illuminate these propositions by historical analysis and above all, I hope to demonstrate, even if by default, that contemporary improvised music needs such analysis if it is to survive.

The relationship between the music and the musician

Contemporary improvisation is a completely new way of producing music, in which the creative emphasis has shifted from the composer to the performer. It allows the individual musician a fullness of personal expression that is simply not available in other musical forms. Music is intrinsically a collective activity—as all culture by definition is a collective entity. This applies even to the solo improvising performer, for his contribution can only have significance within a conducive ambience. In effect an improvised music can only exist within a sympathetic social-musical environment, from which musicians derive strength and within which they give confidence to one another. It is not simple idealism to suppose that such a relationship is potentially more rewarding than one based either on a destructive, aggressive, competitive ethic, or on quietism.

In established Western forms the composition interposes itself between the musician and the music he produces and between him and his fellow performers. In effect the mode of musical production—the way the music is made—is determined by an interceding process in which the musician acts solely as a factotum. Depending on the availability of the skills required to execute the composition, the musician is replaceable. Here we may note something

of the fallaciousness of liberal ideology, with its distorted notion of individual freedom: the interpretative musician is 'free' only to play the music as required or to remain unemployed! Of course, the fact that few classical players would even accept that such a situation exists is an indication of the extent to which the 'free enterprise' system is characterised as the natural and right way of things. Indeed the relationship of the musician to composed music is softened by the relative scarcity of musicianship and the cultural reverence attached to the more complex forms of 'serious' music: his market value, self-esteem, and social status are some compensation for the skilled musician. But the more the music is a commodity the more the musician is likely to be alienated from what he produces.

As a musician's relationship to his product—the music—is determined by the mode of production, one would expect that a new way of playing would bring about a changed relationship to the music produced: remove the tyranny of the composition and a freer musical-social ethos should automatically arise. But no such determinism prevails, for while relationships cannot alter until there is a change in the way music is produced, it is clearly not sufficient for the mode to change in order for a new relationship to be formed. Contemporary improvised music does not automatically construct appropriate institutions to help sustain it. In this connection we should remember that in a general sense all successful modes of production build up customs and a legal framework for protection and to encourage continuity. When a new mode emerges it is subject to the customs and institutions that already exist, and these customs and institutions—like ideas generally—are quite capable of being sustained long after the factors that caused them have diminished. The pressure, therefore, is always for the new mode to accommodate itself to the existing institutional structure. Any significant change from this position inevitably acquires a political dimension.

The ownership of music

The contrast between the prevailing ideological figure in our society—namely property—which in the case of music is amply represented by the composition, and the search for a tenable alternative, which in our case is improvisation, indicates that music itself can be class based. For the composition creates a situation where there are those who own the music and those who do not. Most improvising musicians have had the experience of participating in a composed work to which they have contributed more than the composer, even if only quantitatively. The perception that this is an irrational situation indicates that the established cultural hegemony of a property-based society is not ideologically stable. There has been and must continue to be a response to this irrationality. The nature of the response will be the political dimension.

The mid-19th-century stirrings in and around New Orleans were the beginning of the most prominent example of an improvised music form to appear in a modern market society. Since then we have seen a progressive, if faltering, international development of this type of music making. From the use of simple themes and chord structures as the basis of improvisation, the music has moved (if erratically) towards more complex and more self-assertive forms until, in the past few decades, there has evolved a very strong

movement of improvisation, internally free from the musical strictures and cultural constraints that encrust the institutions with which the music must inevitably have some intercourse.

Despite the external pressures, there is now a very self-conscious aesthetic which gives total priority to improvisation. Nevertheless, this predominantly collective form of music making is still subject to the customs and economic structures of established music; and these, on the mundane though crucial economic level, favour whoever has the most specific claim of ownership over the music. This institutional bias is instructive, for it shows the tenacity of ideology and how improvising musicians themselves act to perpetuate a system even when the conditions make it inappropriate and often contrary to their interests. Throughout the short history of contemporary improvised music we have seen how its precursors and hybrid forms—jazz and latterly the graphic works—have economically favoured the alleged composer and consequent owner of the music rather than the musicians who produce it. To take a very uncontroversial example: what moral or musical grounds give the tunesmith of *Body and Soul* (and his heirs!) all the performing rights and royalties of the famous Coleman Hawkins recorded version? There may be a legitimate argument that the theme and chord structure stimulated Hawkins's masterly creativity, but the rewards should surely have been commensurate with the contribution. As it was, Hawkins got nothing and was, legally and by custom, entitled to nothing.

Keith Rowe offered me an interesting observation arising out of this issue, suggesting further how prevailing ideas and conventions continue to affect behaviour even after the basis for them has diminished. Rowe noted that the composition, or even simply the style of composition, especially in jazz and aleatoric pieces, has often been used by a performer to confer an authority on his work other than that which flows naturally from his own creativity. In a sense the composition functions like a commercial franchise, allowing the musician to acquire credibility via the works of already established artists. This, of course, is the intrinsic definition of 'provincialism', which negates personal expression and promotes compliant (as opposed to creative) responses and a general ethic from which the musician cannot easily escape. A negative corollary to this situation is that the 'franchise' can often become more popular than the original article, as has been the case with much white jazz, which has exploited the vitality and creativity of the black art without adding anything. This is imperialism in music; its consequences are, of course, alien to the whole ethos of improvisation. Not that imperialism necessarily takes such a simple form. US diplomacy has not been above using the real thing—black jazz—in the service of the cold war: Ellington, Armstrong, and other blacks have been featured heavily in Voice of America broadcasts and sent off on State Department trips to woo the Third World. This displays a keenness to extol the liberating virtues of the black art. There has been none of the same kind of keenness to offer the much-vaunted Western freedoms to blacks back at home!

A shift in the mode of music making (as in the Hawkins case outlined above) is not sufficient to change the relations of music making, even though the existing relations may be irrational. An improviser may produce the bulk of the music after the perfunctory execution of a theme. In agreeing to

this—and it might be an implicit condition of his employment—he parts with the rights attached to his music, which in financial terms may be worth many times the amount he is paid to perform. While the system favours the composer (or the organising bandleader, who claims some kind of priority on the ownership of the music by virtue of his power to hire and fire), the hegemony of the compositional formula will continue, not only as a means of justifying the exploitation of creative musicians, but as an ideological buttress for the kind of society that the formula most reflects. My argument is not that the compositional element should be penalised, but that all the creative contributions should be recognised and rewarded commensurately.

The compositional method is obviously an important technical development in the history of music. However, it is not difficult to discern that, because it reflects the property form so accurately, it is politically bolstered beyond its usefulness to musical expression. Perhaps this is the underlying ideological reason why funding bodies find it difficult to finance improvisation directly. Contemporary improvised music is undoubtedly a break with established means of making music. If the customs and economic institutions that have grown up to service the composition (for example, the Performing Rights Society) were reformed to favour the predominantly productive component in improvisational works, I suspect that a much more critical perspective on those compositional forms used as a basis for improvisation would result. If the onus were on the composer to justify his contribution solely on artistic grounds (rather than as a means of generating and controlling income), compositions would tend to be much stronger. The quality of composition, where it was needed at all, would be raised if the means of musical production were firmly in the hands of the musicians.

Structural analysis

I hope by now to have indicated the extent to which economic, and therefore political, structures impinge on the free flow of human expression. Contributing something to an understanding of the structural nature of this music is a difficult task, for it seems to me that no worthwhile example of contemporary improvised music prescribes a syntax for universal application. Indeed it is expected that each improviser brings to the music his own unique formulation. My inclination has been to look beyond surface representations for a deeper structural basis to the music. Musicians of the European classical tradition relate to the composition: it determines their *modus operandi* and economic relations; they re-create and re-emphasise a system of cultural values which, despite infinite variation of expression, broadly asserts the primacy of formal authority. Improvisers operate in a dialectical fashion, seeking to understand and express the connections between people and things in a directly investigative and creative process.

Since giving this lecture I have been concerned, mostly under the auspices of the Association of Improvising Musicians, to arrive at a succinct formulation of the moments that determine the contemporary improvised music ethic. I suggest the two following interlocking elements: the application of 'problem-solving' techniques within performance; and the dialogical interaction of musicians. These

moments become more vivid when contrasted with the classical mode of making music, where: essentially the problems of making music are solved before the performance; and the composition interferes in the relations between musicians. Such a formulation indicates the cultural emphasis embodied in musical configurations, reflecting general aspirations and perhaps even the world view of the music makers. It would be strange, for example, if Cage's avowed anarchism was not evident in his music. Is it not therefore plausible to assume that this could be true (even if less obviously so) of all musics?

Nobody during the discussion denied the validity of the structural analysis, but there were some misgivings about its implications. It was felt that any art form that selfconsciously adopts such a premise will be constrained detrimentally. According to one speaker I was advocating 'social realism' which, in his view, has produced many monsters. Despite an invitation, these 'monsters' were not specified. There are two things to say about this kind of criticism. The first (to paraphrase John Tilbury's response on the day) is to ask whether the work of Shostakovich, Gorky, Brecht, and Eisler ought to be included in such a list of monsters. If so then contemporary improvised music could find itself in very good company! There have also, of course, been plenty of monsters produced by artistic philosophies other than socialist realism. Unlike the speaker, I am prepared to name names. I would refer anyone to Brian Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study II*, for example. Here the main purpose seems to be an exhaustive examination of how far the performer can be driven by noise and impossible scoring before he is broken down and destroyed. In this sense it is an ugly and dehumanising piece. It exemplifies the extreme position to which the composer-musician relationship can be pushed, and the antithesis of the aspirations associated with contemporary improvised music; yet (to my anger) such pieces generally acquire much more credibility as 'works of art'.

The second point to be made is that while improvised music provides the necessary conditions for a different cultural emphasis to emerge, it does not automatically generate that new emphasis—hence the need for some kind of 'realism' and action based on it. As long as musicians remain unaware of the structural implications of their music their development both as musicians and as human beings will be denied. If this is to be construed as socialist realism, then so be it.

This attempt to appreciate the structural nature of improvised music has not been undertaken out of dry academic interest. I hope above all to have convinced you that mere existence is no guarantee of development or survival. A political dimension, no matter how repugnant it might seem to some, is necessary. But political effectiveness can only come from a more comprehensive understanding of the music we make.

Self-awareness and ethnic musics

Since many of the world's ethnic musics have strong improvisational elements, improvising musicians often look to them for inspiration. But do contemporary improvised music and ethnic musics have the same improvising priority? I have argued that contemporary improvised music reflects the desire for a form of personal expression, which directly counters the prevailing 'market-property' individualism of Western society. However, when we come to

look at the social base of traditional musics it becomes apparent that they are hardly compatible with a socialist overview of human relations: the priority lies elsewhere.

Traditional Scottish music, for example, has no compositional or property base, nor was it created as a reaction to the excesses of capitalism. On the contrary, it characterises, and in its modern form romanticises, the feudal society of pre-Union Scotland—although, ironically, this folk form has come to represent the Scottish reaction to the cultural dislocation caused by a modern, market, industrialising society. This gives us another insight into the power of ideas, for a yearning for old Scotland does not offer a possible means of ameliorating adverse political and cultural conditions. It would be wrong to suppose, therefore, that any free aspect perceived in Scottish folk music is in any way analogous to social-economic freedoms in feudal Scotland: there were none. The only freedom such aspects do represent is that of Scotland from capitalism and its political counterpart—English imperialism. The Scottish folk form may be a reminder of another kind of Scotland but it does not portray any inherent social freedoms within traditional Scottish society. Indeed if it reflects anything other than false nostalgia, the music perpetrates an unconscious belief in the hierarchical clan order, which activists in Scottish nationalism would probably be the first to fight.

In almost any music there is an element of play: the musician can give expression of himself even within highly constraining formulae. This is perhaps the redeeming feature of music as an art form. Except possibly in the case of total serialism, where the manipulative demands are so great as to crush the musicians' sensibilities, it is possible to transcend any form and use it as a means of personal expression. Given this saving grace, we nevertheless have to explain why specific forms of cultural expression arise and persist.

Many of the improvised musics of the world with long, continuous traditions, classical Indian music for example, have an undeniably strong social function outside individual expression. Educated Hindus are reputed to like the delicate music of the vina, and the general aesthetic of Indian music is meditative, ideally leading to 'samadhi'.³ It is a soothing music which can be of great therapeutic value, as many Westerners have found. But few would extend such a quietist ethos to all aspects of their lives. Yet passivity of a kind that veers towards fatalism is acknowledged to be a dominant, if debased, characteristic of Indian culture. The totality of the Indian social experience shows that music combines with other aspects of Indian life to encourage tolerance of this world but never the need to change it. A cursory glance at Indian society reveals an essentially static condition, almost immune from change: many aspects of traditional social structures exist essentially untouched today. It appears, therefore, that music generated by tribal or caste societies tends to characterise and bolster hierarchical divisions of labour and class stratifications. In this sense Indian music can be seen as politically repressive.

Western musicians who emulate such forms without recognising the social implications of the music may well find themselves advocating, albeit unconsciously, social formulations which in practice they find abhorrent. Despite the obvious therapeutic lessons to be learned from classical Indian music, it can never be directly applicable to the Western situation. The problem with cross-cultural

apperception is that the observer inevitably introduces his own conditioned perspective; what he perceives and finds meaningful may well relate more to his own background than any hoped for understanding of what he is observing. The ability to appreciate the internal structure of a cultural form is restricted to those who follow the fragile discipline of anthropology. The untrained observer will inevitably filter from the experience what he needs to fulfil his own expectations. This can lead to very crude levels of expropriation. For example, to extract aesthetic value from recordings of primitive aboriginal peoples spewing and farting in drug-induced orgies simply because the sounds are 'interesting' is, to my susceptibilities, repugnant and degrading. An Oriental might do as well with a microphone in Sauchihall Street on a Saturday night. I defy anyone who believes in the primacy of human dignity to make a case for such aesthetic values.

The connection of contemporary improvised music with any pre-modern form seems to me ultimately untenable, and it is difficult to see why any such connection is sought, save as an expression of discontent with the musical forms available to Western musicians. In this sense, as the Scottish and Indian examples have shown, the adoption of traditional ethnic forms represents a negation of contemporary Western market values but does not offer acceptable alternatives, given that there is no going back to pre-industrial social-economic forms.

Evan Parker was among a few who voiced their unease with my analysis of the relationship between contemporary improvised music and the ethnic musics of non-industrialised societies. He argued that there are very dynamic and interactive aspects in Indian music, which would seem to deny that the music is essentially quietist. However, my principal point was not that the music itself is passive, but that it is generated by and supportive of a quietist philosophy. Thus our disagreement perhaps rests on semantics: I can see no reason why a music with dynamic qualities (much rock and roll for instance) should automatically fail to qualify as quietist, just as there is no reason why music with passive and peaceful qualities cannot be very revolutionary. A great deal of the music of the improvising group AMM contains long, peaceful interludes, yet the very basic structure of its music-making relationships is so at odds with the established patterns as to make it the antithesis of 'quietism'. The same may be said of many blues.

I have also been reminded by Gerry Gold that, given the changes occurring in India today, some contemporary Indian musicians must be seeking to break the devotional mould of their traditional music. But, again, I was trying to make a more general point, namely that music tends to characterise and bolster the kind of society that generates it. To widen the perspective I should like to bring in the instructive example of Chinese imperial music. Formal music in imperial China was inextricably bound to Confucianism. The correct social hierarchy and moral order were consciously exemplified by solemn rites (*li*) and music (*yueh*): 'For they were the outward embodiment of the wisdom and virtue of their creators (the ruling members in the old feudal system), the expression of reverence and perfect hierarchical order in society'.⁴ According to this analysis the aspirations of contemporary Western improvising musicians and those of Chinese court musicians have almost nothing in common. By extension there can be

little compatibility between traditional musicians and those whose expression arises out of alienation from modern Western industrial society.

Evan indicated that he saw himself as part of the continuity of reed players through the ages. While this notion (in its primary state) is impossible to dispute, it is questionable whether the continuity goes beyond the common use of the reed. Of more relevance to my general line of argument are the palpable differences that exist between Evan's mode of musical production and that of, say, a court musician of the Sung dynasty. If there are no fundamental differences then we are entitled to ask why Evan chose not to take the more formal route of European musical expression but to follow a path that led to his notable individual contribution to a new ethic of music making. There is much in Evan's work and associations to confirm that they are concerned implicitly with notions of community and collectivity.

The development of the improvisation aesthetic

The multi-culture approach to improvisation tends, because of its romantic, mysterious, and mystical connotations, to distort the underlying aspirations of the music. To reach an understanding of the aspiration that generates the contemporary aesthetic priority of improvisation, some appreciation of its historical growth is necessary.

As I have already indicated, the most prominent example of improvised music generated specifically in response to an emerging industrial market society is jazz. Slave society in the southern USA gave way to an even more uncertain, and perhaps more cruel, existence in which the 'free' blacks owned their own labour power. Towards the end of the 19th century, jazz in New Orleans was in part a response to the social needs and economic realities of an impoverished and beleaguered black community. The music they devised to meet their social requirements developed into a new cultural form. The blacks were a dislocated people, unwelcome in a land to which they had been brought by force—a land which had been developed and which prospered by their sweat. Despite freedom from slavery, the subsequent proliferation of 'Jim Crow' laws made the negro acutely aware of the differences the white community wished to maintain. These differences forced him to create a separate cultural identity.

I suggest that the unique characteristic of this cultural development is its apparent predilection for change. This should not be explained away simply as a reflection of the constant state of flux induced by an ever-developing technology—as the automatic result of the nature of modern society. In most traditional societies there is a recognisably sympathetic refining process within a visible continuity. Such a sympathy is not so readily perceived in the history of contemporary improvised music, which perhaps explains superficially the often violent antagonism of one school to another. We must view the development of black American music differently. 'Refinement' cannot be an appropriate description of the development of jazz, if by that word we mean striving for perfection within generally accepted and sympathetic ideological parameters. For the changes in jazz, given the unwillingness of US society to accept the equality of the negro, must be seen as a continual reaction to the incursions of white-dominated, capitalist structures, which have

constantly emasculated and frustrated black aspirations. On such an analysis, change must, by definition, be endemic in black American culture.

Change in the music of the black community has been necessary because so often the music has been diluted and exploited commercially, or because its more sophisticated forms have been incorporated into a pseudo-egalitarian ethos with which liberals of all shades feel comfortable. The assimilation of the black man's art has not meant a genuine integration of blacks within US society. This explains why some strands of black jazz have become more self-conscious, more aggressive and consequently less susceptible to (although not entirely immune from) capitalist exploitation or incorporation within a reformist political ethic. The question for white jazz and improvising musicians is whether their sense of alienation has the same root as that of their more militant black brothers, or whether they are feeding off a unique artistic development that grew out of the struggles of a harried community. This dilemma may well be at the heart of the desire to perceive a multi-stranded connection with the world's non-industrial cultures. If, however, as I have already suggested, white musicians (and black for that matter) accept musical influences without recognising the impetus that created them—which, in jazz, is undoubtedly the desire for a means of expressing human dignity—then they not only fail to comprehend the full significance of their music, but risk debasing it.

It can be no accident that it has been the proletarian musicians of the advanced industrial societies who have demonstrated a preference for this form of music. And, given the racist tradition that sprang from north European culture, their preference cannot be attributed to a deep-seated admiration for all things black. The impetus for improvised music does not come from the custodians of western European culture, although ironically it does represent one of the most positive and noble strands of humanism. The music remains a medium of self-expression which is the exclusive domain of those who have felt stifled or excluded by the approved routes to artistic experience, which in turn reflect the oppressive character of the dominant political mode.

In recent times there has been a rejection by many European improvisers of the black American heritage, as there has been a tendency to seek parallels with the music of the under-developed parts of the world. As I hope to have shown, these reactions are superficial and divert attention away from the more tenable connections that exist between communities that share the modern industrialising experience. Much of the rejection of black American jazz is really a rejection of US values.

To my mind the most debasing element within much that passes for jazz is a quality of appeasement. This can be identified in two principal ways, each encouraging a particular emotional response—one quietist, the other nullifying and edging towards brutality: both run counter to black and general working-class aspirations. The more romantic modes appeal most to reformist susceptibilities: on the one hand they confirm that blacks feel much the same way as the white men, while on the other they generate interludes of pleasant tranquillity for all. They tend to assuage the very affliction that the modern liberal is dedicated to eradicate—eventually. Other aspects of jazz have succumbed to the crude insistences of rock culture. Rock developed from a grass-roots entertainment music into a vehicle for big business; along the way it has evolved an obscene giantist perspective,

which acts to divorce it from the very populist aspirations that generated it. There have, of course, been many reactions to this development, but each counter-form has been very easy meat for the capitalist process. As the rock culture specifically relates to jazz, Max Roach has called its most pernicious form 'fusion music'.⁵ Here the physical relentlessness of the music, aided and abetted by image makers and technology to make it less resistible, causes the listener to capitulate to instinctive responses which lessen his powers of discrimination. In doing so he becomes brutalised and much less of a human being. The adulteration of jazz also negates the struggle of previous generations who fought to develop the rights of blacks and maintain their integrity through a community music. Much of this retrogressive development in a music that has always been intrinsically a vehicle for freedom and self-respect can be laid at the door of some black jazz musicians as well as the white assimilators. But maybe it would be uncharitable not to understand the capitulation of some negroes in the face of a tempting reformist programme for political equality. Unfortunately the reverse of capitulation has also occurred—namely an automatic rejection of all contributions made and values held by white people, even the more progressively humanitarian ones. The Black Muslim movement perhaps characterises the most virulent manifestation of this attitude, but after reaching a high point in the 1960s its attraction has receded.

It is not difficult to sustain the comparison of the black community in the USA with working-class history in advanced industrialising societies. The relationship of both groups to a market society, if not strictly identical in structural development, arose from the same impetus. In many ways the plight of the English working-class during the 19th century was as bad as, if not worse than, that of the black American. The misleading portrayal of the 'slave' South as feudal and therefore not susceptible to the industrialising impulse has also been dispelled. The historical fact is that negroes have been 'emancipated' and theoretically equal participants in the system for over 100 years. But the reality of their political position has been that they remain an under-privileged section of US society and are manipulated as a huge pool of reserve labour. This acts as much to keep white workers in check as to give an oblique nod to Jim Crow's ghost. What black and white deprived peoples have in common is the desire for a civilised existence. For a long time white society saw civilisation and equality with blacks as somehow mutually exclusive. Of course the reverse is true, for no society can develop its humanity while fettering fellow human beings.

The argument I have tried to make here is that contemporary improvised music is essentially a phenomenon of a modern industrialising society. The common experience it portrays is that of alienation arising from the economic, social, and cultural deprivation caused by a modern, market-orientated political system. The structural aspect common to these musical manifestations, which differ widely in style and performance emphasis, is that which expresses individual aspirations, and that which is the least susceptible to a commodity ethos, namely the improvisation.

Conclusion

If, as I believe I have shown, improvisation persists as a graft upon an essentially compositional body, it remains subservient to the musical and general cultural constraints of the compositional form. If the improvisational element is seen solely as an experiment or an ephemera, it will either be subsumed in the host body or it will be rejected. Either way if the composition is (or is seen as) the initiating mode, then it will be the dominating element. In the same way political observers may note that when aspects of socialism are grafted on to a capitalist body the inevitable result is a weakening of the socialist component. Capitalism and socialism are antagonistic and ultimately mutually exclusive. So it is with improvisation, I suggest. The moment it attempts to accommodate itself to compositional structure it weakens its own integrity.

As I said at the beginning of this lecture, contemporary improvised music offers a means of personal expression that is simply not available in other musical forms. But what does 'personal expression' mean? To assert individuality entails being able to contrast the self against other selves, to perceive where one person ends and another person begins. Yet the paradox is that such a distinction is only possible when the existence of other people is fully accepted, with all the creative attributes and frustrating difficulties that contrasting personalities bring.

The aesthetic priority of improvisation is, in my view, the reflection of the legitimate aspirations of people who want to live free from the irrelevant and irrational dictates of a market society. It is an assertion of the primacy of collective human will over the crude determinism that masquerades as the fairness of *laissez-faire*. This is why an understanding of the nature of the music is vital for its survival, for beneath all cultural preferences there lies a system of politics. In choosing our art we choose a model for life.

- 1 Hanna Charlton, 'Improvising Actualities', *Melody Maker* (29 August 1981), p.16.
- 2 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), p.137.
- 3 'Samadhi' is a complex notion. The main parts of the word are 'dhi' (idea) and 'sam' (union). In brief, it refers to perception of and integration with an underlying and harmonious unity of all things.
- 4 'Confucius', *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol.1, compiled by William Theodore De Bary, Wing-Tsit Chan, and Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), p.18.
- 5 Karl Dallas, 'Evolutionary Forces' (interview with Max Roach), *Melody Maker* (23 August 1980).