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Is free improvisation at an end?

On the past and present of a fugitive art form in Switzerland

Thomas Meyer

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«Free improvisation» was an important word of contemporary music: it stood for the zeitgeist in the highest musical spheres – May 68 spirit, freedom, intuition, openness. However, it has been a while since this practice is no more the centre of attention. It is recognised as an academic discipline, but where is it today in musical life? And what future does it have? No exhaustive inventory, only a couple of thoughts focussed on the Swiss situation, on an actually massive subject.

Teaching improvisation. Not teaching improvisation

What does an improvisation teacher do?

Fred Frith

→ 10

Musicians have always improvised. You recognize musically gifted children by the fact that they make things up. What follows, in the West, is that they learn to read music and do as they're told. This clearly illustrates the problems that are likely to surface if you are «taught» how to improvise. How can the practice of improvisation ever be compatible with «doing as you're told»? Teaching, especially in an institution, is usually considered to be dependent on codification, and comparability. We need rules that can be identified, syllabi, tools for assessment so that declared goals can be reached and outcomes graded. But improvisation is not a genre with rules; it comes from deep inside you. So what does an improvisation «teacher» do? As a contribution for a conference

on improvised music of the Research-Department of the Basel University of Music in 2009 Fred Frith discusses this question and others.

A clandestine anarchist

The improviser and composer Alfred Zimmerlin in dialogue with Torsten Möller

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Alfred Zimmerlin, cellist, composer, improviser, music teacher, and author stands out as one of the most eclectic figures of Swiss musical life. From September 2010 he will share with Fred Frith a chair of free improvisation at the Basel University of Music. As an improviser Zimmerlin performs in various formations, among others in the trios Karl ein Karl and Selbdritt. The discussion with Torsten Möller circles around the question: how is the essence of «Music» to be maintained, through improvisation.

Jazz/Rock crossovers

Stylistic and technical transfers in art music since 1950

Pierre Michel

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Taking as a basis an overall inventory and some particular cases, this essay shall attempt to show how new composition principles and new musical concepts could appear under the influence of music containing an improvised dimension (mainly jazz, but also rock music, the latter being approached here only shortly). Moreover, one shall distinguish between music integrating or not improvisation, while thinking about the role of this practice in this type of relationship between diverse musical categories. Thus, it might be possible to

open space for more detailed research, jazz and rock music and their possible connexions with art music having been relatively neglected in French musicological scholarship.

How «kirnbergian» does unequal temperament have to be?

Choice of keys and texture characteristics in Franz Schubert's Lieder as indicators for particular temperaments

Wanja Aloe, Claire Roberts

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As part of a research project of the Hochschule der Künste Bern into systems of tuning and temperament in the 19th century the project-team looked among other things into the question of how long unequal temperaments survived in the 19th century. In spite of multiple sources concerning the contemporary theory of tuning and temperament, the actual common practice is not well documented.

For this reason the researchers chose to approach the problem from a new angle with the help of a statistical analysis of Schubert's Lied oeuvre. It became apparent that the temperament Kirnberger II, which was mentioned in various contemporary sources and which Herbert Kellertat (1994) argues to be the most plausible temperament for the time from Beethoven to Schubert, would appear to conflict to a certain degree with the overall statistical picture of Schubert's Lieder. Based on further analysis of piano texture in particular keys, the project-team proposes that although Kirnberger II was perhaps common due to its easy tuning, it was not the only temperament used, but one among others.

«Ob in Lächeln, ob in Thränen»
 Romantic guitar song writing by
 Lake Constance
 Christoph Jäggin

→36

Closely connected with the new currents of thought of the late 18th century, the guitar increasingly represented the ideal of the liberated man in the whole of Europe, as well as in Switzerland. Ideal as an accompaniment instrument for popular songs, it acquired an important status first in the centres, from where its presence spread to the less industrialized regions, such as around Lake Constance. This essay attempts to reconstruct the background of this expansion, and to propose ways in which this forgotten romantic guitar repertoire could be brought to life again.

« How does he do it, being outside of time ? »
 An interview with Yvonne Loriod

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On May 17th 2010 the French pianist Yvonne Loriod died in Saint-Denis, just outside Paris. Olivier Messiaen's widow and former student, she created many of his works, always setting extraordinary standards for future interpretations. Thomas Meyer could spend a long time discussing with her in 2004, shortly before her 80th birthday, evoking her youth, her student years, birds, and, of course, the music of Messiaen.

Ideas made irregular
 Mathias Spahlinger talks about
 composer Hans Wüthrich

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The Donaueschinger Musiktage 2010 saw the creation of etudes for orchestra without conductor, by Matthias Spahlinger, entitled *doppelt bejaht* («twice approved»). This inhabitual work, lasting several hours, where the orchestra mainly organises itself through given instructions, is dedicated to the Swiss composer Hans Wüthrich. And not without reason. He also had composed a three part orchestral piece in the 1980's, *Netzwerk*, which does not require a conductor. The almost proverbial disempowerment of the conductor, and the symbolic liberation of the members of the orchestra had a profound political background, which, for a critical and political composer such as Spahlinger, has remained up to this day a model of contestation and questioning. At the core of Wüthrich's work lie conceptual reflections which tackle possibilities of communication available to contemporary music. For Spahlinger Wüthrich's work is an outstanding model of New Music, unfortunately greatly overlooked and underestimated. Spahlinger gives here insights on his fundamental engagement with Wüthrich's work, which he himself sees as the exposition of the background which truly made the so called new music become New Music, with capital letters. The following «detour» into the project of Wüthrich, in its now achieved and written form, is based on a discussion with Bernd Künzig, given in the series «Composer's composer» on SWR2.

Swiss composers
Volte-faces
 Dieter Ammann's orchestral
 triptych *Boost – Turn – Core*
 Stefan Drees

→56

The new orchestral piece *Turn* (2009/10) by Dieter Ammann, the «composer in residence» of the Lucerne Festival 2010, will be created on August 25th 2010 at the Lucerne KKL. It stands as the «missing link» between the already present *Boost* (2000/01) and *Core* (2002), for orchestra, which will be performed in the same concert. The work *Turn*, constituting the middle term of the complete performance of Ammann's orchestral triptych, is conceived as a movement which «organises, in a quiescent tempo, a dense passing, tonally fixed on central tones which often also ground, as bass tones, the musical phrase» (Marie Luise Maintz). In his analysis Stefan Drees concludes that contrary to *Boost* and *Core* its peaceful character is the consequence mainly of these aforementioned harmonic changes, which occur far more fluently as in the other two movements. The object of this study, which also deepens our general understanding of Ammann's working techniques, is the manipulation of diverging musical situations and processes.