KIMMIG-STUDER-ZIMMERLIN

IM HELLEN

STRING TRIO

Most of the world's music, through most of its history, has been improvised in the broadest sense. This near-universal tendency needs no defence. However, in the 19th and 20th centuries, the growing authority of the composer increasingly inspired a reaction from improvisers. Following Ted Gioia in The Imperfect Art, we can talk of two rival aesthetics. The aesthetics of perfection emphasises the timelessness of the work and the authority of the composer; ultimately it is Platonistic, viewing music as essentially abstract sound-structures. In contrast, the aesthetics of imperfection is consciously humanistic, valuing the event or process of performance. The idea of an "aesthetics of imperfection" appears paradoxical – how could imperfection be aesthetically valuable?

In his classic volume Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music, Derek Bailey developed an aesthetics of imperfection, without using that label. Central to it is what he called the "instrumental impulse". Steve Lacy is quoted in Bailey's book as saying "the instrument—that's the matter—the stuff —your subject". Bailey elucidated the thought as follows:

> The instrument is not just a tool but an ally. It is not only a means to an end; it is a source of material, and technique for the improviser is often an exploitation of the natural resources of the instrument.

Bailey takes the concept from Curt Sach's The Wellsprings of Music, which refers to the instrumental impulse as "not a melody in a 'melodious' sense, but an agile movement of the hands which seems to be under the control of a brain centre totally different from that which inspires vocal melody". Analogously, for John Blacking, kalimba tunes of the Nsenga exhibit "recurring patterns of 'fingering' which, combined with polyrhythm between the two thumbs, produce a variety of melodies…the theme is physical and not purely musical". (See Marko Aho's recent The Tangible in Music: The Tactile Learning of a Musical Instrument).

From the beginnings of free improvisation in the 1960s, proponents subjected their instruments to unprecedented interrogation, in pursuit of the instrumental impulse. This is shown in the work of Swiss-German trio Kimmig–Studer–Zimmerlin: Harald Kimmig (violin), Daniel Studer (bass) and Alfred Zimmerlin (cello). On this recording, the instrumental impulse is exuberantly expressed, in what Studer prefers to call "improvisation without any prefixed compositional tool". The trio pull, grab and smack their strings, scratching and striking the body of the instrument, using it as a resonator. These are not mere "extended techniques". As John Butcher argues in an interview, that description is not acceptable for sounds that are "an intrinsic, inseparable part of the artist's sound".

I'm reminded of contemporary composer Helmut Lachenmann's concept of musique concrète instrumentale – drawing new possibilities of sound

production from traditional instruments, focusing attention on their means of production. The singing instrumental tone, which Lachenmann regards as "domesticated by tradition", is replaced by "the detritus of sonic phenomena" – toneless sounds, mostly breathing from wind instruments, and grinding and scraping of the strings. In our email exchange, Studer responds that "I learned a lot from Lachenmann, on how to develop and extend the range between noise and sound not as an effect but as music". But he finds this approach in other composers and improvisers. "Improvisers re-invent their instruments in their development, and every time they perform", he adds. "When you improvise you can enter the pure sound, you can work with the sound in the most direct way, real-time".

When I send my draft sleeve-note to Alfred Zimmerlin, he doesn't dispute the idea of an instrumental impulse, but takes vigorous exception to an "aesthetics of imperfection": "Our music has nothing to do with imperfection", he argues. "I could call it an aesthetic of making a piece of art in the moment – sculpting a sound directly, working on its components. Probably you could compose these complex sounds, but is it necessary? Composition has other aims and advantages. Working so directly on a sound is one of the qualities of free improvised music – along with collective time flow, collective energy, collective mobile forms".

For him, the aim of improvisation and composition is the same: "Composition and free improvisation are two very different methods to lead you to the same goal: to get as good and as lively a music as possible. Composition usually is a lonely – solo – metier where you carefully reflect every note and every sound. You reflect it in verbal thinking and in imagination, and you have all the time in the world to do so. It is a slow process".

"In contrast, free improvisation is a collective work", he continues. "All your decisions as a performer affect the decisions of the others – you have a common time and a common space of expression in which to act in real time. This doesn't mean that an improviser reflects less than a composer, but they do it before and after the creation of the music. This way of thinking while creating is musical thinking in the purest sense, a thinking in sounds – the only thinking that is possible in real time, thinking in words is much too slow! If you think in sounds, you think and create in the same moment. You get into a state of a collective musical energy, a flow, which creates the form of a piece, which in the end is as convincing as a composed form, but different".

I've been trying to develop the idea of an aesthetics of imperfection over some years, and so Zimmerlin's comments give pause for thought. I don't disagree with anything that he says, except about the label – but although, to reiterate, "aesthetics of imperfection" does not imply a deficiency or failing of improvisation, his argument suggests that the term has a continuing hidden bias. At its best, the form of an improvised piece is as

convincing as that of the best composition. But the ideal of being well-formed is not the improviser's only consideration.

This is clear from Zimmerlin's subsequent argument: "If you act musically together in the very moment of creation, you are in the best moments really at the pulse of life, you feel directly and in the most deepest way that you and your fellow musicians are alive! And – very important – you share this experience with the audience. We would like to invite listeners to share a very concentrated state of listening to the sounds which behave like living beings". Zimmerlin adds that the trio's approach has changed since the days of Derek Bailey, but they have great respect for his pioneering work – and that of Nuova Consonanza, New Phonic Art, AMM, AACM, Spontaneous Music Ensemble and many others.

I ask Daniel Studer about the advantages of an "all-string" sound. "I founded a String Trio in Rome in the beginning of the 90s", he replies. "I liked very much the sound and the different roles of the instruments". He adds that "By the term 'string trio', we just mean three string instruments playing together". In classical music, string trios are among the most common chamber music formations. The trio for two violins and cello developed out of the Baroque trio sonata. Haydn pioneered the trio for violin, viola and cello, with Mozart's Divertimento K563 the summit of this repertoire. The medium revived during the 20th century, with contributions from Webern and Schoenberg. In jazz and improvised music, the String Trio of New York, founded by bassist John Lindberg, featured violinist Billy Bang and guitarist James Emery; Kent Carter's String Trio featured bass, viola and violin.

But for Studer, these trios are not a main inspiration. "They have harmonic instruments we don't have. Their approaches are totally different from our musical language, which we see as more rooted in improvised music". Free improvisation surely could not have existed without jazz, but many of its proponents have little interest in jazz. "We all like a wide musical knowledge, and music history, so different kinds of styles come together in our music", Daniel responds. "Jazz is one of them".

How has your playing with the trio evolved, in the time you have been together? "In this group I can express my musical possibilities, ideas and wishes in a very natural matter", Studer replies. "Sometimes with a group you can reach the highest common multiple. In this trio that's possible". The ten tracks – which have a wide range of expression, captured in their poetic titles by German writer Annette Pehnt – involve little unaccompanied playing. It's a strong trio sound rather than three individuals arguing for space. Each voice fits in the overall scheme: a real consort music, unified not broken.

Andy Hamilton, Durham

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IM HELLEN

STRING TRIO

Harald Kimmig, *violin*; Daniel Studer, *bass*; Alfred Zimmerlin, violoncello.

1	Im deutlichen Morgen	10:58	ISRC CH 130.1700762
2	Was Wiesel wissen	5:15	ISRC CH 130.1700763
3	Unter Kinnhöhe	1:31	ISRC CH 130.1700764
4	Gib mir Honig	5:39	ISRC CH 130.1700765
5	Safran im Februar	3:39	ISRC CH 130.1700766
6	Out of reach	5:13	ISRC CH 130.1700767
7	Hinter Wänden aus Papier	2:58	ISRC CH 130.1700768
8	Hinüber oder vielleicht	5:29	ISRC CH 130.1700769
9	Zweifels ohne	4:41	ISRC CH 130.1700770

Total Time 45:28
DDD 24Bit

Composed by Trio Kimmig-Studer-Zimmerlin, Tuhtah Publishing SUISA.

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