MUS 209 - Advanced Music Theory and Practice (4 units)

Improvisation: An Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Investigation

Fall 2003
University of California, San Diego
Fridays, 2-4:50pm, Mandeville 125

Instructor: David Borgo, Ph.D.  (dborgo@ucsd.edu)
Office: H&SS 1341, 858-822-4957
Office Hours: Tuesday 10:30-11:30 and Friday 12:30-1:30 (or by appointment)

MUS 209 – general description
Advanced integrated studies in music theory; composition and styles study through analysis and performance. This course is intended primarily for doctoral students and may be taken by M.A. students only with special approval of M.A. adviser and course instructor. A major research or analytical publishable paper is required.

Course description:

This seminar provides an introduction to the study of improvised musical traditions around the world and a critical investigation of the many questions that the diverse practice of improvisation raises. We will explore a variety of ways to experience and theorize improvised music: along cultural, historical, and stylistic dimensions; with regard to gender, class and race perspectives; in relationship to developments in science and technology; and with respect to methodological and pedagogical considerations and issues of dissemination and globalization. Performance creativity will be approached from the perspective of the artist/creator and equally as art is continually “performed” in its reception and interpretation by individuals, institutions, and societies. Each week will focus on a limited set of themes or issues, having as a starting point a particular improviser or improvisatory tradition. Special attention will be paid to post-WWII intercultural forms of musical improvisation.

Course Requirements:

- Attendance is expected at every session. Please notify me of any extenuating circumstances as soon as possible.

- For each week, I have selected a topic related to improvisation studies and have assigned a number of required and recommended readings to be discussed during our Friday sessions. All required readings are available as a bound packet at Cal Copy (3251 Holiday Ct. #103, behind the Mobil station at the corner of La Jolla Village and Villa La Jolla). All required readings for a given week must be completed prior to the class meeting. Gray titles are recommended reading and are located either in non-circulating journals or on reserve in the SSH library.

- During discussion I will ask students to briefly summarize the readings and to act as moderator of the subsequent discussion.

- Each week you are required to participate in our discussions and to hand in a concise (2-3 page, typed) synopsis/position paper. The format for these short papers is not rigid, however, it should be clear from your writing that you have read and critically reflected on each assignment.

- A substantial, publishable research paper is required by finals week of the quarter. You will also be expected to present the results of your research to the class. There is considerable latitude in topic and approach (e.g. a more analytical, theoretical, historical, or cultural approach to a given topic), but by the 6th week of the quarter you will need to submit a proposed topic along with a description of your intended approach and a sampling of potential resources. All topics must be approved by the instructor.

- During the quarter, I will bring in audio and video examples to illustrate the various topics or artists under discussion, and I encourage students to share audio/video examples and readings as well.
Course Schedule and Readings

Week 1: Introductions and Overview

Week 2: Definitions (and Disregard) of Improvisation

Can we define improvisation? What does the process of improvisation involve? What is the difference between improvisation and composition? Between improvisation and interpretation or variation? What is the relationship of improvisation to spontaneity? To randomness? To novelty or innovation? To tradition? Are there differences between product-oriented creativity and process-oriented creativity? How might we describe the relationship between an art "object" (e.g. music score) and its "performance"? Why has this broadly extended phenomenon been so rarely studied?


Week 3: Improvisation, Oral Tradition, and “the Model”: Ethnomusicological Perspectives

How do musicians and listeners conceive of improvisation in a given culture? How do they value the practice? Are cross-cultural definitions or studies of improvisation possible or valid? How do musicians structure their improvisations in a given setting? To what extent might they change over the course of several performances or over the course of a lifetime? In what ways do cultural or societal expectations affect musical improvisation? What is the relationship between tradition and innovation in a given culture? How does the concept of improvisation relate to societies that do not have a form of music notation? Is there a Western bias concerning the study of improvisation?

• Look over all of the following in the library and select one article to discuss in depth in class:
  o The Yearbook for Traditional Music vol. XIX (1987)
  o World of Music 33/3 (1991)
Week 4: Analyzing Improvisation: Jazz and the “Problem” of Miles Davis and Cecil Taylor

Can we analyze improvisation in the moment of performance? Through what means can we analyze improvisations after the fact? Can or should improvisation be evaluated in the same light as “composed” music? What makes for an exemplary or superlative improvisation? In what ways do the goals or intentions of the researcher affect the analysis? How might being analyzed affect the future creative work of an improviser? What types of analysis have been tried in the past? Can analytical models from other disciplines be effectively applied to improvised music?


Week 5: The Improviser’s Body and Instrument

What is the relationship between an improviser’s intentions and actions? How does an improviser’s physical connection with her/his instrument factor into this relationship? How does instrumental training affect improvised creativity? Why has the creative role of the body been neglected in the music academy and in fields concerned with human cognition?


Week 6: Freedom and Limits I: Individual and Cultural Perspectives

**Final Paper Proposals are Due**

What is meant by the term “free improvisation”? “Non-idiomatic improvisation”? How do individual, cultural, and historical factors affect how we understand and employ these terms? What possibilities are inherent in the practice of so-called free improvisation that may not be available or may be less pronounced in other forms of musicking? What difficulties can arise in the practice? What are some common aesthetic objections to free improvisation? What are some common aesthetic endorsements?
How do individuals, performing groups, listeners, and industry folk make sense, or make use of free improvisation? How are various identity markers employed to describe this music? And what personal, cultural, or nationalistic connections do they highlight or mask?


**Week 7: Freedom and Limits II: Psychological, Spiritual, and Technological Perspectives**

How do performers conceptualize (and listeners attend to) improvisation? Are there cognitive or psychological limits imposed on artistic creativity? What are the benefits and limits to cognitive modeling?


**Week 8: The Politics of Improvisation: Economic, Ethnic, and Gender Concerns**

How does improvised music fit within the economic and political structures of the music industry or music academy? How have individuals and associations confronted and shaped this relationship in the past? What role has race and gender played in the politics and economics of improvised music? What role can cultural and gender studies play in alerting us to, and altering this situation?


**Week 9: Imparting Improvisation: Methodology, Pedagogy, and Reception**

Can improvisation be taught? What methods have been tried in the past? How do these methods vary from culture to culture? What are the potential benefits and potential detriments to the institutionalized teaching of improvisation? to more informal or more community-based settings for instruction? What appeals to audiences about improvised performance? What may be unappealing? How does the relationship between the audience and performer(s) affect the process of improvising?

- Read “Classroom Improvisation” and “Audience”
- Look over other contributions including those by Marilyn Crispell Larry Ochs
- Dean, Roger T. Creative improvisation : jazz, contemporary music, and beyond : how to develop techniques of improvisation for any musical context.

**Week 10 and Finals Week**

**In-class presentations of student research**