

# Improvisation Generated Composition

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A Thesis

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This Thesis composition is a piece of music generated without the use of a musical score, therefore, in lieu of a score and parts, the methodology used for the creation of the work will be described. Ideally, one will have familiarized themselves with the recording of the piece prior to reading the following text.

The concept of this project is the usage of free-improvisation as a means for generating compositional content, while remaining ever-present in a piece of music that can be described as through-composed. There are two examples which illustrate on a basic level, the two concepts which I attempted to join. Firstly, is the gestural form of sonic construction widely used in graphically-scored pieces, or electroacoustic music. Secondly, is the power and excitement of an improvising ensemble which has developed its own style of playing together over a long period of time. In order to bring these two ideas together, I took an ensemble of musicians with a history of improvising together, and workshopped the kinds of gestural ideas collaboratively, using progressively more and more guidance within improvisational exercises to craft the overall form.

The initiation of the music began with two simple instructions from me for a short free-improvisation, which ended up being 2:20. The instruction was a gestural relationship between certain instruments (drums & voice in relation to the saxophone) and a particular method for the introduction of the piano. From a composer's point of view, what is truly exciting about beginning a piece in this method is the unpredictability of the sounds to come. From the very first moment, the way to expand the music from this 2:20 improvisation presented itself to me via the improvisation itself, as opposed to my own abstract impetus. This is because the musicians find their own way to relate to each other in the moment, beyond my initial guiding concepts and create compositionally rich ideas which I can then manipulate into more and more complex structures. This yields musical relationships that I would not necessarily have created on my own, and pushes the piece forward in ways I could not have anticipated prior to workshopping.

Over the course of 8 months of weekly sessions, this 2:20 improvisation became a 20:00 through-composed piece of music, which was completely memorized, and had no need of musical scores. This was possible because of the way in which the piece was composed. Almost always within the realm of group playing, any new compositional idea for moving the music forward was always workshopped, and practiced in the rehearsal setting - all musicians experimenting with the tools and skills developed as an experienced free-improvising ensemble. My role as a composer was very much like a guide, or a director, for the musicians to follow, and over time, the directions become codified, and rehearsed, in order to function the same way between repetitions. However, because of the gestural nature of all the musical content, this format allows for the constant openness of *specific* performance decisions - it gives room for the improvisors to react to in-the-moment occurrences in the music, and injects the piece with a sense of spontaneity which exists within free-improvisation performances.

It's important to describe now, that during the course of working with this ensemble, several of the compositional decisions and ideas which presented themselves to me required the usage of

digital signal processing to realize their full potential. For this reason, I incorporated the synthesis software Supercollider for processing live signals from the performers. The main purpose of the digital signal processing is not to add synthetic electronic sounds to the composition, but to extend the soundscapes of the acoustic instruments themselves, and strengthen the direction of particular musical gestures, so that they may be far more effective in evoking moods, directions, and drama within the piece.

Creating a complete composition in this method resulted in many interesting questions for composers exploring the usage of improvisation. It will be an important process to reflect on the project and try to decide how much of the music generated truly benefitted from its collaborative nature, and how much of the process obstructed me as a composer from using more specific tools to achieve a musical goal (e.g. graphic score, standard notation). The nature of the piece allows for a significant amount of variance in each subsequent performance, and because of this, it's also important to begin working with the question of how this piece functions as work of art. There is one perspective that, because of the free-improvisation thread that exists, views the piece as existing in performance only, always drawing on the momentary reactions of the performers to different venues, audiences, moods, etc. However, given this variance, there is an issue when the piece attempts to exist in a recorded format. If there is always a variance, there is also room for one performance to be more successful than another and we come across the issue of choosing, or not choosing the most successful method of execution for a recorded piece. Why would one not choose the most successful execution for the recording? For what purpose does the openness in performance exist if there is a recorded version? There are many ways to approach these questions, and many reasons in my own opinion for the validity of both perspectives. However, a second composition project in this vein would serve as an essential platform for exploring these issues in the realm of improvisational and experimental music.