

**ARTISTRY AND TECHNIQUE
OF IMPROVISED MUSIC:
REFLECTIONS ON THE
COMPOSITIONS OF
CARLO MOMBELLI**

A Thesis to accompany the Portfolio

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(Composition)

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THE ARTISTRY AND TECHNIQUE OF IMPROVISED MUSIC: REFLECTIONS ON THE COMPOSITION PORTFOLIO OF CARLO MOMBELLI

Introduction

The compositions presented in the accompanying DMus portfolio have evolved over many years and reflect changing stylistic traits from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. They do not represent a homogenous body of work even as ‘jazz compositions’, partly because in almost thirty years there are inevitable evolutions of style, and partly because there are several compositional approaches underlying them. Although it is possible to categorise the whole portfolio as ‘jazz’, it is only in the broadest sense, that of jazz as ‘an Afro-American musical idiom [to] which improvisation is crucially important’, as Martin Williams puts it (1983, 3,4).

As Ingrid Monson also reminds us, however, jazz is both an idiom and a genre, and ‘itself subject to conflicting definitions’ (1996, 15), with a number of subcategories that have developed historically, such as blues, rhythm & blues, gospel, swing, bebop, cool. My works do not reflect all these historical developments (obviously), and they have been influenced by styles outside of jazz; but they do all have some relationship to the artistry and technique of improvisation because of the way I work as a composer, even if improvisation is not always used in every case as a performance technique in the finished product. My works are contemporary jazz, then, and I return to the issue of how they can be seen as ‘jazz’ at the end of this essay. The main point of this thesis is not defining my work so much as discussing the contents of the portfolio and the ways in which it reflects influences, compositional approaches, and situations from which it has arisen.

My works have emerged in essentially three ways: first, directly out of my practice of improvising as a performer (bass guitar and keyboard); second, in a more conceptual if largely unbidden way out of my head and away from an instrument (rather than out of my fingers); and third, in response to an idea or image, as when I am writing music for film. Of these, by far the most predominant in my work is the first, composing out of the

practice of improvisation; and not necessarily in an ensemble context only for I often improvise when I am alone. The second approach is different from the first largely because here composition is experienced initially as a musical idea in the abstract: I hear a composition or part of it playing like a tape-loop in my head in a way that I find difficult to switch off, even when it appears at unexpected times and disrupts my social focus. The third approach is to me the most calculated or constructed because of the external imperative of film – I cannot necessarily work intuitively as I do in the first approach – although it, too, draws on my mode of work as a performer. Thus even in this third approach, where I have a set task and boundaries (a script or set of images), I try to find inspiration somewhere outside of the boundaries of the film for the musical accompaniment to images or scenes. I am most strongly drawn to the first, intuitive, approach than to one consciously structured in response to film; the first way feels the most ‘natural’ and has been with me the longest. Film music is a relatively recent development in my work and although par for the course of having to earn a living (as it is for many people), the first two approaches are what I prefer, and the compositions that result from the first two approaches are mostly what I present to the public at my concerts and on CDs.

This is my main proposition, then: that unconscious or intuitive modes of improvisation have suited my purpose as a composer better than more conscious or rational modes, and that all my works are driven by improvisational rather than more formal compositional techniques. I justify this claim first by looking at how I became predisposed towards an improvisatory mode of composition through training and experience (Part 1: ‘Events in my musical growth as a composer’). I then explore the three main ways in which I approach composition as a process (Part 2: ‘Composing out of the practice of improvisation’, Part 3: Composing in the abstract, and Part 4: Composing to external requirements).

Part 2 is particularly long because this is my main approach, and the main arguments and evidence developing and supporting my claim are found here; so I have subdivided it into sections that deal with intuition, technique, improvisation, composing out of improvisation, improvising out of composition, and aesthetic issues. In the Conclusion of the thesis (‘Artistry and originality’) I relate the argument that I am an essentially and intrinsically an improvising composer to the notion of originality in my work, as I see it,

looking at the concept of artistry as central to originality. I present my ethos as both composer and performer at the end of the essay in terms of something that I call ‘playing on the edge of wrong’. This I have found by far the most effective method of composition, and much of this Thesis explains why.

Because of the importance of unconscious or intuitive modes of improvisation in my work, I first offer some definitions of intuition and ways in which it works in my case, and I begin with the word itself. Cambridge Dictionaries Online defines it as ‘(knowledge obtained from) an ability to understand or know something immediately without needing to think about it, learn it or discover it by using reason’ (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org>, accessed 3.10.08). The important words here for me are ‘without needing to think about it’ or without ‘using reason’, which in compositional terms does not mean without using technique, but in the first instance of a new piece without *consciously* using learnt techniques, i.e. without ‘needing to think about’ composing before doing it. Intuition here is clearly a function of human psychology, and I would argue that the most appropriate model in which to situate myself as a composer as far as process is concerned – and which also deeply affects the resultant aesthetic of my work (notwithstanding outside influences) – is a psychological model.

Jung’s model of the psyche, as an example which resonates for me, has three layers: the outer one ‘represents consciousness with its focal ego, the middle layer the personal unconscious with its complexes, the central sphere the collective unconscious with its archetypes, and its core ... the Self’, as Anthony Stevens puts it (1991, 28). One can look at this in various ways as applied to the process of composition. The ego *consciously* organizes ‘our thoughts and intuitions, our feelings and sensations [and] has access to those memories which are unrepressed and readily available’ (Ibid, 30; my emphasis). Applied to composition, this suggests that there can be both a conscious process (organizing material) and an unconscious one (intuitively generating material) simultaneously at work, when composing ‘intuitively’. I think the latter process is what I am most aware of, most of the time.

I can also use Jung’s tripartite model of the psyche to look at the three approaches to composition: the outer conscious one, in which the ego is located and which comes strongly into play in relationships with other people, is the level of the psyche that comes

into play most when I compose to external requirements, for film or television. The middle layer may be the area of the unconscious I draw on when composing in the abstract, away from an instrument. The central sphere is where I feel most of my work as a composer comes from and explains why I feel that in this approach my music comes from what I call a 'deeper' place, because it comes for the core of my psychological Self.

In addition to a psychological, there is also a neurological aspect to intuition, which has been identified in terms of left-brain or right-brain dominance. The left-brain, as is well known, deals with language and organization while the right brain 'processes intuitively, holistically, and randomly'

(<http://frank.mtsu.edu/~studskl/hd/hemis.html>, accessed 30.9.08). Improvising involves both performing and composing, and in both cases, these are non-verbal activities. This does not mean, however, that they are disorganized ones. Suffice it to say, for now, that when I am composing out of the practice of improvisation – which is most of the time – the right brain is likely to be dominant, and that this is almost certainly linked to my preference for composing out of a 'deep' psychological space.

Another aspect of intuition involves music aesthetics. Aesthetics has a long history in Western culture, also in relation to music and its various meanings (for a historical overview see Scruton 1999 and for a problematisation of the history see Dahlhaus 1983). The history of aesthetics has been mainly concerned with the effect of composition on the listener (more properly called 'affect'), concerned with emotional and intellectual – or indeed physical – response, in other words, rather than on the process of composition itself. But in my compositions – as I show later – the listener is by no means an afterthought, and includes my fellow performers, who are critical to my way of working as a 'jazz' composer. Leonard B. Meyer, one of the most influential writers on music in the mid twentieth century, moreover presents the paradox that although '[f]rom Plato down to the most recent discussions of aesthetics and the meaning of music, philosophers and critics have, with few exceptions, affirmed their belief in the ability of music to evoke emotional responses in listeners', what he calls the 'subjective evidence' of this ability (as seen in treatises, composers' writings, scores) is not easy to present: it 'yields no precise knowledge of the stimulus which created the emotional response' (Meyer 1956, 6-7). 'Because music flows through time', explains Meyer, 'listeners and critics have generally been unable to pinpoint the particular musical process which evoked the

affective response which they describe' (Ibid, 7). Even 'objective evidence' in the form of changes in behaviour or physiology in listeners (walking out of a concert or pulling a face, for example) 'is no indication as to either the presence or force of emotional response' (Ibid, 9). By the same token, and especially when I discuss composing out of intuition while improvising, it is difficult to give any evidence about the precise relationship between what I am doing and what comes out, in terms of any emotional (or other aesthetic) value or intention. Some of my pieces arose directly out of emotional experiences, some not; some have a kind of 'programme', some not. What I am aware of is that the easiest and hence to me most 'natural' way to compose is with an instrument in my hand, in a psychological space where I am not thinking consciously about techniques of composition but about the sounds themselves, their beauty, and the way that they are emerging from that 'deeper' self.

Part 1 incorporates material on the art of performance and improvisation, as well as on my own historical development. My claim as a composer whose chief mode of composition arises out of the practice of improvisation as a performer, is based both on personal experience and on a review of the literature where others' experience is documented and other modes of improvisation are discussed. I begin with a brief overview of the main events in my development as a composer.

Part 1: Events in my musical growth as a composer

One of the reasons I have always valued intuitive composition is because of the way I was trained (or rather, in my case, not trained) into music. I never had formal composition or bass lessons. My school was essentially my record collection, and my practice the garage jazz band that I put together every Saturday when growing up. (We would have practised every day, but we were all still in school.) I was dedicated, worked hard and had a thirst for music knowledge that is still with me. This experience is commonplace among jazz musicians, as Bill Evans (for example) says.

I believe in things that are developed through hard work. I always like people who have developed long and hard, especially through introspection and a lot of dedication. I think what they arrive at is usually a much deeper and more beautiful

thing than the person who seems to have that ability and fluidity from the beginning (Evans 1979).

Each week I brought new compositions to the band. I realised that not every piece worked, and that to achieve a good composition I had to go through many pieces that would be discarded; but I learnt something new each time. Again, learning through trial and error is common in jazz, although not everyone discards the trials. Thelonious Monk was one who did, a rare order of jazz composer from whom we only have around thirty extant pieces. They are all superb; but nobody knows how much trash he produced (if he did) in order to get them. I assume, too, that they all came out of improvisation at the piano, because most of them fall within that kind of idiom.

My earliest deep experience of music was at the age of eight, when my mother took me to see the ballet *Swan Lake*. From that moment, even after hearing the opening theme and the Scene *Pas d'action*, I knew that I would be a musician. My mother saw my determination and sent me for piano lessons. Not having a piano in the house hampered my growth but whenever I came across a piano I would sit and play pieces that I had learnt, as well as (even at that early age) improvised sketches. I was already 'thinking in improvisation' if not yet 'thinking in jazz' as Paul Berliner puts it (1994). *Swan Lake* is an ultra-Romantic piece, moreover a ballet in which for a child there is a visual or narrative focus elsewhere aside from on music – on the stage, on the dancers, costumes, or the story. So it is a powerful early experience of music as a subconscious form of expression: music is heard semi-consciously but represents something deeper and 'inner' being enacted on the stage, that one is also not fully conscious of as a child. Even though I went through very different listening periods as I grew up – pop, rock (Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Emerson, Lake and Palmer), classical music, jazz – when I started composing music I aimed for something that gave me the same kind of experience I had with that very first exposure to Tchaikovsky.

It was the American bassist Jaco Pastorius who influenced my decision to play bass. He had such an individual and contagious way of playing, however, that even though I admired him I never wanted to just play like him. The only solo of his I 'worked out' for bass (by ear) is *Portrait of Tracy*. When it came to composition I did learn by copying from other people, and it was the European, Scandinavian, and Brazilian composers that

particularly influenced my earlier compositional style; composers such as Eberhard Weber and Egberto Gismonti, and the Norwegian ensembles of Jan Garbarek and Nils Petter Molvaer. The group Oregon, led by Ralph Towner, had an immense impact on my compositional direction; even though they were North Americans they improvised over European chamber music styles and Indian forms. I then discovered that all this music was recorded for the German record labels ECM, ENJA, and JMT Records, all based in Munich. From these labels, in turn, I started to discover musicians such as Keith Jarrett, Charlie Haden, Pat Metheny, Nana Vasconcellos, and Charlie Mariano, all of whom have had a major impact on my music. Another very different kind of music with which I fell in love with was by folk singer Joni Mitchell. All these artists touched me in a very deep, spiritual way; and so this is what I wanted people to feel when they listened to my music, as I began to compose. I wanted to play music that would touch the audience, uplift them, challenge them, stimulate the imagination, and draw them into another world.

ECM recording artists probably had the most influence on my intuitive first approach to composition. Their music had a spiritual calm, almost eeriness to it; here I heard silence for the first time in music; the melodies were unpredictable and beautiful. This to me (in the 1980s) represented the ‘European avant-garde’. I began experimenting with composition: analyzing the sound on recordings such as *Solstice – sound and shadows* (ECM 1095) that featured Garbarek and Weber, and modelling my sound on that. During the 1980s this was the music I wanted to make; but as I grew towards my current project, *The Prisoners of Strange*, I ceased trying to copy other musicians and began to develop my own voice.

In 1985 I started writing music for a project with two guitars, bass, and drums, and put together a group that I called Abstractions: myself, Johnny Fourie and Jo Runde on guitars, and Neill Ettridge on drums. We played a gig every Thursday at the club ‘Jamesons’ in downtown Johannesburg. Here Lloyd Ross, the owner of Shifty Records, heard us perform and invited us to record an LP. We pressed 140 copies. I took my band back to his studio the same year (1986) to record more music, but this has never been released. (I will release it at some stage, as I feel that those recordings are better than the music on the LP.) This was a creative and important period of musical growth. Presented in my Portfolio are several compositions conceived at this time: *My inspiration, As I turned my head, Happy sad, and I drank my coffee and dreamt* (from 1985); *Places*

people go to, Johnny the Guru, Dear music lover, It's cold, I said, On the other side, Journey of my dreams, Dancing thoughts, and Wailing (1986); *Remember Lucia*, and *Deep impressions parts 1 and 2* (1987).

I left South Africa in June 1987 in the hope of recording these works with a great European record label. When at first I was not successful, I went into a rejection depression and did not compose anything for two and a half years. I did record an album for ITM records in 1988, *Carlo Mombelli's Abstractions*, but it used material that I already had. In 1990 I started composing again and recorded three experimental albums: *Happy sad* (1990), *Dancing in a museum* (1993) and *Bats in the belfry* (1996). I also made a composition contribution for the Jaco Pastorius tribute album *Basstorius* (1993). It was at this time that I changed the name of my project – and my band(s) – to The Prisoners of Strange.

I moved back to South Africa at the end of 1998 and formed the South African version of Prisoners of Strange, later recording the album *When serious babies dance* (2002). This evolved from live performances. I must point out here that there are not many places in South Africa to play live jazz regularly, even in Johannesburg. To have a regular monthly gig at a local jazz club, then, I felt I had to compose a few new pieces for each show so that there would always be surprises for the (faithful) audience (I always saw familiar faces) as well as for the musicians; keeping it fresh. Besides writing music for Prisoners I have also branched out into more crossover styles, composed for other projects that came along via (for example) the New Music Indaba, including a piece for the Stockholm Saxophone Quartet that resulted in *Observations from the hideout*, as well as music for documentaries and animation films. Since returning to South Africa I have been in what feels like a very creative productive season.

Part 2: Composing out of the practice of improvisation

The reason why so many of my compositions have emerged from improvisation is an obvious one: I am a jazz musician by inclination and (self-)training as noted above, and a jazz musician is primarily a performer and an improviser. Such compositions are more intuitive, have a more natural and personal feel, arise more unconsciously although not

without effort; and even if the resultant piece is complicated the co-musicians in Prisoners seem to play the music easily. This, I argue, is because it has come from a deeper place than a composition that has not come from improvisation. This deeper place, as noted in the previous section, could be thought of as a personal unconscious in psychological terms, or the place that suggests an affective response, in aesthetic terms, or it might be indicative of my right brain preference. More pertinent to my argument here is to understand how this method of composing arises. I begin by exploring how improvisation itself arises, examining my own and others' experience and drawing on some of the extensive literature on improvisation, in order to identify what improvisation is and how one strives to acquire the skill for it.

Jazz musicians have a great deal to say about this, and from various angles, some of them psychological: Bobby McFerrin for example calls improvisation 'the courage to move from one note to the next' (quoted in Werner 1996, 56). To begin the exploration I suggest a working hypothesis, drawn from the definition of intuition given above, that improvisation is born out of intuition, backed by technique.

Intuition and technique

A musician may hear an amazing composition in his or her head, but if s/he has no technique s/he will not be able to express it and it will never be heard by anyone else. Technique brings out what is inside; it is the skill required to *produce* music, as a performer/improviser. The better one's knowledge of other music, too, the more ways one has of expressing oneself; and the search for new levels of technical mastery are life-long. Good technique is not a source of inspiration. It 'gives your playing a unique musical accent' but it is 'only a means to an end, 'the end' being music that communicates something', John Goldsby claims (2002, 153). Although in young players the technical side develops earlier and faster than the emotional side, 'practising technique will not cripple your ability to express yourself; in fact, your personality will come through only when you have some kind of technique to bring it through' (Ibid). The two go in tandem; both are 'abilities' but they are of a different order, and technique is the more tangible.

The technical ability major artists have is not always apparent because it often simplifies as the years pass, and they often become known for an increasingly simple approach. Looking at a Picasso sketch or listening to a Steve Swallow improvisation, for example, it is hard to imagine the depth of their technique. It is artistry that is expressed, and technique is simply a means to this end. Technique certainly seems to ‘manifest[] unconsciously’ (Werner 1996, 100) in most jazz musicians, although I tend not to agree with Kenny Werner’s assertion that one can become a master of ‘pure music’ without some degree of technical mastery. I do however agree with his assertion that ‘[w]hile listening to them you can’t conceive of any other way to play’ (Ibid), if by this he means that technique must match musicality at any level of development.

When it reaches a certain level, technique ‘hid[es] itself’, then, as Stephen Nachmanovitch puts it, even though it ‘may have been a life-and-death battlefield when the artist was creating it’ (1990, 74). I don’t necessarily subscribe to the view that learning technique is a battlefield, but Nachmanovitch’s idea that skill eventually ‘reveals the unconscious’, and becomes ‘the vehicle for surfacing normally unconscious material from the dream world’ (Ibid) resonates with my ‘deeper place’ of composition as a realm of the unconscious.

If I think too consciously about what technical moves will impress a listener I will find intuitive sensitivity suppressed. I must be free enough with technique to follow the flow of the moment, even if compositional ideas change in the process. And this often happens in my first approach. Herbie Hancock has noted how, on many occasions, he will ‘start with an idea and something else will come out of it. Rather than me trying to follow the idea I originally had, I just go with what I have’ (quoted in Woodard 1988, 20). Ingrid Monson refers to the outcome of this process as ‘saying something’, using a verbal analogy that for her ‘underscores the collaborative and communicative quality of improvisation’ (1996, 2). For her the act of composition itself is always communal, however, whereas for me what I am ‘saying’ is usually at first a solo idea explored privately, formulated gradually, and then fully realised as a composition through collaboration.

Performing improvisation is a different matter from composing *out of* improvisation. But both are what Nachmanovitch calls ‘the surrender business. Improvisation is acceptance,

in a single breath, of both transience and eternity. We know what might happen, but we cannot know what will happen' (1990, 21). If when composing music out of improvisation I arrive at a concept or sound and have an idea where the piece is going and it takes another route, I will intuitively follow the natural flow. In some contemporary art music, too, intuition comes when you need it, as Stockhausen has noted. 'And when you play in a group – intuitive music, not written-out music – then you badly need it. Otherwise you only rely on your mechanics, on what you have studied, learned, and rehearsed many times'; and you know that you have it 'because you haven't thought it or reflected on it, you've experienced it' (quoted in Cott 1974, 26).

Improvisation

Hal Crook, one of north America's best-known improvisers and jazz educators, offers the following definition of improvisation: 'to spontaneously create melodies, rhythms, harmonies and/or effects of a more or less original nature on a musical instrument, with or without the restrictions imposed by tempo, meter, chords, song form and/or style, while functioning in the capacity of soloist or accompanist' (Crook 2006, 23). The key elements here for jazz are 'spontaneous creation', 'more or less original', and 'with or without restrictions' on one or more parameters. In some ways, then, improvisation in the jazz tradition is very different from improvisation in classical (art) music.

There have been many ways of using improvisation in whole pieces or sections in art music, especially since World War II. Composers have used aleatoric techniques (Cage's 4'33' is arguably the most famous example here: an entirely improvised work relying on environmental sound), experimental techniques (composers such as Cardew, Wolff, Feldman), repetitive process (La Monte Young, Reich, Riley, Glass), or electronic techniques including interactive electronic process techniques (David Behrman, Chris Brown, George Lewis, Pauline Oliveros, or Scott Johnson).

Many art music composers involved with improvisation have in turn been strongly influenced by music from other traditions, such as Indian classical music (Terry Riley), Indonesian gamelan (Lou Harrison), or rock (John Zorn; see also Zorn's *Arcana: Musicians on Music* (2000) for various views on music that straddles the art-popular

divide and uses improvisation). Indeed, post-war musicians have in almost every genre ‘promulgated renewed investigation of real-time forms of musicality, including a direct confrontation with the role of improvisation’ as George Lewis says (2004, 131). Lewis further notes that the new forms of improvisation in Euro-American art music ‘exhibit broad areas of both confluence and contrast with those emerging from musical art worlds strongly influenced by African-American improvisative musics’ (Ibid 132), and he uses as exemplars of each tradition in the 1950s John Cage and Charlie Parker, respectively (Ibid 133).

Perhaps it is worth drawing a distinction here between compositional processes used by some of the people just listed and composing coming out of improvisation, a distinction that I see as a difference between experimentation and improvisation. A number of twentieth-century composers have been dubbed ‘experimental’ that use improvisation. For Cage, experimental was a problematic term, only to be used ‘providing it is understood [as] an act the outcome of which is unknown [because] what has been determined?’ (quoted in Nyman 1999(1974), 3). Terry Riley’s *In C* veers towards the improvisational side of experimentation. Its one-page score ‘allow[s] much room for improvisation’, consisting as it does of a ‘single page containing fifty-three modules’ based on the C-major scale, with a page of instructions about roughly how often and how to play them (Potter 2000, 109, 111). Steve Reich understands composition as ‘musical process’, but not in the Cagean sense; rather he sees it as a combination of process and result, which he calls ‘sounding music’, the two happening simultaneously so that there is no ‘hidden structure’, as there is, for example, in serialism. ‘I’m interested in a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing’ (Reich 1974, 10). This is not, for him, a process in which improvisation is involved, because the ‘distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note details and the over all [sic] form simultaneously. One can’t improvise in a musical process – the concepts are mutually exclusive’ (Ibid 11).

From the 1950s the efforts of art music composers seem to have been concentrated in three principal directions, then: the extension of serialism, the development of electronic media, and the introduction of chance.¹ With the introduction of chance the composition

¹ Chance music, also called aleatoric music, is dependent on material generated randomly, sometimes with external intervention; an example being Cage’s use of the *I Ching*.

was different at each performance despite using pre-composed music, as in 4'33"; more different, say, than any two performances of a classical work might be. Another example is Earle Brown's *Twenty-Five Pages* composed for one to twenty-five pianos (1953). Brown's directions are to arrange the sheets of musical material in any order the performers wish. However, even though the composition will be different at every performance, this (to me) is not 'improvised' in the sense of creating something new in the moment, unpremeditated. In addition, even though the performers have some freedom in creating the outcome of Brown's work, this does not mean they 'improvise'. They can choose when to play something, in this instance, but not what to play.

The composer Feldman gets closer to the concept of improvisation as I use it in my own work. His *Projection* (1950-51) and other pieces are written on squared paper, each square representing a unit of time to be filled either by silence or by a sound defined in quite loose terms: it might be a pizzicato note in the middle register of the cello, the player being free to choose the pitch within that range (Griffiths 1978, 172). The balance between 'freedom of choice' and 'instructions to players' comes close to jazz here. Similarly, in 1967 Stockhausen gave his ensemble the instructions 'the musicians must also react to each other, each sometimes offering a variation of what he has heard from another' (quoted in Griffiths, 165). This is a concept totally familiar in jazz.

The classical composer's approach (and material) is generally different however, I suggest, and whereas in art music it is usually the personality of the composer's voice that dominates, in jazz each individual performer's voice develops its own musical colour to a far greater extent. Collectively jazz musicians bring to the composition a set of voices that can make it change. The composer brings the canvas, the theme, idea, or inspiration, and the improvisers complete the composition with their voices, working in harmony with each other. In classical new music, on the other hand, the approach seems slightly different: the voice of the composer is more dominant, being to a large extent expressed or 'executed' by the ensemble. One of the great attractions of jazz for me is that when I listen to recordings or performers or certain composer-bandleaders it is always possible to hear who is playing in the band. Improvisation and composing are so closely knit that the performances virtually become the composition. I would like to argue here that for art music this extent of identifiable personal voice in improvised music is not present to the same degree.

There are nevertheless other new paths forged by new classical music from which jazz could learn, for example Stockhausen's manipulation of sound frequencies, or Cage's prepared instruments. Jazz musicians such as Coleman or Davis in the same era were still meanwhile using conventional 'notes' and 'scales', relying on the jazz concept of using the musical voice in an ensemble to create the music. In some of my compositions I have experimented with *musique concrète*,² radios, loops, etc., but I do also rely heavily on the personality of the sound of my acoustic performers – who for this reason are chosen very carefully.

Improvising is not unique to jazz in the twentieth century, as some jazz pedagogues such as Jamey Aebersold, claim; nor is it necessarily 'the most natural way to make music' (2000, 5). However, he is probably correct in saying that improvising is the earliest form of music making, and the most widespread culturally. 'Long before the printing press was invented, people played music on various instruments and all were thought to be creative musicians. Through the ages the art of improvising on a musical instrument gradually lost favour to the printed page' (Ibid).

I would rather say that improvising is the most natural way to *make music*. I started improvising as a child long before I knew what jazz was. I found simple melodies that I played over and over again – little compositions – and now, having children myself, I have seen the process repeated. Paul Berliner begins *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* by reminding us that newborn babies live in an 'auditory world' (1994, 21), and that part of a child's growing sense of her/his own identity is built out of what s/he hears (Ibid 21-22). Few classical music teachers encourage improvisation, however, even though, as Mildred Portney Chase pointed out (long ago), '[t]he child will create sound patterns, learn them well enough to repeat them with pleasure, and then discover new ones' (1981, 68). 'From this free improvisation', she claims, 'the child may begin to compose. But that is not as important as the value of the experience itself. Whether you began to improvise as a child or only begin now as an adult, improvising will enrich all of your playing' (Ibid).

² Music that uses sounds (recorded) from the 'real' world, such as vehicle noise, or bird calls.

I have never engaged in the kind of performances of classical music outlined above, but it has always been important to me, and compositionally my first-hand experience of classical music is somewhat unusual for a jazz composer. I worked in 1990 as an orchestral copyist for the Munich-based publishing company Ricordi & Co. and was in direct contact with composers and their sketches. In this capacity I wrote out Hubert Stuppner's *Concert Musique KV91 Amadeus* for flute, clarinet & string orchestra, Martin Kalley's *Miniatur Eins*, Rolf Ruhn's *Berceuse* for 104-piece orchestra, and Gerhard Stabler's *Co wie Kobalt* for solo contrabass and 88-piece orchestra. Aside from anything else, this act of walking in the notes of other people in an avant-garde (German) art-music style made me interested to go and listen to the classical avant-garde festival that took place once a year in Munich, where this music was being performed.

When I started studying jazz, I began to have a deeper understanding of improvisation of a particular kind, one that uses the principles of composition – melody, harmony, rhythm, and form – to compose pieces.

Composing out of improvisation

My bass practice session has a strict format: practising intonation, scales and arpeggios, sight reading, studying new pieces, walking over chord changes at different tempi, gathering musical information, building stamina, and always trying to develop a better technique to listen to myself. I make time to 'search' (I usually close my eyes). Sometimes I hit on something that could evolve into a good piece. This is my first sketch, done on the instrument and developed by countless repetitions. I listen and feed off the music for the next idea or note. It could take a while before I add anything. A simple soundscape of one to three notes can keep me in a meditative space and I might stay in this space for a long time, and still end the day with the composition not finished. I may revisit it the next day or week, or even the following year.

I have a box of manuscript sketches of potential works composed this way that I revisit from time to time. The piece *87/99* (Portfolio page 104) is so called because it was sketched in 1987 and completed in 1999. The time has to be right, because composing is a spiritual, personal experience to me, not a mechanical one. I don't force compositions

but let them unfold. I do however know when it is finished; and this is when the form has played itself out in relation to the material. An inexperienced artist has a tendency to continue adding, but in fact at this stage of my life I am now beginning to do the opposite. I accumulate information and then simplify the composition until I have reached the right sound and form, then I stop.

Perhaps there is a useful analogy to be made here with a process in fine art, and in this respect I mention a Picasso exhibition that I went to see in February 2006 at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, that made a deep impression on me. In the collection were the series of eleven lithographs entitled *The Bull*, created between 5 December 1945 and 17 January 1946 (see the catalogue by Madeline and Martin, 2006, 184-89). The first in the series is a detailed representation of a bull, the second is drawn in less detail, and each one becomes simpler until finally Picasso merely suggests the bull using a few lines. Even though each drawing is a complete artwork, the series is a metaphoric unity of gradual simplification – rather like a compositional process in visual form. The difference between this process and the compositions of mine that began complex and ended simple but coherent, is of course that my gradual simplifications are not in themselves compositions, only sketches or pre-compositions. They are nevertheless important stages in the process. When I have an inspired moment, therefore, I try not to forget the idea, the opening statement of the work and I have learnt to make notes or recordings before I stop improvising. (I have occasionally not done that and lost ideas, having only a vague memory of what they were.)

Improvised composition is not limited to a practice session. It can happen any time that I feel the need to play. A good example is *Sonic design: volcanic eruptions in slow motion* (Portfolio page 160). I am embarrassed to say that this composition was inspired by my losing my temper and smashing a plate on the floor. This disturbed me so much I could not sleep, so at 4 a.m. I went to my studio, picked up my bass, closed my eyes, and began to improvise. I recorded the bass and superimposed some manipulated spring soundscapes (see explanation in Portfolio Preface page vii) that I had made a few weeks earlier. The piece has an almost representational feel of lava flowing out of a volcano – red, orange and browns in slow motion; a metaphor for my anger. At the time I recorded the manipulated springs, however, the composition was still waiting (some weeks) for this moment, to be completed.

The link between performing and composing that I have described could not happen if my bass were not always ready to hand. When I composed *Sonic design* I did not have to look for it, take it out of the case, and start setting up my studio to record it at 4 a.m. My instruments are set up at all times and not packed away: they are available ‘in the moment’. There is an element of chance in this: I play the instruments that are placed around my studio as I last left it. If my acoustic guitar is in its case in the cupboard, I won’t use it. In many recent works I have made use of electronics and loop stations. If those machines were out of sight I would not improvise with them; therefore everything is set up and ready to use. I also have everything set up for use in a concert (as can be seen on the DVD of my DMus recital), where improvisation then plays another role, that of realising a composition.

Using instruments as *objets trouvés* is common in jazz composition and performance overseas. Brazilian musician Hermeto Pascual, for example, has a percussionist with a somewhat unusual way of setting up his instruments for each concert. First, he collects found objects or non-factory equipment (the kitchen is a great source). ‘Setting up’ consists of turning his percussion bag upside down on the stage and where the contents land (like a sangoma’s bones), that provides his solution for the evening. He will continue to use the percussion instruments closest to him during the entire performance; thus, every performance will be different because of what lands within reach. This is also a useful way of disrupting the force of habit. As drummer Peter Erskine has noted, it is a good idea to put ‘people in situations where they can’t rely on stuff they know and play out of muscle habit’ (1998, 27). When he records for ECM, he knows that ‘producer Manfred Eicher smells habits right away [so to deflect this] he might imply that I should play a particular part of a tune just on the cymbals, for example’ (Ibid). In this concept of creating possibilities for sound and then reaching for sounds, each performance as well as each composition will necessarily be different, not only for the audience but for the musicians on stage.

An improvisation can occasionally turn into quite an extended composition, note for note. In 1984 Joe Zawinul, co-leader of the group Weather Report, which had a strong influence on my work in the 1980s, told interviewer Greg Armbruster in answer to the question ‘How closely related is your compositional style to the way you play?’

I would say it must be exactly the same, because I compose by playing. I could always sit down and play for a long time. I switch on a tape recorder and play. I jot down the tape number, the day, and maybe the program of the sound. I have maybe 2000 cassettes full of music. Rather than playing 8-note phrases or something, I could put together a whole piece of music with a long thought. Then I might return to certain things without really thinking about it. It's more of a natural construction. Concentration is what it really is. I'm not thinking of construction or anything – I just let it move. I'm hardly aware of the way I'm composing; it's a talent, a lucky break. When it is done, I just write it down note for note without changing anything (quoted in Ambruster 1984, 48).

Nowadays we have computers and software to capture such 'natural constructions'. I press 'record' on my computer, improvise on my keyboard, save, and bring up my improvisation on the screen as music notation. Then I do what Picasso did: simplify, taking away the notes I do not want, until the piece evolves into the form it has to be. The computer has been an enormous boon in this respect, allowing mobility of experimentation with form, the option to repeat or delete sections easily. I can experiment by copying and dragging to where I might want to hear a section: cut, paste, and listen. If this does not work, I go back to the original. If there is a phrase I particularly like I can copy it to different instruments, and with the transpose function easily transpose it.

This latter process is the sequel, what comes after the initial idea that comes out of improvising. *Observations in the hideout* (Portfolio page 181) and *The mime artist* (Portfolio page 212) are good examples of the outcome of this process: both are improvisations recorded onto music software and moulded into shape. The results are (to me) fairly 'constructed', and it is interesting that the one thing they do not embody as a structural feature is improvisation – in the sense of allowing space for it in performance – so in many ways they are atypical. The majority of the compositions that I arrive at *through* improvisation have the possibilities and indeed the need for further improvisation, from the voices of other improvisers.

To end this section on composing out of improvisation, I offer an account of improvised music that is almost the total opposite of mine: that of the British improvisation group AMM. Although some of them came out of jazz, the improvisations they have made (over the course of forty years) do not lead to composition. Edwin Prévost, in *No Sound is Innocent* (1995) makes it very clear that he understands composition as a 'prescription' for a future performance (which may or may not involve improvisation). More important,

he sees it as quite ‘a subtle prescription for a network of power relations’ (1995, 5), mainly the power of the composer over the performer. Within the political ethos of the group, this approach is a kind of compositional fascism, while what they are striving for is something far more radical: compositional communism. The kind of free improvisation in which AMM engages is thus not in any way regarded as an end product, because it cannot be repeated or templated. To treat the end product differently from the process would, for them, imbue the result with a political power, a form of control, which AMM does not believe in. ‘The intention [of improvisation is purely] ‘making music, and listening to it, as if for the first time’, in dialogue with other musicians, and it is quite a specific process which Prévost calls ‘dialogic heurism’ (Ibid 3). I find this extremely interesting but obviously it conflicts with my own position; for I do very much see composition as an outcome of improvisation.

Improvising out of composition

I start writing from the premise of, ‘what do I want this composition to do? What’s the function of this piece?’ What it expresses emotionally is a key element. Another is its function as a vehicle for improvisers, because at the core of all the music I’ve written is the idea that this piece is a tool with which to develop certain improvisational ideas (Dave Holland quoted in Mandel 2001, 28).

There is composing out of improvisation, and there is improvising *on* composition. Traditionally in jazz – so the convention often goes – musicians play through the tune and then take it in turns to solo, then ‘head out’, i.e. move towards closure. I try to avoid this convention as much as possible. The idea in my work is not so much to improvise solos but rather to improvise the composition into being, to ‘realise’ it through improvisation; not so much improvising on and through, rather in the same way as a piece of Baroque music comes into being through the harmonic realisation of a figured bass and melodic ornamentation. The ‘figured bass’ for my compositions is far looser, even. I ask performers in *The Prisoners of Strange* to forget preconceived ideas, ‘licks’, clichés, familiar tunes, and listen to the shape of the composition as it evolves; listen to themselves bring it into being. When musicians forget about the composition and start to show off, hearing only themselves (an experience found at many jam sessions and unfortunately, many concerts in South Africa), the audience may be left with a

momentary ‘wow’ but the result usually lacks depth, and even sounds uninspired when the intention was the opposite. ‘The way to slam the door on inspiration is to strut your stuff’, as Gary Peacock puts it (quoted in Rosenbaum 1993, 60). This is what makes him go on to say that in improvisation ‘what comes last is technique’ (Ibid). The artistry of composition based on improvisation that I strive for – as I see it, and as is also apparent in the Picasso paradigm – is that having learnt all the techniques of drawing, mixing colour etc. the artist then puts brush to canvas, forgets everything and lets inspiration take over. It is almost a process of self-abnegation. As Nachmanovitch says: ‘For art to appear, we must disappear’ (1990, 51); and this relates back to what I said earlier about the importance of intuition in my work.

Listening to other improvisers is a vital part of learning to improvise; but it is not about copying a sound. As Keith Jarrett notes: ‘I could list many names, but I never thought of sounding anything like any of them. The thing I got from them was not the sounds of the music they made. It was what must have been their inspiration to make those sounds’ (quoted in Granat 2003, 53). It is about getting behind the result to the process. In my work, creativity is influenced more by the *intention* of performance – by habit even, and certainly by the daily discipline of practice – than by any feeling of inspiration. Bill Evans said in the same interview I quoted from earlier, that jazz is ‘a creative thing that you can turn on [after] disciplining yourself to this particular thing for years. You walk on to the stage and ... the creative process [works] because it’s been disciplined to work’ (Evans 1979). This is common to other world music traditions, including for example Indian classical music, with which I feel an affinity because there discipline and self-abnegation also carry spiritual connotations. Hazrat Inyat Khan expresses the underlying philosophy of this tradition:

I played the Vina until my heart turned into this very instrument; then I offered this instrument to the divine musician, the only musician existing. Since then I have become His flute; and when He chooses, He plays His music. The people give me credit for this music, which is in reality not due to me but to the musician who plays his own instrument (Khan 1996, Prologue).

This encapsulates my own attitude to the first and main way that I compose, out of improvisation. I have twice attended concerts by Oregon, and each time they improvised a composition from point zero. The improvised work sounded exactly like a composed work, as if they had worked it out beforehand. I also have a great deal in common with

this method. Collective improvisation that produces this high level of composition with all the elements of music, melody, harmony, rhythm and intensity, requires a full connection with the music and with each other, knowing when to take the lead, compose a theme, embellish it, play counterpoint or just ‘lay out’ (jazz musicians’ term for letting others play for a while). In performance, I strive to let this happen.

Another example I admire is Keith Jarrett’s way of creating complete works out of improvisations live in concert that are later transcribed and published. (This of course must be anathema to AMM.) Even when performing completed, already composed works my approach is still to play as if the piece was being composed right there. With this attitude the music will always be new and exciting to play as well as opening up possibilities for adding other people’s (and my) creative voice. ‘If you compose as you play’, as Peter Erskine puts it, ‘then you are approaching music in the most creative way possible’ (1998, 31). This experience is also, as I am well aware, what performers of classical music sometimes strive for: to play a well-known piece as if for the first time, almost as if they were composing it.

As in jazz, classical performers are subject to the same pressures from audiences, which more often than not means not taking risks with the ‘classics’ or (as in jazz) ‘standards’. While conducting her research on performance and composition as research in the South African context, Christine Lucia encountered several interviewees who noted the different position this forces performers and critics to take up. One critic, for example, ‘complained that classical performers in South Africa repeat the same tropes, not bringing anything original to the old material. ‘There must be new interpretation each time. If you listen to recordings and [just] do same...’ (Lucia 2005, 101). On the other hand, a performer complained, ‘I am constantly expected to include on my programme either the [X], or the [Y]. That’s what people want ... I’ve been asked, for example, to play a recital at the [Z] School at the end of this year, and they have told me the audience will expect popular, light music there’ (Ibid). For this reason, Lucia suggests that although contemporary art music composers may suffer from ‘anxiety of influence’ (Bloom 1973) – and I return to this point later, performers may perhaps be criticised for the exact opposite, feeling too little anxiety about their predecessors, or about the conventions (Ibid 102).

In the moment of performance, all jazz musicians are both performers and instant composers: the music that comes from their instruments or voices is conceived just before they play it. Thus the goal of every jazz musician is to play (or sing) what is heard in his/her mind, according to Aebersold (2000, 3). The artistry of presenting this to the public, however lies in performance ability, and what performers draw on is the practice and experience of performing; yet, as Aebersold notes, what they are doing is also composition. Russ Nolan takes this point further:

The most memorable jazz musicians are defined by their compositional approaches to their improvisations. Composition and improvisation are one in the same. Composition is improvisation out of time, and improvisation is composition in real time. Every piece of music is a penned improvisation, and every improvisation is a spontaneous composition (2006, 90).

Composition and performance are however qualitatively different processes. For a jazz performer to ‘compose in the moment’ through improvising, there is something to improvise *on*. Steve Lacy’s response when asked by Derek Bailey to describe in fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation was simply, ‘in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds’ (quoted in Bailey 1993, 141).

Whether improvisation is totally free or drawn off an existing composition, the improvising performer plays in the present and cannot change a note, although s/he has the freedom of unlimited ideas within her/his own voice to bring to the improvisation. Once an improvisation becomes a composition, however, I have more freedom and control than performers ‘in the moment’: I can change or correct notes even after they are on paper; I can dictate the theme or ‘topic’ (idea) of the composition. I have precisely the kind of political control over my work, in short, that Prévost finds problematic. When improvising on composition, then, as opposed to composing out of improvisation, I see myself as bringing a topic to the debate and debating it with others; freely, but within the parameters of their personalities and my conception.

In my compositions, performers usually improvise within the structure of the compositional frame of the piece, but there is also space for a more free kind of improvisation at the beginnings and ends of pieces. On the other hand, even in my most freely structured compositions I still like to have glue that holds the spaces together. It

could either be ride cymbals as in *It's for You* (CD 1), or wind as in *Deep impressions – part one* (CD 2). Or it could be a loop, as in the bass loop on the free section of *Gismonti*. I have not (yet) reached the point when free improvisation occupies the whole piece, as in the case of ensembles such as POW or the Evan Parker Electro-Acoustic Ensemble.

In my projects I pay special attention to the personality of individual musicians, listening to their sound, trying to learn what they can or cannot do, pushing their boundaries a little, trying to find out what they enjoy; for if they do not like a piece every one in the band will feel it. I try to make space for them to add their voice. Personality is for me the equivalent, here, with creativity or 'voice', and I do not try to force a personality out of anyone, just as I do not force the music on them. I do however handpick my band; and in South Africa this is not as easy as it sounds. The pool is small (I had more choice when I lived overseas). All good bandleaders compose for their own musicians, however, and the prime example here is Miles Davis, who handpicked the most cutting-edge jazz improvisers of the late twentieth century. He gave them freedom – within the ensemble's framework; this was the Miles Davis concept. He also noticed when other musicians did this: 'Joe [Zawinul] sets up the musicians so that they have to play like they do', he says, 'in order to fit the music like they do' (Davies quoted in Ambruster 1984, 45). Ellington did likewise; as did John Zorn: '[i]t's true I pick the bands and in this sense the Ellington tradition, the selection of the people, is very important. Everybody is vital. You take one person out and the chemistry is going to be different' (quoted in Bailey 1993, 77). Musicians affect the way compositions are conceived: when bassist Jimmy Blanton played with Ellington, Ellington wrote new compositions that were bass heavy.

Sometimes it is difficult for improvisers to become free spirits during improvisation, not bound by clichés. By the reverse token one does not always recognise the free spirit, because notions of cliché and freedom, convention and originality, change over time. When I recorded the album *Abstractions* in 1989 with the drummer Bill Elgart, for example (Elgart was working with Kenny Wheeler and guitarist Peter O'Mara and had worked with musicians such as Dave Holland and Anthony Jackson), we were improvising on *It's cold, I said* (Portfolio page 43), and Bill left out a beat in the improvisation section. It disturbed me endlessly, and if we had software such as Protools at the time, I would have 'fixed' it. I could not understand why it did not bother anyone else. Listening to this recording, years later, I realise that it was an inspirational take, and

that in 1989 I was still bound by technique rather than intuition. I have learnt that if I want to grow as a composer, I must discard the rules once I know them. Claude Debussy put it well when he said that '[w]orks of art make rules, but rules do not make works of art' (quoted in Varèse 1967, 196).

The past, for me, is there to build on, then, but tradition does not inhibit my work. Nor overall, except for the small size of the pool of musicians, does living in South Africa. I feel some affinity in this respect with Cage's position, when a Dutch musician said to him, 'it must be difficult for you in America to write music, for you are so far away from the centres of tradition'; to which he replied, 'it must be difficult for you in Europe to write music, for you are so close to the centres of tradition' (quoted in Griffiths 1978, 129). I return later in this essay to the issue of tradition and influence, from the perspective of how my own musical language evolved, because tradition and influence cannot be so easily shrugged off.

Aesthetic issues in compositions that arise from improvisation

One of the consequences of composing mainly out of improvisation is that I do not pre-plan compositions. This does not mean they do not have 'form'; and I must emphasise that my music is not free jazz or free-form jazz: indeed I dislike these terms because of what Mervyn Cooke describes as its tendency to promote 'extremes of atonality, amorphousness and unorthodox instrumental noise [providing] a tempting and comfortable haven for musical mediocrities' (1998, 169). Moreover, as Hal Crook says, 'to the degree that it involves knowledge, skill, technique, craft, creativity, imagination, experience, perseverance, integrity, fearlessness, and a relaxed, confident attitude – there is nothing easy about playing free jazz' (2006, 16). The fact of having spent very little time studying the classical music tradition in school however, has, I believe, in itself had a freeing effect, a positive effect on the balance and form of my works. I have developed a sense for form simply through listening, playing, and composing. I have a strong feeling for when a composition has played itself out, i.e. is complete, which I think developed from composing continuously as a teenager. There was a great deal of redundancy here, but it was a good learning curve.

Most of the music I have composed since I arrived at what I consider my first acceptable composition, *Bara*, can ‘move’ in form and yet be flexible, in a way that I can liken to the mobiles of one of the fore-runners of minimalism in visual art, Alexander Calder. He made mobiles out of materials such as glass, china, iron wire, and aluminium. Each mobile had a perfect balance even though the objects were different in size, shape, and weight. I like this kind of art, since I too have a dislike of symmetrical works. Calder’s mobiles change shape depending on which angle the mobile is received from; the whole mobile can also move without the work losing its purpose and balance.

Earle Brown also found inspiration in Calder:

In 1952 when I was experimenting with open form and aspects of improvisation, my influence to do that were primarily from the American sculptor Alexander Calder and his mobiles, which are transforming works of art, I mean they have indigenous transformational factors in their construction, and this seemed to me to just be beautiful. As you walk into a museum and you look at a mobile you see a configuration that’s moving very subtly. You walk in the same building the next day and it’s a different configuration, yet it’s the same piece (quoted in Bailey 1993, 60).

Moments (gestures or movements) that make up my work are not necessarily of equal duration but a composition that has a balance using different size ‘objects’ is more interesting to me than balance achieved by symmetry. Knowing when the form – the balance between sections of a composition – is right is both an organic process, I find, and a result of that process. This is very different from the approach of art music under High Modernism, an approach that is also to some extent represented in the kind of music textbook authors that I encountered (very briefly) when studying. William Lovelock, for example, claimed that ‘[f]orm in music means the way in which a composition is planned or designed’; and he added, ‘a definite plan [is] as essential to music as it is to anything else: without some kind of form it becomes merely rambling, if not chaotic’ (1954, 9). This was compositional advice that I did not take. Not only because it is too deterministic for me, and even perhaps outdated as an approach, but mainly because I do not use form as formula in the way that he presents rondo, sonata, suite, and fugal forms – as prescriptions. In saying this I am aware that in jazz, forms such as blues or song form can (and often have) become formulaic. Forms in the abstract, however, are good for probing a style or period while learning elements of compositional techniques, but not as

prescriptions for a composition itself (hence the caveat by Debussy that I referred to earlier).

Moreover, eighteenth-century Classical composers themselves did not use prescriptions to compose, and the rules around form were generated later, coming to seem *a priori*. Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven built on the styles and genres current in their day; their music arose out of practice, rather than prescription. As Charles Rosen writes in *The Classical Style*, ‘Sonata Form could not be defined until it was dead. Czerny claimed with pride around 1840 that he was the first to describe it, but by then it was already history’ (1980, 30). And despite the rigorous training in figured bass and counterpoint typical of the day, when Mozart asked how one would learn to compose, he is reputed to have answered ‘here, here and here (pointing to his ear, his head and his heart) is your school’ (quoted in Gorow 2000, 11). I also rely on my heart and ears. If the harmony sounds good, I trust my judgment. In other words, there are no set rules by which I compose or arrange chord changes. Any key or chord can follow any key or chord. This does not mean that my music does not have system, or harmonic sequence, or a voice, or consistency, but rather that in the process of composing I let my feelings and my ear lead me: this is essentially what my intuition relies on.

There are nevertheless many things one can learn, as a jazz composer, and one of the things I have profitably learnt is the use of instruments, especially those used in the classical orchestra. I try to learn as much about an instrument as I can before I use it (range, timbre, special qualities). This has always been the case. In the early 1980s when I was living in a South Africa where white males over the age of eighteen had to report for military service, I was fortunate to be accepted into the Army Entertainment Unit, which comprised about ten small dance bands and a big band. I was soon removed from the small bands for wanting to play original music and sent back to work in the office; but I then used my free time to learn arranging. I regularly questioned big-band musicians and recorded their answers in a notebook. ‘What is your range? Please play your ugliest note. What are your beautiful notes and please play them. What effects can you do?’ I also asked musicians to play wind voicing that I then experimented with in my room, and they would correct me if it sounded terrible. I was an irritation all round, but I was super-inquisitive and wanted to learn. I also transcribed music off records, and if for example I heard a cello playing in a beautiful range, I needed to know how to get that sound.

During this time of trial and error, I composed *Bara* (Portfolio page 27). I was twenty-one, and it was the first composition with which I was satisfied, and indeed characterised the style that I would continue to explore. It comprises fixed form as well as what I call ‘free colour improvisation’ and draws on the jazz and ECM tradition. My second piece in this ‘new wave’ style is *Princess* (Portfolio page 35), which was influenced by the Lydian sound I heard on a Ralph Towner recording. I composed many pieces I now consider unsuccessful, but learnt from each one. I did not have the opportunity to study orchestration formally in the 1980s, which would have given me a greater understanding of the colour pallet of the instruments, but on the other hand the time taken to gather information was time experimenting, listening, and remembering.

When I create a composition, I like it to have an opening statement, a strong and interesting melody or harmony, sensitive dynamic contrast, a balance between loud-soft, slow-fast, tension-release, consonance-dissonance, and I like to have areas for improvisation so that the piece can be fresh and exciting for the musicians every time it is performed. This may all sound conventional, but I have always striven for something unconventional, unpredictable, wanting my music to flow in a narrative sense, where the story can change at any moment. I also believe in a certain degree of pictorialism: my story must be apparent to others; my music is representational rather than abstract. If I compose a sound-scape it must transport the listener to the experience of the work.

The piece must also have a good ending, but again, one that does not conform to cliché. I like pieces that softly diminish into thin air, like the ending of *Sunlove* (Portfolio page 94) where I loop a plastic toy trumpet that sounds like a baby crying. It’s the ending that most affects audiences. However, I should point out that this aesthetic has little to do with what Walter Thompson calls ‘sound painting’ (see <http://www.soundpainting.com/history.html> and also Marc Duby’s work on sound painting and music education (Duby 2006)). Unlike Thompson’s work, mine is not the product of free improvisation; nor do I use the coherent system of improvisational gestures that Thompson created, with his 800 hand signals.

Like Cage and other environmental composers, what might be perceived as noise to some is a sound-scape to me. I love the sound of a lift for example, or a car indicator (as in

Sunlove), or a baby crying: all of these things enter my compositions either acoustically or (more usually) electronically. I may have developed this penchant as a teenager listening to Pink Floyd, who used everything from alarm clocks to cash registers in their music.

This is where composition arising from improvisation takes on a slightly more conceptual (even deterministic) slant. I have ideas for sound designs and make instruments that bring new things to my music. For example, I went to a spring manufacturer to search for springs, after hearing how beautiful the springs of my desk lamp sounded when I placed pickups inside the lamp. I bought a box of springs of various sizes and remembered the experiments we did at school with two tins attached to a piece of string in the middle, to show how sound travelled. I used a very flexible spring that has no audible character, but tins extracted the sound from the spring, and this is the instrument I use for *Sonic design: volcanic eruptions in slow motion* (Portfolio page 160). I love the ambivalence of such sounds: they have an earthy, natural feel but at the same time seem to come out of nowhere.

I have used running water, birds, operatic recordings, marbles in a metal dish, and radio in my pieces so far, and over these sounds the musicians improvise. Such concepts are not necessarily innovative: *musique concrète* is an early twentieth-century phenomenon, and Cage used the radio in his *Imaginary Landscape* (1951) as did Stockhausen in *Kurzwellen* (1968). But such concepts are unusual in jazz; and in any case my radio has today's stations and programmes.

Many of my compositions emphasise melody; they are fairly 'simple, even folk-like, as in *Happy sad* (Portfolio page 55) or *My friends and I* (Portfolio page 58). This does not necessarily mean they are all tonal, for many of them also have an atonal, dissonant quality. This dissonance – for some listeners – may also arise from the fact that I have spent a lot of time in forests and the bush, in traffic and crowded sidewalks, in noisy lifts and on the beach. My conviction is that if I want to be in touch with the planet I have to be in touch with all the sounds of it. I compose what I hear. In Ralf Gleason's liner notes for the Miles Davis album *Bitches Brew*, a turning point in jazz history, he likewise writes: 'Miles hears and what he hears he paints with. When he sees he hears, eyes are an aid to hearing if you think of it that way. It's all in there, the beauty, the terror and love,

the sheer humanity of life in this incredible electric world which is so full of distortion that it can be beautiful and frightening in the same instant' (Gleason 1969).

Melody is also important in my compositions because it is the starting point for improvisation: the order of importance is melody first, and harmony or texture (sound combination) second. One can sometimes have melody that takes a secondary role in relation to harmony, or two melodies of equal importance. *Gismonti* (Portfolio page 117) has two melodies playing at the same time, one on trumpet and guitar, and the other on tenor saxophone, which gives the piece a contrapuntal feel. This piece arose after I recorded with Egberto Gismonti on the album *Raiz de Pedra, Diario de Bordo* (Enja records, tip 888 822 2). Brazilian pianists have an amazing ability to play left hand chords on the offbeat while playing the melody (usually double notes that sound like flute double-tonguing) in the right hand. In this piece, my bass part is Gismonti's left hand and the trumpet is his right hand, while the saxophone plays a second melody between the beats. This composition is also in two parts: a bouncy first section with chords, followed by a free section.

The most important aspect of my own aesthetic development has been learning to listen – to myself, and others, and (to a lesser extent) the audience: I try to create a kind of community within the band, which can also involve the audience. Indeed, as recent work on the culture of improvisation has shown, the process is a kind of socio-political act. Members of the band – even more so the audience – come from many cultures and communities, and improvisation provides a connective dialogue between them. 'Democratization, experimentation, and the sense of 'collectively organized community' are all at stake in the interrogative, alternative practices that improvisations can potentially enable' as Fischlin and Heble note (2004, 12).

Listening to composers was a vital aspect of learning how to compose. I wanted to write music like they did. As I grew better at composing, I realised I could stop copying and search for my own identity, but by then I had learned to be a good listener, and through so much performance experience I learned to be a good listener *especially* when performing. Musicians cannot expect the audience to listen to their music if they are not listening to themselves. On stage, the order of my listening is, myself first, focusing on intonation, tone, and the composition; then the ensemble, in which I try to blend and fit

my concept of time into the time of the ensemble and play supportive roles while at the same time holding the music together. Then I listen to the dialogue taking place in the improvisation sections, which in turn brings my listening back to me, and my response to what is happening. Finally, I am aware of the audience although not ‘listening’ in the same way; but even though the audience doesn’t fall within this tight listening circle, people will feel the depth of listening taking place on stage, which I believe brings them into a closer experience of the composition. ‘The player in us must move the listener in us powerfully before we have a chance of moving anyone else’ (Rodby 1993, 81). Given the nature of my compositions, in fact, I cannot have musicians in my ensembles that cannot listen, or have an ego-driven approach: they must be like me, strive for the blend. Then, ‘when everyone listens to what is going on around them and tries to blend in, that blending becomes a thing of great beauty’ (Silver 1995, 14).

Improvising before or within the composition

As noted, many of my compositions are a mixture of composed music and free sections for improvisation not *on* but *within* the composed music. It is the latter sections that identify the composition: the free sections vary according to which musicians I have in the band. In *It’s for you*, composed in 1983 (Portfolio page 37) I call the free sections ‘colour improvisations’ or ‘spontaneous free style’. I give minimal instructions to the musicians, such as, ‘start with a pulse on the ride cymbal’. From there, the section evolves (and the composition with it) until I feel it is time to return to the pre-composed music.

The success of the free sections depends on the ability to listen deeply and also, fast. It does not help to hear something only after a second or two, and then respond – the moment has gone. Goldsby sums it up when he says, ‘you don’t get hired because you can play fast; you get hired because you can listen fast’ (1999, 79). When musicians ‘listen fast’ they follow the spirit of the music, locking into every nuance in the groove, trusted to play the right notes. Another requirement for playing these freestyle sections is the ability of my musicians to understand how to use silence; know when *not* to ‘say something’, when ‘silence is better than speech’ (Khan 1996, 136).

I only book musicians that like to play my music because my music can only be played successfully by musicians who like my work. Other contemporary jazz seems to be moving towards this state of being bound up with particular groups or players. This leads me however to pose the question, how easily can other ensembles play my music if I am not in the ensemble? How transportable is it? My first answer to this is that other ensembles are already playing my compositions. The South African vocalist Nontuthuzelo Puoane, for example, who now lives in Belgium, regularly performs *Me the mango picker* (Portfolio page 108). She has arranged it differently, as happens to most jazz compositions, but I like what she has done. Another example is *My friends and I* (Portfolio page 58), which has been recorded and performed by several people. The National Youth Jazz Ensemble has performed entire concerts of my music, even though I was not playing with them or directing them. Because my pieces consist of written music as well as spontaneous freestyle, the written section – the core – will always be recognisable no matter who is playing; only the drummer (i.e. the rhythmic style) can seriously alter the mood of the piece. Moreover, I am open to different interpretations.

The improvisatory sections are largely in the hands of the performers, although there are indications in my scores as to where they come in the composition, and what kinds of things are expected; which relate to what I earlier called the ‘topic’ of the piece. For example, on the recording of *Requiem* (Portfolio on page 76) on the CD *Bats in the belfry* the solo piano improvisation works within the voice of the composer to create the spirit and rhythm of the music. There are however some pieces that can only be played as I imagine performing them, which is mainly because of the eclectic nature of my bass playing. One such piece is *The art of slow motion* (Portfolio page 65), and it illustrates a particular technique that I use. The American critic Karl Coryat noted it when he said, ‘[o]nce in a while an artist comes along who produces music unlike anything you’ve heard. His lines sound as if they were recorded backwards’ (1991). I get this ‘backwards’ effect by shaving off the attack of the note with a volume pedal while playing the notes using a lift-off hammer-on technique in the left hand. (I developed this technique when my right hand was immobilized after an operation.) This piece was recorded for three basses and I would imagine that it would only sound right if I play them, or someone else imitates my playing. A similar case is *Sonic design: meditations in my back yard* for solo bass. Both pieces might in a sense be regarded as ‘solos’ rather than ‘compositions’; but they are really exceptions in my work.

Much of the music that I have composed in the last eight years requires the bass player to be familiar with and be able to use a looping device (see the Portfolio 'Preface', p. ix). This is not a particularly unusual technique, and these pieces can be rearranged giving each part of the loop to a different instrument. I did that myself when I arranged *Sunlove* for an ensemble in Sweden. Lastly, the sound design aspect, which has become more important in my recent music, also gives it a particular aesthetic, which may or may not be easily transferable. For a piece like *Sonic design: volcanic eruptions in slow motion*, for example, the springs are manipulated using digital delays; so another band would need to make or have a similar instrument to reproduce the intended mood of this music.

Part 3: Composing in the abstract

Besides finding compositions through improvisation, I also have the experience of hearing compositions in my head, which I call composing in the abstract. This does not happen very often but it still has a place in my systems of composing. I hear the music playing like a tape recorder in a loop-mode fashion, difficult to 'switch off'. Perhaps because I am not actually playing or improvising at such moments, these inner fragments are particularly persistent. It may be simply a more abstract way of composing out of improvisation, but there is a difference. Whereas in the improvised way of composing I record the improvisations that lead to compositions, with the experience of hearing compositions in my head I have to write down the music on manuscript paper – a slower and less reliable process that affects the resultant composition.

Some jazz composers even dispute the value of such unbidden music. Steve Swallow for example says 'I'm not of the opinion that you get a great song from walking in the beautiful woods and hearing an inspiring birdsong. That may happen to some, but I'm sceptical. It doesn't happen to me' (quoted in Herrera 2006, 29). It does happen to me, however. I have on occasion got out of bed in the middle of the night to sing a melody that I have dreamt into a tape recorder. (Other composers have had similar experiences. Stockhausen has called them 'sound visions', which he heard 'very often at night in a deep sleep. I wake up and the entire pieces are in me' (quoted in Cott 1974, 24).)

What I heard in my head was rarely a whole piece, and often still in some way inspired by sounds in the environment. *Sunlove* came into my head when I was in my car at an intersection, waiting for the traffic light to change. My indicator was on, creating a high low clicking loop. I usually tap rhythms to this loop but on this occasion, the melody of *Sunlove* immediately started to appear in my imagination. The sun was shining and I was thinking about my wonderful wife. By the time I got home, the seed for a melody was planted, the 'topic' was composed. I strapped on my bass and found notes that sounded like the car indicator, started refining the melody, and then added the rest of the music.

Ethical Sam's cookery school (Portfolio page 143) was inspired by a bass line with which I was obsessed. Wherever I went I could hear this bass line and slowly the melody started to evolve in my head. The words 'we come in peace' matched the emerging bass groove and I looped it in my imagination. The Iraqi war had just started, and I remembered a movie I had seen called *Mars Attacks* about aliens landing on Earth and proclaiming 'we come in peace' just before they open fire. This composition evolved in my imagination, then, sparked by a bass line and the television news. After juggling the music in my head I sat at the piano and arranged the horn voicings.

Me, the mango picker started as a melody in my head, but once again, I went to an instrument to write it down and work on the harmony. Only then did I discover that it was in 7/4 time. Writing the composition down on paper or playing and recording it gives it birth, otherwise it mingles around in my head and cannot grow. The compositions *Sad Vincent* (Portfolio page 68) and *Gina* (page 71) are two that I heard totally in my head without touching an instrument. The chord progression for *Gina* is simple and was easy to hear when the melody started to shape itself. Not only did I hear the chords but I could also visualize them. Even though it turned out that I was not at the correct pitch (aurally) I 'saw' the chords in the key of C.

Compositions that come like this seem like a gift: I just have to be open to receive them. Perhaps for this reason, I find it difficult to teach composition: for me it's such a personal thing, a connection with the spiritual. Sheila Chandra, who writes about composing in a spiritual state of mind says, 'It's very difficult to describe but there seems to be no effort on my part. It's as if a very calm voice in my head is giving instruction. It feels like tapping into a collective unconscious, or even into the personality of a song that actually

exists before I write it' (Chandra 1994). The Jungian connection comes here again – the collective unconscious being where, for Jung, the second level of the psyche is located. Joni Mitchell also composed from this kind of space: 'a lot of it is [about] being open to encounter, and in a way in touch with the miraculous' (2003).

Part 4: Composing to external requirements

The third way I approach composing is more calculated, although not entirely without intuition. When composing for film there is always another party involved aside from fellow musicians: the director, and behind him or her, the producers – and ultimately the funders, and the market. There is the stress of trying to keep everyone happy – giving them the feeling that they are getting value for their money and getting what they want – as well as produce something I am satisfied with. This has never stopped me from starting at an artistic level, even if I have to (and I'm afraid this is how it sometimes happens) dilute the work until director and producers are satisfied.

Writing for film is something that I have only been doing since 2001. I have a given task and given boundaries, but I try to find inspiration for the events my music will accompany. This happened in the *Dwarsklap* theme music on the M-Net television station (Portfolio page 180) and the music for documentaries such as *The roads to restitution* (see DVD 2 in the Portfolio), and animation films (see *The devolutionaries* DVD 1 and score page 219 in the Portfolio). Directors go to various composers because they like their work, I presume, and therefore expect to hear the composers' inspiration and imaginative input on the film. (I am not a commercial jingle composer and it probably works differently in that field.) Aside from the difficulty of creating music in such circumstances, I also have to deal with what happens to my music after it is delivered. Music is usually secondary in film, quite often softer than I imagined it – changed in the mix. So much so, that sometimes people cannot even hear the music as composition. Such music plays a supportive and subordinate role, whereas the music in my first two approaches is for the music's sake and for the audience.

I always seem to get the film too late. In the case of *The roads to restitution* the producer needed the music to be composed, recorded, and mixed within two weeks. I did it, but

with very little sleep, working through the night. This is one of the biggest differences between this and the other ways I compose: deadlines. The music definitely does not have time to unfold, to emerge, from a 'deeper space'. The purpose of writing is to support the visual image, or the scene. If one considers composing out of improvisation as an art form, with an element of surprise, writing to visual image can be an art, but so far (for me) it is more a case of working to order, the end being entertainment rather than art. Some film composers place quite high value on entertainment: Bill Conti, the composer for many films including *Rocky* feels that film music 'comes from inside. It's original, and interpretive. Above all, it's entertainment. We're looking to entertain. You have to use artistic means to do something that is really not that artistic, in the classical sense' (quoted in Seeger and Whetmore 1994, 289).

What I try to do in film music is use 'artistic means' to draw the audience into the film without anyone necessarily seeing my music as art. If anything, it is an art of deception. The first film music I did was a collaboration with trumpeter Marcus Wyatt. We watched the film, which was supposed to be a suspense thriller. It completely lacked suspense: the acting was bad, the lighting threw the shadows in the wrong places, the continuity was awful, and the story was pathetic. It was almost a comedy. In addition, there was very little money left for music. We did it as a learning project and decided to use pseudonyms. (Once again, I had not studied how to write for film. I learnt by doing.) In the end, we composed music that we felt brought something to the film that it lacked, and we were so proud of this that we used our real names. What we had done was manipulate the audience to feel suspense through the music that the film lacked. Ultimately, however, as Hollywood film composer Shirley Walker puts it, 'music can't save a bad film. We [in Hollywood] jokingly refer to those situations as 'dressing the corpse.' If it's dead it's dead, and all we can do is dress it up and give it a pretty surrounding' (quoted in Seeger and Whetmore 1994, 341).

Writing for visual media is less intuitive in the sense that one decides what type of emotion it must project, but in my case I still have to try and get in touch with my own emotions in order to compose the music. Because of the deadlines and the need to work fast, intuition usually has to play a role. I find it impossible to compose completely 'objectively' even if I'm constructing music to a sequence of images, and even if those images are distasteful. For example, when I did a session for the film *Slash* I was booked

to set up all my looping devices and gadgets and play solo bass; the film was screened on a big screen and I simply had to improvise to what I saw – which was unexpectedly horrific; one murder after another, heads rolling. After an hour, I had to stop the improvisation session because of a migraine from the effect of the film; and they had to cut and paste what I had done to complete the sound track.

For *Roads to restitution* I had a better experience: the director and I watched the film together and she showed me where she would like to have music – the ‘spotting session’. We even discussed the emotion and the vision that the director had for the scene, and I made suggestions. However, she used the group Dire Straits for what is known as the ‘temp track’ (where directors take music off the shelf before original music is composed) on the opening credits. It was the opening credits that later gave me a headache, because all the director could hear was the temp track every time I played her what I had composed for this opening sequence. Some directors do not like certain instruments, so it is pointless to use them. For *The devolutionaries* I originally had a slide guitar for the *small bots* theme but I learnt that the director doesn’t like the slide guitar. The right instrument is also sometimes a cultural issue: I have used a mouth-resonating bow (for example) when the film takes place in Richterveld (where the San people live), or *maskanda* guitar if the film takes place in Zululand. When there is no cultural feeling, as in *The devolutionaries*, I have to watch the film repeatedly until the picture inspires me into a certain direction of music and instruments that best suit the mood. Besides the overall feeling of the film, I have sometimes also had to assign different instruments to different characters.

I sometimes do the sound design as well, as in *Ummemo*, where I created a rock fall using seashells and a bass drum; but usually I just compose the music. Being aware of the sound design and dialogue is however important as they can interfere with the music and (similarly) the music can mask the dialogue. I try to write themes that sit behind and between dialogue, so that the director will not cut the music at certain points or bring it down in the mix so it is inaudible. Above all I try to generate a unifying sound: themes and rhythms that recur keeping one in the space of the film. This takes many watching sessions but the more I watch the film the more ideas I get. Once I have a theme, I then mould it into a number of permutations.

A composition principle that I have found in all three methods of composing is that of finding a sound and spirit for music out of a variety of sequences of notes. In other words, there is a sense in my work of ‘many pieces, one spirit’. This is almost what one might call a central theme, and can be likened to ‘style’ although I do not think it is the same thing. It is more like the way an artist approaches a retrospective exhibition: many paintings collected into different rooms, with the central theme being the development of the composer, or the composer’s overriding ‘theme’. There has to be some connection between different works. Whether in film, in concert, or on CD, there has to be what as a jazz composer I can only call a vibe, a connectedness with my deeper self, regardless of the uniqueness of each piece and the (in some cases enormous) differences between them. As Stravinsky famously observed, creating musical language is establishing an order among pitches and intervals, and a composer ‘seeks in his resources of available pitches as many sounds as possible that fit [a] defined language. The more such sounds he can discover, the more resources exist for reconfirming the particular sound quality of the language’ (Cogan and Escot 1976, 122). Stravinsky did not say this with film music in mind, but I have found it to be particularly true of my work for film.

Conclusion: Artistry and originality

My interest in the artistry of music as opposed to technical procedures has had a profound influence on how I compose improvised music. I have spent years trying to understand the relationship between music and artistry, so that I may not only become a more original musician but so that I may also understand how to lead and inspire other musicians, bring the best out of them and take my music to a higher level in performance. It is therefore important that part of this thesis is concerned with artistry and originality.

Like Nachmanovitch, I believe that ‘[t]he creative process is a spiritual path. This adventure is about us, about the deep self, the composer in all of us, about originality, meaning not that which is all new, but that which is fully and originally ourselves’ (1990, 13). ‘Fully and originally ourselves’ to me means a sound that is authentic, honest, that expresses my personality, feelings, voice. It does not need to be a huge innovation on the lines of Schoenberg or Miles Davis. Some of what I have done may have been done before, but not with my voice: my tone, dynamics, and ideas. What I compose is

‘recognisable as me’ as Ronnie Scott puts it (quoted in Bailey 1993, 52). The growth of my authentic self – if I can call it that – happened over a considerable number of years, as this thesis and the portfolio makes clear. I am not one of those people of whom Horace Silver has said, they ‘do not have to search for [uniqueness] because it just seems to appear in a natural way’; I am one of the many ‘others [who] have to take time to cultivate it’ (1995, 26). I have methods to help cultivate originality (as distinct from ‘approaches’ that much of this thesis has been concerned with), and I now briefly explore some of them.

Like most composers, I have learnt by imitation. In many ways I wish I were better at it, for ‘[t]he best musician is the one who can immediately play what he has heard, either on the radio – any tune – or who can immediately find the pitch of a bird and play that, too’ (Stockhausen quoted in Cott 1994, 32). Stockhausen is talking here about an extremely heightened awareness of sound, which for me developed very early on. As Dave Pomeroy has said, when we begin we are ‘are a product of [our] immediate influences: the music you listen to, the people with whom you play, and the songs you learn. As you progress and focus on the styles you enjoy most, it’s natural to emulate players who inspire you [and] those players also had influences that shaped their music’ (1998, 82).

I have already noted how musicians grow towards uniqueness from imitation. This might lead to staleness, but when I worked with the guitarist Titus Vollmer, who had done many transcriptions of others’ playing, I saw that he had nevertheless developed a unique voice on his instrument. This was because he had never transcribed more than one solo from any one musician. At one point in my career I was only listening to the music of Eberhard Weber and my compositions were very Weberish at that time. *Deep impressions part 1 and 2*, (Portfolio page 52) is such a piece. ‘How you combine your own ideas with what you’ve learned from others eventually will become the basis of your musical ID’, Pomeroy claims, and he goes on to suggest ‘[t]wo ways to start unlocking your identity: combine more than one influence into a new part, or take a stylistic device from one genre and apply it to another’ (1998, 82). In my early years I combined Eberhard Weber and the ECM sound with Weather Report and the fusion school, all the way to Joni Mitchell and Pink Floyd.

How did all this become Mombelli? Like Pat Metheny, for me jazz ‘is music that demands change’ (Metheny 2003, 44), as indeed it obviously does for someone like Miles Davis. What makes him sound like Miles Davis is that after a certain point he only played Miles Davis. He had become himself, and only explored his own voice. In many ways this is what I have also tried to do. It is not important to know fifty styles of music, unless one is going to remain a session musician. My philosophy as an artist, then, is that my music grows if I am brave enough to compose honestly and with originality. The popular music industry (record companies and charts/polls) can have a devastating effect on originality and perhaps especially in the case of jazz, which some people still regard as entertainment. This is why I avoid the more commercial side of composing, and why I feel most ‘unnatural’ when I compose for film. Entertainment places artists in the wrong type of competition with one another, in my view, encouraging them to compose music to win awards and to run the risk of changing their voice to please the crowd or the sponsors. It can also be deceptive for the audience because they believe if an artist has won an award, s/he they must somehow be original. As Wayne Shorter reminds us, ‘a lot of people in an audience listen not with their souls, but with computerised minds, assembled and conditioned by the system which includes polls and awards’ (<http://www.downbeat.com>, accessed 12 August 2006). He also points out the potential danger to creativity:

I wonder if a poll or contest is valid to give artists an incentive to create, to go on, or to run the mile in less than a minute. Is art an art or a sport? I think polls, awards and Oscars come right out of the school system – the star you get on the paper, the A B C D mark. If we could rid the stigma that grading over such a long period of time has produced, I think we might have a clearer idea of what a person does when he is creating something. For instance, if a person wins first place in a category in the arts through a voting system, and he feels good about it, is he actually going to create or merely perpetuate the poll system (Ibid).

On the other hand, some musicians are intimidated by people who came before them. I do not feel that I stand in the shadow of Jaco Pastorius, however. True, he is unique. However, if ‘musicians are filled with too much awe for that legacy [they] never feel ‘worthy’ of adding to it. By fearing ghosts, you deny your birthright to create, and are condemned to recreate’ (Werner 1996, 56). Few have written about this more tellingly than poetry critic Harold Bloom, whose notion of ‘anxiety of influence’ has itself been enormously ‘influential’ in literary theory:

By ‘poetic influence’ I do not mean the transmission of ideas and images from earlier to later poets. This is indeed just ‘something that happens,’ and whether such transmission causes anxiety in the later poets is merely a matter of temperament and circumstances. These are fair materials for source-hunters and biographers, and have little to do with my concern. Ideas and images belong to discursiveness and to history, and are scarcely unique to poetry. Yet a poet’s stance, his Word, his imaginative identity, his whole being, must be unique, or he will perish as a poet (1973, 72).

The idea of uniqueness here is that of taking a ‘stance’, positioning oneself in relation to what has gone before, to ‘discursiveness and to history. I have transcribed and listened to music to study the tradition, allow for the ‘transmission of ideas’, as Harold Bloom puts it. But just as he adds, ‘[w]hat makes us free is the knowledge of who we were, what we have become, where we were, wherein we have been thrown; whereto we speed, wherefrom we are redeemed; what is birth and what is rebirth’ (Ibid, 84), so what I have tried to do is know *myself* through knowing the tradition. The moment when I really put aside those early influences to find my own voice was some time during the late 1980s. Aside from the relocation from South Africa to Europe and the depression this caused (mentioned earlier), it was also aided by the fact that I had a wrist operation to heal damage caused by over-practising. After the operation, my hand was in a splint. Not able to stay away from the bass, I started using my thumb to play, as I discussed earlier – this was the only finger not in a cast. To play faster notes, I started developing the lift-off and hammer-on techniques in the left hand. This became a compositional technique in for example *Wailing* (Portfolio page 51 and CD 1). I took this tiny technical situation and worked on it till it became a part of my sound. I was forced to find something in myself, not in imitation of other musicians.

As an artist I have tried to constantly push the boundaries of my creative imagination. I admire musicians such as American saxophonist Steve Lacy, who believes that ‘music always has to be – on the edge – in-between the known and the unknown and you have to keep pushing it towards the unknown otherwise it and you die’ (quoted in Bailey 1993, 54). My own sense of this I call ‘playing on the edge of wrong’. If I am not aware of the ‘in-between’, I might let something amazing slip by, thinking it was a mistake (as I did in the case of Bill Elgart’s ‘wrong note’).

Playing on the edge of wrong

Harold Bloom quotes a passage from Kierkegaard that particularly moved me:

Everyone shall be remembered, but each became great in proportion to his expectation. One became great by expecting the possible; another by expecting the eternal, but he who expected the impossible became greater than all. Everyone shall be remembered, but each was great in proportion to the greatness of that with which he strove (quoted in Bloom 1973, 72).

It is the striving rather than the becoming that relates to my sense of artistry and risk-taking. When I take risks, and my band takes risks, pushing the limits of improvisation, I call this ‘playing on the edge of wrong’. It has taken some courage because it involves risking audience alienation, but I have found that throughout my career I can gradually take audiences with me. The edges of wrong are what Mark Levin refers to as the ‘jagged edges’, of which one needs a few ‘to be interesting’ (1995, 83). Sometimes people have perceived those jagged edges to be wrong notes in the composition, or mistakes in performance, or dissonance and atonality in the harmony. I prefer to think, like Miles Davis, that one should not fear mistakes: indeed, ‘there are none’ (quoted in Werner 1996, 85). Another way of thinking of them is as ‘the hippest thing you play – especially when you’re improvising’ (Chris Wood quoted in Jisi 1998, 42). One such so-called ‘mistake’ is the dissonance that comes in my case from playing the 4th note of a major scale: (a passing tone or ‘avoid note’ as it is called in jazz) simultaneously with the major chord. It is (in jazz) conventionally perceived as a clash because of the semitone or minor 9th interval implied between the 3rd and 4th. Guitarist Johnny Fourie showed me that, on the contrary, if you embrace this note as being correct and consonant, it could sound beautiful. Harmonic dissonance has a history of its own: a few hundred years ago dissonant notes were heard and regarded as wrong; today we embrace them.

if dissonant notes are played and the player embraces them as consonant, the listener will also hear them as consonant. As you improvise from an expanded consciousness, you discover that in fact, there are no wrong notes! Appropriateness and correctness are products of the mind. Trying to live within those imaginary guidelines inhibits the flow (Werner 1996, 88).

I am aware that my music has become increasingly dissonant. It is part of my constant search for the new. Dissonance, surprisingly, still often sounds ‘new’ in jazz, whereas in art music it is considered ‘modernist’ and quite outdated. Like Stockhausen, I want to be

‘surprised as much as every one else by what [I’m] doing’ (quoted in Cott 1974, 106). In my quest for the ‘mysterious vibration of kindred tones’ as Van Gogh called his obsession with colour (quoted in Nachmanovitch 1990, 59), I have created a style that sometimes puzzles listeners, and critics. I therefore end by considering the question I am often asked about my own music, ‘Is it jazz?’

My music in this Portfolio is jazz in that mostly jazz musicians play it. The Stockholm Saxophone Quartet plays *Observations from the hideout* – they commissioned it – and classical concert pianist Jill Richards plays *The mime artist*. Aside from these fully notated pieces, virtually all my work requires the types of improvisation that I have described, and these belong to the realm of jazz. Besides the technical and stylistic challenge of my work, then, musicians have to be unusual improvisers: creative improvisers, with a voice of their own: improvisers who play ‘on the edge of wrong’. Improvisation, as we have seen, plays a huge part in the way my music is conceived and structured as well as executed. The musicians in my ensembles are such players, having the ability to ‘say something’, against environmental sound, using dissonance, and using silence as well as sound.

The people performing my music are mostly jazz musicians, we play at jazz venues, and recordings of my music are on sale in record stores under ‘jazz’. However it is also performed at new music festivals such as the New Music Indaba in Grahamstown, electronic music festivals such as Unyazi in Johannesburg in 2005, and experimental venues overseas as well as jazz venues in South Africa, Europe, and America. It is also used in film and ballet. Because my music consists of written ensemble pieces and free improvisation, I would probably prefer to call it ‘spontaneous freestyle chamber music’ rather than ‘jazz’. It is improvised composition with jazz and other roots, and because it is continually evolving, I do not know what it will be like ten years from now.

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