

## Towards an Ethic of Improvisation [Cornelius Cardew](#)

from "Treatise Handbook," 1971, Edition Peters

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I am trying to think of the various different kinds of virtue or strength that can be developed by the musician.

My chief difficulty in preparing this article lies in the fact that vice makes fascinating conversation, whereas virtue is viewed to best advantage in action. I therefore decide on an illustrative procedure.

Who can remain unmoved by the biography of Florence Nightingale in Encyclopaedia Britannica?

The career of Ludwig Wittgenstein the philosopher (brother of the famous lefthand pianist who emigrated to America) -whose writings incidentally are full of musical insights- provides an equally stirring example:

He used a large inheritance to endow a literary prize. Studies in logic brought him to the publication of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1918) at the end of which he writes: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, . . ." and in the introduction: ". . . the truth of the thoughts communicated here seems to me unassailable and definitive. I am, therefore, of the opinion that the problems have in essentials been finally solved." Then, in the introduction to his second book 'Philosophical Investigations' (1945) he writes: "Since beginning to occupy myself with philosophy again, sixteen years ago, I have been forced to recognize grave mistakes in what I wrote in that first book. . .

"For more than one reason what I will publish here will have points of contact with what other people are writing today. -If my remarks do not bear a stamp which marks them as mine,- I do not wish to lay any further claim to them as my property.

"I make them public with doubtful feelings. It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another -but, of course, it is not likely."

In his later writing Wittgenstein has *abandoned theory*, and all the glory that theory can bring on a philosopher (or musician), in favour of an illustrative technique. The following is one of his analogies:

"Do not be troubled by the fact that languages a. and b. consist only of orders. If you want to say that this shews [sic] them to be incomplete, ask yourself whether our language is complete; -whether it was so before the symbolism of chemistry and the notations of the infinitesimal calculus were incorporated in it; for these are, so to speak, suburbs of our language. (And how many houses or streets does it take before a town begins to be a town?) Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses.

"It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.-Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable [sic] others.-And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life."

A city analogy can also be used to illustrate the interpreter's relationship to the music he is playing. I once wrote: "Entering a city for the first time you view it at a particular time of day and year, under particular weather and light conditions. You see its surface and can form only theoretical ideas of how this surface was moulded. As you stay there over the years you see the light change in a million ways, you see the insides of houses-and having seen the inside of a house the outside will never look the same again. You get to know the inhabitants, maybe you marry one of them, eventually you are inhabitant- a native yourself. You have become part of the city. If the city is attacked, *you* go to defend it; if it is under siege, *you* feel hunger - you are the city. When you play music, *you* are the music."

I can see clearly the incoherence of this analogy. Mechanically -comparing the real situation to one cogwheel and the analogy to another- it does not work. Nonetheless, in full conscience I soil my mouth with these incoherent words for the sake of what they bring about. At the words 'You are the music' something unexpected and mechanically real happens (purely by coincidence two teeth in the cogwheels meet up and mesh) the light changes and a new area of speculation opens based on the identity of the player and his music.

This kind of thing happens in improvisation. Two things running concurrently in haphazard fashion suddenly synchronise autonomously and sling you *forcibly* into a new phase. Rather like in the 6-day cycle race when you sling your partner into the next lap with a forcible handclasp. Yes, improvisation is a sport *too*, and a spectator sport, where the subtlest interplay on the physical level can throw into high relief some of the mystery of being alive.

Connected with this is the proposition that improvisation cannot be rehearsed. Training is substituted for rehearsal, and a certain moral discipline is an essential part of this training.

Written compositions are fired off into the future; even if never performed, the writing remains as a point of reference. Improvisation is in the present, its effect may live on in the souls of the participants, both active and passive (ie audience), but in its concrete form it is gone forever from the moment that it occurs, nor did it have any previous existence before the moment that it occurred, so neither is there any historical reference available.

Documents such as tape recordings of improvisation are essentially empty, as they preserve chiefly the form that something took and give at best an indistinct hint as to the feeling and cannot convey any sense of time and place.

At this point I had better define the kind of improvisation I wish to speak of. Obviously a recording of a jazz improvisation has some validity since its formal reference -the melody and harmony of a basic structure- is never far below the surface. This kind of validity vanishes when the improvisation has no formal limits. In 1965 I joined a group of four musicians in London who were giving weekly performances of what they called 'AMM Music', a very pure form of improvisation operating without any formal system or limitation. The four original members of AMM came from a jazz background; when I joined in I had no jazz experience whatever, yet there was no language problem. Sessions generally lasted about two hours with no formal breaks or interruptions, although there would sometimes occur extended periods of close to silence. AMM music is supposed to admit all sounds but the members of AMM have marked preferences. An open-ness to the totality of sounds implies a tendency away from traditional musical structures towards informality. Governing this tendency -reining it in- are various thoroughly traditional musical structures such as saxophone, piano, violin, guitar, etc., in each of which reposes a portion of the history of music. Further echoes of the history of music enter through the medium of the transistor radio (the use of which as a musical instrument was pioneered by John Cage). However, it is not the exclusive privilege of music to have a history -sound has history too. Industry and modern technology have added machine sounds and electronic sounds to the primeval sounds of thunderstorm, volcanic eruption, avalanche and tidal wave.

Informal 'sound' has a power over our emotional responses that formal 'music' does not, in that it acts subliminally rather than on a cultural level. This is a possible definition of the area in which AMM is experimental. We are *searching* for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them. The search is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician himself is at the heart of the experiment.

In 1966, I and another member of the group invested the proceeds of a recording in a second amplifier system to balance the volume of sound produced by the electric guitar. At that period we were playing every week in the music room of the London School of

Economics -a very small room barely able to accomodate [sic] our equipment. With the new equipment we began to explore the range of small sounds made available by using contact microphones on all kinds of materials -glass, metal, wood, etc. -and a variety of gadgets from drumsticks to battery-operated cocktail mixers. At the same time the percussionist was expanding in the direction of pitched instruments such as xylophone and concertina, and the saxophonist began to double on violin and flute as well as a stringed instrument of his own design. In addition, two cellos were wired to the new equipment and the guitarist was developing a predilection for coffee tins and cans of all kinds. This proliferation of sound sources in such a confined space produced a situation where it was often impossible to tell who was producing which sounds -or rather which portions of the single roomfilling deluge of sound. In this phase the playing changed: as individuals we were absorbed into a composite activity in which solo-playing and any kind of virtuosity were relatively insignificant. It also struck me at that time that it is impossible to record with any fidelity a kind of music that is actually derived in some sense from the room in which it is taking place -its shape, acoustical properties, even the view from the windows. What a recording produces is a separate phenomenon, something really much stranger than the playing itself, since what you hear on tape or disc is indeed the same playing, but divorced from its natural context. What is the importance of this natural context? The natural context provides a score which the players are unconsciously interpreting in their playing. Not a score that is explicitly articulated in the music and hence of no further interest to the listener as is generally the case in traditional music, but one that coexists inseparably with the music, standing side by side with it and sustaining it.

Once in conversation I mentioned that scores like those of LaMonte Young (for example "Draw a straight line and follow it") could in their inflexibility take you outside yourself, stretch you to an extent that could not occur spontaneously. To this the guitarist replied that 'you get legs dangling down there and arms floating around, so many fingers and one head' and that that was a very strict composition. And that is true: not only can the natural environment carry you beyond your own limitations, but the realization of your own body as part of that environment is an even stronger dissociative factor. Thus is it that the natural environment is itself giving birth to something, which you then carry as a burden; you are the medium of the music. At this point your moral responsibility becomes hard to define.

"You choose the sound you hear. But listening for effects is only first steps in AMM listening. After a while you stop skimming, start tracking, and go where it takes you."

"Trusting that it's all worth while."

"Funnily enough I dont [sic] worry about that aspect".

"That means you *do* trust it?"

"Yes, I suppose I do." \*

### **Music is Erotic**

Postulate that the true appreciation of music consists in emotional surrender, and the expression music-lover becomes graphically clear and literally true. Anyone familiar with the basis of much near-eastern music will require no further justification for the assertion that music is erotic. Nevertheless, decorum demands that the erotic aspect of music be approached with circumspection and indirectly. That technical mastery is of no intrinsic value in music (or love) should be clear to anyone with a knowledge of musical history: Brahms was a greater composer than Mendelssohn, though it can be truly asserted that Mendelssohn displayed more brilliance in technical matters. Elaborate forms and a brilliant technique conceal a basic inhibition, a reluctance to directly express love, a fear of self-exposure.

Esoteric books of love (the Kama Sutra for example) and esoteric musical theories such as Stockhausen's and Goeyvaerts' early serial manipulations lose a lot of their attraction when they are readily available to all.

Love is a dimension like time, not some small thing that has to be made more interesting by elaborate preamble. The basic dream -of both love and music- is of a continuity, something that will live forever. The simplest practical attempt at realising this dream is the family. In music we try to eliminate time psycholggically [sic] to work in time in such a way that it loses its hold on us, relaxes its pressure. Quoting Wittgenstein again: "If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present".

### **On the repertoire of musical memories and the disadvantages of a musical education.**

The great merit of a traditional musical notation, like the traditional speech notation ie writing, is that it enables people to say things that are beyond their own understanding. A 12yearold can read Kant aloud; a gifted child can play late Beethoven. Obviously one can understand a notation without understanding everything that the notation is able to notate. To abandon notation is therefore a sacrifice; it deprives one of any system of formal guidelines leading you on into uncharted regions. On the other hand, the disadvantage of a traditional notation lies in its formality. Current experiments in mixed-media notations are an attempt to evade this empty formality. Over the past 15 years many special-purpose notation-systems have been devised with blurred areas in them that demand an improvised interpretation.

An extreme example of this tendency is my own TREATISE which consists of 193 pages of graphic score with no systematic instructions as to the interpretation and only the barest hints (such as an empty pair of 5line systems below every page) to indicate that the interpretation is to be musical.

The danger in this kind of work is that many readers of the score will simply relate the musical memories they have already acquired to the notation in front of them, and the result will be merely a gulash made up of the various musical backgrounds of the people involved. For such players there will be no intelligible incentive to music or extend themselves beyond the limitations of their education and experience.

Ideally such music should be played by a collection of musical innocents; but in a culture where musical education is so widespread (at least among musicians) and getting more and more so, such innocents are extremely hard to find. Treatise attempts to locate such musical innocents wherever they survive, by posing a notation that does not specifically *demand* an ability to read music. On the other hand, the score suffers from the fact that it *does* demand a certain facility in reading graphics, ie a visual education. Now 90% of musicians are visual innocents and ignoramuses, and ironically this exacerbates the situation, since their expression or interpretation of the score is to be audible rather than visible. Mathematicians and graphic artists find the score easier to read than musicians; they get more from it. But of course mathematicians and graphic artists do not generally have sufficient control of sound-media to produce "sublime" musical performances. My most rewarding experiences with Treatise have come through people who by some fluke have (a) acquired a visual education, (b) escaped a musical education and (c) have nevertheless become musicians, ie play music to the full capacity of their beings. Occasionally in jazz one finds a musician who meets all these stringent requirements; but even there it is extremely rare.

Depressing considerations of this kind led me to my next experiment in the direction of guided improvisation. This was 'The Tigers Mind', composed in 1967 while working in Buffalo. I wrote the piece with AMM musicians in mind. It consists solely of words. The ability to talk is almost universal, and the faculties of reading and writing are much more widespread than draughtsmanship or musicianship. The merit of 'The Tiger's Mind' is that it demands no musical education and no visual education; all it requires is a willingness to understand English and a desire to *play* (in the widest sense of the word, including the most childish).

Despite this merit, I am sorry to say that 'The Tiger's Mind' still leaves the musically educated at a tremendous disadvantage. I see no possibility of turning to account the tremendous musical potential that musically educated people evidently represent, except

by providing them with what they want: traditionally notated scores of maximum complexity. The most hopeful fields are those of choral and orchestral writing, since there the individual personality (which a musical education seems so often to thwart) is absorbed into a larger organism, which speaks through its individual members as if from some higher sphere.

### **The problems of recording**

I have touched on this problem twice already. I said that documents such as tape-recordings of improvisation are essentially empty, as they preserve chiefly the form that something took and give at best an indistinct hint as to the feeling and cannot of course convey any sense of time and place. And later, that it is impossible to record with any fidelity a kind of music that is actually derived from the room in which it is taking place - its size, shape, acoustical properties, even the view from the window, and that what a recording produces is a separate phenomenon, something really much stranger than the playing itself, since what we hear on tape or disc is indeed the same playing but divorced from its natural context.

A remark of Wittgenstein's gives us a clue as to the real root of the problem. In the *Tractatus* he writes; "The gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to one another in that pictorial international relation, which holds between language and the world. To all of them the logical structure is common". (4.014) This logical structure is just what an improvisation lacks, hence it cannot be scored nor can it be recorded.

All the general technical problems of recording are exacerbated in the recording of improvisation, but they remain technical, and with customary optimism we may suppose that one day they will be solved. However, even when these problems are solved, together with all those that may arise in the meantime, it will still be impossible to record this music, for several reasons.

Simply that very often the strongest things are not commercially viable on the domestic market. Pure alcohol is too strong for most people's palates. Atomic energy is acceptable in peacetime for supplying the electricity grid, but housewives would rebel against the idea of atomic converters in their own kitchens. Similarly, this music is not ideal for home listening. It is not a suitable background for social intercourse. Besides, this music does not *occur* in a home environment, it occurs in a public environment, and its force depends to some extent on public response. For this reason too it cannot happen fully in a recording studio; if there is hope for a recording it must be a recording of a public performance.

Who can be interested purely in sound, however high its 'fidelity'? Improvisation is a

language spontaneously developed amongst the players and between players and listeners. Who can say in what consists the mode of operation of this language? Is it *likely* that it is reducible to electrical impulses on tape and the oscillation of a loudspeaker membrane? On this reactionary note, I abandon the topic.

News has to travel somehow and tape is probably in the last analysis just as adequate a vehicle as hearsay, and certainly just as inaccurate.

#### **Virtues that a musician can develop**

1. *Simplicity* Where everything becomes simple is the most desirable place to be. But, like Wittgenstein and his 'harmless contradiction', you have to remember how you got there. The simplicity must contain the memory of how hard it was to achieve. (The relevant Wittgenstein quotation is from the posthumously published 'Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics': "The pernicious thing is not, to produce a contradiction in the region where neither the consistent nor the contradictory proposition has any kind of work to do; no, what *is* pernicious is: not to know how one reached the place where contradiction no longer does any harm".)

In 1957 when I left The Royal Academy of Music in London complex compositional techniques were considered indispensable. I acquired some -and still carry them around like an infection that I am perpetually desirous of curing. Sometimes the temptation occurs to me that if I were to infect my students with it I would at last be free of it myself.

2. *Integrity* What we *do* in the actual event is important -not only what we have in mind. Often what we do is what tells us what we have in mind.

The difference between making the sound and being the sound. The professional musician *makes* the sounds (in full knowledge of them as they are external to him); AMM *is* their sounds (as ignorant of them as one is about one's own nature).

3. *Selflessness* To do something constructive you have to look beyond yourself. The entire world is your sphere if your vision can encompass it. Self-expression lapses too easily into mere documentation -'I record that this is how I feel'. You should not be concerned with yourself beyond arranging a mode of life that makes it possible to remain on the line, balanced. Then you can work, look out beyond yourself. Firm foundations make it possible to leave the ground.

4. *Forbearance* Improvising in a group you have to accept not only the frailties of your fellow musicians, but also your own. Overcoming your instinctual revulsion against whatever is out of tune (in the broadest sense).

5. *Preparedness* for no matter what eventuality (Cage's phrase) or simply *Awakeness*. I can



best illustrate this with a special case of clairvoyant prediction. The trouble with clairvoyant prediction is that you can be absolutely convinced that *one* of two alternatives is going to happen, and then suddenly you are equally convinced of the other. In time this oscillation accelerates until the two states merge in a blur. Then all you can say is: I am convinced that either p or not-p, that either she will come or she won't, or whatever the case is about. Of course there is an immense difference between simply being aware that something might or might not occur, and a *clairvoyant conviction* that it will or won't occur. No practical difference but a great difference in feeling. A great intensity in your anticipation of this or that outcome. So it is with improvisation. "He who is ever looking for the breaking of a light he knows not whence about him, notes with a strange headfulness the faintest paleness of the sky" (Walter Pater). This constitutes awakeness.

6. *Identification with nature* Drifting through life: being driven through life; neither constitutes a true identification with nature. The best is to *lead* your life, and the same applies in improvising: like a yachtsman to utilise the interplay of natural forces and currents to steer a *course*.

My attitude is that the musical and the real worlds are one. Musicality is a dimension of perfectly ordinary reality. The musician's pursuit is to recognize the musical composition of the world (rather as Shelley does in Prometheus Unbound). All playing can be seen as an extension of singing; the voice and its extensions represent the musical dimension of men, women, children and animals. According to some authorities smoking is an extension of thumbsucking; perhaps the fear of cancer will eventually drive us back to thumbsucking. Possibly in an ideal future us animals will revert to singing, and leave wood, glass, metal, stone etc. to find their own voices, free of our torturings. (I have heard tell of devices that amplify to the point of audibility the sounds spontaneously occurring in natural materials).

7. *Acceptance of Death* From a certain point of view improvisation is the highest mode of musical activity, for it is based on the acceptance of music's fatal weakness and essential and most beautiful characteristic -its transcendence.

The desire always to be right is an ignoble taskmaster, as is the desire for immortality. The performance of any vital action brings us closer to death; if it didn't it would lack vitality. Life is a force to be used and if necessary used up. "Death is the virtue in us going to its destination" (Lieh Tzu).

\*Except [sic] from a dialogue on AMM by David Sladen.

## **Responses to Virtues, for Theorizing**

(This critique of the foregoing was written by Michael Chant on 29th April 1968)

"Simple", if it is to be used to denote any aspect of what is true, must be taken to mean 'without parts'. However, we also want to use the word to convey a state of mind, or, further, an attitude of mind to what is the case. We want to be happy. 'Simplicity' cannot be a virtue, except in reference to a state of pure happiness. The world is then essentially without parts in that firstly, we discern no problems, and secondly, we sense no dichotomy between the internal and external worlds. We may say that we feel no discontinuities. In no sense can "simple" be used to signify "the opposite of complex", where by "complex" I mean 'multiform'. We cannot speak of a 'contradictory fact'. And I think we cannot tolerate a 'felt contradiction'. Logic -meaning 'system of reasoning'- must not be taken as standing for something absolute. A contradiction has reality only when it can be felt. If we discern a contradiction, we must resolve it by rejecting the mode of reasoning which generates it. Can we be happy while yet being aware of contradictions?

Integers are the abstractions of temporal discontinuities. Ordinal nos. are existentially prior to cardinal nos. To be happy implies the rejection of integrity. A person who respects integrity will perceive sounds as external disturbances, a musician will think of music as he thinks of words -a statement of a feeling (or expression of an external fact). Communication is an entirely internal phenomenon. Sounds which stand for themselves demand an effecting of communication by a rejection of the dichotomy between internal and external worlds. What subsists between man and his environment is the expression of a form.

To imagine oneself as exclusively concentrating on a one self is to ignore the relationship that exists between self and other. To imagine that one can alter one factor in this relationship without altering the other is to delude oneself. The relationship is a formal one -a continuity between altering the environment and altering oneself. Art is a statement of the further continuity of this relationship, it is an education. The ground lines are not static.

To imagine one can improve the external world by attempting to bring

about its conformance to one's present ideal is thus seen to be an illusion. If something environmental is found grating, one must seek to adjust the relationship, not the external or internal world.

All that is needed is recognition that a relationship exists.

It is a distinctive feature of life that this sort of relationship exists, is called forth whenever we can speak of life. It calls forth time as a form. What is distinctive of consciousness is the control of this form. Art is the way of controlling this form internally. Music, as conventionall [sic] understood, is a record of the composer's experiences in this direction. We can go beyond this conception of music (and perhaps it may be as well therefore to drop the term) by letting a composition be a statement of how to control the form.

In pure happiness the relationship is null.