of group playing with solo playing is something I have tried to maintain ever since.

LANGUAGE

The analogy with language, often used by improvising musicians in discussing their work, has a certain usefulness in illustrating the development of a common stock of material – a vocabulary – which takes place when a group of musicians improvise together regularly. With a successful improvising group the bulk of their material will be initially provided by the styles, techniques and habits of the musicians involved. This vocabulary will then be developed by the musicians individually, in work and research away from the group, and collectively, in performance. In a wider sense, Steve Lacy speaks of a 'brotherhood of language. Each player who comes along affects the common pool of language. When you hear a new player – and you make it your business to hear anyone who comes along who has something new – then you have to go back and rethink everything.'

In the choice and development of material the solo improvisor works in similar ways to the group improvisor. Building a personal vocabulary and working to extend it in both performance and preparation. The material is never fixed and its historical and systematic associations can be ignored. The improvisor can also look for material which will be appropriate for, and which will facilitate, improvisation. This last consideration, for me, provides the main purpose and the continuing interest in solo playing. It forms part of the search for whatever is endlessly variable, the construction of a language, all parts of which are always and equally available.

The most obvious differences to group improvisation – greater cohesiveness and easier control for the soloist – are not, in improvisation, necessarily advantages and an even greater loss, of course, is the unpredictable element usually provided by other players. In this situation the language becomes much more important and there will be times in solo improvisation when the player relies entirely on the vocabulary used. At such times, when other more aesthetically acceptable resources such as invention and imagination have gone missing, the vocabulary becomes the sole means of support. It has to provide everything needed to sustain continuity and impetus in the musical performance. This, it seems to me, is where the main danger in solo improvisation arises.

Improvising alone, before an audience, is not without its terrors. The temptation, when nothing else seems to be offering itself, to resort to tried and proven procedures, to flog those parts of the performance which are most palatable to an audience – and no musician who has spent time playing in public is in any doubt about what they are – is not easily resisted and it is clear that in solo improvising, as with a great deal of performed music, a successful audience response can be the cause of rituals and formulae being repeatedly trotted out long after they have lost any musical motivation. At this point the credibility of the activity is in the balance and maintaining it simply depends on the courage of the player. Once solo playing descends to being the recycling of previously successful formulae its relevance to improvisation becomes pretty remote.

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The developments in my playing following on from those described in the chapter on Joseph Holbrooke continued along the same lines and for the same reasons: to find a way of dealing with a freely improvised situation in which a conventional vocabulary proved inadequate. Again, a written description – any description – is, inevitably, a distortion, ossifying and delineating a process which was fluid and amorphous – and almost always empirical.

Beyond the immediate influence of the musicians I was playing with, the bases of my improvising language came from an interest in the music of Schoenberg's pre-serial, 'free' atonal period, the later music of Webern and also certain early electronic music composers. (Musicians who shared, it is fairly safe to say, a deep antipathy to anything remotely connected with improvisation.) Apart from the fact that I liked the stuff, I thought (and I still think) that intervallic manipulation of pitch is less restricting and more productive than other ways of pitch management, and that the very clearly differentiated changes of timbre which characterised some early electronic music was the sort of thing which could assist in assembling a language that would be literally disjointed, whose constituents would be unconnected in any causal or grammatical way and so would be more open to manipulation. A language based on malleable, not pre-fabricated, material. Generally I was looking, I think, to utilise those elements which stem from the concepts of unpredictability and discontinuity, of perpetual variation and renewal first introduced into European composition at the beginning of the 20th century.

But this 'improvising language' was, of course, superimposed upon another musical language; one learned, also empirically, over many years as a working musician. Working musicians, those found earning a living in night clubs, recording studios, dance halls and any other place where music has a functional role, spend very little time, as I remember it, discussing 'improvising language', but anyone lacking the ability to invent something, to add something, to *improve* something would quickly prove to be in the wrong

business. In that world, improvisation is a fact of musical life. And it seems to me that this bedrock of experience, culled in a variety of situations, occasionally bubbles up in one way or another, particularly playing solo. Not affecting specifics like pitch or timbre or rhythmic formulations (I've yet to find any advantage in quoting directly any of the kinds of music I used to play) but influencing decisions that affect overall balance and pace – judging what will work. The unexpected, not to say the unnerving, can also occasionally appear. Recently, it seems to me, some reflection of the earliest guitar music I ever heard occasionally surfaces in my solo playing; music I have had no connection with, either as listener or player, since childhood.

Once a vocabulary of some homogeneity is assembled and is working and has proved to be usable in a playing situation, material can be included, at least for a period, from any source. And that's a necessity, because the need for material is endless. A feeling of freshness is essential and the best way to get that is for some of the material to be fresh. In a sense it is change for the sake of change. Change for the sake of the benefits that change can bring.

Eventually, the attempt to analyse one's playing in this way reveals, among other things, the limitations of the vocabulary/language analogy. The flute player Jim Denley points out the automatic simplification that occurs whatever kind of explanation is attempted:

For the improvisor the physicality of producing sound (the hardware) is not a separate activity to the thoughts and ideas in music (software). In the act of creation there is a constant loop between the hierarchy of factors involved in the process. My lungs, lips, fingers, voice box and their working together with the potentials of sound are dialoguing with other levels which I might call mind and perception. The thoughts and decisions are sustained and modified by my physical potentials and vice versa but as soon as I try and define these separately I run into problems. It is a meaningless enterprise for it is the very entanglement of levels of perception, awareness and physicality that makes improvisation.[1]

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Talking with other improvisors about solo playing revealed that most people see it as a vehicle for self-expression. A way of presenting a personal music. One curious uniformity of attitude, or at least explanation, was the use of Paul Klee's 'Taking a line for a walk'. Evan Parker, Christine Jeffrey and Phil Wachsmann have all quoted it at different times in talking about what they do.

1 From 'Improvisation: the entanglement of awareness and physicality', a paper by Jim Denley published in the improvisation issue (Summer 1991) of *Sounds Australian*.

Leo Smith says: '...one improvisor creates a complete improvisation with more than one instrument and of mixed character (eg trumpet, flugelhorn, percussion instruments and flute.)' And then the opposite approach is suggested by Tony Oxley: 'In solo playing at the moment I'm limiting myself to certain aspects of the kit, just a part of the vocabulary. I find that an interesting thing. It's obviously more secure than the wide open thing.'

It is clear that in solo playing the instrument achieves a special potency and its importance to this kind of music-making is at its most obvious here. In some cases, the music is literally constructed from the instrument, as with instrument builders such as Hugh Davies and Max Eastley. The German guitar player Hans Reichal, who seems to have spent the greater part of his career playing solo, has built a series of guitars of unique design, each modification reflected in the music he plays on them. For others, special instrumental techniques form the basis of their approach.

Solo playing, in fact, has produced some remarkable, even spectacular, performances, usually of a dense, furiously active nature: a panic of loneliness; a manic dialogue with the phantom other; virtuosic distortions of natural bodily functions unequalled since the days of La Petomaine. Missing, is the kind of playing which produces music independent of the characteristics of instruments or even individual styles ('...who played that?...'), unidentifiable passages which are the kind of magic only possible, perhaps, in group playing.

The most interesting soloists to my ears often turn out to be trombonists. Paul Rutherford and George Lewis, in their different ways, both seem to make improvisation the basis of their solo playing and also take advantage of the 'singleness' of the solo situation; happy for the music to sound like one person, playing alone. Vinko Globokar, on the other hand, the trombone player who initiated much of the vocabulary widely used by improvising trombonists (contentious area this), dismisses solo improvising as meaningless.

PRACTISING

Paco Peña: *I prepare to be able, technically, to reach anything I want to reach on the guitar and for that, of course, I do my exercises and so on. But not specifically for improvising.*

Evan Parker: *It seems to me the only practising of improvisation you could do is either to improvise or to think about improvising.*

Ronnie Scott: *I've done what for me is a great deal of practising and then played in public and my technique feels worse than it's ever been before, whereas, one can not touch the instrument for weeks, and go out and be free and loose.*