

Improvisation and the self:

To listen to the other

Henrik Frisk

To listen to the other: This phrase raises an incalculable number of issues. One of the central topics in teaching improvisation is learning how to listen to those with whom one plays, but in my experience the most difficult task is listening to the self. The point of listening to the other in performance is obviously not to completely give up the self, nor is it to become the other, but to attune to, or find resonance with, the other. It is in the interaction between two or more musicians that open and unbound improvisation unfolds, in the space between adjusting to the other and listening to the self. In this paper, I will use my artistic practice in the Swedish-Vietnamese group The Six Tones as a context for approaching some of these questions concerning self and other by means of three concepts, each of which have a profound influence on the self: freedom, habit, and individuality. Though these concepts are very broad and deep, they will be tackled in a relatively limited and practical context.

The impact of freedom, being such an essential concept in the understanding of improvisation, is closely related to some of the more social and political topics that I will touch upon, and can be understood in a number of ways, such as freedom *of the self* and freedom *from the self*. Habit is a factor that can both allow for freedom and limit the space for it: there are a number of examples of the destruction of habit functioning as a creative force. Habit, furthermore, is part of the constitution of the self, and detaching habit from the self may be a method to initiate change. Individuality, an equally important aspect of jazz and improvised music, is interesting and complex and can contribute to turning freedom-of-the-self into a power of domination. Freedom is a necessary condition for individual expression which in turn may reduce the space of freedom for the other. In The Six Tones, situated as it is in an intercultural context, the meanings of self, other, listening, habit, and individuality are also investigated outside a purely musical realm. Starting from the stylistically, as well as geographically local perspective, the paper ends with a discussion on center and periphery

from a somewhat wider angle, and, as a preliminary remark, I believe that it is both possible and important to engage in a social and political discourse in this context, and I am confident that the art field, including the field of artistic research, is an appropriate arena for this.

I am not attempting to use a theoretical framework and applying it to the artistic work flow. Rather, I am concerned with understanding what was going on in the early stages of our work in the group, and to understand my own initial and subsequent reactions. By filtering these experiences through the thoughts presented below, and understanding my own reactions as expressions of a system of domination, I can approach my own artistic practice as a vehicle for social and political thinking through music, and I can approach the difficult questions concerning self, habit, and freedom. The method employed is a recursive cycle through stages of artistic practice, reflection, evaluation, and theory as practice.

The notion of the self is a philosophically complex issue, and I am not claiming that this text is an exhaustive account of all possible angles. My primary interest is the role of the self as seen from a very practical perspective: In a musical interaction how can the self be responsive to the other, be free, and be individual at the same time, and what is the epistemology for this aspiration? By virtue of the subjective nature of improvisation and many other creative practices, the role of the self is essential to the various processes in artistic work such as creation, evaluation, construction, and presentation. Many theories have been developed to explain the operations of the “mysterious nature of the self” (Griffiths 2010: 167), subject to constant change, but the mere attempt to define its nature appears to change it. That one’s reflection upon the self in fact alters it is a fundamental principle of most kinds of therapy, though there is no way of knowing whether it is the understanding of the self or the self itself that is altered. The connection and interdependence of self with time and place, with the other, with the body, and with the socio-political spheres and power relations makes it clear that it is in a consistently uncompleted state, in a capacity of constant becoming. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson, to whom we will return later in this text, identifies the self as an aggregation of “habits of perception and adaptive action” (Bateson 1972a: 242). Although his definition may appear to be too formal in this context, acknowledging habit as a defining property of the self is significant, and part of my argument here is that altering habitual responses is a way to alter the self.

As an illustration of one of the ways in which meeting with the other changes not only the self but also the other, Deleuze and Guattari claim it to be possible to move across, or transgress, the border between self and other: “Whenever there is transcoding, we can be sure that there is not a simple addition, but the constitution of a new plane, as of a surplus value. A melodic or rhythmic plane, surplus value of passage or bridging” (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 346).¹ I would like to argue that improvisation in particular is a powerful site for exploring questions concerning subjectivity, identity, and the spheres of self and other, and many of the

¹ See also (Semetsky 2011: 140)

principal aspects of the meeting between self and other can be anticipated and expanded in the domain of musical practice. Counterpoint, and the simultaneous interaction between several voices at once, would render any verbal discussion incomprehensible and impossible to follow, whereas in music, it may even do the opposite: create greater clarity. Listening is fundamental to all musical practices, and listening to the other is an essential aspect of any relation: “since music making is something we inevitably do with others (whether they are present or not), musical dialogue is *fundamentally* ethical in nature” (Benson 2003: 164). As important as listening, however, is knowing what to listen for, in essence an epistemological question.

Although very difficult to define, freedom in general is a recurring concept in the discussion of musical improvisation. What is the function of freedom in the constitution of the self? In a more general context Hanna Arendt claims that “to raise the question, What is freedom? seems to be a hopeless enterprise,” (Arendt 1993: 143) and freedom is no less complicated when discussed in relation to musical practices. Free jazz became a genre with Ornette Coleman’s epic release *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (Coleman 1961) and ever since then there has been a discussion as to what has actually been freed in the process. Is it the musician that is liberated or the music? Or something else? The free jazz movement in the USA in the 1960s was intimately linked to the civil rights movement, adding a political dimension to the discussion. On the surface improvisation may seem to be a means to create music that is free from the chains of the formal structures that, e.g., notation imposes on the musician. Subjectivity and individuality are, and have been, powerful agents in much of jazz and improvised music, as it has rejected the generality that other kinds of music have advocated.² Even though we know that such descriptions are not correct, the prevailing notion is that jazz is a music that may be created on the spot and whose substance is defined by the will of the improviser rather than by external factors or structures.

² After all, composing for symphony orchestra only makes sense if the sounds it offers are relatively general. Hence, the symphony orchestra is a machine that proposes a finite set of sounds and, as such, it would cease to work if its musicians began to promote their own individual and singular sound, similar to how Ben Webster and Johnny Hodges did in the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

Many have rightly criticized the understanding of jazz and improvised music as devoid of planning and ignorant to history and memory, but the field is complex, and the concept of improvisation will not let itself be defined on only one axis. The idea of the improvising musician as a “mystic who is unable to describe his or her own creative process is a staple of conventional cultural wisdom about jazz” (Lewis 1996: 170), having been proposed by established, privileged and canonical composers as well as by improvising musicians themselves. It should, however, be noted that many of the attempts to target improvisation as unforeseen, unplanned, spontaneous, and based primarily on “feelings” is to a significant degree a political strategy by which jazz musicians have been kept outside the central structures of cultural funding. An expression that, according to the popular view to a significant degree, is made up in the moment cannot be taken seriously in a culture otherwise driven by the auteur.

The requirement for jazz musicians to be both strongly individual and free at the same time quickly becomes problematic as the two concepts are connected. With reference to one’s right to be individual, one may end up using one’s personal freedom to claim the right to control the situation at the expense of the freedom of the other. This is a surprisingly common mode in jazz improvisation where both freedom and power of expression and musical readability are highly valued. In his book *The Philosophy of Improvisation* Gary Peters calls it the “aporia of freedom.” Though freedom is generally thought of as a positive concept he claims that it is a mistake to neglect its “questionable duality” (Peters 2009: 21): “my freedom comes at the expense of the other’s freedom, my own autonomous world at the expense of the other’s heteronomy” (Benson 2003: 165). This duality is perhaps even more obvious in light of the mythical view of the creator, a Kantian genius, who enjoys the undeniable freedom of the artist. To this artist subjectivity and individuality are not choices; they belong to his vocation and constitute the very nature and value of artistic work. As an emblematic representation of the notion of the true creative virtuoso, Pierre Boulez expressed a sheer lack of understanding for Cage’s idea of setting one’s own intention to the side. To avoid or even neglect the qualified

projection of the self in determination would be simply irresponsible (Boulez, 1964).³ In the context of improvisation the autonomous creator may not be as intrusive, but the combination of creativity, as an imminent and individually constituted property, and freedom will indeed risk circumscribing the freedom of the other. Furthermore, the romantic nineteenth century artist has created a mythology so powerful that even today it has an impact on authors, composers, and musicians alike. The creative act is so strongly soldered to this image that even the understanding of an improvising musician, whose creativity depends not on creation of musical works but on real-time impulses in performance, is informed by it.

Although the search for an individual sound is, in most cases, a very conscious act, there is a corresponding search for the pure, or unconscious, expression, exemplified by Ornette Coleman's attempts to short-circuit the habitual aspects of his saxophone playing. In order to be able to "create as spontaneously as possible—'without memory,' as he has often been quoted as saying" (Litzweiler 1992: 117), he started playing the violin and the trumpet without any 'real' training. These instruments gave him the freedom to play and improvise in a manner that his memory made it difficult for him to do on saxophone. When playing the saxophone he would be partly ruled by his meta-knowledge, his knowledge *about* playing the saxophone. Habits encoded mentally as well as bodily would also influence him and, to Ornette Coleman, this hindered his spontaneity. On the violin he adopted a highly original technique that allowed him to bypass "not only the jazz tradition, but Western musical traditions altogether. He had no teachers or guides to show him how to play trumpet and violin and purposely avoided learning standard techniques" (Ibid.). Freedom from memory and freedom from influence from extra-musical parameters—these 'unknown' instruments gave Coleman a sense of *internal* freedom, liberated from the physical memory associated with his saxophone playing. He approached a self-expression where the transformation from intention to result was not ruled by a preconceived notion of what it should sound like. Coleman identified the embodied memory as

³ See also my discussion in Frisk (2013, p. 144-5)

perhaps the most important dimension in the struggle to be free, and by using a new tool, he neutralized the impact of the habits related to his saxophone playing.

In early 2006 Stefan Östersjö and I initiated a project together with Ngyen Thanh Thuy and Ngo Tra My, two Vietnamese musicians temporarily visiting Sweden at the time as guest teachers at Malmö Academy of Music. Thuy plays dan tranh, a traditional Vietnamese zither played by plucking the strings with the right hand and adding vibrato and glissandi with the left hand. The dan tranh is related to the Korean kayagum and the Japanese koto. The dan bau, played by My, is a single chord instrument played with a bamboo plectrum with the right hand while altering the pitch with the left hand by pushing, or pulling, a rod, thus stretching or relaxing the string. Different overtones can be produced depending on where the string is plucked, and the sound of the string is picked up with a magnetic pickup and amplified through a small speaker. Since 2006 we have completed a number of tours and projects in many different constellations and settings.

The Six Tones is an encounter between traditional Vietnamese music and experimental Western European music, and since its inception the main objective has been to find forms for interaction between these two musical cultures on more or less equal terms. However, apart from the musical intercultural intentions, the group has become a site for experimentation and examination of the political and social meaning and impact of that ambition. Experimentation is a central concept to us and “by definition, experimental data must be able to behave in a way not predicted by the hypothesis. Thus, the experiment is conceived as an excellent setting for exploration and discovery, a perfect opportunity for an encounter with the new, the unforeseen, and the unfamiliar” (Corbett 2000: 165). In order to truly encounter the new and the unforeseen, challenging different aspects of the notion of center and periphery was necessary: is Western art music the norm and traditional Vietnamese music an exotic other? Are Stefan and I ‘visiting’ a music outside of our own sphere, or is it rather Thuy and My who are forced to approach us? Is it at all possible to communicate on equal terms in a context that contains so many economic and social inequalities? Are we as Westerners able to rid ourselves of the

colonial heritage that in many respects still govern our interactions with the East when we meet Thuy and My in this group? These are questions belonging to the larger scope of The Six Tones project and will not be thoroughly probed in this text, but it is nevertheless possible to distill the questions into the more individually oriented: What is the role of the self in the encounter with the other? Even though my own interest in the self in artistic practice started more than a decade before we initiated The Six Tones, the project strengthened my belief that self, individuality, freedom, and habit were important agents whose interrelations are substantial in, and outside of, my musical practice.

To begin with we had to reevaluate our own musical identities, and for myself I had to question my roles as composer and improviser and reconsider what my level of influence should be, and what it could become. In order to create the necessary preconditions for the two different musical traditions to intermingle, rather than merely coexist void of deeper interaction, the individual influence on the musical structures had to be carefully negotiated. As a result of our lack of experience in such collaborations, our first meetings were very tentative. I found it extremely difficult to balance my own initiatives while leaving enough space for the input of Thuy and My. One reason was the lack of a shared language, and another was the social asymmetry between the two subgroups. The fact that the geographic origin of the four members was parallel to their gender made the collaboration saturated with disparity and inequality. Although music can be seen as a neutral form of communication with the potential of compensating for social differences, it may equally well disguise them. While we were in the known environment of the music academy—at home musically, culturally and socially—they were foreign visitors without language or context.

Reflecting upon the situation brings forth questions concerning identity, culture, power, and habit, all of which are to some degree interrelated, whereas in a culturally and socially homogeneous context many of these questions are not even raised. They are unnecessary as much of the negotiation goes on in a larger context, outside of the rehearsal space. Common signifiers, references, and aesthetic negotiations, inherited and nurtured since the early

development of musician and composer, are easily accessible. Collaboration, however, does not have to be between two different musical and artistic cultures in order to raise issues such as those we encountered in *The Six Tones*. Simply bringing together musicians from different genres may create obstacles that are difficult, or plain impossible, to maneuver.

At our first meeting in the composition studio at the Malmö Academy of Music, I became incredibly self-aware of the asymmetry between Stefan and me on the one hand and Thuy and My on the other. Given the history of Vietnam in particular, and the history of the white man in general, I feared that my identity, individuality, and cultural background would get in the way of Thuy's and My's freedom to participate on their own terms. But instead of letting them *speak for themselves*, I leaned on my preconception of what it means to be a female Vietnamese visitor in Sweden. While trying to compensate for what I perceived as vulnerability, I accomplished the opposite: I subjugated them to my own understanding of the world, the context, the music, and our interaction. Because they could not speak within our regulatory framework, they remained voiceless. This is an archetypal way in which the Western subject has dealt with the other; it is habitual response.⁴ Much later I learned that I was wrong in my assumptions of Thuy and My. Yes, they felt they were in a foreign environment with limited latitude, but initially they had no problem with our interactions, other than my behavior. After all, they were not only foreigners; they were also professional musicians ready to get involved in a new project. It is possible to argue that the predicament was now settled, that there was no need to dig deeper into the imbalance between the two subgroups. Part of my argument here, however, is that some of the behavioral patterns involved in an intercultural meeting such as this are centuries old and will influence the self even after the insight. As is so well described by Edward Said, for a change to be carried out it is not enough to speak of the asymmetry; it is necessary to also restore that which was once converted:

⁴ I will return to this question towards the end of the paper.

Formally the Orientalist sees him-self as accomplishing the union of Orient and Occident, but mainly by reasserting the technological, political, and cultural supremacy of the West. History, in such a union, is radically attenuated if not banished. Viewed as a current of development, as a narrative strand, or as a dynamic force unfolding systematically and materially in time and space, human history—of the East or the West—is subordinated to an essentialist, idealist conception of Occident and Orient. Because he feels himself to be standing at the very rim of the East-West divide, the Orientalist not only speaks in vast generalities; he also seeks to convert each aspect of Oriental or Occidental life into an unmediated sign of one or the other geo-geographical half. (Said 1978: 246-7)

In the following I will attempt to describe the continuous growth of the group that followed this initial and largely unsuccessful encounter, and describe the evolution of our project through our interpretation of the song *Tu Dai Oan*.

Tu Dai Oan is a popular traditional Vietnamese tune in the Oan mode. Although the idea of playing Vietnamese traditional music in The Six Tones occurred soon after our first meetings in 2006, *Tu Dai Oan* was first picked up in 2007 when we started working on the version that we have since been playing.⁵ In Vietnam the song is very popular and it is often heard played on a dan tranh, an instrument on which the tune is naturally idiomatic. Stefan transcribed it for ten-string guitar and, to have a greater control over vibrati and glissandi, he played it with a slide. Such ornamentations are important in the Vietnamese tradition and the musical mode depicts how, and where, to perform them.

The decision to do a trio version of *Tu Dai Oan* for dan tranh, ten-string guitar, and live electronics was an attempt to create a structure with a wide range of expressive opportunities.

⁵ There are three recordings of *Tu Dai Oan* with The Six Tones available. A live recording from Gothenburg, 2009 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbVN0VgBKfw>), a recording from Hanoi, 2010 (*Signal-Noise*, dB Records, 2013), and a live recording from Malmö, 2011 (*(re)thinking improvisation: Artistic exploration and conceptual writing*, DVD, Lund University Press 2013).

Being a plucked string instrument with a wooden resonance box, the ten-string guitar bridges the gap between the dan tranh and the electronics. Distinct from the Vietnamese lute, the ty ba,⁶ the ten-string guitar, has many properties in common with the dan tranh. The challenge to create a coherent version of the tune was obviously not resolved merely by instrumentation, and the predicament we found ourselves in 2006 had to be avoided. At the time, Thuy was a master musician in the tradition, Stefan had practiced playing Vietnamese music on his instrument for about six months, and I had explored it for about the same time period. With no more than a rudimentary sense of Vietnamese music, Stefan and I had little understanding of the nuances of the tradition while, at the time, Thuy had only just begun to explore contemporary Western music. Furthermore, we had barely any common spoken language. With the ambition to create a shared space to explore the music without being too closely tied to either Thuy's tradition or our own, while at the same time retaining enough signifying traits from both styles of music to make them identifiable, performance was the only useful means of communication. Hence, we had to improvise.

In his presentation at EMS 2006 *Appropriation, exchange, understanding*, British electronic music authority Simon Emmerson points out how musicians have always exchanged concepts and ideas through the act of performance itself, often without language. But Emmerson also brings up how any mode of exchange involves some kind of distortion, reduction, impoverishment, or loss: “While some of these losses will be an inevitable result of global social change, the ethical question of knowledge and awareness cannot be avoided” (Emmerson 2006).⁷ Though our awareness of the complexity of the project grew over time, the social and political dimensions were part of The Six Tones since the beginning, but the important issue, raised by Emmerson, is how to identify the values that could be jeopardized in a collaboration. He also points out that the idea of intercultural music is commonly channeled through Western technologies such as notation and performed using

⁶ The Ty Ba is closely related to the Chinese Pipa.

⁷ This quote appears only in the abstract of the paper (see: <http://www.ems-network.org/spip.php?article292>), not in the paper itself.

European performance practices. The overarching goal with The Six Tones, however, was to dismantle the binary distinction between East and West and not disregard any of the performance traditions involved. We were looking for a dynamic meeting between the traditions, with exchange, rather than appropriation, of knowledge at the center. Looking back at the process Emerson is indeed correct when concluding that in intercultural projects there is a need to develop “a sensitivity to different significant sound qualities and behaviors, as well as different aesthetic and cultural values, in a very practical sense, so that we are aware of what is lost in an intercultural transaction” (Emmerson 2006: 8).

A working session and a concert at the Vietnam National Academy of Music in the fall of 2006 turned out to be a pivotal moment in the development of The Six Tones. If the first meeting in Malmö was terribly hesitant and governed by failed attempts to counteract the perceived inequity within the group, the visit to Hanoi had a notable impact on the development of the project. To work with Thuy and My in their own country made a tangible difference, reinforced by a temporary reversal of roles as Stefan and I were now the visitors in a foreign country with little understanding of the codes and of the culture.

This was emphasized by learning about the gender roles in Vietnam, different from those in the West. A striking number of the positions held by women in Vietnam are in Europe traditionally held by men. The deanship and a number of other significant positions at the Academy of Music are held by women, and many of the jobs at the other end of the hierarchy, such as cleaners and secretaries, are held by men. According to Van Ky (2002) women in Vietnam have had a strong position historically, but the situation in Hanoi in present day is more likely influenced rather by the role Vietnamese women had to bear in the Vietnam War than by the historical evidence of matriarchy. However, experiencing this subtle but important difference clearly affected the relations in the group, and whether or not there had ever been good reason to treat Thuy and My cautiously as fragile, sensible, and subordinate women,

seeing them in their home country made it clear that there was no longer any need to do so.⁸ As a consequence, thanks to a merely rudimentary insight into Vietnamese society, the basis for interaction in the group had a radically altered premise, the main difference being the way in which I could approach Thuy and My. I was to some extent able to break free from my preconception of them as foreigners, victimized by definition—to break free from the standard response, the habit. I was now able to listen.

It may seem self-evident that closer contact with a foreign culture and social system, as well as with the music with which one is interacting and attempting to get better acquainted, results in more natural and less strained communication, and that the opposite—namely, lacking firsthand information about the specific music and culture—results in the kind of confusion that was seen at the unfortunate start of the Six Tones. However, the issue at stake here is not solely epistemological. Gregory Bateson claims:

[In] the natural history of the living human being, ontology and epistemology cannot be separated. His (commonly unconscious) beliefs about what sort of world it is will determine how he sees it and acts within it, and his ways of perceiving and acting will determine his beliefs about its nature. The living man is thus bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which—regardless of ultimate truth or falsity—become partially self-validating for him. (Bateson 1972a: 314)

Looking at human behavior as a holistic, cybernetic system in the way Bateson is suggesting, one may return once again to the first rehearsal and see it as an unstable system with no means for self-correction. With good intentions I tried to compensate for a postulated inequality assuming that I, as in my ‘self’, could correct the imbalance. According to Bateson that would have been impossible. The stability of a complex system, such as a group of

⁸ For a more in depth and comprehensive account of gender roles in Vietnam, see Drummond and Rydstrom (2004)

musicians playing together, is a function of the product of all the parts of the system (of all the “transformations of difference” (Ibid.: 316) as Bateson calls it), and there is no way in which one part of the system can control all others unilaterally. On the contrary, at any point in time, every part of the system has to adapt their actions according to information from within the system. In other words, the problem was not so much that we did not have a language, but that we were unequipped to pick up on the existing information within the group and adjust accordingly. To instead fall back on habit, as I did, thinking that the self, by itself, can counterbalance a lack of information is a characteristic of an Occidental attitude which, according to Bateson, has a cultural and social predisposition towards thinking about the self as a delimited agent performing purposive action upon objects rather than seeing the holistic aspects of the system. Although arriving at the issue from very different angles, there is a parallelism between Bateson’s Occidental self unable to see himself as part of a larger, mutually dependent system; Said’s description of the Orientalist reasserting the cultural supremacy of the West; and Emerson’s appeal, in intercultural projects, to develop sensitivity towards different aesthetic and cultural values. All of them identify a problematic aspect of the Western self in the encounter with the non-European other.

It was not until the year after our first visit in Hanoi that we started working with *Tu Dai Oan*. In the years to follow we would play it numerous times, and we continued to develop the form and the expression. Although referred to as an improvisation, *Tu Dai Oan* is part of a tradition of playing that is in fact very fixed and which only allows for a limited set of possible permutations. Even if our intention was not primarily to propagate a traditional style of playing, we hoped to maintain enough significant traits of the original piece for the music to be recognizable as coming out of the Vietnamese musical heritage. Learning from our earlier experiences our method was to move forward cautiously and in constant dialogue with Thuy, the only one with a solid experience of playing traditional Vietnamese music. In many of the rehearsals⁹ we let Thuy take the initiative while Stefan and I stayed in the background, only

⁹ The rehearsals discussed here were carried out at the Electronic Music Studios in Stockholm (EMS) in the late winter of 2009 and we have nearly complete video recordings of them. The actual events in the rehearsals are discussed in greater detail in Östersjö and Nguyen (2013)

occasionally fronting ideas or commenting on performances. At this point we already had some common experiences, as well as a greater understanding for our respective musical, social, and cultural backgrounds, but we were still in absence of a common language, which is, returning to Emerson, not an infrequent situation in intercultural projects.

In preparation for the upcoming Scandinavian tour, as part of my repository I had created a virtual instrument intended to sound like a combination of dan tranh and dan bau. This was in itself a departure from how I usually work. As I am generally more interested in sounds that are the result of an interaction, preparing a pitched instrument that plays notes was not at all natural to my electronic music practice. There was, however, a need for me to be able to take initiatives to which Thuy could react. A characteristic of live interactive electronic music in real time, with a focus on processing or live sampling, is that no sound can be produced until a sound has been received, and I had seen that this was a problem in our group. In order to become more interactive, I had to become less so. Once I arrived at a relatively satisfying compromise with the instrument, I entered all the pitches of *Tu Dai Oan* in an array and let the instrument step through the pitches for each trigger, allowing me to focus on the timing of the onset, the intonation, and the glissandi. Though there was nothing wrong with this instrument, the desired effect—to aurally bridge the conceptual and cultural gap between the acoustic Vietnamese dan tranh and the electronics—was lacking. In fact, the more I transformed this instrument away from its original sound, the more effects I added to it, the better it seemed to work. The concept of the instrument itself, and its conceptual affiliation to the glissandi and vibrati of the other instruments, appeared to be more important than the sound quality. Even after the modifications, however, this simple synthesizer was so far removed from the techniques I usually used that to actually play it in performance was incredibly awkward in the beginning. I had to forcefully break with my aesthetics and habits of playing electronics, the reward being that the performances worked really well.

Not being able to efficiently discuss and negotiate the performances in the rehearsals made it necessary to use a trial and error method. By going through short iterations of cycles of play—

evaluate—alter, we slowly raised our awareness of what could work. Through this method we were able to not only practice our own communication, or refine our group as a cybernetic system, it also turned out to be an effective way to teach each other about some of the specifics of our respective playing traditions and, perhaps even more importantly, to learn how to negotiate parts of our performance traditions. One of the early choices we made concerning the form was to expand the traditionally rather free introduction—the part of the tune where the performer had real freedom to improvise in a Western sense. We inserted an improvised section in the middle, and at the end we added an extended improvisation. The dan tranh and the guitar played the tune, and I joined in primarily in the improvisatory sections. This was a form kept intact over the years of playing *Tu Dai Oan*, in itself a way to maintain an alliance with traditional Vietnamese origin of the tune, but it was also an efficient way to allow ourselves to renegotiate the details of the structure of the performance. By staying with the form we could develop our musical interaction and attune ourselves to the “transforms of differences” (Bateson 1972a: 318), something that allowed for quite radical changes to the shape of the form.

Simon Emmerson warns us of the risk of masking, that some aspect or property of one sound will obscure some property of another. This line of thinking can be expanded to the level where one culture may mask another. Colonialism has, among other things, resulted in cultural appropriation or cultural imperialism, and in *The Six Tones* appropriation was something we thought we could identify, but the subtle concept of masking is difficult to spot. Masking will probably occur to a certain extent in any kind of music, but the question asked by Emmerson —“Have we masked something ‘significant’ as seen from within the culture?” (Emmerson 2006: 2)—is material; it is not so much *if* something is lost as *what*, what the importance of this property is, and from what perspective the loss may be experienced. Perhaps my physical modeling instrument was more problematic as a virtual copy of the dan tranh than it was as a deviation from the real instrument. Perhaps it masked the Vietnamese instrument due to its similarity with it, but reinforced it as it grew different. The way I developed my part in *Tu Dai Oan* was in effect a movement away from my initial respect for the Vietnamese tradition,

instead approaching a genuinely experimental mode of playing. However, at the same time, this development had nothing to do with a lack of respect, quite the contrary. I feel inclined to argue that the attitude I had in the beginning of the project, before our first trip to Hanoi, was lacking in respect. My assumptions about Vietnamese music, though constructed in good faith, were not informed by the tradition itself but rather by my prejudices about it. When Emerson warns us about masking and writes that if the exchange continues, “in time the masked element may disappear as it no longer functions within the music,” (Ibid.) we must not take it too literally. In our case, to think that we could erase or destroy parts of the living tradition of Vietnamese music would be to overestimate the influence and power of our group. Regardless of the validity of this otherwise legitimate concern, our experience in *The Six Tones* is that we could go quite far mixing the two modes of expression without any masking of significant traits in the original music. The more important attunement performed was that in the social dimension. As this grew stronger, our musical artifacts did also.

Finally, it is interesting to note that while Stefan saw it necessary to go much deeper into the theory and practice of playing Vietnamese traditional music, I was more concerned with *not* making authenticity a parameter in my playing. One reason is that Stefan’s instrument has a certain affinity with the instruments we worked with, whereas electronics find no evident response in the Vietnamese musical tradition. Over time I became more and more audacious in my experiments with the music.¹⁰ The consequence of this attitude was that in concerts I took bold chances, sometimes resulting in ‘errors’, and some of these experiments eventually resulted in changes to the dynamics of the form. The effect of my ‘error’ assumed the unintended function of Coleman’s violin, the “abrupt disappointment of expectations of meaning” that makes us reconsider what we heard and how we experienced it (Barthes 1968: 144). Returning to the idea of the group as a cybernetic system, we can use Bateson’s language and arrive at the experimental conclusion that once the system has reached a point where

¹⁰ By audacious I mean that, although I am less concerned with right or wrong, and less focused on the history and idiomatics of the tradition as it takes shape in my own playing, I obviously have a deep respect for the Vietnamese musical tradition as it is carried on by master musicians such as Thuy and My.

transforms of differences are communicated efficiently between the different parts, even great discontinuities, such as my errors, are handled well. I will argue, however, that the basis for that claim is that experimentation is an agreed method and, most importantly, that the self is prepared to break with habits and listen to the other.

There is an obvious tendency to always look at Western art music as the center and whatever is external to it as the periphery. The Eurocentric view is rooted in the concept of the West as the social, economical, and political focal point in the world in which the music of, say, a Vietnamese musician will always be grounded in the periphery. As such, it can serve as a peculiar and colorful complement but never engage in an encounter with the West on equal terms. Attributing values to it such as “beautiful” or “masterful” does not change its locus and does not move its status closer to the center. Quite the opposite: aestheticizing the other, or the expressions of the other, is an effective way to keep it locked out. Many writers and scholars have discussed these issues. Apart from the works already cited in this paper, to mention only a few, we find George Lewis using Somers’s ideas of the epistemological other to discuss the situation of African American jazz musicians (Lewis 1996), postcolonial theorist and philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who rhetorically asks *Can the subaltern speak?* , Edward Said discussing the enormous inequality in the war in Palestine in *Permission to narrate*, and Gloria Jean Watkins, also known as bell hooks, who approaches her own background in racist America in the significant text *Marginality as site of resistance* (Hooks aka G. J. Watkins 1990).

Deleuze’s and Guattari’s supposition that in transcoding, becoming-other is a way to resolve the opposition between self and other, East and West, center and periphery, is quite forcefully rejected by Spivak (1988). Taking a broad view on the world, she poses important questions concerning the continuous marginalization of those without, or with only limited, access to the sources of cultural imperialism. In her survey, as has already been mentioned, because the

Eurocentric subjectivity, according to Spivak epitomized by Deleuze and Foucault, threatens to further obscure the subaltern:¹¹

It is not only that everything they read, critical or uncritical, is caught within the debate of the production of that Other, supporting or critiquing the constitution of the Subject as Europe. It is also that, in the constitution of that Other of Europe, great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredients with which such a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary. (Spivak 1988: 75)

What is the significance of these complex issues concerning economy, hyper-capitalism, world domination, and postcolonialism in the context of contemporary music? How can the deconstruction of the concepts of center and periphery be applied to the artistic practice of a group consisting of two Vietnamese and two Swedish musicians? Why is it necessary to consider inherited power structures when approaching the seemingly simple task of creating a workable platform for musical and cultural interaction? What impact does it have on the notion of the self? My hypothesis here is that the self is constituted of behavioral habits, conscious as well as unconscious, as suggested by Bateson (1972b). These are culturally encoded with ideas concerning freedom and individuality, and in the arts they are built on the idea of the projective self (Frisk 2013). Although it is easy to understand that the habits and the cultural codes are different in other cultures, according to postcolonial thinking, knowing is not enough (see, e.g., Said 2000; Frisk and Östersjö, 2013): to let the other speak, and to allow oneself to listen, it is necessary to break some of these habits. After several years of working together my experience is that, within the context of The Six Tones, I have not had the experience of having to limit my artistic latitude, nor have any of the other members had it. The reason we have arrived here, rather, is that we initially worked consciously with breaking our habits and limiting our freedoms, some of which I have described above. Through this process we are now in a position where we *can* allow ourselves much individual space and

¹¹ There have been attempts to seek redress for Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault and prove that their thinking was not rooted in Eurocentricity and that it will not necessarily lead to oppression of the other (See e.g. Robinson and Tormey 2010).

freedom. The main topic in this paper, to foster the social and political dimension of musical interaction through improvisation by exploring the self and the consequences of freedom and habit formation, may be successfully investigated through the practice itself.

At a time when art in general, and music in particular, is commodified to a degree that not even Adorno could have anticipated, artistic research is one of the few remaining fields that has the potential to withstand entrepreneurial tendencies in the music academies and within the field of music itself, and to ceaselessly engage in the important artistic and social questions that lie ahead of us.

References

- Arendt, H. (1993). *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin Classics. Penguin Group (USA) Incorporated.
- Barthes, R. (1968). *The Death of the Author*, pp. 142–9. Fontana Press, London. Translation by S. Heath.
- Bateson, G. (1972a). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (2 ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Bateson, G. (1972b). The Cybernetics of Self : A Theory of Alcoholism. See bateson72:steps, pp. 309–37.
- Benson, B. E. (2003). *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music*. Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Biggs, M. and H. Karlsson (Eds.) (2010). *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*. Routledge.
- Boulez, P. (1964). Alea. *Perspectives of New Music* 3(1), 42–53.
- Coleman, O. (1961). Free jazz: A collective improvisation. LP Record. Atlantic SD1364 (Recorded in 1960).
- Corbett, J. (2000). Experimental oriental: New music and other others. In G. Born and D. Hesmondhalgh (Eds.), *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*. University of Calif. Press.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (1980). *A thousand plateaus - Capitalism and schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota.
- Drummond, L. and H. Rydstrom (2004). *Gender Practices In Contemporary Vietnam*. Singapore University Press.
- Emmerson, S. (2006). Appropriation, exchange, understanding. In *Proceedings of EMS -06, Beijing. Terminology and Translation*. Electroacoustic Music Studies: EMS.
- Frisk, H. (2013). The (un)necessary self. In H. Frisk and S. Östersjö (Eds.), *(Re)Thinking Improvisation: artistic explorations and conceptual writing*, Chapter 5, pp. 143–56. Lund University Press.
- Frisk, H. and S. Östersjö (2012/2013). Beyond validity: claiming the legacy of the artist-researcher. *STM 2013*, 1–17. In print.
- Griffiths, M. (2010). *Research and the Self*, Chapter 16, pp. 167–85. Routledge. In: Biggs and Karlsson (2010).
- Hooks (aka G. J. Watkins), B. (1990). Marginality as site of resistance. In R. Ferguson (Ed.), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, pp. 341–3. Cambridge: MIT.
- Lewis, G. (1996). Improvised music after 1950: Afrological and eurological perspectives. *Black Music Research Journal* 16(1), 91–122.
- Litzweiler, J. (1992). *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life* (US ed.). Morrow Inc., New York.
- Östersjö, S. and T. T. Nguyen (2013). Traditions in transformation. In H. Frisk and S. Östersjö (Eds.), *(Re)Thinking Improvisation: artistic explorations and conceptual writing*, Chapter 6, pp. 184–201. Lund University Press.
- Peters, G. (2009). *The Philosophy of Improvisation*. University Of Chicago Press.

- Robinson, A. and S. Tormey (2010). Living in smooth space: Deleuze, postcolonialism and the subaltern. In S. Bignall and P. Patton (Eds.), *Deleuze and the postcolonial*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Penguin Group, New Dehli.
- Said, E. (2000). *Reflections on Exile: And Other Essays*. Harvard University Press.
- Semetsky, I. (2011). Becoming-other: developing the ethics of integration. *Policy Futures in Education* 9(1), 138–44.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Chapter 2, pp. 271–316. Macmillan.
- Van Ky, N. (2002). Rethinking the Status of Vietnamese Women in Folklore and Oral History. In G. Brocheux and P. Bousquet (Eds.), *Viet-Nam Expose - French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society*, pp. 87–107. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.