

ROLAND DAHINDEN
TALKING WITH CHARLIE
AN IMAGINARY TALK
WITH
CHARLIE PARKER

ROLAND DAHINDEN: TALKING WITH CHARLIE,
AN IMAGINARY TALK IN FIVE PARTS WITH CHARLIE PARKER

Bass-clarinetist Gareth Davis asked Roland Dahinden to write something for his quartet, with Koen Kaptijn (trombone), Dario Calderone (bass) and Peppe Garcia (percussion). Dahinden responded with an “imaginary talk” with

Charlie Parker, one of his musical heroes, captured in a score involving graphic as well as more conventional elements. “I took a piece of paper, and started to talk to him [Parker] one to one – and compose. Phrases, and graphical stuff”. The resulting performance, says Dahinden, was “an intense and wonderful interplay between the musicians themselves and me as the conductor”.

Dahinden is an improvising trombonist who works a lot with pianist Hildegard Kleeb. When I ask him whether he views himself primarily as an improviser, or a composer, he replies: “For me, sometimes composing is the better tool, and sometimes improvising is. One big difference is that when I compose, others are playing the music”. As a youngster, he wanted to study classical and jazz at the same time. He became a student, and assistant, of Anthony Braxton, appearing with him on several recordings. He compares him to a supernova: “I learned so much by and through him”, he comments. He sees a line from Charlie Parker, through Coltrane, and Dolphy, to Braxton. However, as a composer, Braxton uses fewer graphics and gives less freedom in interpretation, he believes.

Our discussion suggests some thoughts about the contrast between composer and improviser. It's tempting to think of the composer as essentially a “desk-worker” who produces scores for performance by others. But this model rests on the composer-performer divide, which appeared in Western music only as notation developed. Previously, one could say, all composers were at the same time performers of their own work, and perhaps that of

others – for instance, troubadours might have learned each others' pieces. Though it's a matter of debate, it seems that in medieval church music, for instance, there was a limited canon of non-contemporary works; the “work-concept” in music was in its infancy.

The introduction of written notation in Western music in the 12th-13th centuries had momentous consequences. Notation probably began as a mnemonic device, to remind performers of music fixed in advance. Medieval notation didn't specify pitch, not because it wasn't fixed, but because performers knew the material and didn't need reminding. Although notation began as a means of communicating music that had already been made, it became a driving force in the evolution of music. It led eventually to the composer becoming a desk-worker rather than a performer, and finally to the idea that a composition can be defined by its score.

That is part of what is involved in the work-concept, which was also associated with the increasing portability of music. This is nothing to do with the much later Sony Walkman revolution, important though that was. Rather, it concerns the contrast with Bach's job as Kapellmeister, writing pieces for a particular location and set of performers, with no thought for their portability. These compositions were not works in a narrow sense, though that is what they later became – something repeatable in different locations, at different times, by different performers. A work may be inspired by or commissioned for a particular occasion, and written for particular performers, but is not limited in its performance by this. (There are obvious parallels with other media, such as the portability of framed paintings.)

The portability of music led to a more standardised product. In Bach's day, performers were expected to embellish and elaborate. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the composer acquired an increasing authority. As composers wrote more elaborate music, in particular orchestrating for a larger range of colours and sounds, scores became increasingly specific, limiting the input of the performer – though any system of notation requires the performer to interpret an apparently fixed artefact. In the 20th century, one could argue, there was a reaction, as jazz and improvised music developed their own alternative aesthetic. At the same time, the use of graphic notation by Western composers sometimes involved greater performer freedom.

Before the appearance of the composer-performer divide, it could be argued, all music was improvised – at least in a broad sense. That seems to be Roger Scruton's view, when he refers to "the emergence of 'works' from a tradition of spontaneous performance". Throughout the history of music, surely, lively performance has been valued. However, I'd argue that self-conscious improvisation, associated with positive values of spontaneity, energy and creativity is a Western post-Romantic ideology. An improviser, in the Baroque era, was not reacting to a strictly controlled score; there were no such scores. When Chopin improvised before "fixing" the final version of a piece – if there was a single final version – that situation was changing.

I've been appealing to a useful distinction between broad and narrow cultural concepts, developed by the classicist G.E.R. Lloyd, in his intriguing book Disciplines. Lloyd distinguishes "narrower" and "broader" views of philosophy, and science; one can also speak of narrower and broader concepts or practices of design. The divide between designer and maker parallels that between composer and performer. At one time, designers were



also makers; design in a broad sense involved planning in some form, but not by a professional class of designers, and consumerism, in this era, did not exist. As a class of designers appeared, and became professionalised, they produced plans for products manufactured by others. Only with the appearance of a design in this narrow sense, are there consumers in our familiar narrow sense. “Consumer”, today, does not just mean someone who eats to survive, or wears clothes to keep warm; in its modern sense, it has the narrower meaning of someone who enjoys visiting restaurants and fashion boutiques, and who in some sense values good design.

Broad and narrow senses of “composer” go with corresponding senses of “improviser”. In a broad sense, a composer is someone who puts things together, in a pleasing form. Composers in this sense have always existed. In a narrow, more modern sense – the sense we are most familiar with today – a composer is a non-performer who controls performances of their own work, usually notated by means of a score. Analogously, in a broad sense, an improviser is someone who determines a significant number of the music’s features as they play; in a narrow, modern sense, they are someone committed to post-Romantic ideals of spontaneity and originality.

Conventional ideas of the score are relative to a system of notation – staff notation for instance – or at least a set of parameters. Thus there are closely-specified and more open scores. For most contemporary Western musicians, the idea of a system of notation that leaves pitch open – as medieval notation did – is alien. But openness is always relative. John Cage was very specific in certain parameters, and not others; for instance, his Number pieces specify duration very closely, but not pitch or instrumentation.

Graphic scores are interesting in particular, because they perhaps undermine the distinction between interpretation of a composed work, and improvisation. Dahinden’s Talking With Charlie is a mixture of conventional and graphic notation – bebop-sounding phrases inspired by Parker are notated. “I wanted an open-ended piece”, Dahinden explains. The 43 pages of notated music aim to be very clear: “In a way I try to be very precise – and to be not precise”, he adds. The group recorded the piece twice, six months apart – the first time, problems emerged with a couple of the mics, and so they decided to record again.

“In the graphics the players find a balance of interpreting and improvising, together with my conducting”, the composer comments. “Your phrase hit it: the graphics undermine the distinction between interpretation and improvisation”. The interpretation is subjective, not like a code, to be worked out. However, “the graphics emerge from the more precise notation of the composition – this is very important and comes quite naturally in playing”, he continues. “So the players cannot understand the graphics without the context of the other aspects of the composition which are more precise. The musicians also respond to what they personally read in the graphics – there’s a constant changing interplay between musicians and conductor”.

“I’m actively writing for these four instrumentalists – it’s not only the instrument, it’s also the person”, Dahinden adds. It’s a collaboration between the quartet and the composer, and as with Duke Ellington and his musicians, the results are personal, and of universal appeal.

Andy Hamilton, July 25th, 2018

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« J'écris activement pour ces quatre instrumentistes – pas seulement pour l'instrument, mais aussi pour l'individu » précise Dahinden. Dans cette collaboration entre le quatuor et le compositeur, et à l'instar de Duke Ellington et de ses musiciens, les résultats sont personnels et leur attrait, universel. *Andy Hamilton, translated by Benjamin Mouliets*

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TALKING WITH CHARLIE
AN IMAGINARY TALK WITH CHARLIE PARKER
DARIO CALDERONE double bass · GARETH DAVIS bass clarinet
KOEN KAPTIJN trombone · PEPPE GARCIA percussion

1 PHONOLOGICAL EXTENSION 12:03

ISRC CH 130.1800846

2 FREE MORPHENES 9:00

ISRC CH 130.1800847

3 ALL - O - PHONES 11:52

ISRC CH 130.1800848

4 MORPHOLOGICAL DRIFT 9:43

ISRC CH 130.1800849

5 SEMANTIC CROSSINGS 9:48

ISRC CH 130.1800850

Total Time 52:30

DDD ²⁴/_{Bit}

Composed by Roland Dahinden, Tuhtah Publishing SUIISA.

Recorded June 2018 by Micha de Kanter at Studio C, Amsterdam; Mixed by Micha de Kanter at Studio Mideka, Den Haag, June 2018; CD-master by Peter Pfister; Liner notes by Andy Hamilton; Graphic concept by fuhrer Vienna; Produced by Roand Dahinden; Executive production by Bernhard „Benne“ Vischer; Christian C. Dalucas & Werner X. Uehlinger.

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