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Strategies for Composing for Large Groups of Improvising Musicians

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Manchester Metropolitan University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Manchester Metropolitan University

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Abstract

This research project is a Practice-as-Research enquiry into a novel approach to composing for large groups of improvising musicians, namely by incorporating improvisations into the writing process as well as the performance. The primary contribution to knowledge is the new working method that I present as a solution to key issues identified by other practitioners in the field. The two central lines of enquiry throughout my research can be summarised as: 'To what extent is it possible to better feature the voices of the improvisers in my work?' and 'how can we achieve greater collective ownership over the material?'

This complementary writing documents the evolution of this method, situating my practice in a lineage of practitioners as well as showing where and how I challenge performer-composer hierarchies. How this evolution contributes to wider discussions in the field is covered with specific reference to issues around solo improvisation, collective intention and curation. In doing this, I draw on recent scholarship in the emerging field of critical improvisation studies, as well as the more established jazz studies and new jazz studies, to provide a framework for these insights.

Throughout the project, as is expected with creative research, several other avenues of interest appeared, arising from engagement with my central themes. These are focussed on issues of notation and distributed direction, and are discussed primarily in relation to the evolution of my creative practice, although I also outline their relevance to the wider community. This research is a first-hand account of my practice in the field of improvised music, and as such, it constitutes a contribution to knowledge by making tacit knowledge more explicit for others to engage with.

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Overview

This complementary writing should be read alongside listening to the audio recordings. The writing provides a context for the audio, and highlights how this project constitutes a contribution to knowledge. The scores are also presented throughout the body of the text, although I would encourage the reader to listen first before reading these, if time allows. There are multiple versions of each piece, sometimes for different ensembles, sometimes not. As with any performance involving improvisation, arriving at a definitive version is both undesirable and impossible, however, the following table gives some indications of audio quality by stating how it was recorded. Those recordings marked as being multitrack are those that I either have released, or will do so.

Chapter 1 outlines the context to my work, ascertaining key issues identified by other practitioners in the field. The two central lines of enquiry throughout my research can be summarised as: 'To what extent is it possible to better feature the voices[1] of the improvisers in my work?' and 'how can we achieve greater collective ownership[2] over the material?' I situate my practice in a lineage of practitioners including John Zorn, Ken Vandermark and Graham Collier, look at how they address these concerns and identify a gap in their approaches.

Chapter 2 describes the methodology, namely how I proceed with the practice, addressing the concerns raised in chapter 1 and proposing my own solutions to them. This is in itself the central contribution to knowledge, from which the other insights arise. The thesis is loosely grouped into those insights that arose from intellectually engaging with the process of composing (chapters 3, 4 and 5) and those associated with the practical execution (chapters 6 and 7)

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[1] I am following McMillan's definition of voice as '…the revelation of self through an expressive act' (McMillian, 1999:267), which is further discussed later in chapter 1.

[2] Ownership is discussed in more depth with relation to Picknett in chapter 4, but I am using it here as a key element of the composer's relationship to the material performed.

Chapter 3 discusses how this practice challenges traditional performer-composer hierarchies[3], through disrupting my normal working practice. Parallels are drawn with other disruptive practices within improvised music, drawing on the scholarship of Floris Schuiling (2018) and others to show how my practice constitutes an inversion of the more common disruptive relationships Schuiling describes.

Chapter 4 details how engaging with a critical question around solo improvisation prompted an evolution of my practice and led to insights around Garry Hagberg's concept of collective intention (2016). In evolving my practice, I bring Michael Picknett's devising practice (2014; 2016) into a new context as a way to develop solutions to the problems laid out in chapter 1, whilst also adding to understanding of this approach.

Chapter 5 centres around a search for an understanding of the role that a composer's voice plays when working with improvisers, and finds useful resonances in the fine art world by engaging with Rosen Ventzislavov's suggestion that curating should be considered as a fine art in its own right (2014).

The issues addressed in chapters 6 and 7 are related to the execution of my practice, that is, they arose through performance of my compositions rather than the process of developing the compositions. Chapter 6 draws on Christopher Williams (2016) and Krzysztof Golinski (2012) to investigate and address issues around notation for improvisers. Chapter 7 looks at my use of distributed direction, and uses Zorn, Vandermark and Collier to refine my practice.

Chapter 8 draws these threads together and points towards potential future research within my own practice and the wider academic field.

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[3] This refers to the '… (Western art music) notion of a hierarchical distinction between the creative composer and the interpretative performer' which Armstrong finds 'can still exert a powerful influence on contemporary practice' (2012)

List of audio recordings

All are recorded live in performance in front of an audience.

Piece	Date	Ensemble	Filename	Quality
Winter 16	Jan '16	Vonnegut Collective	Vonnegut Collective - Winter 16.mp3	Zoom
	May '17	LUME Lab Octet	LUME Lab Octet - Winter 16.wav	Multitrack
Always A Fox	June '16	Article XI	Article XI Always A Fox - London.mp3	Live stereo
	May '17	LUME Lab Octet	LUME Lab Octet - Always A Fox.wav	Multitrack
	Dec '17	Article XI	Article XI - Always A Fox – Birmingham.wav	Zoom
			Article XI - Always A Fox – Sheffield.wav	Zoom
			Article XI - Always A Fox – Newcastle.wav	Multitrack
LUME Kestrel	Nov '16	LUMEkestra[4]	LUMEkestra - LUME Kestrel.wav	Live stereo
	May '17	LUME Lab Octet	LUME Lab Octet - LUME Kestrel.wav	Multitrack
When Flowering	May '17	LUME Lab Octet	LUME Lab Octet - When Flowering.wav	Multitrack
Managed Decline			LUME Lab Octet - Managed Decline.wav	
Colin Webster's Fractured Finger			LUME Lab Octet - Colin Webster's Fractured Finger.wav	
Labrats			LUME Lab Octet - Labrats.wav	
Municrination	Dec '17	Article XI	Article XI - Municrination - Birmingham.wav	Zoom
			Article XI - Municrination - Sheffield.wav	Zoom
			Article XI - Municrination - Newcastle.wav	Multitrack

---

[4] Video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSb3_nIgJNc

Ensemble line-ups

Article XI are:

Oliver Dover: alto saxophone
Sam Andreae: alto saxophone[5]
Simon Prince: tenor saxophone
Cath Roberts: baritone saxophone

Graham South: trumpet
Nick Walters: trumpet
Richard Foote: trombone[6]
Tullis Rennie: trombone

Seth Bennett: double bass
Johnny Hunter: drums
Anton Hunter: guitar

LUME Lab Octet are:

Dee Byrne: alto saxophone
Rachel Musson: tenor saxophone
Cath Roberts: baritone saxophone

Kim Macari: trumpet
Tullis Rennie: trombone

Tim Fairhall: double bass
Andrew Lisle: drums
Anton Hunter: guitar

Vonnegut Collective in January 2016:

Gemma Bass: violin
Gary Farr: trumpet
Cath Roberts: baritone saxophone
Tullis Rennie: trombone and laptop
Anton Hunter: guitar

LUMEkestra November 2016:

Dee Byrne: alto saxophone
Cath Roberts: baritone saxophone
Colin Webster: baritone saxophone
Julie Kjaer: bass clarinet
Ollie Dover: bass clarinet
Tom Ward: clarinet

Kim Macari: trumpet
Tullis Rennie: trombone

Paulo Duarte: guitar
Dave Kane: electronics
Adam Fairhall: piano
Rebecca Nash: keyboard
Martin Pyne: vibraphone
Olie Brice: double bass
Tim Fairhall: double bass
Johnny Hunter: drums
Matt Fisher: drums
Anton Hunter: guitar

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[5] London June 2016 replaced by Tom Ward: tenor saxophone

[6] Newcastle December 2017 replaced by Kieran McLeod: trombone

Chapter 1: Context

In Ekkehard Jost's seminal book Free Jazz (Jost, 1974), he discusses the musical and economic problems inherent in working with large groups of improvisers. Musically speaking, that 'a larger group requires a larger measure of musical organization (sic) and pre-planning' (ibid.:182) when compared with smaller groups. He narrows this down to state:

> The problem of the big band in free jazz … lies first and foremost in employing the sound potential of a large apparatus … without having to reduce the individual creativity of majority of the players to merely reading notes. (Jost, 1974:182)

I hypothesise that there are two interrelated but discrete problems facing the improviser in a large ensemble. Firstly, as Jost highlights, reduced opportunities for their individual creativity to feature in the music. I will further discuss this below, but for now let us refer to this individual creativity as the 'voice' of the improviser. Secondly, with the tendency towards written music in large ensembles comes a re-enforcement of the traditional composer-performer hierarchy, and, as such, there can be a lack of shared ownership over the music (Picknett, 2016). As we will see below, many composers who work with large improvising ensembles seek to subvert this hierarchy, but I will critique these and seek to explore an alternative approach through my research.

Hence the two central lines of enquiry throughout my research can be summarised as: 'To what extent is it possible to better feature the voices of the improvisers in my work?' and 'how can we achieve greater collective ownership over the material?' 'Better' and 'greater' are problematic terms here as they pose the further question 'better and greater than what?' As this practice-as-research project is about my own practice first and foremost, this can be answered as 'better and greater than previous times I have attempted this', but also, through engagement with approaches from other composers, I will show relevance beyond my own immediate circle of collaborators.

The question of why to compose for improvisers at all does, of course, also raise its head when working with high-calibre musicians who can constantly surprise an audience through improvisation alone. This PhD is not another examination of the question of why compose for improvisers at all, but rather, having made the decision to do so, how the tension between composer and improviser is negotiated, and what strategies[7] are useful for this. Furthermore, the fact that many groups continue to explore this area should point to the fact that it is a worthwhile pursuit.[8]

These issues with large group improvisation are reflected in the clear preferences of most improvising musicians to perform in small groups, a situation where listening and responding freely is easier. When investigating groups of improvisers, Harald Stenström 'finds an ideal size of four musicians, followed by the alternatives three or five musicians' (2009:45), and goes on to quote Simon H Fell's view that large ensemble improvisation is 'a scarce commodity' and 'a high-risk strategy, possibly with musically modest benefits' (Fell, 1998:online). John Corbett agrees, saying groups of five or more suffer because 'it's more difficult to pay attention to the overall music' (Corbett, 2016:123).

This is not a problem exclusive to improvised music either; large groups often result in less flexibility and interaction between the musicians. Andy Hamilton refers to an

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[7] I am using 'strategy' to mean an over-arching approach to composition, expounded upon in the methodology chapter.

[8] Groups currently working in this field that I would encourage the reader to investigate include those of Ken Vandermark (as discussed below), The ICP Orchestra, Maria Faust's Jazz Catastrophe and Alexander von Schlippenbach, as well as UK groups Cath Roberts' group Favourite Animals, Moss Freed's Union Division, Martin Archer's Engine Room Favourites and Matt London's Ensemble Entropy are all exploring the fertile ground between improvisation and composition in large groups. Also in the UK, the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra, London Improvisers Orchestra and Merseyside Improvisers Orchestra all work with guest composers/conductors from time to time. This is not an exhaustive list, of course, but contains a lot of great music to listen to.

‘interactive empathy’ (2007:213) which is intertwined with improvisation, and specifically ‘inviting spontaneity at the point of performance’ (Hamilton, 2000:183).

> …interactive empathy is present in classical music too, at a high level for instance in the traditional string quartet, if not the orchestra (or jazz big band) (Hamilton, 2007:213).

Despite, or maybe because of this, there are a number of significant artists working in the field of large-group improvised music. Corbett notes that hearing a large ensemble

> …can be jaw-dropping. It’s like watching an Olympic diver: the degree of difficulty is so much higher that when it works, it’s worth lots more points (Corbett, 2016:123).

In this chapter I talk about the approaches of leading figures John Zorn, Ken Vandermark and Graham Collier, in relation to developing strategies for improvised practice in large groups and will consider how each practitioner addressed the challenges highlighted above. I then consider how the working practice of each practitioner and my analysis of the challenges (and solutions) posed by each approach will inform my own large ensemble improvisatory practice. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive overview of the work of these composers, but rather the elements of it with relevance to my practice and my personal journey within improvised music.

It is useful to divide the compositional process up into three stages; the first of which concerns the generation of material. The second stage is the development and arrangement of material, and finally the third stage is rehearsal and performance. By the third stage, the compositional elements are fixed.

Commonly in large ensemble jazz music, the musicians are required to have some level of creative involvement through improvisation during the third stage, typically in the form of improvised solos. However, a large part of playing in a large ensemble like this, as Jost observes above, involves the playing of pre-written material, and for the composers below, and myself, this is something to be challenged. They seek ways that the musicians can all be creatively involved in performance rather than simply score reading, and I discuss some of the ways they do this below.

John Zorn

John Zorn explored large ensemble composition in the 1980's with his series of game pieces, which are 'a kind of parodic authoritarian staging of controlled social encounters modelled on sports or war games' (Born, 2017:49). In Cobra, widely regarded as the most complete example of this approach, Zorn directs his carefully selected ensemble using a series of cue cards and prompts to define who is playing, and the manner in which they interact with each other, but not precisely what they play. Zorn recognised that the musicians he was working with each had 'a highly personal language, that's often not notatable' (Zorn in Mandel, 1999:171).

> My first decision, which I think was the most important, was never to talk about language or sound at all. I left that completely up to the performers. What I was left with was structure. (ibid.)

Although the music is certainly open to the performers having an input, this input comes during the performance, both through the material they improvise, and influencing the structure of the piece through a system of visual cues.

Zorn is aware of the hierarchical nature of the composer-performer relationship, and seeks to subvert it; 'I'm not one of these ivory tower musicians that writes like they're handing down the word from Mount Sinai' (Zorn in Rubien, 2009). However, several things in Zorn's work seem to contradict this statement. Not least with the piece Cobra; by not publishing the score (such that it is) or instructions, Zorn ensures that the piece can only be performed when he is directly involved. Discussing the possibility of rotating the role of prompter for the piece, Zorn says that he experimented with this in early performances, but that 'ultimately, I'm the best prompter there can be, because then I can be a complete fascist!' (Zorn in Brackett, 2010:50). With Cobra and the other game pieces, Zorn was writing for a specific community of improvisers based in New York, and elsewhere he has talked about having to take up the saxophone in order to gain their trust so he could get them to play his music (Zorn, 2007:online). He says this in a typically flippant style, but it does serve to support the notion of Zorn as a lone composer.

More recently, he has written over 300 tunes that comprise the *Book of Angels*, and is sending them out to other ensembles and arrangers to produce albums (Zorn, 2015). This could be seen as either giving the musicians ultimate freedom once the initial material has been generated, or perhaps demonstrates a lack of interest in actually collaborating with musicians, beyond selecting them for the project. Although, it should be noted that Zorn does say 'choosing the players has always been a crucial part of the performance process' (Zorn in Cox and Warner, 2004:197), something I return to later in chapter 5 on curating.

Zorn intersects with my practice at a couple of key points in my life as a musician. Firstly, aged 23 on my first visit to New York, I watched a fundraising gig at his club The Stone on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Zorn had brought together around a dozen players and they played short sets in a variety of combinations across the evening. I was struck by how music-focussed the venue was (there was no bar, and the only toilet was behind the stage, so no interruptions were possible), and how I was witnessing a group of musicians coming together for the good of the wider musical community, both playing together and raising funds for the continuation of the venue. This resonated strongly with what others and I were hoping to achieve in Manchester, through The Noise Upstairs and other events (see page 16 for more detail).

Secondly, I encountered Cobra through a close collaborator, Dr. Rodrigo Constanzo. He had studied the piece and we would rehearse it together with others at his house, eventually leading to him running workshops through The Noise Upstairs, and I now occasionally do this too, with groups of students, or the public, or any interested parties (see Bright and Hunter, 2019 for more on Cobra). Engaging with Cobra in the setting was the beginning of learning ways of organising improvisation that made sense for a large group, and one that continues to be exciting and valuable.

Ken Vandermark

Ken Vandermark has worked with a range of large groups, initially as a performer in Peter Brötzmann's Chicago Tentet, where he also first tried composing for large ensembles. He has gone on to lead several of his own large groups. In the liner notes of his album *Kafka In Flight*, Vandermark discusses a compositional approach he used when writing for his ten-piece band The Resonance Ensemble:

> One of the primary issues facing any band that deals with written material is having enough time to rehearse. In a larger ensemble this problem is compounded many times over … to solve this time constraint problem, I developed a modular system of composition ... This kept the music spontaneous and easy to learn. (Vandermark, 2011)

He talks about bringing the music to the ensemble, once it is composed, regardless of how much freedom is involved in the performance. Once again, the input from the performers comes at the time of performance; in this case the band negotiates their way from one composed element to another by means of improvisation.

Looking at his work more broadly, there is still a sense of the composer bringing pieces to the band in order for them to learn them, and he talks about the 'original approach to writing for the Resonance Ensemble, which was fairly complex' (Vandermark, 2011) and replacing this with the aforementioned modular approach, with 'thematic material that *could be taught quickly*' (Vandermark, 2011, emphasis mine). In an e-mail exchange when I was requesting some scores, Vandermark commented 'much of the development and teaching of the material won't be feasible by just looking at the notated pages'; still referring to the learning of the material as being a teaching process.

The opening minutes of Daniel Kraus's film *Musician* (2007) show Vandermark at home, composing alone with his saxophone, piano and manuscript paper. This all suggests that the composer here is working alone before bringing his music to the ensemble, which is how the stereotypical composer might work. Indeed, the paper *Music as Collective Invention: A Social Network Analysis of Composers* opens with the assertion; 'Composers generally write music alone, and we commonly understand the great figures of classical music as singular geniuses.' (McAndrew and Everett, 2015:56) The aim of the paper is to refute this idea, making the case that the social setting/environments that a composer inhabits will inform the pieces they write.[9] The authors focus on composers' social and pedagogic networks and their influences on the work. I am talking, however, about the specifics of any particular piece, and as much as X performer would have been part of the development of Y composers' piece, it still reads as the composers' piece.

My personal reasons for including Vandermark in this thesis are, again, a product of the influence his work has had on my own. In 2012 I was involved in promoting a trio gig of his in Manchester, and the following year I played on the same bill as him in Sheffield. Hearing his Resonance Ensemble on record around this time spoke to what I wanted to achieve with large ensemble composition, with strong melodic identities blended with group improvisations. His approach to engaging with the music business, which is musician-led as evidenced by his choosing to perform at our musician-led events, is one that resonates with the scene I am part of in Manchester. That he frequently goes to lengths to explain his thought processes in interviews and in person makes him an ideal candidate for inclusion from an academic standpoint also.

Graham Collier

A major step on my own personal journey was reading British composer and improviser Graham Collier's book *The Jazz Composer* (2009). In it, he talks about the importance of having all the musicians being creatively involved in the performance of large ensemble work by making sure that there is improvisation in all the parts, not just the improvised soloist plus written backgrounds common in much big band jazz. He strives for ‘the involvement of the musicians themselves in the creative process’ (Collier, 2009:270). He describes at length various compositional methods he uses to do this, including using leadsheet-style scores, use of pitches without rhythmic notation, and vice-versa. All of these I have used in my own practice in the past, and have found to be effective ways to bring the musicians’ voices into the performance, some of the specifics of this will be addressed in chapter 6.

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[9] This is a stance supported by many thinkers, in particular Born's chapter in the edited volume *Improvisation and Social Aethetics*. (2017)

However, when considering *when* the musicians have a creative input into Collier’s work, this also, like Zorn and Vandermark, comes at the performance stage. He talks at length about composing alone at the piano (Collier, 2009:266) and goes further later on, stating that ‘the music can be used by many different groupings’ (ibid:271). While this is not to be discouraged, it further serves to highlight that Collier is very open to the input of the musicians, but only in the performance stage, rather than attempting to incorporate the voice of the musicians into the fabric of the compositions as well as the performance, as I set out to do.

Also, like Zorn, he is still very much in the role of a conductor for the live performances, directing when the ensemble moves to different sections in real time and so on. Following on from the observations of an audience member, he named one album *Directing 14 Jackson Pollocks*, reflecting the fact that, although the contributions of the musicians are ‘vital to [his] work’, Collier is ‘controlling the piece, directing most of the sounds’ (Collier, 2009:265).

The three composers above are all keen to involve the musicians in the creative process, but, for all of them, this comes at the performance stage of the process, rather than while developing or generating the material. The result of which is that the compositions feature the composer’s voice first, and the improviser second, or, as Bob Brookmeyer would have it; ‘You don't write in a solo until you've completely exhausted what you have to say’ (Brookmeyer in Ratliff, 2006:online).

This is in contrast to how many small groups work, where it is possible, and indeed common, to arrange pieces together over the course of several rehearsals. This approach has been the norm for most of my practice as a performer and composer in small groups across a range of styles. To find a music that features the musicians' contributions during the writing or development of material, one has to look beyond the field of improvised music to studio-based projects or to collaborative composition, as I do below.

One such project I have been involved in is the band Some Some Unicorn, a collective of improvisers gathered together by electronic musician Shaun Blezard. The first album was a collage-based work that took improvisations from 29 musicians and layered, edited and processed the recordings in a variety of ways to produce the finished work (Blezard, 2014). On a better-known scale, this is similar to how David Slyvian worked when creating the album Manafon. He invited several well-known free-improvisers to record, and then later added his own vocals and other overdubs to the tracks, sometimes layering several takes together (Boon and Sylvian, no date:online).

As a way of harnessing the improvisational powers of the musicians involved, it would seem to be very effective, as the relative lack of restrictions on what the musicians played would suit those that define themselves as free improvisers (this, and the specific type of musician I work with, will be discussed below). Indeed, as Sylvian notes; 'you don't walk into a roomful of free improvisers and say "this is what I want you do to"' (Boon and Sylvian, no date:online).
However, this approach still reinforces the hierarchy of the composer-performer relationship, albeit after the fact through editing, or curating, and provides a quality-control screening process before presenting the finished article to the public. For my research project, I aim to create music that is performed live, in real-time.

Collaborative Composition is a term used to describe one way that some composers have tried to address the hierarchical nature of the composer-performer relationship across a variety of genres. Once such composer, Michael Picknett, talks about applying the techniques used in devised theatre to music (Picknett, 2014; 2016). Although there are some clear differences with the work of improvising musicians, namely ‘when a performer performs in a devised piece they rarely improvise’ (Picknett, 2014:11), the working methods may present a viable approach to composing for large groups, and I explore this in my *LUME Lab Octet* suite in chapter 4..

> Part of the devising process is finding ways of working together, and this will include finding material that fits the performers’ instruments. Because the material for the project is created through the performers’ improvisations on the instruments in rehearsal, the piece forms around the instrumentation of the group and is idiomatic to that particular group of musicians. (Picknett, 2016:160)

This suggests that collaborating with musicians during the development phase of a composition can indeed produce music that is unique to the particular group of musicians and, as such, this presents an interesting avenue to explore for my thesis.

It also suggests a preoccupation with the instrument, rather than the player. Similarly, jazz guitarist and composer Mary Halvorson, talking about her octet record *Away With You,* said of pedal steel guitarist Susan Alcorn: ‘Hearing her made me more aware of the *instrument*’ (Halvorson, 2016:online), and described a process of collaboration whereby she ‘was corresponding a lot with Susan—because I didn’t understand how to write for the instrument’ (ibid.).

This is not a new approach; composers have often collaborated with performers in this way, not least in the case of virtuoso instrumentalists who may be working at the very limits of what had previously been thought possible, ‘especially if non-normative instrumental techniques are involved’ (Halay, 2016:37). Similarly, Krzysztof Golinski describes Roscoe Mitchell approaching new pieces by meeting the musicians and asking them to play ‘various techniques that they have learned or invented, cataloguing the different sounds that will form his compositional palate’ (Golinski, 2012:26).

This gives a sense of the composer exploring what is possible on an instrument, rather than discovering the character of the musician. I think this a key distinction that has been missed so far, and one I will return to in a later chapter about solo improvising. For now, consider a hypothetical guitar player, who may have perfected the ability to perform two-handed tapping. This would be a 'technique that they have learned' (Golinski, 2012:26), but, for reasons of taste or otherwise they might never draw upon this during an improvisation. Would it be appropriate to say this was part of their musical voice or not?

Returning to Picknett, he goes on to say 'it is tempting to employ one set of performers for research and another for performance' although conceding that this 'tends to create issues over ownership' (Picknett, 2016:161). A fundamental motivation for me investigating these methods in a large ensemble setting is to arrive at a point where the musicians do feel some ownership. Picknett states that 'a sense of ownership allows the performer to take risks in performance' (Picknett, 2016:164), and as such this presents a strong case for attempting to achieve this with large ensembles. Risk is well documented to be an integral part of improvised music: '…improvisation and risk are, necessarily, mutually entwined' (Blau, 2010:314). Further discussions around risk in improvisation can be found in the writing of Hamilton (2000) and Sparti (2016).

Given all of the above, I find some room here for the involvement of performers much earlier in the compositional process than is typical within the tradition of large-ensemble jazz-oriented composition for improvisers. I will explore this through my practice, by borrowing some elements of the methods talked about in collaborative composition and the studio-based approach of composers like David Sylvian and bringing these into the field of large-ensemble improvised music. By bringing my practice into the academy, I hope to encourage debate around this rich, but somewhat overlooked, field.

In Tom Arthurs' PhD thesis, Anna Kaluza of the Berlin Improvisers' Orchestra describes working with large ensembles of improvisers as 'even more fragile, because all these difficult personalities are there together, and have real problems' (Kaluza in Arthurs, 2015:208). Arthurs goes on to say 'sadly, a full examination of large ensembles in contemporary Improvised Music…lies far beyond the scope of this thesis, meriting such a study in itself' (Arthurs, 2015:208). While my research is not an ethnographic study of the sort Arthurs is advocating, my work will contribute towards a greater understanding in this area.

Further justification for this project, and composing for improvisation PhDs in general, comes from Christopher Williams' observation that often 'notation for improvisers offloads musical work directly onto local practices without explaining them directly' and this in turn 'tends to result in that knowledge being lost or forgotten for subsequent performers and scholars' (C. Williams, 2016:17). Undertaking, documenting and discussing research in this field begins to address this concern, adding to the body of knowledge for future scholars and composer-improvisers alike.

Simon Ellis has blogged about themes that arose during an open conversation at Middlesex University on 25th October 2016 entitled 'Artistic Doctorates in Europe – Current issues and Practices'

> There remain no clear ways for PhD students to fund the development and production of their practices. This means that practice-as-research tends to produce small-scale and often solo practices. (Ellis, 2016:online)

My research will be relevant not only to the emerging field of improvisation studies, but also to the wider practice-as-research project. Although I too struggle with funding, the fact that my professional practice is intertwined with both large ensembles and improvising gives me a unique opportunity to present a practice-as-research PhD that is focused on the large-scale.

Me and my practice

Expanding on my professional practice gives a clearer idea of what it is that makes me well placed to carry out this research. My playing experience is largely focussed around improvisation, on a sliding scale from free improvisation to more jazz-orientated contexts, including leading[10] my own trio and 11-piece Article XI. At the freer end, I am a member of improvising groups Beck Hunters and The Spirit Farm and I have a longstanding duo with baritone saxophonist Cath Roberts, as well as playing in her quintet Sloth Racket and ten-piece Favourite Animals. Towards the more mainstream jazz-orientated music I have been a member of the Beats & Pieces Big Band since its inception in 2008, and my formative years involved playing music in large groups at school and university. For most of my adult life I have been involved in organising live performances, initially jazz jam nights and then, in 2007 I established a free improvisation jam night called The Noise Upstairs which has run monthly since then in the same venue in South Manchester, attracting coverage in The Wire magazine (Spicer, 2016b) as well as interest from within the academy, leading to me collaborating on a book chapter (Bright and Hunter, 2019).

Who will I be working with?

For the purposes of this research, it is important to note that 'improvising musician' does not mean 'a musician who *only* improvises'. In fact, all the musicians involved in the project are comfortable working with composed, as well as totally improvised music, and frequently do so. Furthermore, in contrast to the first wave of British free improvisation, referred to as 'non-idiomatic' by Derek Bailey (1992:xii), the current generation of improvisers based in the UK do not reject idiomatic playing and as such are closer to what Steve Lacy calls 'poly-free' (Corbett, 2016:131) in how they incorporate written elements, and, as Adam Fairhall has recognised; 'pan-idiomatic' (Spicer, 2016b:36) in how they use idiom.

> There are young(ish) Northern players who are open to, and highly adept at, incorporating elements of riff, groove and theme into freely improvised music. (Fairhall in Spicer, 2016b:36)

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[10] I use the term 'leader' as in 'bandleader', a common term amongst jazz music which generally denotes the main composer in a group, and often the one with the responsibility for organising activities, including booking gigs and so on. Due to the hierarchical nature of the term, it is used less in improvised music.

Fairhall was being interviewed for a feature on ‘Manchester’s new improv underground’ (ibid.), so it is understandable that the word Northern is used, but this approach is one that is shared by musicians all over the country, and those involved in my PhD are based in Manchester, London, Leeds, Berlin and Perthshire, Scotland. This geographic spread is not without its drawbacks. In his book *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s*, Michael C. Heller talks about communities of pay, play, place and race. With reference to Actor-Network Theory, he talks about the proximity of the various loft spaces in Manhattan and how this meant there was no shortage of opportunities to play.

> When one marathon session finally ended, the close proximity of the spaces meant that another was always waiting a few blocks away. (Heller, 2017:3)

This allowed the music to develop in a certain way, and some bands even lived together so as to work on their music together. Heller’s book makes a strong case for the influence that this had on the music, directly referencing ‘the ease of meeting other artists within the neighbourhood’s rich musical ferment’ (Heller, 2017:33) as well as quoting musicians who ‘felt like, yes, this is family’ (Iacovone in Heller, 2017:136).

Similarly, generations earlier, large ensembles of the type run by Duke Ellington had a close relationship that allowed the music to develop collectively over a prolonged period of time, with the popularity of the bands enabling them to tour and perform regularly. Ellington in particular is often held up as an example of someone writing for the individual personalities in his band, and some analyses go further, suggesting ‘Ellington’s band members contributed musical material to his compositions to varying degrees by fixing improvised solos over time’ (K. Williams, 2012:239). Although this fixing of solos would be frowned upon in my community that strives for different interpretations each night (see the discussion later of the pieces Always A Fox and Municrination, for example), this does serve to highlight another example of music being able to develop due to the close proximity of the musicians playing it.

In Joe Morris' book *Perpetual Frontier: The Properties of Free Music* (2012), he interviews fifteen different improvising musicians, and many of these talk about the importance of these creative communities. Ken Vandermark expresses it explicitly as a source of influence: 'This creative community and its interaction completely shapes the trajectory of my playing and composing' (Vandermark in Morris, 2012:154). We will see elsewhere in this thesis the importance of this within my practice, and specifically how expanding my field of collaborators impacts on the work, in chapters 4 and 6.

Currently, in the scene of musicians that I am a part of, and that my practice takes place within, the larger geographic spread forces the music to develop in different ways. For example, complicated through-composed music that requires a lot of rehearsal might not be the most effective way of creating music when people do get together. This is not a challenge unique to myself, of course, and other musicians have developed their own solutions; Ken Vandermark again gives an example of how these considerations affected his compositional approach, as someone used to being part of a creative community in Chicago, to then go and work on a project with Polish musicians in his ten-piece band The Resonance Ensemble:

> One of the primary issues facing any band that deals with written material is having enough time to rehearse. In a larger ensemble this problem is compounded many times over … to solve this time constraint problem, I developed a modular system of composition ... This kept the music spontaneous and easy to learn. (Vandermark, 2011)

I will engage with this approach in chapter 6, but here it serves as a contrast to the sort of scene Heller describes in the New York lofts, or the Ellington band. American guitarist Ava Mendoza describes a similar working practice to my own geographically spread-out situation when she says:

> These kinds of collaborations don't have to be bands that rehearse every week. You can play together once or twice a year … you keep meeting over the years and continue evolving your music together. (Mendoza, 2017:209)

The fact that musicians outside of the UK are dealing with similar issues, points to the wider reach of my research, suggesting that solutions to problems of mine will resonate with the wider community.

Funders and bookers

Using Latour's terminology, there is a complex network of actors that each influences the music in its own way. Largely the scene of musicians I belong to relies heavily on musician-led organising, and most of the performances of my work during this PhD were at these kinds of events. Primarily, these were organised by LUME in London, a musician-run organisation who commissioned my LUME Lab Octet, booked Article XI for their festival in 2016 and invited me to take part in their large ensemble LUMEkestra on two occasions. Elsewhere, the Article XI tour, a joint endeavour with Cath Robert's Favourite Animals in December 2017[11] was made possible by a range of jazz promoters. TDE Promotions in Birmingham and More Music in Morecambe were in theatre-style venues, whereas Jazz at the Lescar in Sheffield and Jazz North East in Newcastle are both regular nights in function rooms of pubs that have built up a regular audience over many years. Whilst this is not a study of these audiences, my colleague Dr. Geoff Bright makes some valuable contributions to that field in (Bright and Hunter, 2019).

The Vonnegut Collective performance was commissioned by the New Music Northwest festival at the RNCM, and was organised by academic composition staff at the conservatoire. This is the only instance of the academy funding this research. Other then my stipend, for which I am of course grateful, there was no additional funding with which to pay the professional musicians I worked with. Ergo, the practice displayed a fairly typical relationship to funding, with a variety of promoters receiving Arts Council England funding to supplement ticket sales. On occasion, when unsuccessful, this is replaced by promoters' own money, which is neither desirable nor sustainable. The Article XI / Favourite Animals tour received guaranteed fees from the promoters which then enabled us to apply for grants to support the tour. We were awarded around £15,000 from Arts Council England, £1,500 from the independent Fenton Arts Trust and had a grant of around £5,000 rejected by the Performing Rights Society Foundation. This is typical of this kind of tour, to be supported by a mixture of public funding and ticket sales. One avenue of funding that rarely features is commercial sponsorship, and, although there are documented issues with public funding (not least what happens when applications are rejected, and see (Pocknee, 2012)), by avoiding commercial sponsorship, and not having to rely solely on ticket sales insulates the music from 'market forces' and thus enables us to explore the art for art's sake. In addition, the musician-led nature of many of the gigs means we often play at each other's nights, not to mention in each other's bands. This undoubtedly would be of interest for further study, perhaps using Born's concepts of social aesthetics (2017) as a starting point, or Dr. José Dias' book *Jazz in Europe* (2019), but is beyond the remit of this research.

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[11] Further info at http://articlexi-favouriteanimals.co.uk/

Voice of the improviser

Having outlined above that I am seeking to better feature the voices of the improvising musicians I am working with, I want to unpack what this actually means. The study 'What Makes a Good Musical Improviser? An Expert View on Improvisational Expertise' by Wopereis et al used 'a group of 26 renowned musical experts' (2013:222), including musicians and critics. These experts rated 169 different statements about characteristics of 'a good musical improviser' from 1, 'relatively unimportant' to 5 'extremely important' (Wopereis et al., 2013:225) and a top ten of the highest-rated statements was compiled.

The statement 'A good improviser is someone who has a personal, recognizable voice' was third in this top ten, and rated very to extremely important, with a mean rating of 4.29. (Wopereis et al., 2013:229)

This is a common theme when talking about musical improvisers, John Zorn refers to the musicians he was working with as each having 'a highly personal language' (Zorn in Mandel, 1999:171) while Graham Collier valued the 'individuality of voice and language' (Collier, 2009:51) of musicians he admired and worked with. Mary Halvorson too talks of often 'hearing individual musicians' voices in [her] head' and using this as a starting point to compose musical ideas for those musicians to perform (Halvorson in Morris, 2012:127).

When these composers talk about individuality, this implies a distinctiveness in relation to other players, both historically and when compared against contemporaries. In jazz and improvised music especially, one's own voice is defined in relation to those that have come before. Pianist Chris Burn describes how an awareness of this drove him to explore extended techniques on the piano to develop his own voice.

> Whilst in the early days I tried in my keyboard playing to sound like McCoy Tyner, Keith Tippett or Cecil Taylor, I failed to find any sense of individuality by pursuing what was essentially hero worship/pastiche. So I went inside and worked on the strings. (Burn, no date:online)

Guitarist Keith Rowe, whose technique involves laying the guitar flat on a table, describes a similar path to Burn, albeit motivated by his studies as a painter.

> One of the great lessons for me was the professor pointing right into my nose saying, "Rowe, you cannot paint a Caravaggio. Only Caravaggio can paint Caravaggio." Suddenly trying to play guitar like Jim Hall seemed quite wrong… Who am I? What do I have to say? (Rowe in Warburton, 2001:online)

I am setting out to feature these personal voices in the music I compose, and so some further unpacking of what the term means is required. Ros McMillian's 1999 paper focuses on students using improvisation to develop their own personal voices. She suggests three factors that contribute to this development:

> Both the literature and personal and anecdotal accounts indicate that the three aspects of stylistic independence, the ability to take risks and musical

> relationships between players are common factors in the development of the personal voices of improvising musicians. (McMillian, 1999:266)

She does not talk at length about what might constitute the voice itself, preferring to address pedagogic methods to encourage students' development, but we do get a further definition: 'Voice… is the revelation of self through an expressive act' (McMillian, 1999:267). Although this is a fairly vague definition, this is also how I am using the term, and I will seek to unpack this further to ensure a solid base for my research.

In my own experience as an improviser, I identify closely with McMillian's three factors for developing my own voice. Growing up improvising with my younger brother, a drummer and composer, fulfilled all three criteria; our musical relationship allowed us to explore different musics together and in the context of several groups, having a rehearsal space in our house and a wide range of collaborators throughout our teenage years enabled us to take risks outside, or rather alongside, a conventional music education as well as being outside any commercial constraints. Recognising myself in McMillian's writing, it is no surprise that I am drawn to her definition of voice as 'the revelation of self through an expressive act' (ibid.). In chapter 4, on solo improvisation, I further explore what might constitute the voice of the improviser, and bring new insights to the discussion.

In this chapter, I have situated my work in the lineage of composers that includes Zorn, Collier and Vandermark. The theoretical framework comes from Practice-as-Research, as will be discussed in the following chapter, and I draw on writings from within the emerging field of Critical Improvisation Studies, as well as its precursors Jazz Studies and New Jazz Studies. I have outlined the key issues that my research addresses, around ownership and voice, laying the foundations to address these later on in this thesis. I have defined the type of musician I am working with, and therefore whom this research might be most relevant to.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Robin Nelson's book on the subject of Practice as Research (Nelson, 2013) talks about the difficulties of defining a methodology in arts research, and cites a report from the United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education that 'suggests that the question of methodology may simply be avoided' (Nelson, 2013:98). However, a more productive angle to take might be that Practice-as-Research is an emerging field, and as such, a generic methodology is still being defined. Nelson's book 'is itself a PaR methodology' (Nelson, 2013:98), and there have been contributions to the field from the likes of Blain (2013), Smith and Dean (2009) and others.

Practice as Research 'typically involves a multi-mode inquiry drawing upon a range of methods' (Nelson, 2013:99). Nelson goes on to define the two fundamental modes as being 'the way of proceeding with the practice itself' and 'a book-based inquiry with related writings' (Nelson, 2013:98). Furthermore, he goes on to suggest other components to the research: 'There may be interviews, questionnaires or focus groups to establish the impact of the praxis' (Nelson, 2013:98).

The book-based inquiry can be seen in the previous chapter, identifying the context and lineage that my practice sits within, and is woven throughout this thesis. Before going on to discuss further my way of proceeding with the practice, which is itself the central contribution to knowledge, I will first address other modes of inquiry that have been used.

Throughout the thesis you will see evidence of qualitative data having been gathered at various points throughout the PhD. These include conversations with audience members after performances, comments from musicians after or during the rehearsal process and press reviews. This is presented as I discuss each piece, and acts variously as a trigger for, a challenge to, or to support my reflections.

In addition to this, I have carried out more formal interviews with two musicians who were involved in each of the stages of the research, performing each piece of music.

Initially I had promised them anonymity so they were able to speak freely, but happily they have agreed to waive this after reading how I have used their words. Cath Roberts is a baritone saxophonist, bandleader and co-runs the LUME improvisation organisation, promoting jazz and improvised music in London. Dr. Tullis Rennie is a trombonist and a researcher at City University, London. They both play in my Article XI ensemble and we all play in Cath Roberts's ten-piece Favourite Animals. They are both composers and each have a vast experience of playing improvised music in large and small groups. I chose them to interview as they are trusted and close collaborators of mine, and their deep knowledge of my practice as well as music and improvisation in general made their insights valuable.

I played them recordings of each performance, as well as selected excerpts from the development phase of each piece, using a technique called stimulated recall. I was first introduced to stimulated recall interviews (SRI) during a workshop lead by the saxophonist and neuroscientist Christophe de Bezenac. The fundamentals of the technique involve making an audio and/or visual recording of an activity, which is then replayed whilst interviewing the participants in order to gain insights into the activity. Dempsey's paper on the subject states that SRI are an 'underutilized technique in ethnography' (Dempsey, 2010:352), but says using them

> …enhances the quality of ethnographic interviewing by providing a sort of memory prosthesis, a crutch that can bring an informant beyond a recitation of traditional "best practices" (Dempsey, 2010:351).

I am not conducting an ethnographic study, but moving beyond well recited clichés is crucial to gaining insights into my methods, and borrowing methods from other fields is something Nelson encourages in Practice as Research. This aid to memory is also essential as I am conducting these interviews a long time after the sessions. This is by design, as I seek to compare the outcomes of each different approach that I have used, in order to inform my practice going forward. As well as taking a wider view and seeking the musicians' thoughts and opinions on which of the finished pieces they prefer, I also used recordings of the development process to encourage them to reflect on how they felt during the process. SRI can help with this too; Dempsey says ‘reflection on process’ is one key benefit of this technique, and ‘the recording helped informants re-experience the music such that it could help them reproduce the emotional logic’ (Dempsey, 2010:361) of their decisions and experiences. Indeed, using SRI, Dempsey ‘was able to uncover important dimensions of successful musical collaboration’ (Dempsey, 2010:350).

Dempsey makes a strong case for including SRI in ethnographic research, and I believe there is a strong case that SRI can enhance a Practice as Research enquiry. Recording sound and/or video is something most artists are comfortable doing, if not themselves, then at least comfortable being recorded. Especially as ‘high fidelity audiovisual recording equipment becomes ever more affordable and unobtrusive’ (Dempsey, 2010:355), it seems well within the reach of most artists to document their practice in this way. When working within a collaborative practice such as improvisation, SRI present a method for getting participants/collaborators to move beyond using clichés when talking about ways and means of working. Dos Santos and Hentschke’s study of undergraduate piano players’ repertoire preparation (2010) also uses SRI in a similar manner to me, in that the researchers carried out recordings of the pianists throughout a university semester, and then returned to these after the semester ended to help answer specific questions and reveal further insights alongside their other methods. While Dempsey makes the point that ‘the interview itself should be conducted as soon after the recording as practicable’ (Dempsey, 2010:355), in dos Santos and Hentschke’s study the interviews are months after the first recordings (dos Santos and Hentschke, 2010:251). For my own case, I used them to extract qualitative data with regards a comparison between the differing approaches from piece to piece, and this had to happen after the majority of the pieces had been performed, and so the interviews took place, at Roberts’ flat in London in October 2017. The quotes throughout this thesis are taken from the recordings made at that point.

Proceeding with the practice

To begin to discuss my methodology, and the central strategy that my title refers to, it is useful to begin with my most recent work in this field prior to starting my PhD, and then to describe how and why I move on from there. In 2014, I was commissioned by the Manchester Jazz Festival to write a suite of music for a new 11-piece ensemble. I had already been reflecting on the issues raised in the previous chapter, and had conceived of ideas for how I might involve the other musicians in the creation of the work, at an earlier stage in the process than the rehearsals/performance. The hypothesis being that this would lead to a greater sense of ownership over the music, and that it would feature the voices of the musicians better than if I were to write the music by myself before bringing it to the ensemble for performance, thus addressing the two key areas of concern outlined in chapter 1.

I wrote a short melodic phrase for each of the musicians, which I sent to them with instructions to record themselves playing the phrase and then immediately improvising. These responses were then incorporated into the finished suite in a variety of ways, perhaps inspiring a certain feel or direction for the music, or I would transcribe improvised lines and use these as melodies or riffs within the written music. Overall, I was happy with the outcome, with various reviewers commenting that ‘a guiding force helps all the personalities put their stamp on a common purpose’ (Cronshaw, 2014).

> Despite the lack of song titles, you could tell exactly which song was composed for whom. The songs are completely defined by the musicians. (Maby, 2014)

These positive responses reinforced my feeling that working in this way was worth exploring. But there were also still areas I felt I could do better. The setting was largely a comfortable one for me, both stylistically, and by working with musicians I was generally familiar with. These factors informed the choices made when setting out my research plan. Namely I included musicians I had not worked with before in all but one of the pieces, and sought to engage with a tradition outside of the field of contemporary jazz through my work with the Vonnegut Collective for the first piece; Winter 16. Along the way I also encountered a critical question about the nature of solo improvisation[12], which changed my working methods and will be discussed in its own chapter.

The practice proceeds in an iterative manner as outlined by Smith and Dean (2009:19-25), with insights from each piece feeding into the working methods of the following one. Although, I also wrote the piece LUME Kestrel, which could be called a 'control piece'; that is, not aiming to involve any of the musicians in the development process. This was outside of the iterative cycle, and the motivation was primarily to enable better reflections on each stage, to give me a point of reference when interviewing musicians, and discover whether they felt that being included in the development actually changed their experience of performing or not.

As set out in the previous chapter, I am seeking to investigate involving musicians in the development of pieces before the performance stage, but this can be broken down further, into development stage or the material generation stage. As well as being the way I am proceeding with the practice, this is also the fundamentally novel aspect as of my PhD, it is the central insight. The other insights arise directly from thinking about the implications of this for my practice and the academy (chapters 3, 4 & 5), or from issues that arose when carrying out the practice, which presented themselves as significant to the wider project of composing for improvisers (chapters 6 & 7).

For Winter 16 and Always A Fox – the musicians' input is at the development stage, responding to audio or notated stimulus I sent to them. The LUME Lab Octet pieces invited input at the material generation stage, and Municrination returned to input at the developmental phase. LUME Kestrel, as already noted, had input at the performance stage.

The pieces can also be categorised by the nature of this input; the first two pieces (Winter 16 and Always A Fox), as well as my initial 2014 commission, all feature musicians improvising by themselves as part of the process – I asked them to record themselves playing solo for me to transcribe. The later works (the four LUME Lab Octet pieces and Municrination) moved to using small group improvising in place of solos, using Michael Picknett’s work on devising music (Picknett, 2016) as a contextual framework and motivation for this. The rationale behind this and insights arisen are discussed in chapter 4.

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[12] Where 'solo improvisation' means a musician improvising by themselves, unaccompanied, rather than soloing on chord changes as it might in a jazz context.

The following table shows all the pieces, along with outlining the nature of the input from the musicians, and which of the three stages this came in. The dates given are the performances represented in the audio submission.

Piece	Date	Ensemble	Input
Winter 16	Jan ‘16	Vonnegut Collective	Material Generation – I exchanged short recorded improvisations with the members of the ensemble over a month, and extracted material from these for the composition.
	May ‘17	LUME Lab Octet	
Always A Fox	June ‘16	Article XI	Development – I generated the material myself, with members of the ensemble invited to contribute to the development of the piece by recording solo improvised responses.
	May ‘17	LUME Lab Octet	
	Dec ‘17	Article XI	
LUME Kestrel	Nov ‘16	LUMEkestra	Performance only – The piece was written entirely alone; musicians only contribute during the performance.
	May ‘17	LUME Lab Octet	
When Flowering	May ‘17	LUME Lab Octet	Material Generation & Development – the pieces began as small group improvisation sessions with members of the ensemble. Material was transcribed from these sessions
Managed Decline			
Colin			

Webster's Fractured Finger			and then developed through improvisation at further small group sessions.
Labrats			
Municrination	Dec '17	Article XI	Development – I wrote melodic material which was developed in a small group improvisation session.

The pianist Kris Davis, writing in the Arcana series of books published by John Zorn, outlines her approach to composing. She identifies that 'composing is a multi-step process' and describes the three stages of '*macro-composition*' (dealing with structure, or conceptual ideas), '*micro-composition*—a stage when the material is generated to realise the overall concept of the *macro-composition*' and finally '*processing through live performance*' (Davis, 2017:49-51). This final stage is the same as the third stage I have identified in my own practice, the playing of the music with the ensemble, during which the material can be refined further through repeat performances (something I return to in chapter 6). Her second stage is analogous with my first stage; material generation, and I do most of my '*macro-composition*' during what I have termed the development phase.

Davis points out the importance of remaining flexible during the process, showing openness to 'letting go of the original plan for a different and sometimes better option' (Davis, 2017:51). Although I see resonances between our approaches, for me this letting go of an original plan is easier when no plan exists in the first place. By inviting musicians to contribute in the development phase, they can help shape the structure of the piece, rather than adhering to a pre-conceived one before their input, although, of course, 'the steps aren't always so clearly identifiable' (Davis, 2017:51), for Davis or myself.

I bring Davis into the discussion at this point to highlight that other composers working with large groups in the field of improvised music are also thinking about their compositional process and recognising the importance to this of the contributions from musicians. Davis highlights the performance stage as being ‘one of the most exciting moments’, due to it representing ‘…a release of total ownership’ (Davis, 2017:51). It is my hypothesis that releasing this total ownership earlier in the process will lead to a greater sense of ownership for the musicians involved, and better feature their voices, as outlined in chapter 1.

Although, as I have made clear, I focus my investigations on the processes of composing rather than particular musical elements directly, I do engage with other musical practices. Specifically, I will engage with the graphic notation practices of Cornelius Cardew (chosen to broaden the scope of my research beyond the field of contemporary jazz), and the modular composition approach that Ken Vandermark employs with his Resonance Ensemble. The distributed cuing of John Zorn and others (i.e. not always having one conductor) and the musical devices of Graham Collier are constant threads through my work.

The complementary writing, that you are now reading, is arranged according to insights or themes, rather than being grouped by piece, or chronologically. As should now be obvious, I am following Nelson again in using the first person throughout. I am using a mixture of writing modes, however, with some chapters leaning more heavily on philosophical discussions (chapter 4 on solo improvising, and chapter 5 on curation), and others more focussed on refinement of my practice (chapters 6 and 7 on notation and distributed direction), perhaps closer to a more traditional composition PhD that Nelson alludes to when saying ‘a series of music compositions could justifiably be accompanied by minimal (10,000 to 15,000) words’ (Nelson, 2013:101). It is by including various writing modes, as well as the multi-modal approach to the research inquiry itself that I achieve the rigour required.

Chapter 3: Disruption

Although setting out to address the problems outlined above, by inviting the input of my collaborators into the early stages of composition I am welcoming a creative disruption to my normal working methods. This chapter is a discussion of how this is an inversion of other examples of disruption in improvised music, and how this directly challenges the composer-performer hierarchy.

At points throughout my creative life, when composing, I have found myself at dead ends, unsure how to proceed with the material as it stands. This is not an uncommon phenomenon, of course, and many creative artists experience some form of writers' block to varying degrees in their careers. Much of my material is initially in the forms of repeated phrases (see section 2 in Always A Fox for example), and I can often get caught in looping them without development; I have many audio 'sketches' of these on file, waiting to be expanded upon.

In reflective interviews, the idea arose that I was using the material generated to point ways out of these dead ends, and Cath Roberts recognised that 'it's an intervention, a kind of interruption of your normal way of writing by the participants' (personal interviews, 2017) and went on to use the word 'disruption' to describe this. This is an extremely astute observation, and one I had not fully grasped prior to this reflection.

Composers working with improvisers have long recognised the value of creative disruption in their practices, and chapter 6 has a deeper discussion on how Ken Vandermark uses this in his groups[13]. A strong example comes from Misha Mengelberg's compositions for the ICP Orchestra, using his compositional intervention to force the players into new areas; 'The purpose of the written material is to disrupt a "nice flow" of improvisation' (Delius in Schuiling, 2018:181), or, as Mengelberg himself puts it 'I am interested in that: to put sticks into the spokes of all wheels’ (Mengelberg in Whitehead, 1998:149).

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[13] This has resonances within jazz, as, for example, Miles Davis would often 'call tunes in different keys, or call tunes that the band had not rehearsed.' (Barrett, 1998:609) And, too, with non-improvisers, such as the New Complexity music of Brian Ferneyhough. (Harvey, 1979:3-4)

Schuiling draws comparison with the concept of ‘flow state’ as developed by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, stating that ‘Most musicians would probably regard the disruption of flow as a bad thing’ (Schuiling, 2018:181). However, he has overlooked a crucial aspect of flow, in that there needs to be a level of challenge present for one to be able to enter a flow state, and as one gets more skilled at a particular activity; ‘In order to continue experiencing flow, [one] must identify and engage progressively more complex challenges’ (Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, 2002:92). This actually relates well to a point made later in the same chapter, that within the ICP:

> …there is an important form of creativity in learning to deal with a situation in which the musicians are not quite sure what to do next and where the music is headed. (Schuiling, 2018:185)

So, an important part of the music is how the musicians respond to the disruption from Mengelberg. In fact, there is a disruptive element present in all composing for improvisers; given that improvisers do not need a composer in order to make music, the mere presence of a composer implies a certain amount of disruption, as Tobias Delius is alluding to above.

Whitehead summarises Mengelberg’s way of working with the musicians of the ICP Orchestra as seeking ‘…to thwart rather than amplify their natural inclinations’ (Whitehead, 1998:156) My own approach lends itself more to amplifying rather than thwarting, not least because I use transcribed snippets of improvisations within the composing process. I do have sympathies for Mengelberg’s thinking, but am more in line with Anthony Braxton’s approach; ‘Finally, I recommend as few rehearsals as possible so that everyone will be slightly nervous’ (Braxton in Cox and Warner, 2004:204). In other words; cultivating risk, rather than antagonising the players. As indicated above, the conditions for flow involve a suitable level of challenge, and this is interpreted here as risk, discussed briefly in chapter 1.

Kris Davis also recognises the disruptive nature of composing for improvisation; '…the act of composing [is] an opportunity to challenge myself as a player, writing things I *wished* I could play…' (Davis, 2017:49) Specifically, she talks about '…falling into the same harmonic and melodic patterns…' (ibid.:50) when improvising at the piano during her compositional process, which led her to explore composing away from the piano to avoid things her '…muscle memory gravitated towards' (ibid.). The rest of the article goes into detail about a specific piece, inspired by Luciano Berio, and how the writing of the piece influenced her improvisational voice. Although she is primarily talking about using it as a tool to develop her own voice on her instrument, we again see evidence of a compositional intervention being used to disrupt improvisation.

The composers above use composition in order to avoid improvisational habits, either of their own, or of the musicians they work with. None of these composers, or those addressed in chapter 1, permit the improvisers to disrupt their compositional practice in a similar way though, by virtue of the fact that they do not allow room for any input during the development of pieces. This is at the heart of the composer-performer hierarchy, even when the pieces written allow for various improvisational freedoms in performance. For Mengelberg, the musicians of the ICP Orchestra are free to disrupt the performance, although by then the compositions are written down on paper, and Davis disrupts her own practice, outside of the context of an ensemble.

Here I am using the improvised input of my collaborators to avoid compositional habits and disrupt my working practice. Whether the musicians recognise themselves in the final score or not, this is music that I would not have written with a different group, as was raised in interviews with the musicians. By inviting this input, I am disrupting the hierarchy in new ways at the same time as benefiting practically from it myself.

Having arrived at this conclusion, for my final piece, Municrination, I sought to utilise this by inviting two members of the ensemble to improvise with me in a trio, using a selection of written riffs and ideas as a focal point. (The journey I took to get to the point where I am working with a small group to develop music for a large group is outlined in chapter 4.) This is inviting input at the second stage in my process, the development stage.

With the other pieces you will read about, I made sure to get input from all the members of whichever ensemble the piece was developed for/with, motivated by a desire for them all to have a sense of shared ownership. However, with Municrination, by only using a sub-set of the ensemble, any arguments for a greater shared ownership are no longer relevant since not all the musicians are contributing, and I am focussing primarily on using disruption as a tool for developing the compositions.

I used the session in two main ways. First of all, by bringing a selection of ideas, this trio acted like a quality control filter. Certain ideas did not translate well into a group context and so they were eliminated before I progressed any further with them; one melody sounded too twee, and another riff was dropped when a similarity to another tune was pointed out. Neither inspired much of interest in the improvisation.

Secondly, having recorded the session and selected the material to develop further, I used the audio recordings as a catalyst for writing the rest of the composition. Later in this thesis I detail a variety of ways I have used transcribed material, but with Municrination I improvised along with the recordings to develop a melody for the piece. Improvising to write melodies is a common approach of mine, and many others of course, but the key thing here is that I was improvising over a recording of band members. A lone composer will often have an idea in their head of how a finished piece will sound, or anticipate the way certain players might approach the material. By actually improvising around the material in a trio, I was able to explore these possibilities and then base the piece upon how the musicians actually engaged with the music.

Furthermore, when listening back, I was drawn to the way the trio, and in particular the drummer, moved from improvisation back into the written material, and so I decided to open the piece with a bass and drums improvised duo, with the instruction to work towards the riff. Rather than me transcribing anything in particular as with other pieces, in these ways the improvised input has informed the soundworld and the structure of the piece from an early point in the development.

I have shown that this approach is a disruption of my normal working methods, reflecting an inversion of the disruptive practices present in a lot of composing for improvisers. By using improvisational input from the musicians to help me solve problems that composers might ordinarily tackle alone, I am also challenging the traditional composer-performer hierarchy that is present in composing for improvisers, and amplified when working with large ensembles, as shown in chapter 1. One potential outcome of this sharing of compositional responsibility is that my voice as a composer is diminished in the work, and I return to this in chapter 5 with a discussion around curating.

In this mini-chapter, I have discussed the culmination of my project, in that this was the most recent piece of my portfolio. I have also outlined the key novel approach that my practice is presenting, and in the coming chapters, I go into depth on the various insights that led me here.

Chapter 4: From Solo Improvisation to Devising[14]

In this chapter, I discuss a critical question around solo improvisation and its relevance to my practice. I go on to describe how engaging with this question changed my methods for composing the LUME Lab Octet suite, with reference to Michael Picknett's approach to 'devising music' (2014; 2016). I conclude by reflecting on the effectiveness of this, as well as whether the process answers any of the questions raised by the discussion of solo improvising, and highlighting resonances with other scholarship.

Is solo improvising really improvising?

In the early stages of my PhD, the ways I had asked musicians to contribute all involved improvising solo, whether they were contributing during the material generation stage or the development one. The critical question above arose during my reading which forced me to reassess my working methods. Two particular quotes sparked this line of enquiry; the first is from respected critic, curator and promoter John Corbett, and the second from one of the most prominent free-jazz saxophonists, Peter Brötzmann.

> Doubts can be raised about whether improvisation is even possible for a lone player (Corbett, 2016:119)

> Jazz . . . is something you do together. The solo playing . . . is not really a part of it. (Brötzmann and Rouy, 2014:77)

Elsewhere in Corbett's book he talks about the dialogic nature of free improvisation, and dedicates a chapter to 'Interaction Dynamics' (Corbett, 2016:47-67), inviting readers to listen out for the different modes of interaction present in improvised music. Clearly, without other musicians to interact with, these interactions that Corbett and others value highly are no longer present, causing him to question the legitimacy of solo improvisation. Corbett does concede that, in their place, it might be possible to consider the interactions '…between the soloist and the instrument or the performance context or the audience…' (ibid.:120), but there is a fundamental difference here when compared with improvising with a live human being.

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[14] The bulk of this chapter was published in the Open Cultural Studies journal. (Hunter, 2018)

When Broztmann says 'Jazz . . . is something you do together', he is not disregarding solo improvisation as not possible (and indeed, has released records of solo playing himself), but is instead placing it in a separate category: 'solo playing . . . is something different' (Brötzmann and Rouy, 2014:77).

Brötzmann, of course, is not the only improviser to perform solo, which seems to contradict Corbett's claim that solo improvisation is not possible. There is plenty of support for the notion of improvisation as a group rather than lone activity, whether from the academy; Paul Berliner's assertion that '…the highest points of improvisation occur when group members strike a groove together' (1994:388), or from other musicians, such as French percussionist Lê Quan Ninh's bold statement that 'My solos are always failures' (Ninh, 2014:73). Despite this, improvising musicians continue to perform solo, including Ninh himself, perhaps constant failure is not enough to deter him, or he is judging the solo playing by the same criteria one would use for a group performance, and finds it lacking. I discuss his motivations later.

Rather than focus on whether solo improvising can actually be classed as improvising, the apparent contradiction in the views expressed above points instead to a category error, as Brötzmann hints at, and Garry L. Hagberg asserts; 'There is a difference of a fundamental kind between performing solo and performing in an ensemble' (2016:481). Furthermore, this is something that 'every performer knows' (ibid).

Relating this to my own work, it is not too big a leap to say that a methodology that places an individual solo improvisation at its core might be missing something essential. My contemporaries and I spend the vast majority of our performing time with others, and as such it is safe to assume that the development of our skills is mostly done with ensemble playing in mind. Indeed, the chapter 'Solo' in Derek Bailey's widely referenced book 'Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music' opens with;

‘Improvisors are, as a rule, musically gregarious, preferring to work with other musicians in any combination…’ (1992:105).

Language

Whilst the above could lead us to question why anyone would want to improvise by themselves, plenty of improvising musicians still do, and Derek Bailey once again offers some insight into why. In the chapter ‘Solo’ mentioned above, Bailey discusses his own approach to solo playing, which he was motivated to do initially as a learning process, as part of his practising, ‘to have a look at [his] own playing and to find out what was wrong with it and what was not wrong with it’ (1992:105). The reason he turned to solo playing to do this, he states, was because of the way it highlights the musical language being used by virtue of the fact that the usual interactions with other musicians are absent.

> [In solo playing] the language becomes much more important and there will be times in solo improvisation when the player relies entirely on the [musical] vocabulary used. (Bailey, 1992:106)

Lê Quan Ninh, expanding on the earlier point about all his solos being ‘failures’, also recognises this focus on language that arises in a solo context, when, lacking the ‘…network of solidarity…’ (2014:73) that he experiences in a group, he is forced to turn to what he refers to as ‘…my *compulsory figures,* motifs that have emerged and that I have memorized’ (ibid.). Although the way he describes this seems less pragmatic than Bailey, he too is aware of the developmental nature of solo playing, stating; ‘Playing solo offers me the chance to interrogate those patterns and motifs’ (ibid.).

In Graham Lock’s book about Anthony Braxton, this same connection is highlighted: ‘His own musical language grew out of the solo context’ (Lock, 1988:26). Braxton pinpoints his first ever solo concert as one catalyst for the development of his language and approach to making music that went on to inform all of his music, not just in the solo context.

> I imagined I was just going to get up there and play for one hour from pure invention, but after ten minutes I'd run through all my ideas and started to repeat myself. (Braxton in Lock, 1988:27)

This account is a fairly common one when speaking anecdotally with other musicians. There is often the need to have an idea of where one is heading, or starting from, and a couple of points in between, in a way that does not typically happen in group free improvisation. These preparations can act as a safety net, guarding against the experience described by Braxton, and tend to be unnecessary in group playing with other musicians to provide impetus. My own experiences of performing live by myself are that time seems to pass much slower and what I think has lasted a full half hour set has barely scratched the surface. Perhaps what is happening is the amount of ideas present would last around 30 minutes in a group, but with no other musicians to develop them, or contribute their own ideas, the set is over much quicker.

What is the significance of this language that these improvisers talk about? Pianist Vijay Iyer sheds some light on this by invoking Barthes' *The Grain Of The Voice* (1977:179) essay to suggest that meaning is not only constituted by the '…semantic content…' and '…melodic logic…' of an utterance '…but also by its *sonorous* content' (Iyer, 2004:399). He goes on to be more specific:

> Tellingly, among many jazz musicians, a most valued characterization is that a certain musician has his or her own, instantly recognizable *sound*, where "sound" means not only timbre, but also articulation, phrasing, rhythm, melodic vocabulary, and even analytical methods. (ibid.)

He recognises that melodic vocabulary is part of what makes up the voice of an improvising musician, but that it is just one of several elements, and David Toop would seem to support this stance as he says '…the player exists within the sounds…' (2016:8) If I am focussing on material generated when a musician is playing alone and Bailey says this preferences material at the expense of other elements, then I am neglecting these other aspects that make up the sound of the improvising musician. In particular, the element that many musicians themselves would consider to be most important; the interactions between the musicians. Judith Lewis suggests an explanation for what is missing; 'Solo improvisation . . . does not rely on any inherent dialogical elements such as those found in group improvisation' (2013:259), expressing the same sentiment as Peter Brötzmann above. (Brötzmann and Rouy, 2014:77)

To further explore what might be missing here, we turn to Hagberg's discussion of collective intention in ensemble improvisation. He rejects '…the Cartesian model of selfhood…' (2016:482) that would have an improvised performance be the sum of its individual parts, or rather, the intentions of each individual involved as, in this view, 'There could be no such thing as an intention that transcended, or was external to, any given single individual' (ibid.) He turns instead to Bratman's concept of collective intention. For something to count as 'true collective intention', the activity must be 'non-summative; irreducible to the individual; worked out across the span of its enactment' (ibid.:487). He uses a Coltrane trio performance displaying '…a kind of audible mutual trust…' (ibid.) to show that improvised ensemble performance meets these criteria, and draws parallels with de-individuation, '…the regrettable phenomenon of merging into a mob and then doing things as a collective that no individual within that mob would choose to do' (ibid.).

So the aspect that I am missing by using solo improvisation is recognised by recent philosophical thought as a phenomenon, such that 'there is something essential to the phenomenology of collective action that remains after we subtract the sum total of the individual intentions from the final result' (Hagberg, 2016:483).

Furthermore, he goes on to discuss the interactive style of a given player, which he claims '…will differ from player to player in a way as distinctive as fingerprints' (Hagberg, 2016:492). While Iyer and Toop above seem to suggest that a musician's unique voice is contained within the semantic and sonorous content of their playing, here Hagberg offers a strong argument that the way in which a particular player interacts with others is equally unique.

What seems clear from the above discussion is that solo improvising is indeed distinct from ensemble playing and, as I am aiming to investigate how to effectively feature the individual musicians' voices in my music, this led me to reassess my working methods.

On a more practical note, the solo improvisations were not without difficulties. For my piece Winter 16, I set out to exchange recorded solo improvisations with the trumpet player who would be the featured soloist when it was performed. As it transpired, we only managed to send each other two files before the piece was to be finished, due to a variety of time constraints. Changing tack slightly for another piece, Always A Fox, I sent the same five short melodies to each of the ten musicians who were to perform it, and asked them to record themselves playing any of these melodies followed by improvising and to send me the results. Only three of the musicians responded by the deadline, and something rather illuminating happened in one of those. During the recording of one contribution, Tullis Rennie made himself laugh so much he could not play and had to stop and start again. This fit of the giggles was brought on by him imagining me listening back to the recording, and the surreal nature of this derailed the process.

As well as this specific incident, interviewing musicians involved afterwards revealed a more general disconnect between the process of development and the finished performance.

> By the time the piece was on the stand in the rehearsal, I had probably forgotten that anything we had done by correspondence was involved in its creation. So I think by the time I looked at it I just thought, "this is Anton's piece". (Roberts, 2017:interview)

So, the practicalities of getting musicians to find the time and the inclination to sit down and record themselves playing solo (a setting that they are predominantly not used to) proved difficult. And when they did, it did not necessarily bring about the sense of collective ownership I had set out to achieve, perhaps partly due to the sense expressed above that musicians tend to prefer not playing solo, which certainly seemed to be the case for Rennie.

Bringing these back to the context in which I am working, to motivate the next phase of my research, I can hypothesise that changing my methods to use small groups to develop material, as described in the following section, might lead to the musicians feeling greater ownership over the music, greater involvement in the process and, if I have been neglecting the ‘interactive style’ (Hagberg, 2016:492) of the players, there may be some evidence of this in the final performed music.

Devising

In an effort to address the above questions, and the difficulties raised by the practicalities of my previous methods, it was clear that my compositional practice needed to explore ways of using group improvisation in the development of the material. One possibility for a method of working can be found within the practice of devised theatre and dance. Michael Picknett has explored bringing these techniques into a musical context (2014; 2016). He goes into great detail about involving the musicians in the creative process, with the goal that ‘…the project is unique to the performers…’ and ‘…the performers have an especially intimate relationship to the material…’ (Picknett, 2014:11).

The appeal of Picknett’s work is that he presents a model for bringing musicians into the creative process earlier, as I am setting out to do, and finds that ‘the performers have a stake in the creative process, and a sense of ownership over the material’ (2014:107). This has resonances with Simon H. Fell’s assertion that, when he writes for larger groups, ‘The key element is that each collaborator must feel that their individual contribution is important and valued’ (Fell in Morris, 2012:125). Fell is talking about contributions made during performance, and Picknett suggests that involving the musicians in a devising process is one way to achieve this. In this section I will detail how my engaging with this can take his work further by bringing it into different contexts, before discussing how I have applied his methodology to my practice and what insights were produced from doing so.

In more recent work, Picknett (2016) has codified his approach and breaks the process down into four stages: Research, Creation, Rehearsal and Performance. These broadly map on to my distinctions of stages in my own process, mentioned in my introduction and methodology chapters, of: material generation, material development/arrangement, and rehearsal/performance, although I haven't made a distinction between the rehearsal and performance stages.

Picknett's thesis *'Devising Music'* (2014) discusses several pieces, all of which are for duos or solo performers. Sometimes the devising process involves Picknett as the composer, interacting with one or two performers, as is the case with *Carter Piece*, and others he himself is involved in the performance as well, as with *Water Music.* In all of my work, I am involved as a performer, but the key difference with how I am using his work is the increasing of ensemble size to an octet, with the broader aim to expand to large ensembles in general.

Another crucial difference comes from the type of musician I am working with. As discussed in chapter 1, I am working largely with a specific type of improvising musician (from within a free-improvising tradition, as well as being comfortable with written material). Picknett states: 'when a performer performs in a devised piece they rarely improvise' (2014:11), although he later permits that 'material can retain improvisatory elements in performance' (2014:13). He goes on to clarify this, saying 'the scope of these improvisations is generally clearly defined' due to there being a distinction between a 'performance' context and 'creative exploration' (ibid). This is a distinction that does not exist in the same way for jazz musicians and the kind of improvising musicians I am working with, where creative exploration is an integral part, if not the fundamental point, of performance.[15]

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[15] This is also why I don't make a distinction between rehearsal and performance in my methodology; the creative exploration is present in all contexts.

The musicians I work with are part of a different tradition from Picknett and his collaborators (the word ‘jazz’ doesn’t appear once is his thesis for example) and he seeks to set himself apart from improvisation as a performance method when stating ‘devising offers an approach to generating and experimenting with flexibility in performance that is quite different from that of improvisation’ (Picknett, 2014:43). This is not intended as a criticism; as practitioners we have experience and knowledge of our own traditions, and the value that this brings to academic discussions is at the core of the Practice-as-Research project. (Nelson, 2006) However, by overlooking the resonances between devising and improvised music, Picknett leaves room for me to take these methods, scrutinise them in my own context, and therefore add insights.

LUME Lab Octet

The opportunity to explore this came from London-based improvised music organisation LUME, who invited me to be part of their ‘LUME Lab’ series, aimed at giving composers time and space to develop brand new work. I brought together a new octet for this project, including two musicians who have been involved in each stage of my PhD research so far, to enable their insights to assist me in comparing my approaches. Alongside these two regular collaborators and myself, the rest of the octet was deliberately chosen to be musicians I had not often performed with previously.

What Picknett terms the Research phase is ‘to explore the creative possibilities of the project idea, without making performance material’ (2016:159). The first sessions with LUME Lab Octet set out to do this, albeit with the knowledge that I was recording the sessions with the intent of using these to inform the compositions (and so hence my terminology ‘material generation’). Picknett states these research sessions usually start with the director/composer bringing a specific idea to explore and in my instance, as all the musicians involved identify as free-improvisers, I decided to set the first task as simply to improvise. I started with small group free improvisation sessions, with the members of the octet broken up into two duos, a trio and a quartet. This is motivated by Stenström’s observation of improvising musicians’ own preferred group sizes. (2009:45)

The second stage, ‘Creation’, focuses on ‘generation and development of performance material’ (Picknett 2016:162). For me, this was more heavily weighted toward development, given that I was taking freely improvised elements from the first stage as material to be developed upon in the second stage. These were again in small groups (although mostly different combinations), and this time the task was to collectively improvise around the thematic material, so once again, ‘performers improvise responses to tasks set by the director/composer’ (ibid.). I tried not to be prescriptive in how I wanted musicians to improvise with the material, and so the word ‘task’ is maybe less appropriate here, as there is no specific outcome to be arrived at, rather multiple possibilities that can be explored; allowing the group to collectively define how the material is played. All sessions were recorded, and the improvisations informed the final compositions in a variety of ways.

To illustrate one of these, the melody in *(fig1)* appeared in quite a frantic session on trumpet. Bringing it to the second sessions, the melodic phrase became much more drawn out, the busy improvising became much more textural and the drone became more of a feature. This shaped the whole arc of the piece in its final form, the composition Managed Decline, as evidenced by the recording.

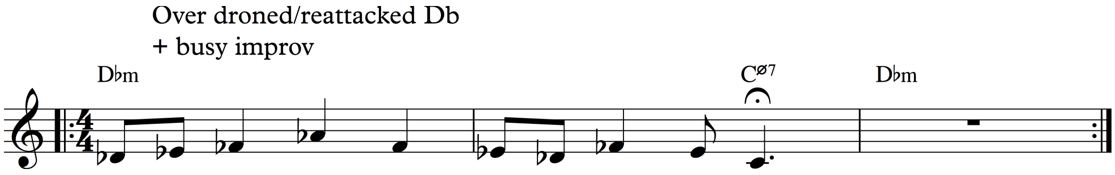

Figure 1

In another example, during another trio improvisation the chords in *(fig2)* were formed, and played very serenely and with a lot of space between them. These were taken as written to the second sessions for development, during which different approaches to the material were tried, with different people cueing the chords and so on. The character of them did not drastically change, and as such, they formed the opening of the composition When Flowering, as well as informing the harmonic content and overall mood of the piece.

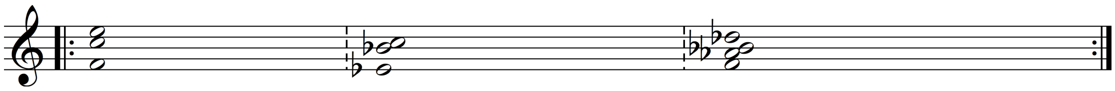

Figure 2

As well as these specific examples, I organised the recordings from the second sessions into playlists based around each idea, so I had, for example six different recordings of small groups improvising around the chords in *(fig2).* I used these playlists to put myself back into the soundworld created by the small groups interrogating the material, and as such to disrupt the normal workings of a lone composer. In interview, Rennie reflected on this aspect of the process, and echoes Kevin Whitehead's comment that 'free improvisation is one way a group discovers its own sound' (Whitehead, 1998:154).

> So that starts to unify the group . . . the ways in which all of those people in various different combinations play one idea. (Rennie, 2017: interview)

By using recordings in this way, I am able to work towards a group sound that has been developed collectively, rather than imagining how the musicians might fit together based on what I know about them individually. This was highlighted especially with this group as I chose to work largely with musicians I was less familiar with, who I had performed with fewer times, or sometimes not at all prior to this commission, and as such the recordings were especially useful.

Having outlined the Research and Creation stages, the Rehearsal and Performance are more self-explanatory stages. For Picknett, 'the rehearsal process changes the raw material generated in the creation phase into performance-ready sequences' (2016:166). The key difference for me, as discussed above, is that improvisation is very much still at the heart of the rehearsal and performance stages as well as the earlier stages. Although in interview, Rennie suggested that the open nature of the early sessions led to a shock when faced with more solidified/notated work, and during the full-band rehearsals with the octet was the point at which certain notation issues started to arise.

Reflections

Interviewing some of the musicians who had been involved in this and earlier projects raised some interesting insights. Roberts, who had commented above on the disconnect between the process and the final performance in an earlier piece, said of the octet work; ‘I felt more involved in the process of doing this than I did in the previous ones’ (2017:interview). This was what I had hoped would come from working with groups this way, although whether this was manifested in the music is another question.

Despite the musicians talking favourably of the process of developing the music, they also highlighted what they saw as shortcomings in the final pieces: ‘When it came to playing the pieces there was little or no space to affect the authorship of the actual performance’ (Rennie, 2017:interview). With specific reference to Managed Decline, the strong tonal centre was remarked on as being restrictive. In another piece, When Flowering, the tonal nature of the music was intended to be pulled around more than it was in performance. In interviews the musicians raised this as an issue around my scoring, suggesting that, by using conventional notation, I was leading people to play in a more conventional manner than they might otherwise, this is expanded upon further in chapter 6.

I raise these issues here to highlight that, although they felt more involved in the process that led to this music than previously, this was not their primary concern. It perhaps should not have come as a surprise that improvisers might be more interested in how things happen in the moment rather than the process by which the music was developed, but I had hoped it would have had a greater influence on the performance than it did. Within the wider aims of my research, this approach did not lead to effectively featuring the individual voices of the musicians.

One of the hypotheses behind my methods is that, with a greater sense of ownership over the music, musicians might feel more inclined to re-shape the material in performance. This was motivated by the way this happens in small group situations, specifically with duos and trios I have played with regularly, and developed the music collectively over a period of time. Picknett says ‘ownership gives the performer permission to take risks in both creation and performance’ (2014:33), but in this instance it doesn’t seem to have had this effect.

Another possibility is that my engagement with the practice of devising music might be at fault. As a relative newcomer to the process of devising, I perhaps became too focussed on the process and neglected to take a wider view of how the finished music might be performed. Perhaps this is a welcome reminder not to focus too much on the processes behind the work at the expense of the performance. Another interpretation could be that the field of devising music in this way is a relatively recent one, and as such needs further development. It is possible that this methodology is not one suited to improvising musicians, or that more time is needed to familiarise both the wider scene and myself with these working practices. Devising in theatre has a long history (Heddon and Milling, 2015), and translating these approaches to improvised music might not be without its difficulties at first, not least due to the strong individual voices that musicians spend their careers developing (Iyer, 2004). It is plausible that this might make improvising musicians more reluctant to enter into a process of devising.

One of these compositions was released on the Live at LUME compilation CD, and so I have the benefit of being able to bring in some reviews. Journalist and broadcaster Daniel Spicer commented on his radio show ‘a cracking line-up, a great bit of music’ (Spicer, 2017:online). Ian Mann on his blog said ‘the term “composition” is used lightly . . . this evolves into an animated collective conversation’ (Mann, 2017:online). While being far from exhaustive, both these two excerpts choose to refer to the group, with Spicer referencing the high calibre of the musicians, so perhaps their voices are well represented, and Mann referencing the collectivity of the music; implying the performance is constituted largely by improvisation.

By developing the music with groups, I have foregrounded the collective intention that Hagberg talks about above, and that Mann reflects in his review. This is something that Picknett recognises in devising, observing that that the music '…forms around the instrumentation of the group and is idiomatic to that particular group of musicians' (Picknett, 2016:160). As a possible consequence of this foregrounding, the individual voice has perhaps been backgrounded. Certainly the musicians interviewed felt this and, although Mann's review talks about the improvising as a large part of the piece, he refers particularly to the 'collective conversation'.

This is in contrast to my earlier work with my eleven-piece ensemble Article XI. The music was developed using solo improvisations, and reviews of the music talk about there being 'ample room for individual voices to be heard' (Spicer, 2016a:79) in live performance, and on the released album 'each member not only shines but clearly contributes to the whole' (Rice Epstein, 2018:online). Returning to my opening questions about whether I can develop music that effectively features the individual voices of the musicians and whether I can bring about a greater sense of collective ownership over the material, these reflections suggest that the individual voices are better featured when I have worked with solo improvisations, which would support the discussion above around solo improvisation and language. Similarly, a unified group sound focused on collectivity is present when working with Picknett's devising methods, which also presents some evidence of Hagberg's collective intention.

Drizzle: a virtual multiplicity

One final aspect of Picknett's devising stuck me as being worth a further exploration here. When describing the processes behind the project *Ne Pleure Pas, Alfred*, he talks about the early sessions (the 'Research' phase mentioned above) and comments that:

> Although these exercises did not produce material that would be used in the final performance, they helped to develop a working practice within the group and to shape the project's aesthetics. (Picknett, 2014:24)

This resonates with my own experiences, both as a motivating factor in choosing to study composing in this way, and what I have found during my research. Above, we have seen evidence of devising leading to a group sound, and I have talked elsewhere about Kevin Whitehead's statement that 'free improvisation is one way a group discovers its own sound' (1998:154). He is referring to the way he saw the ICP Orchestra working within the Dutch scene, but the idea can be found elsewhere.

Seeing the pianist Django Bates performing Charlie Parker's music with his piano trio Belovèd Bird in 2012 I was struck by the alertness and interaction between the musicians. We commented amongst ourselves about the 'hive mind' we had just witnessed and there was a general feeling that the gig set something of a benchmark for a jazz performance. It should not have been a surprise to learn that 'the trio formed as a free-improvising workshop in 2005' (Hobart, 2017:online); five years before their recorded debut. Here is a living example of a band freely improvising for a considerable amount of time before working on written material, thus honing their group sound together through free improvisation. This also has resonances with Marcel Cobussen's analysis of free-improvisation: "Everything starts with the process of making connections, that is, the actors are interactively produced through one another; they emerge through their interactions." (2014:25)

For an explanation as to what might be happening here, we can turn to Adam Parkinson's writing. Drawing on the work of Levi Bryant and Gilles Deleuze, he writes about musical objects, meaning sounds and instruments, and the 'hidden worlds' contained within them (Parkinson, 2014:57). I will argue that this can be applied to ensembles as well.

He begins by using Object Oriented Philosophy (OOP), which, building on Latour's Actor-Network Theory, speculates that 'the world is made up of distinct objects or "actors"' (Parkinson, 2014:58). These objects include literally anything 'from atoms to dogs, political theories, theatres, social clubs, bass lines, mountains and guitars' and they 'possess "hidden worlds" or reservoirs of untapped potential' (ibid.).

He moves on to liken Bryant’s approach to these ‘hidden worlds’ to ‘a Deleuzian virtual multiplicity’, a concept he explains by borrowing an example from John Protevi of weather and climate. The weather at a given moment is an actualisation of the climate, where climate is a ‘hidden world’ or ‘virtual multiplicity’ containing the potential for a variety of outcomes. Thus there are tendencies towards particular weather such as, he says somewhat unkindly, ‘the inevitability of incessant drizzle in Manchester’ (Parkinson, 2014:61), and so ‘Climate … is virtual, and the weather is an actualisation at any one time’ (ibid.). [16]

What does this mean for us? Well, Parkinson states that music is a ‘relational quality that emerges through an encounter’ (2014:59), and uses the idea that ‘any encounter with a sound actualises but one possibility within the multiplicity’ (ibid.:62) to talk about the way different people react differently to the same piece of music (he uses Merzbow and Coldplay amongst his examples of polarising musical experiences). Furthermore, he puts forward improvisation as one strategy for engaging with these ‘hidden worlds’:

> Improvising becomes a way of exploring sounds and actualising different qualities, throwing light upon new possible musics which we reach at with ears and fingers. (Parkinson, 2014:64-5)

As mentioned above, the thrust of the article is around technologies, but we have already seen that objects within OOP can include people, social clubs and so on. As such, it is possible to expand Parkinson’s writing to include musical ensembles, and talk about the relational qualities and encounters between musicians within these ensembles.

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[16] The concept is familiar to those who have studied physics of atoms too, whereby an atom contains a certain number of electrons, whose position we cannot know, but the probabilities of where they might be gave rise to the informal term ‘electron cloud’. We could think of this as being a virtual multiplicity, albeit one whose actualisation we cannot know. See also Schrödinger’s cat and quantum superpositions for more depth, if you are that way inclined.

At various points through this thesis I talk about the specific ways in which improvised elements become part of the written piece, and I am suggesting now that this is a manifestation of Parkinson's work, whereby a particular ensemble possesses 'hidden worlds', a virtual multiplicity, before we have played together. The process of improvising together, much like Kevin Whitehead saw with the ICP Orchestra, and Django Bates found with his trio, is an investigation of this multiplicity, and the music that is created is one actualisation of this.

A clear example of this from my practice is Winter 16. Each improvisation that the musicians in the ensemble sent to me featured long sustained tones. This, when related to my penchant for drones as described in the Curation chapter, led to one actualisation of the virtual multiplicity that is that specific group of players. Or, put another way, long sustained tones are one aspect of the 'group sound' that Whitehead mentions, arrived at through improvisation. As discussed above, engaging with Picknett's practice of devising draws out this group sound.

This can also explain why I find it easier to write music for musicians I am familiar with. If we have explored these multiplicities together before, we know what sort of areas we might tend towards, in a similar way that the more accustomed one is to the incessant drizzle in Manchester, the more one wears a coat.

Conclusion

Using Hagberg's discussion of collective intention, I have shown a distinct difference between solo and group improvisation, which has then changed the way I have approached composing, specifically by applying the devising approach explored by Picknett to a large group of improvising musicians. The outcomes of this investigation, discussed above, have been both positive (the musicians felt more involved in the compositional process) and negative (the musicians felt restricted by the compositions, regardless of their involvement in creating them). This would seem to contradict Picknett's assertion that 'ownership gives the performer permission to take risks' (2014:33) and so I have also suggested that the process of devising music might not be suited to improvising musicians. The same could be said, however, about any other method of composing for improvisers, and thus call into question a whole lineage of artistic endeavours, and so I will continue to refine this in the future. I have also found resonances between the work of Picknett and that of Parkinson, which is again encouraging for future study.

Chapter 5: Curation

During the process of conducting research I have reflected on what exactly constitutes my composerly voice. By focusing on featuring the voices of the improvisers, and allowing them to disrupt my compositional practice, I have reflected on whether or not this diminishes the voice of the composer. This was triggered by working on the LUME Lab Octet, as well as the piece Winter 16; as described in chapter 4, the process of developing these pieces began with free improvisation, either solo or in small groups, rather than from a written stimulus. I felt that my voice as a composer was lacking somewhat, or that I was perhaps shirking my responsibilities as a composer by not showing up with anything for people to play. While not particularly nuanced or unpacked, this was my reaction at the time, and prompted this exploration into how my composerly voice might manifest itself.

This is also a question that is brought into sharp relief by working with improvisers in any context. This is not just re-hashing the question of why anyone would bother composing for improvisers at all, but rather, having made the decision to do so, how the tension between composer and improviser is negotiated. In this chapter, I will use Rossen Ventzislavov's work (2014; 2016) and others to make the case for a curatorial element to composerly voice, both in general and specifically in my practice.

I first encountered the idea of composer-as-curator through Sound and Music, a UK based funding organisation who seek to 'to create a world where new music and sound prospers, transforming lives, challenging expectations and celebrating the work of its creators' (no date:online). They launched their Composer-Curator strand in 2013, saying 'It supports entrepreneurial artists from a range of disciplines looking to create their own opportunities by curating their own events' (ibid.).

'It is the first programme of its kind in the UK' (ibid.), and as such, Sound and Music are recognising the overlap between the roles of composer and curator, and are nurturing those artists who actively identify as both in their practice.[17] Although this is the case, they are, as they state, focused on the entrepreneurial, and the curatorial element is based around artists running events. I will argue that the link goes much deeper, and that, when composing for improvisers, there is a curatorial element that is inherent to the creative practice itself, not just in an entrepreneurial sense.

This focus on the entrepreneurial is likely to be met with resistance from professional curators and others in the art world. David Balzer's book *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art world and Everything Else* (2015) is sceptical of how the concept of curating has evolved to be used as a marketing tool, citing Subway as an example, calling 'sandwich-makers 'sandwich artists' in an amusing, telling marketing of the artist-curator relationship as parallel to that of the server-customer' (ibid.:110). The concept has even reached the satirists, with website The Daily Mash running a piece about 'Tossers 'curating' everything', even cups of tea: 'The tea-making process is an ongoing dialogue between water, milk and tea that requires careful curation.' (2015:online)

There is similar scepticism, albeit expressed less crudely, within the academy. Lianne McTavish, writing in the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, voices a common concern about 'populist accounts of curation' that position it 'as an act of selection and arrangement that can be applied to any domain' (2017:182). Clearly if I am to argue that I am using curation in my practice, I need to define my terms to avoid being accused of merely selection and arrangement, or worse, becoming a Daily Mash article. The Oxford English Living Dictionary defines the verb to curate as to 'select, organize, and look after the items in (a collection or exhibition)' (no date:online), but McTavish's paper goes deeper than this, quoting a range of arts professionals who 'contend that curating is an active and informed practice done by experts, not people who choose or arrange things based on their predilections' (2017:183).

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[17] When I was fortunate enough to receive a small amount of funding through this scheme myself in 2014, the approach we took was to tour our duo Ripsaw Catfish and invite local musicians to join us each night, thereby curating new ensembles and contexts in which to explore and interrogate our artistic practice.

This makes the distinction not based on what is done, or even how it is done, but on the status of whom it is done by; curating is something done by curators. To examine further what it is that marks these curators out as experts, Ventzislavov suggests that curators 'create artistic value through the art of selection' (Ventzislavov, 2014:83). Doubtfire and Ranchetti also see the curator as creating something new:

> The curator, or in this case the artist-curator, in the process of bringing works together, creates new narrative through and with existing narratives, present within the work composed by the work's maker (Doubtfire and Ranchetti, 2015:online)

McTavish goes on to describe the ways in which curating has been co-opted by people who are not 'real curators' in order to survive in an increasingly neo-liberal world where jobs are threatened; the language of curating is used 'by many people to convey their employability, that is, their ability to do what in marketing language is called 'value creating work'' (2017:189). If curating adds value, then, by invoking it, other professions can make themselves appear more valuable.

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps no surprise that curators themselves are rethinking their own role. Martinon encourages curators to 'revel in the idea of a practice that destabilizes all systemic endeavours' rather than mourning 'the loss of centrality of 'art practice' with regards to curating' (Martinon, 2017:228). So we have some conditions of what curating might entail, and an acknowledgment that any definition within the curating academic field is at best a fluid one. I will now show how these can apply to various musical situations.

Compositional Voice

The improviser's voice is discussed in chapters 1 and 4, and now we turn to discuss a compositional voice. As previously noted, Vijay Iyer recognises an improviser's sound is constituted of 'not only timbre, but also articulation, phrasing, rhythm, melodic vocabulary, and even analytical methods' (2004:399), so too might a composer's voice have many components, such as; melodic vocabulary, analytical methods, approaches to voicing chords, orchestration, preferences for certain groups of instrument or idioms, and so on.

This preference for certain elements/approaches/instruments forms part of what I will call the curatorial component of composing. Several composers use an approach of generating a large amount of material, selecting the elements that speak most to them and then organising how they all sit together best. I suggest that this is similar to the approach a curator may take, selecting works of art and placing them together in a certain way to achieve a final goal. The difference is perhaps that in the traditional example of an exhibition in a gallery, the curator is using artworks already created by other artists, rather than themselves, but I shall unpack this further below.

When Blain describes the processes he used for *Connecting Flights II*, several things he says point towards a curatorial approach:

> …the remaining 4 pitches in the first twelve-note collection, to my ear, appeared to work well together, so were added to the collection (Blain, 2013:135)

The use of the word 'collection' certainly has resonances with a curator developing a collection at a gallery, and 'appeared to work well together' gives a further impression of combining elements in the way a curator might do.

> This process … created 72 6-note chords. … my chosen pathway through the material was to move through the matrix diagonally, from top-left to bottom-right for the groupings a-d, and then from bottom-left to top-right for the groupings e-h; of course, many pathways are possible and would be likely to produce a rich variety of harmonic material. (Blain, 2013:138)

The distinction, of course, is that Blain developed the material himself, as is usual for a composer, and this is why he would define himself as such, and not as a curator. Although, he uses a ‘Boulezian concept of chord multiplication’ (ibd.:134) to generate these 72 different chords, which he then chooses a pathway through, so it could be said that he is curating the particular harmonic language from the wider set developed using an approach from Boulez. If that is too great a leap, then consider what his relationship to the material would be if an assistant had created the 72 chords. I would argue that there is potential for a curatorial element to be evidenced here, but this is brought into sharper focus should the material be generated by improvisers, as I discuss later.

Compare this with Ventzislavov’s discussion of Marcel Duchamp’s 1938 installation *1,200 Bags of Coal* at the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris (although Ventzislavov erroneously has it as being in New York). The installation consisted of literal coal sacks, filled with newspaper and suspended from the ceiling of the main room of the exhibition. He remarks that the exhibition ‘was effectively curated by a man who, under the telling title of “Generator-Arbitrator,” cheekily inhabited the two roles at once’ and by doing so, Duchamp was ‘redrawing the limits of what it meant to be an artist and, equally, of what it meant to be a curator’ (Ventzislavov, 2014:87).

Ventzislavov goes on to ask the reader to ‘try to imagine a professional curator, instead of Duchamp, putting the 1938 exhibition together, it is clear that the result could have been exactly the same’ (ibid.). In Duchamp’s case this is perhaps true, in that he was literally using a large number of coal sacks, but here the analogy with Blain and composers in general breaks down, as they create their own materials as described above. I am not trying to argue that all composers are curators, but instead that there is a curatorial aspect to the approaches that I, and others, have used. Or rather, that there is an element to my composerly voice that can be explained as curation, and helps to shed light upon my research question regarding the balancing of composer’s and improviser’s voice.[18]

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[18] From a broader perspective, it may be possible to use this curatorial aspect of composing to justify the presence of a composer at all in improvised music. The music

This is where my practice sits, in particular the compositions that form the LUME Lab suite, but in truth there is an element of it in all my work. By inviting musicians to improvise, and then by picking through the recordings of these improvisations to find material to use for the finished compositions, one can see the improvisations as analogous with individual artworks, and the composition as the exhibition in a gallery.

Before addressing examples from within improvised music, I will outline two more from outside, one looking at electroacoustic music, and first, Charles Ives. He frequently, and famously, used material from other people's compositions in his work, to the extent that books have been written on the subject. J. Peter Burkholder's book *All Made of Tunes: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowing* (1995) discusses the various techniques Ives used to incorporate these elements into his own compositions, from variations on a particular tune and paraphrasing to collage and patchwork of multiple elements at once. The book also shows that the overall approach of Ives fits with our definition of curating, namely

> …all [the different techniques] are interrelated in the ways they spring from existing music and recreate borrowed material *in a new context*. (Burkholder, 1995:415 emphasis added)

Or, in other words, he allows 'relationships to be communicated non-verbally through … contextual … dialogue'. (Doubtfire and Ranchetti, 2015:online) To underline this further, Burkholder also shows that Ives 'marks and evidences his … understanding of the artefacts' (ibid.) when drawing comparisons to other composers who also used folk tunes in their work, but with less understanding of the material than Ives

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can happen without the presence of a composer, just as art happens without the need for a curator, but it is possible to bring together a group of highly individual musicians and still to reflect the composer's voice, just as Hans-Ulrich Obrist has made a name for himself as a curator. Ventzislavov recognises this too, pointing out that 'for an increasing number of curators, their personal idiosyncrasies are becoming part of the larger custodial narratives' (2014:91).

> [the pieces] had nothing to offer musically or spiritually, for Gilbert’s music did not manifest a deep identification with the idealism and spirit that underlay the black struggle for freedom and equality. (Burkholder, 1995:423)

Ives highlighting this lack of respect and understanding of the source material, the ‘artworks, objects or ideas’, by other composers seems to predict the modern debate around curating, resonating with McTavish’s assertion above that curators are experts involved in ‘an active and informed practice’ (2017:183)

Turning to electroacoustic music, Aaron Einbond’s 2014 conference paper explicitly addresses the composer as curator.

> In one sense nearly all electroacoustic music could be termed “creative curation,” as all except purely synthesized electronic sound material is borrowed from some source. (Einbond, 2014:2)

He is offering a definition of curation as existing when material is not generated directly by the artist themselves, before going on to talk specifically about pieces that demonstrate the composer acting as curator, in each case working with libraries of existing information, in the form of a ‘cultural archive’ or ‘found sounds’ (ibid.:4) for example. For Einbond, the shift to a more curatorial approach to creativity comes from technological advances, rather than motivated by post-structuralist arguments as Ventzislavov[19] is, and he makes reference to a need to challenge ‘pre-digital concepts of originality and authenticity’ on several occasions. (ibid.:2) Regardless of the motivation, the bulk of the paper is discussing approaches to dealing with datasets in electroacoustic music, and as such assumes that the composer becomes a curator, or at least uses curation in their work. At no point does he question whether there is an overlap or not. This is something I believe is present in all work with improvisers, and I now present some examples.

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[19] ‘If we accept, on Wilde’s and Barthes’ urging, that authorship is a function of spectatorship, it seems a logical next step to recognize all artworld actors with any sway over the modes of spectatorship as authors, or coauthors, of the exhibited work’ (Ventzislavov, 2014:87).

Conduction-as-curation

One approach to working with large groups of improvisers falls under what Evan Parker calls the ‘philosophically distinct strand’ of being ‘conducted or signal-led’ (2014:3) (the other two strands being the free improvisation mainstream, and chance/aleatory/text). Well known proponents of this approach include Butch Morris, who has patented his approach, called Conduction, another is Sound Painting, developed by Walter Thompson. Common to both of these approaches is a direction instructing musicians to repeat what they are doing, selecting material that the conductor likes. Morris’ gesture for this in Conduction is: ‘To motion for repeat, the conductor forms the letter "U" with the left hand and then designates who the command is meant for’ (Almeida, 2008:22).

They can then direct other musicians to join in, thus placing together different artists to provide a context for their performance. For example, one phrase can be highlighted, repeated by one player, followed by other musicians joining in and developing the material through improvisation. In this way, the phrase has become part of a new context, and the narratives of the piece have formed around it.[20] This happens in a similar way to how a gallery curator might bring together artworks for an exhibition, sometimes re-contextualising them in the process, ‘creating new narratives’. In this way, conducting an ensemble such as this could be seen as real-time curation.

Cobra-as-curation

The piece Cobra is discussed elsewhere in this thesis, but here the relevance appears in interview with its composer John Zorn, in which he hints at curation in his work.

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[20] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAC3LXwssqE for a good example of this in practice, Butch Morris conducting in New York in 2012, and explaining to the audience as he goes.

> The choosing of the players has always been a crucial part of the performance process and the art of choosing a band and being a good band leader is not something you can impart on paper in a written preface to the score. (Zorn in Cox and Warner, 2004:197)

He is making this point here in relation to why he has chosen to never fully publish the score for Cobra, and he recognises a component to his artistic output that it is not possible to write down, and thus distinguishes it from composition in a more traditional sense. The language Zorn uses is similar to Ventzislavov's assertion that curators 'create artistic value through the art of selection' (2014:83), and he is certainly positioning himself as an expert band leader, which is consistent with McTavish's definition of curating also. This is recognised in Rodrigo Constanzo's thesis where he remarks on 'John Zorn's curatorial approach to improvisation, specifically in his game piece Cobra' (2016:onlne). What Constanzo means by this can be further illuminated by Doubtfire and Ranchetti's definition of what it means to be a curator:

> In bringing artwork, objects or ideas together, the curator marks and evidences his/her understanding of the artefacts and their relationships, whilst allowing such relationships to be communicated non-verbally through visual, contextual or relational dialogue. (Doubtfire and Ranchetti, 2015:online)

Replace the words 'artwork', 'objects' and 'artefacts' with 'musicians' in the above quote and it could have been written about Cobra*,* which is all about the relationships between the musicians that Zorn brings together to perform the piece; 'I basically create a small society and everybody finds their own position in that society' (Zorn in Bailey, 1992:78).

Turning inward

In reflecting on the curatorial aspect of my own practice, there are some clear examples that reveal something of my own voice, through what I have chosen to include, or curated.

The piece Managed Decline, discussed elsewhere in this thesis, started with an element taken from an improvisation with myself, a trumpet player and tenor saxophonist. The improvisation begins with delicate trumpet notes, setting a mood that the guitar picks up on, playing a fairly sparse, atonal selection of notes. Around 1:20, the trumpet plays a sustained Fb note, with the guitar joining ten seconds later a minor third below on a Db, both repeating their notes. This relatively static point then provides a basis for the tenor to enter, playing in quite a busy fashion in juxtaposition to the trumpet and guitar texture. Given that this is the first tenor entry, the other two players maybe see this as a productive area for exploration, and so the trumpet remains on Fb until 2:10, when she further establishes a tonality by use of an Eb note.

Myself on guitar remains on the re-attacked Db until 3:30 when I gradually break with the tonality to join the busy tenor improvising, while the trumpet player continues the drone, breaking away to play short melodic phrases with other diatonic notes from a Db Aeolian mode, until at 4:50 the motif that would later form the basis of the piece is heard, ending on a strong C note.[21]

The trumpet and then myself on guitar have established a tonality of Db minor together, which then all three players have either played inside of or played against, playing with the tension created by dissonance, but also the tension created by sustaining one pitch for a long time.

In listening back to these improvisations and selecting passages to further develop in the next phase of composition, it is clear that my ear was drawn to the drone-like qualities of this passage, and in that context the melodic lines of the trumpet stood out particularly strongly against the backdrop of both the well established tonality, and the busy chattering lines from the tenor and guitar. In focussing in on the drone, both initially in the moment as an improviser, and then later on when listening back and curating elements to bring back to the group for development, I have revealed something of my own voice as a composer and musician.

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[21] A very clear shift given the strongly established Db minor tonality, and could either be thought of as lending a melodic minor flavour, or a complete shift of key.

Drones are also present, to a lesser extent, in the piece Winter 16. In developing this piece, as described elsewhere, I invited the musicians involved to send me recordings of them improvising solo in response to recordings I had sent them of me doing the same. The resultant score features two boxes representing long sustained tones, one varying timbre and one varying tuning. I chose these as all the recordings featured long sustained tones at some point, either varying the timbre, or, less often, the intonation. While one sustained tone alone might not constitute a drone (and without other musicians to reinforce or play in contrast to the long tones, none of the musicians stayed with just the one note for very long before moving to explore other areas), I took it as an indication that the group would work well exploring this element, and my ear was, again, clearly drawn to the drone-like possibilities.

My own history as a listener has involved a lot of music with drone-like qualities. The first time I can recall being interested in drones is when listening to the Scottish band Mogwai in my teenage years, and the impact of having one small musical idea drawn out to 15 or more minutes stayed with me. Shortly after this time I would have heard the Spiritualized album *Pure Phase* (1995), during which almost every tune features a sustained organ tone throughout the piece. In fact, Spiritualized released a 12” vinyl of just this drone, which they named the Pure Phase Tone. The release *Pure Phase Tones For D.J.’s* (1996) features the drone at several different pitches, all the notes of the diatonic C major scale plus a B flat, at different octaves depending on which speed the turntable is set to. As well as being present throughout the record, Spiritualized regularly use the Pure Phase Tone live in between songs. At one point, Spiritualized were the band I had seen most in live performance, and they had a lasting impact on me.

I am not arguing that all of this background on my teenage years is implicit when listening to a performance of Managed Decline or Winter 16, but rather that element of my voice as a composer is present, even though the material originated in the musicians' improvisations. My tendency towards drones has manifest itself through my curating of other people's improvisations, much as 'for an increasing number of curators, their personal idiosyncrasies are becoming part of the larger custodial narratives' (Ventzislavov, 2014:91).

I have found similar results with other elements too. From the initial 5 melodic phrases I sent to the band when writing Always A Fox, I added a textural element, written on the score as 'A Texture: clicks, slaptongue etc.' This came from an early rehearsal version of the piece with a saxophonist from Article XI and some other players on a residential that I took part it at the same time as working on the composition. The texture was hinted at from the saxophone, and responded to and developed by the drummer and guitarists. In this version it does not last long and the texture gives way to more tonal playing. My ear was drawn to the staccato clicks and I incorporated this into the score to allow space for this to happen as an event in its own right, but also as a potential bridging element for transitioning between two of the more tonal sections, or for stacking on top of other sections.

Winter 16 also features a box that is an invitation to play texturally. In this case, however, I have not specified how, rather given some visual prompts. Textural playing is perhaps something that connects the world of free improvisation, where often players explore extended techniques in order to develop their own voice (as discussed with reference to Keith Rowe and others in chapter 1). This texture box is to encourage the kind of 'squeaks, hisses and rasps' that make up the improviser's 'special vocabulary' (Corbett, 2016:88) to become a part of the piece. David Toop, too, recognises 'a pulse, a texture, a wash' (2016:166) as being central to the development of improvised music in Britain, with these sorts of approaches replacing melody, rhythm and so on as fundamentals of the music.

Here again I find resonance with the discussion of Ives earlier; Burkholder sees Ives' use of musical borrowing as expressing a fundamental part of his musical personality. By bringing 'the music he had known is his youth into his art songs' Ives is 'speaking for himself, in a language that is his own, one that assimilates all the musical tongues he has learned' (Burkholder, 1995:424-5). Or, as I argued above, he is curating these elements that he has expert knowledge of, and in doing so creates a new narrative, and something of his composerly voice is revealed through this process.

Conclusion

Returning to Ventzislavov, there are two key quotes that can be modified to apply to music. As he says 'artworks can be viewed as raw materials for curatorial creation' (2014:89), we can re-imagine this to say that musical elements, such as a melody, a chord and so on, could also be viewed as raw materials for curatorial creation. I have described above how I have done just this, taking musical elements from improvisations and creating new narratives by re-contextualising them into pieces. Through the discussion around drones and textures, I have tried to highlight that I am doing more than just rearranging based on my predilections, as McTavish warns against, but instead I am deeply invested in the forms, as I am in improvised music, thus allowing me to curate these as part of my artistic practice.

Just as Ventzislavov says

> …we are justified to think that curatorial work retains a strong element of artistic creativity to the extent that it engenders ever new narratives for artworks to dwell in. (ibid.:90)

So too can we say of composers writing for improvisers that they are engendering new narratives for the improviser to dwell in, in the form of structures to be improvised in, or melodic and harmonic material to frame or inspiration a performance, for example. Or, in the case of bandleaders such as Zorn, creating new narratives by bringing together artists with their own voices and encouraging them to improvise together.

I have used Ventzislavov's ideas of the curator-as-artist to explain an aspect of both my composerly voice, and that of any composer working with improvising musicians. In doing so have contributed to the discussion around curating, as 'curating is indeed no longer confined to art’ (Martinon, 2017:226), I have shown how it can usefully be expanded to include musical composition, perhaps generally, but certainly within my practice.

Addressing the initial thought that led me to this line of enquiry, accepting a curatorial element to my work allows me to see how my voice as a composer can still be present even when sharing compositional authority with the musicians I work with.

Chapter 6: Notation

The focus of my research has been on the process of developing new compositions, rather than how they are presented. However, during the course of the project, several different insights have arisen that relate specifically to notation, and the effectiveness or otherwise of different approaches to score making. I did not set out to write a thesis in notation, and other people have done so in much more depth, most notably Christopher Williams' thesis *Tactile Paths* (2016), but it became relevant to my enquiry as musicians raised the issue of notation during interviews about my processes.

In this chapter, firstly I will discuss difficulties caused by my use of standard notation, which contradict some of Williams' thoughts. I find that the experiences can be better explained using Golinski's thesis (2012), in which he highlights the authority that notation holds. Related to this, I also discuss difficulties faced when engaging with graphic notation in Cornelius Cardew's Autumn '60, and how I dealt with this in my piece Winter 16. Both of these instances are examples of the voice of the improviser being inhibited, and as such are related to the core themes I am investigating. In the second section of this chapter, I engage with a particular approach to structuring pieces from Ken Vandermark, which I include in this chapter on notation as it leads to a discussion on how the structure is presented.

All three points above are of interest when brought into the context of the kind of musicians I work with; the poly-free or pan-idiomatic musicians outlined in chapter 1. They are only difficulties given the specific context I am in, and, equally, bringing them into my specific context can bring about deeper understanding of the respective sources.

Notational Hierarchy - LUME Lab Octet

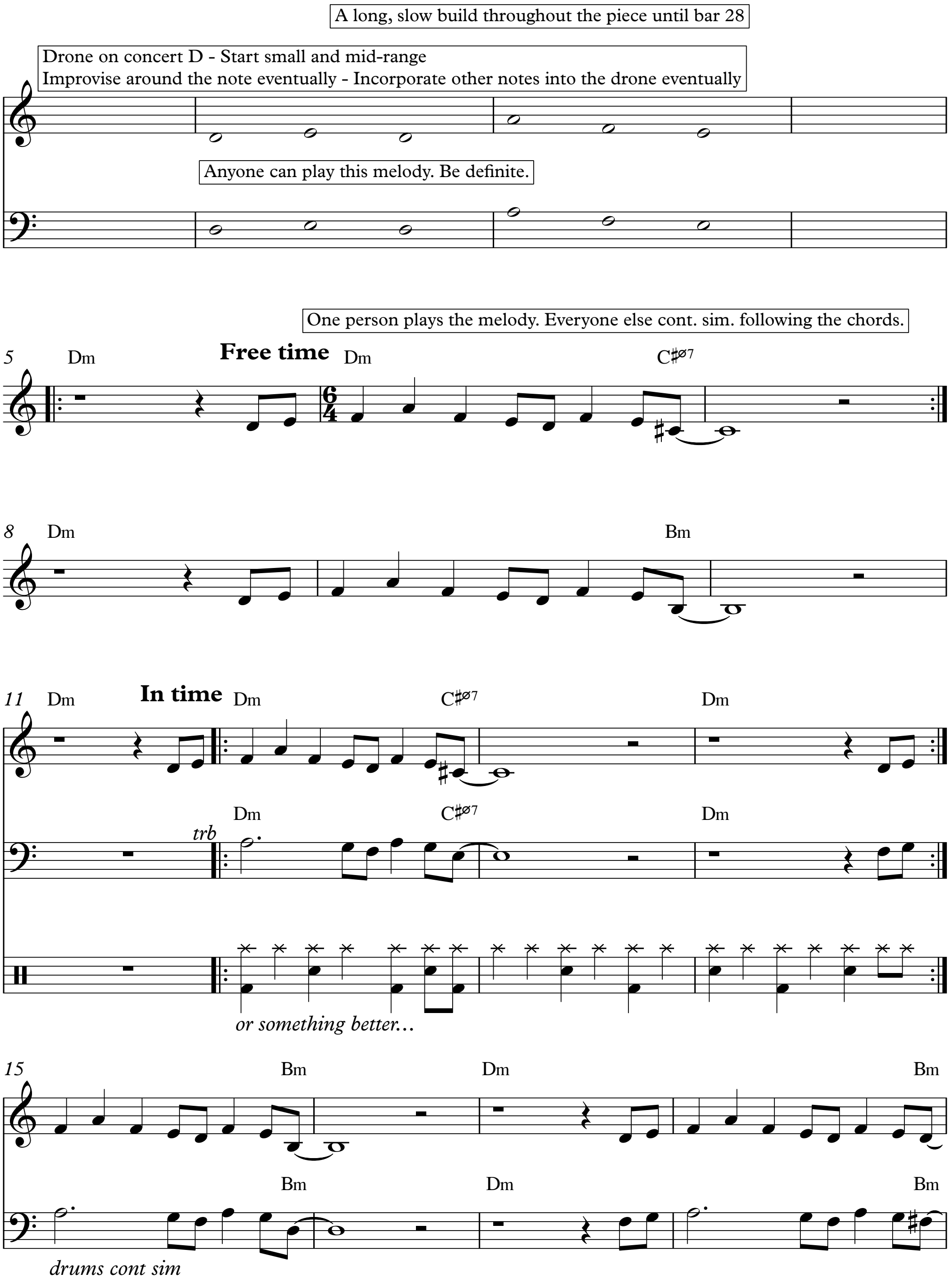
In Christopher Williams' thesis *Tactile Paths,* he sets out his philosophy on notation, treating it 'non-hierarchically as another element in the cognitive system, dynamically interacting with other agents' (2016:30) and elsewhere highlighting that 'for the improviser … scores are simply one more artefact in the musical environment' (2016:14).

This points towards a utopian view of notation that I too would hope to be the case, but the experiences with LUME Lab Octet and further discussions with musicians suggests it might not be. Notation and the score still hold high status in these situations, as discussed below, despite me mostly working with musicians that I expect to feel free to take liberties with the written material. By involving them in the composition process I hope that this results in greater ownership of the material, and therefore more risk-taking, as discussed in relation to devising in chapter 4. Perhaps this is easier in bands that have developed this way of working together, rather than groups brought together for a one-off performance, as LUME Lab Octet or Vonnegut Collective were.

In interview, Rennie mentioned a 'disconnect between how free the initial plays were and how fixed the compositions ended up being' (2017:interview). Expanding on this, they made reference to the music being 'very much harmonically dictated throughout quite a lot of the pieces' (ibid.) – something that was apparent most in Managed Decline (largely a drone piece in D minor), and When Flowering (a piece with a chord sequence to follow). The criticism was that 'there wasn't that much room for broadening the harmonic pallet' (ibid.), however, my intention with both these pieces had been for more harmonic ambiguity. Taking When Flowering as an example, I had intended the long tones in section B to be pulled around, by improvising with these as a focal point.

Managed Decline

LUME Lab Octet


A long, slow build throughout the piece until bar 28

Drone on concert D - Start small and mid-range
Improvise around the note eventually - Incorporate other notes into the drone eventually

Anyone can play this melody. Be definite.

One person plays the melody. Everyone else cont. sim. following the chords.

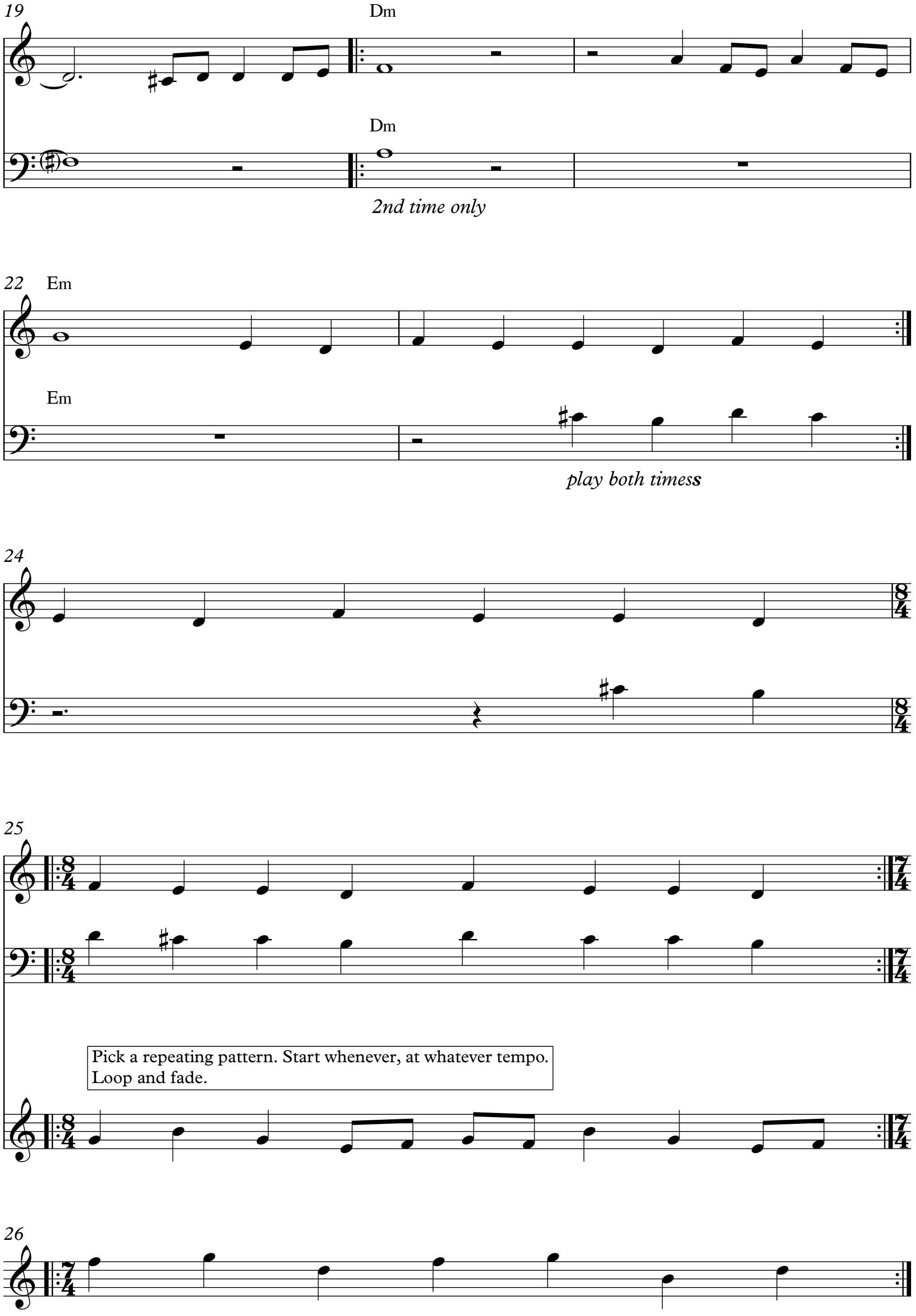
Free time

In time

or something better...

drums cont sim

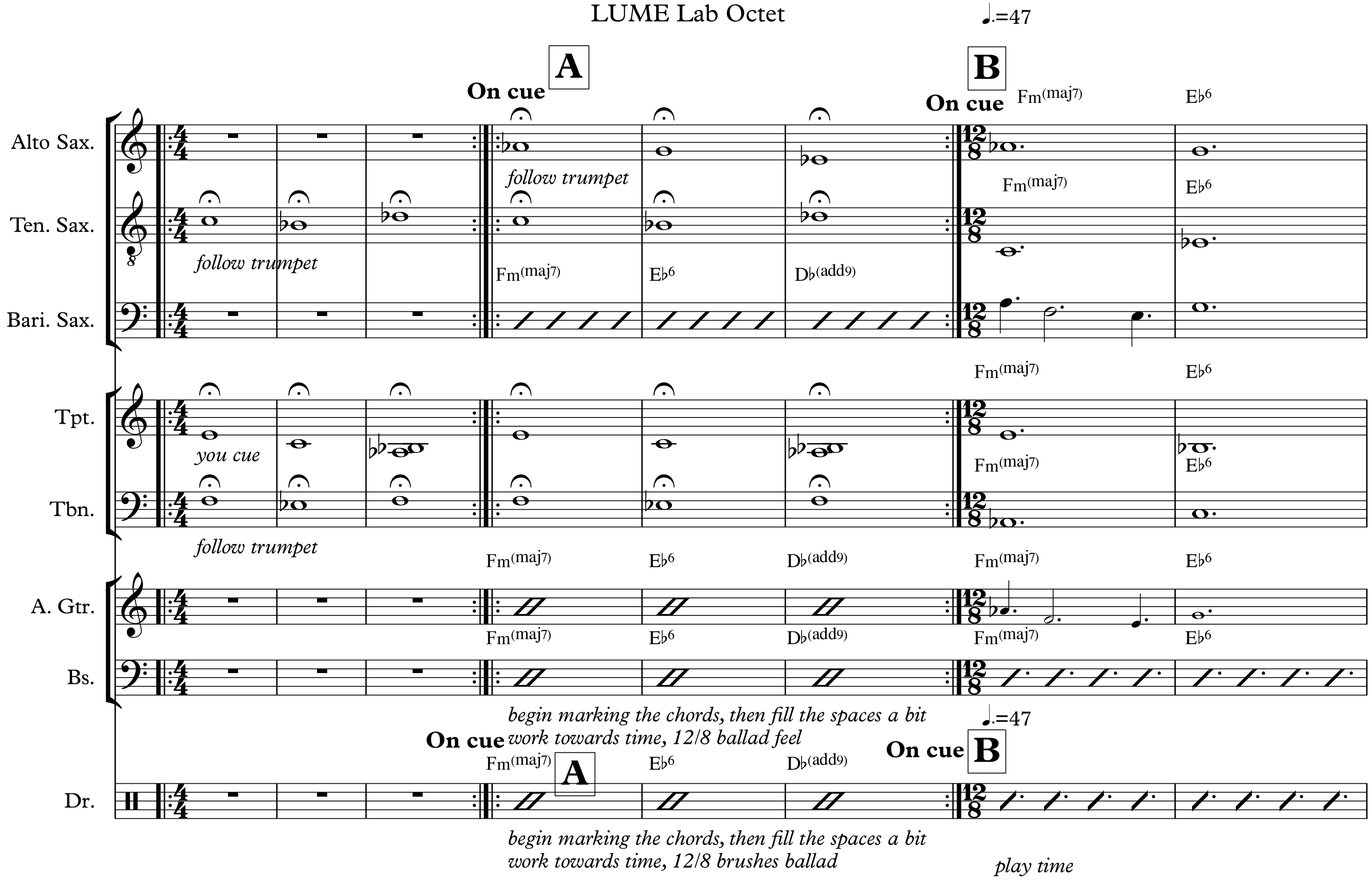
5
Dm
Dm
C♯ø7
8
Dm
Bm
11
Dm
Dm
C♯ø7
Dm
Dm
C♯ø7
Dm
trb
15
Bm
Dm
Bm
Bm
Dm
Bm


19
Dm
Dm
2nd time only
22
Em
Em
play both timess
24
25
26

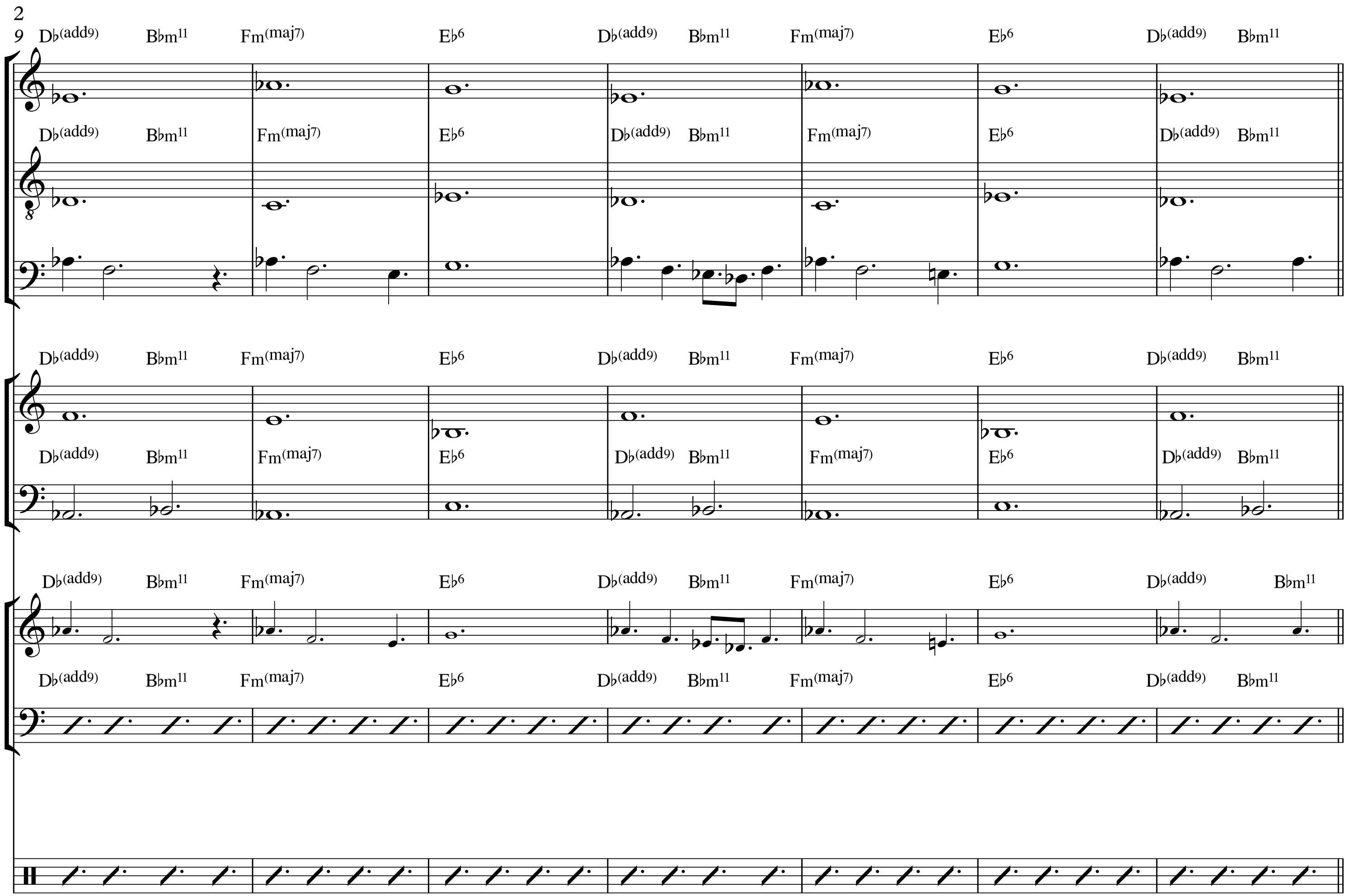
Pick a repeating pattern. Start whenever, at whatever tempo.
Loop and fade.

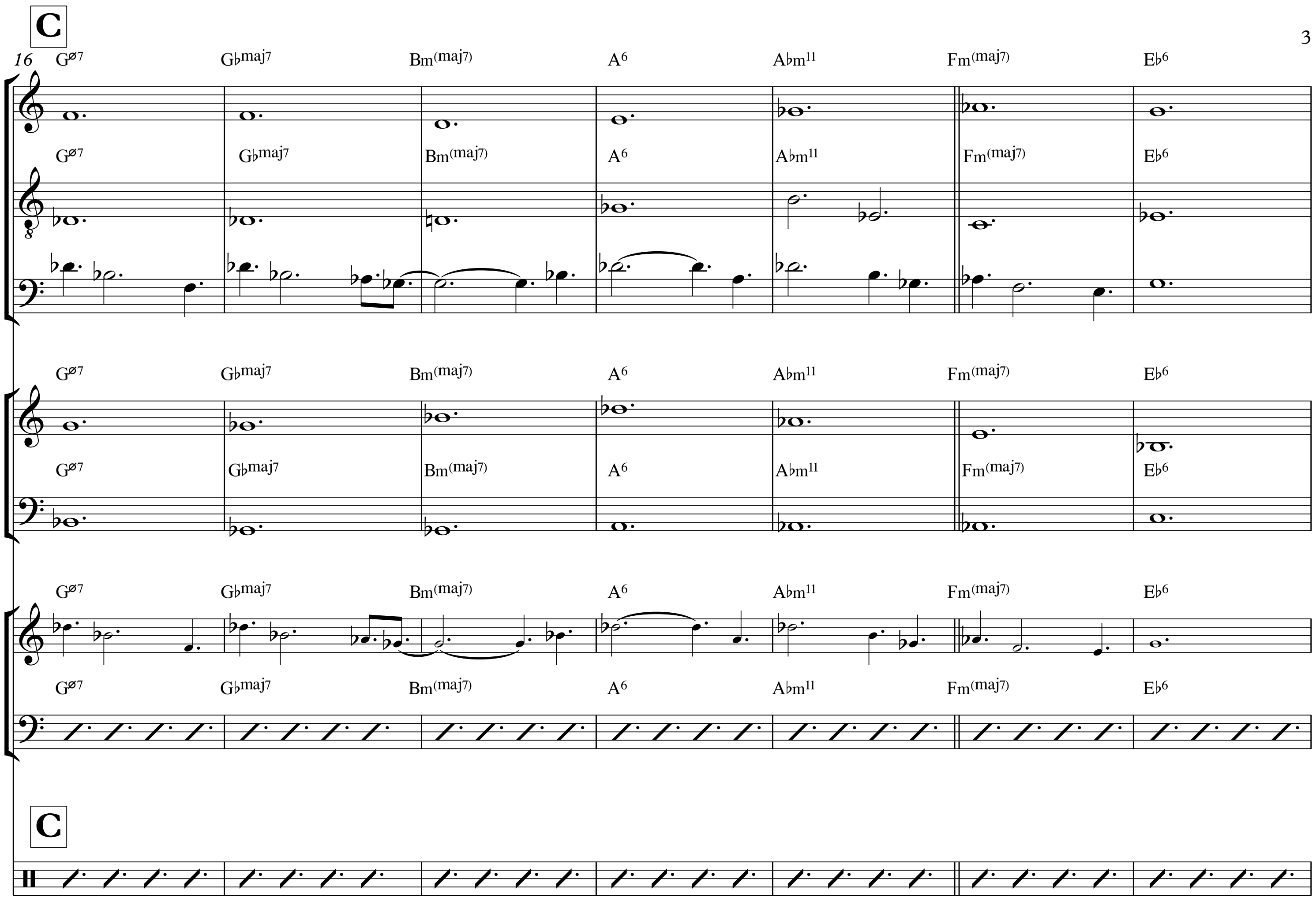
When Flowering

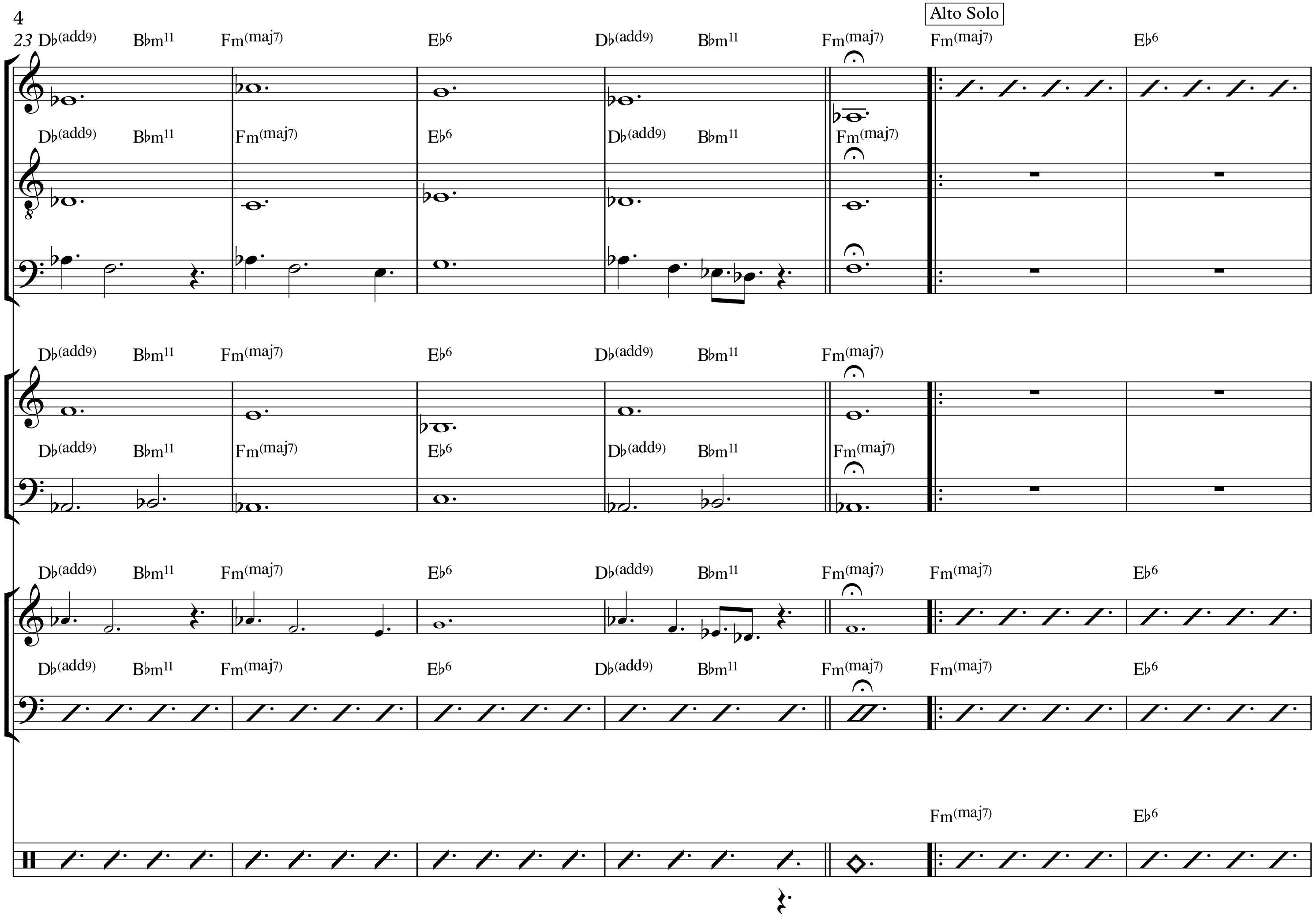
LUME Lab Octet

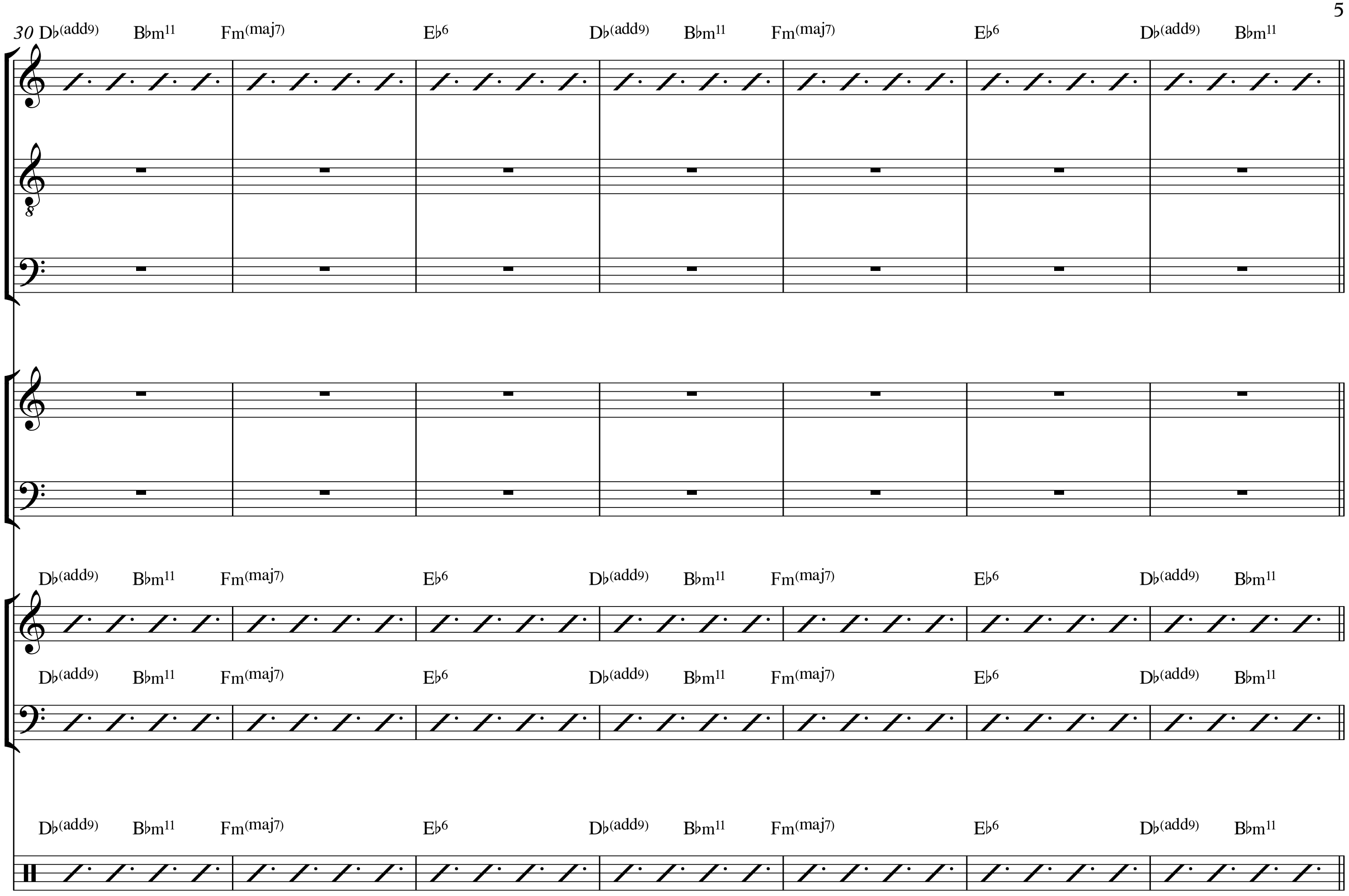


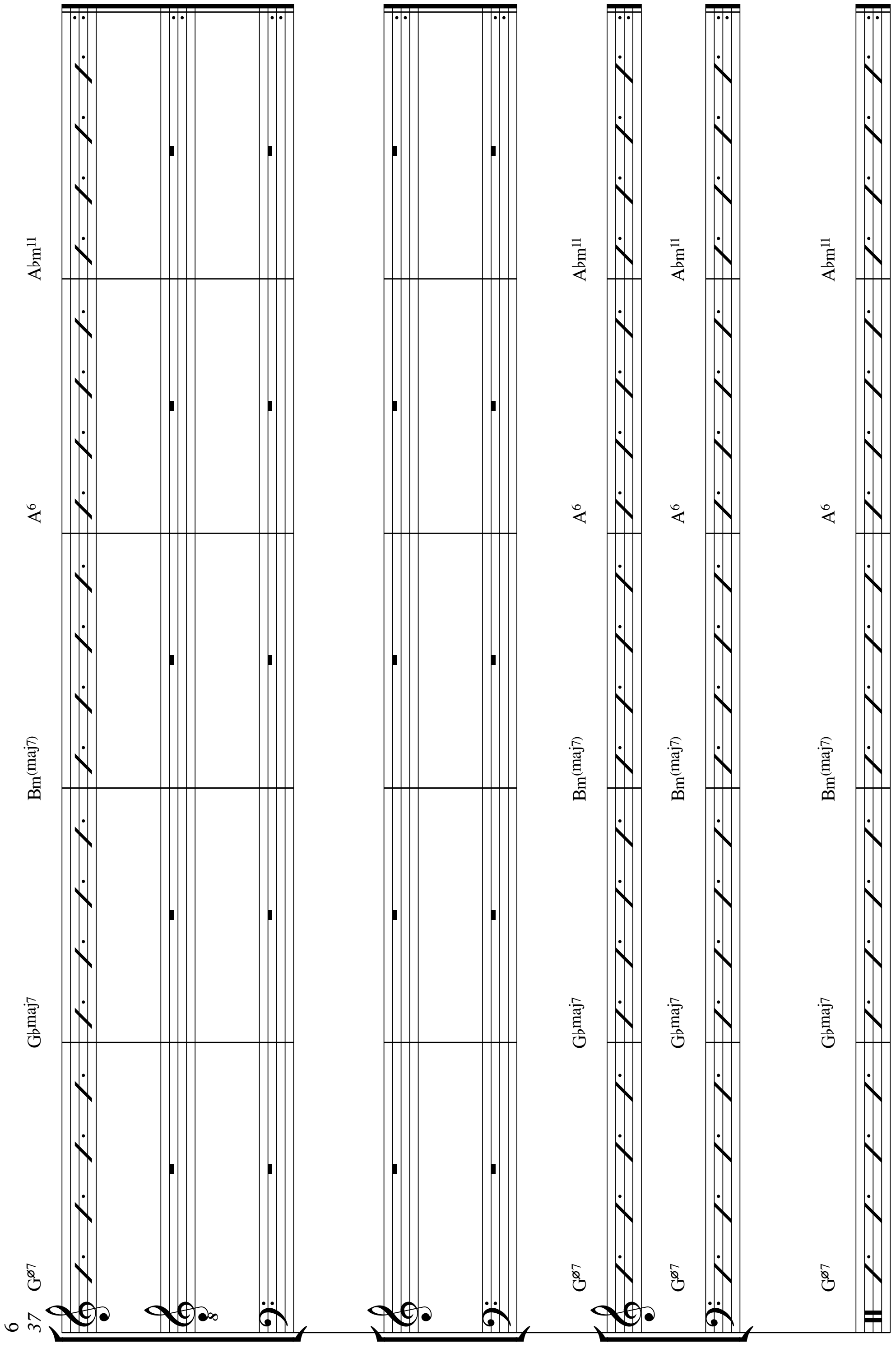
♩.=47
On cue
A
B
Alto Sax.
Ten. Sax.
Bari. Sax.
Tpt.
Tbn.
A. Gtr.
Bs.
Dr.
follow trumpet
you cue
Fm(maj7)
E♭6
D♭(add9)
begin marking the chords, then fill the spaces a bit
work towards time, 12/8 ballad feel
begin marking the chords, then fill the spaces a bit
work towards time, 12/8 brushes ballad
play time

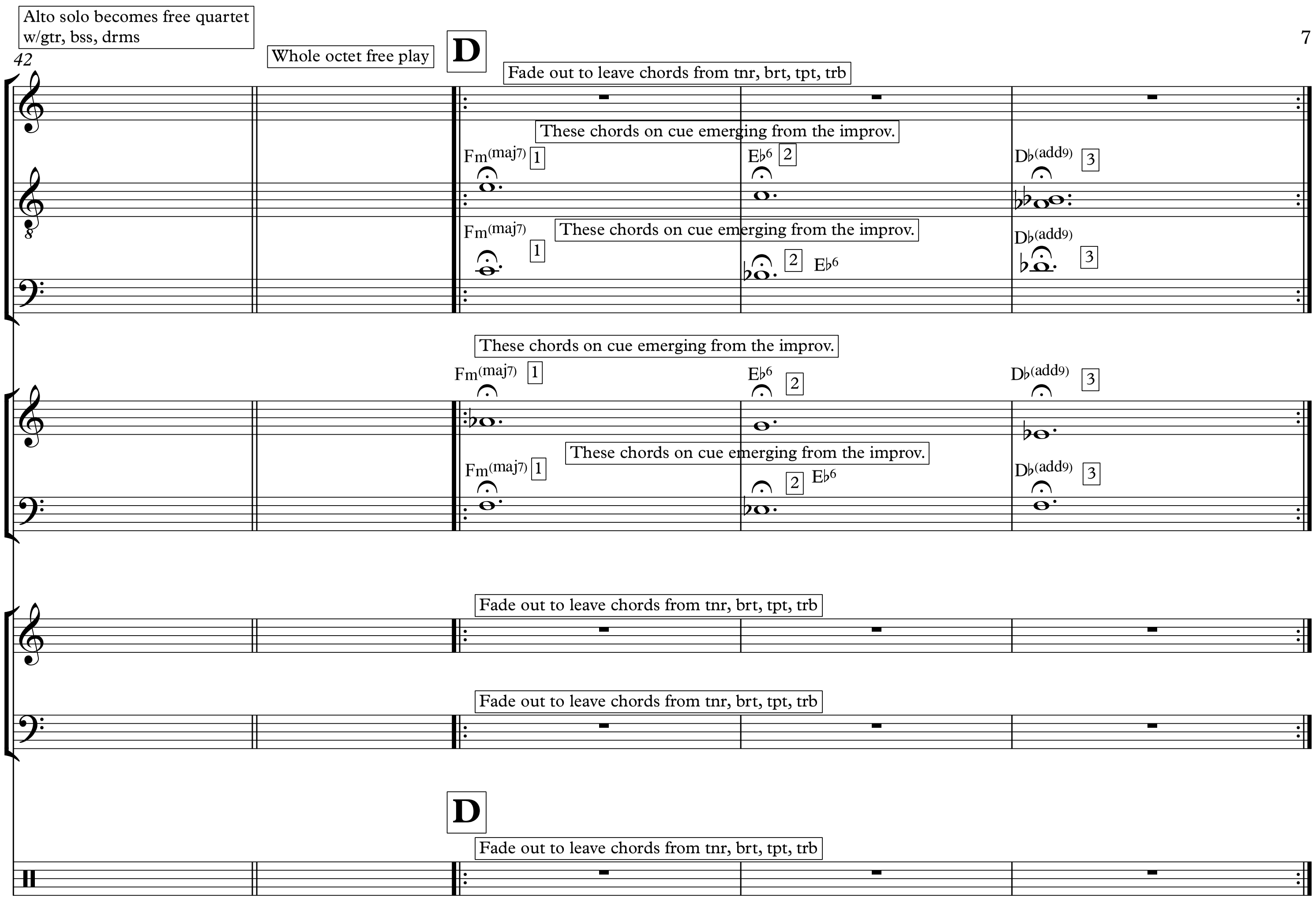

2
9
D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11
D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11
D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11
D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11
D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11
D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11 Fm(maj7) E♭6 D♭(add9) B♭m11


C
16
Gø7
G♭maj7
Bm(maj7)
A6
A♭m11
Fm(maj7)
E♭6
C


23
Alto Solo
D♭(add9)
B♭m11
Fm(maj7)
E♭6
D♭(add9)
B♭m11
Fm(maj7)
Fm(maj7)
E♭6


30
D♭(add9)
B♭m11
Fm(maj7)
E♭6
D♭(add9)
B♭m11
Fm(maj7)
E♭6
D♭(add9)
B♭m11


6
37
Gø7
G♭maj7
Bm(maj7)
A6
A♭m11


Alto solo becomes free quartet w/gtr, bss, drms
42
Whole octet free play
D
Fade out to leave chords from tnr, brt, tpt, trb
These chords on cue emerging from the improv.
Fm(maj7) 1
E♭6 2
D♭(add9) 3
These chords on cue emerging from the improv.
Fm(maj7) 1
E♭6 2
D♭(add9) 3
These chords on cue emerging from the improv.
Fm(maj7) 1
E♭6 2
D♭(add9) 3
These chords on cue emerging from the improv.
Fm(maj7) 1
E♭6 2
D♭(add9) 3
Fade out to leave chords from tnr, brt, tpt, trb
Fade out to leave chords from tnr, brt, tpt, trb
D
Fade out to leave chords from tnr, brt, tpt, trb

Virginia Anderson in her chapter in *Sound & Score* (2013) offers an analytical framework for assessing scores, and three specific approaches. These are firstly to do with the physical properties of the score, for example graphic, text and standard notation. The second approach is 'Idea Transmission Model' (ibid.:134), and hinges on 'how the musical idea is transmitted from composer to performer and listener through the score' (ibid.:131). In the third of these, which she refers to as the 'pursuit of happiness' (ibid.:137), the question she asks of each score is 'What are the limits of realization in a given piece? What is possible, and what is impossible?' (ibid.:131).

Applying this third approach to my LUME Lab Octet, one can see why the musicians felt restricted by When Flowering. Nothing about the physical document of the score suggests anything other than playing the semibreves as just that. In rehearsal I had explained how I had wanted these notes to function as a tonal centre, rather than simply playing the written notes, and it had been easier for me to talk about this approach rather than think of a way to notate it, as I was unaware of any way that exists within traditional western notation. In hindsight, this was a short-cut I should not have taken, and one that casts doubt on to notion of notation as a non-hierarchical element, as suggested by Williams. An alternate viewpoint comes from Krzysztof Golinski:

> Most musical instruction treats notated material as an absolute and we are taught that there is a correct and an incorrect to play it (Golinski, 2012:29)

This is not supported by evidence in Golinski's writing, and in particular ignores strong aural traditions both outside of the western world (Indian classical music) and within it, such as in folk music and jazz. Perhaps a more accurate statement would be: "Most musical instruction *that deals with notation* treats notated material as an absolute…", but this was certainly reflective of my experiences.

Although the musicians interviewed supported Golinski's assertions about the "right" and "wrong" ways to play written material, these same musicians are elsewhere quite comfortable taking liberties with written material. This is discussed in the chapter on Distributed Direction, but I raise it again here to suggest that one potential reason for reverting to a learned approach to notation could stem from the unfamiliar nature of the LUME Lab Octet. This was the first performance for this group, and I specifically wanted to work with musicians who had not performed my compositions before. As such, we had not had the time to develop the collective approach that is needed when making this kind of music. This resulted in the conditions Golinski predicts, of treating ‘notated material as an absolute’ (2012:29).

In fact, the musicians I interviewed (those regular collaborators, while the rest of the octet was chosen to be musicians who hadn’t worked on my compositions previously) raised this point exactly. During the discussions, Rennie asked:

> Can you get away with things being on the paper that don’t mean necessarily what people wouldn’t think or not being on the paper and being able to do verbal instructions or have some tacit agreement because you have the luxury of working with a close group of collaborators who are mostly close friends as well? (2017:interview)

This sentiment was a big motivating factor for bringing together the LUME Lab Octet, seeking to expand my circle of collaborators and specifically to highlight issues with my working methods by scrutinising them in less familiar circumstances.

Graphics - Winter 16

Given the concerns raised above about traditional western notation, and how this may be treated as an absolute, this could be a motivation to investigate graphic scores, and indeed this point was raised in interview:

> What’s useful about less traditional notation methods is that they at least invite a ‘ok so what do I do here?’ rather than ‘ok I think I get this’ … it forms, subliminally or subconsciously, some kind of attitude to an approach. (Rennie, 2017:interview)

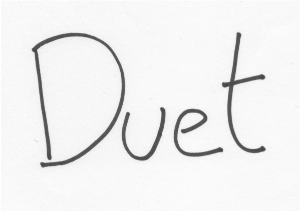
Golinkski also recommends this as an approach, saying ‘musicians do not feel the same constraints of “right” and “wrong” ways to play the material’ when using non-standard notation (2012:30). Accordingly, I did engage with graphic notation during my project, specifically for the piece Winter 16. The opportunity to do this arose from a commission from the Vonnegut Collective, a chamber ensemble established by two members of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra ‘making new music relevant and accessible through improvisation and innovative collaborations’ (Collective, 2016:online).

Winter 16

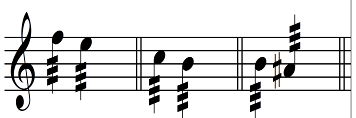
A Hunter

(a response to 'Autumn 60' by Cornelius Cardew)

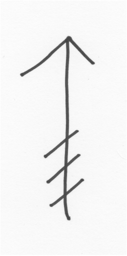
- For improvising soloist with ensemble of any size.
- The soloist is also the conductor.
- On soloist's cue, the ensemble should move to any of the 12 boxes. Or continue doing what they are doing. This repeats for the duration of the piece.
- The box in bold ('Soloist's Melody') shouldn't be played by any musician until the soloist has played it.
- The soloist is free to improvise whatever music they wish, but it must feature the 'Soloist's Melody' at some point.
- In addition, the ensemble should collectively label three sections 1, 2 and 3. The soloist may cue these by holding up the appropriate number of fingers. For added fun, the ensemble should pick these sections and not tell the soloist.
- Ending: if an ending doesn't occur naturally, the soloist should make a fist (to end the piece abruptly on the next cue) or hold up 5 fingers (to fade out on the current texture)



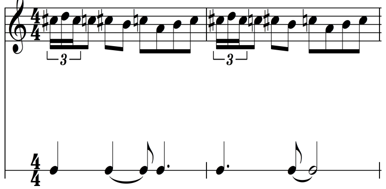
…with the soloist



…or other semitones



Tremolo and slide up

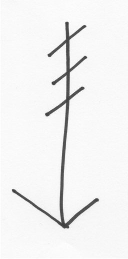


Continue in a similar manner

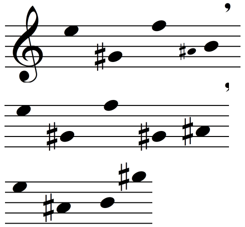
Whatever pitches fit. Omit some notes sometimes too.

Pick a line

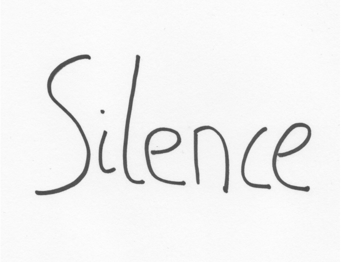
Concert

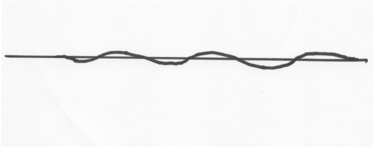


Tremolo and slide down

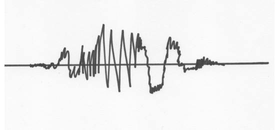


Soloist's Melody (expand)

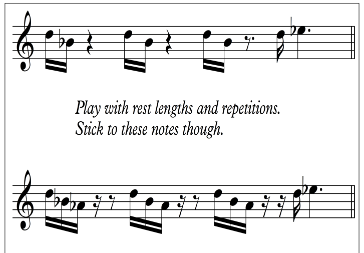




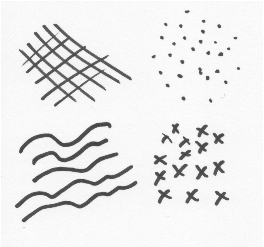
Long sustained tones, vary tuning. Look for beats frequencies.



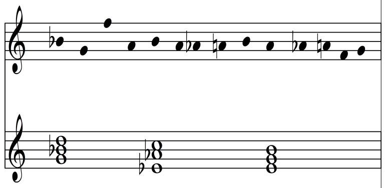
Long sustained tones, vary timbre



Play with rest lengths and repetitions.
Stick to these notes though.



Improvise a texture



Pick a line

The commission was to respond to the Cornelius Cardew piece Autumn ‘60, which features some traditional notation alongside sixteen additional symbols, defined in the preface to the score, and uses a conductor to cue transitions from one bar to the next. I first explored the piece in workshop sessions with the other members of the Vonnegut Collective, which immediately posed difficulties for the musicians’ producing performances that felt forced, with little opportunity for interaction between musicians. Edward Venn writes that ‘the musical challenges posed by Autumn ‘60 are considerable’ (2006:6), and this held true in our experience, with the density of information proving a barrier to improvisation, even with only sixteen new symbols.

Venn goes on to suggest that these challenges are due to it ‘requiring performers to participate in the creative process of the work’ (ibid). However, I would argue that improvisers constantly involve themselves in the creative process when performing, and that the challenges faced were more due to the large amount of unfamiliar information on the score. After one short run-through, the conductor commented that ‘it really flew as soon as I went ‘play on’ … you both relaxed loads’ (author’s own recording, 2015); supporting the notion that being tied too rigorously to a score had been inhibiting the performance. The violinist too commented that her ‘brain certainly [was] having to work quite hard’ and struggling with ‘making lots of decisions very quickly based on a lot of information’ (ibid.).

With more rehearsal time, the complexity of the score may well cease to be such a barrier. Although, this carries with it a risk of stagnation, whereby with repetition the musicians learn a particular way of navigating the score, and indeed they are encouraged to so by presence of blank staves ‘…for writing in whatever one intends to play…’ (Cardew, 1960:4). This would even further diminish the role of improvisation, and Ken Vandermark raises this particular issue below. At this stage, it is worth reflecting that the challenges faced by using conventional notation, and the inherent respect for this inbuilt into many trained musicians are not solved by using graphic notation; once the language is learned well enough to execute the piece, it again becomes a case of treating ‘…notated material as an absolute…’ (Golinski, 2012:29).

So, again, as with my use of traditional notation critiqued with reference to the LUME

Lab Octet, we find an overly specified composition inhibiting the improviser, most likely born out of the fact Cardew was not writing for improvising musicians in 1960. Indeed, when Cardew later joined AMM in 1966, it was clear to the group's percussionist Eddie Prévost that 'Cardew was looking for something that he couldn't find in his own milieu' (Hopkins, 2009), reflecting the differences between the types of musicians he had previously been working with, and the improvisers he sought out. Once again, this serves to reiterate the point that my work gives insights into a particular world inhabited by a particular group of improvising musicians.

Thus, my response to Cardew became a response to the problems found when bringing Autumn '60 into contact with improvising musicians. As can be seen in the score for Winter 16, I retained certain elements of the Cardew score, in particular the tremolo up or down directions, which had been commented upon favourably in the early workshops. Another key element retained is the role of a conductor giving downbeats to indicate a change, enabling changes in music to happen simultaneously across the ensemble, although here this role is incorporated into the soloist's role (presenting challenges discussed in chapter 7).

To avoid the issues experienced around over-specific notation, Winter 16 uses significantly fewer elements, and largely allows musicians to choose which of the twelve boxes they move to when cued, or indeed not to move at all, thus removing the pressure felt by processing a lot of visual information at once. Including boxes with directions to 'Duet with soloist' and to play 'Silence', as well as invitations to improvise texturally allow the musicians space to improvise, whereas including some written notation adds a harmonic element to the piece, as well as providing a starting point for musicians who might be more comfortable reading. Although this was not my intention originally, this flexibility has led to me using the score in a variety of educational contexts with amateur ensembles or university students. It invariably does not take long to make music with the piece, as generally each musician can plot his or her own path.

Prior to this piece, all my large ensemble work was structured linearly, often with open sections, either improvising freely or over a written riff/chord sequence and so on, but always proceeding from A to B to C and so on. Winter 16 was the first piece in which sections could be jumbled into different orders, in real-time by the ensemble. I will now talk about where this line of enquiry led to next.

Vandermark Modules - Always A Fox

For the piece Always A Fox, I engaged specifically with a compositional methodology taken from Ken Vandermark. As noted in chapter 1 (Context), Vandermark has worked with a range of large improvising groups. Initially this was as a performer in Peter Brötzmann's Chicago Tentet, where he also first tried composing for large ensembles. (Golinski, 2012:15) He has since gone on to lead several of his own large groups, including The Territory Band, The Resonance Ensemble and Audio One.

I engaged with this approach as I recognised problems that Vandermark raised around the availability of rehearsal time for large groups, and, as an experienced and respected practitioner in the field, I saw an opportunity to learn from bringing this approach into my own practice, as I will discuss below. In the opening chapter, I set out that Vandermark 'developed a modular system of composition' (Vandermark, 2011) for the record *Kafka in Flight* in order to cope with having a short amount of rehearsal time. This is an approach that he was experimenting with earlier than this, however. In an interview in 2007 he describes the beginnings of this approach.

> The Free Music Ensemble [FME] was the beginning of the creation of a system that was modular. There was a series of thematic material that was more fragmented - pieces of pieces. These could be re-assembled from concert to concert and set to set. (Vandermark in Ezana, 2007:online)

This is highlighted particularly on the album *Montage* (Vandermark, 2006), which has two discs recorded live on September 22nd and 23rd 2005. Each concert has the same ten themes or modules, segued together in groups of two, three or five with improvisations to make long-form pieces. For example, the first track from the first concert is listed as *On A Wire/Montage/False Rabbit,* and in the second concert, there is a track called *But Only Almost/False Rabbit/Montage.* (Vandermark, 2006)

The motivations for exploring these modular compositions are less about a lack of rehearsal time, or the specific problems of a large group, as the FME was a trio. The concerns in this instance were primarily musical, as Golinski points out in his thesis, after having interviewed Vandermark.

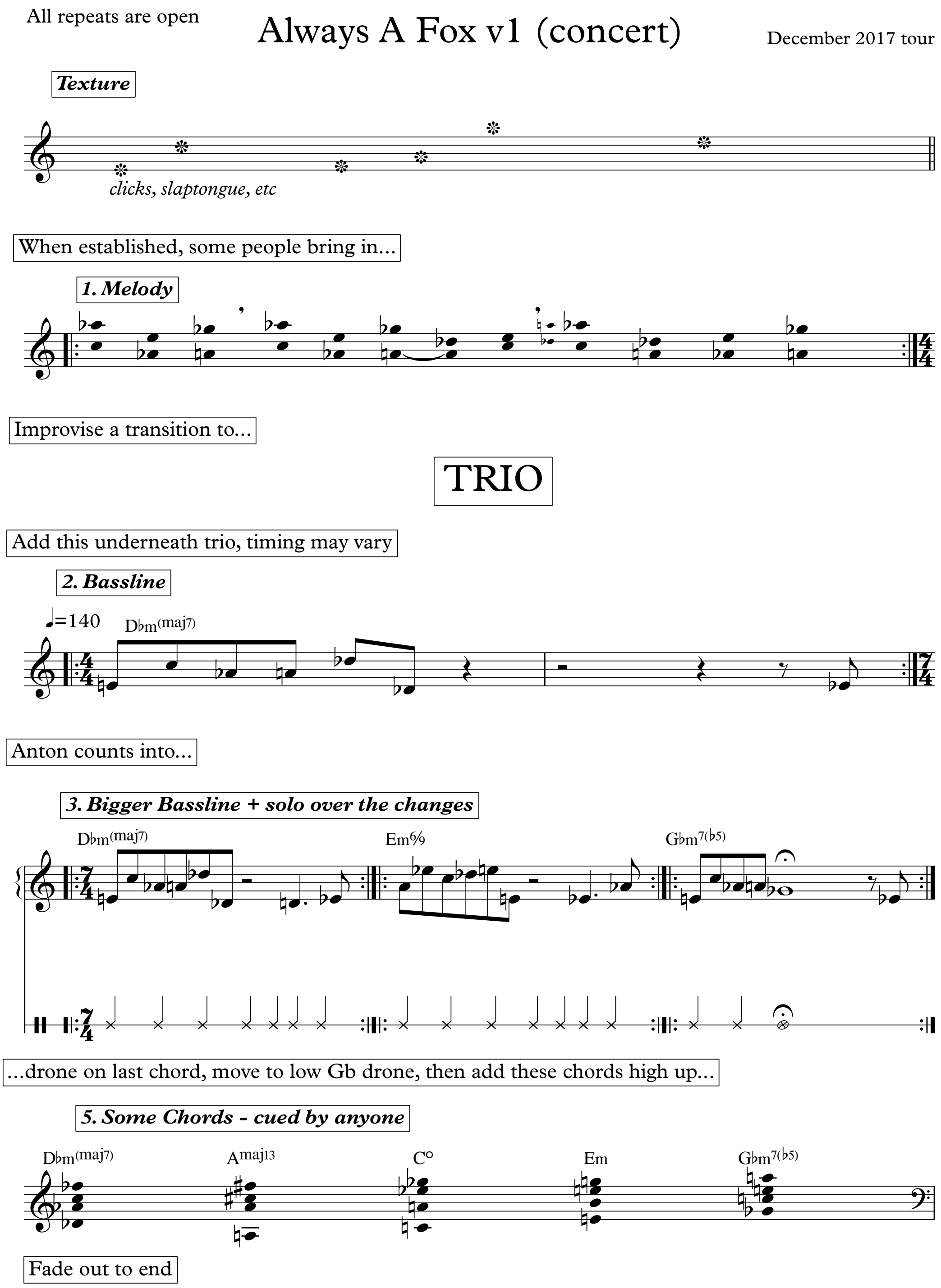
> One thing that Ken Vandermark noticed while working with his groups is that given a structure, musicians will tend to solve a certain problem (for example, how to move from a trio improvisation to a large group unison section) in the same way each time after they find a solution that works. This poses a serious problem as it eliminates a great deal of the risk inherent within the improvisation. For Vandermark, one of the crucial principles of jazz and improvised music that sets it aside from other forms is “the search for something new or unexpected to say during the course of an improvisation,” which is not possible if one proceeds through a piece the same way each time. (Golinski, 2012:18)

This is consistent with my own experiences playing structured music in a variety of large and small groups; certain pieces can evolve to explore the same areas from one reading to the next, ‘even if you don't want to and especially if you're on tour and you're tired’ (Vandermark in Ezana, 2007:online). The solution to this that we used in my collaborative duo Ripsaw Catfish was to take small fragments and then improvise around them. Indeed, this approach is one many small groups take, including the piano trio Fragments, who weave pre-written fragments into improvisation; ‘we don't know what fragments we'll end up using when we start a piece’ (Fairhall in Dehany, 2019:online). In that particular interview, pianist Fairhall goes on to discuss various audio cues that are used, and it is clear that listening is crucial to the success of this approach. This points to why this approach may present more difficulties in a large group, Vandermark elsewhere talks about having ‘to deal with selective hearing … because I cannot hear 11 other people and everything they’re doing’ (Vandermark in Shukaitis, 2015:online). His solution, then, is to use defined modular sections, but to re-order them to force the band to find new paths between the material.

We can find resonances with Justin Yang's discussion of uncertainty in improvisation, in which he uses Jean-Louis Schefer's article *Cy Twombly: Uncertainty Principle* (Schefer et al., 1995:146-155), and moves Schefer's concepts from Twombly's painting into the world of musical improvisation. Describing the way Gino Robair 'cultivates situations, which led to surprise' (Yang, 2014:83) during his practice routine and how Paul Stapleton 'builds unpredictability into his instruments so that the performance situation is by nature one of discovery and exploration' (Yang, 2014:84) leads Yang to conclude that these improvisers 'demonstrate an affinity for uncharted territory … engendering a context where improvisers can expand themselves and grow their personal creativity' (Yang, 2014:85).

It is this uncharted territory that Vandermark is seeking to build into his compositions. Of course, he is not the first, and Yang draws parallels with Anthony Braxton's work, quoting the composer as referring to 'the mystery of navigation through form' (Braxton in Yang, 2014:89). The discussion is around free improvisation, but is crucial when contemplating composing for improvisers; Yang shows that the 'mystery', 'uncharted territory' or 'uncertainty' is central to free improvisation, and Vandermark's methods as discussed in this chapter are a clear attempt to retain this within his compositions. As I found when engaging with this practice, it is possible to obtain unpredictability within the context of performing the same material on several occasions close together.

For the Article XI December 2017 tour, it was suggested in rehearsal that I need not conduct what had previously been a problematic transition into section 3 of Always A Fox, and instead we would navigate it as an ensemble. I discuss this further in chapter 7, but for the purposes of this chapter, I will describe how this manifested itself in performance, to lead onto a discussion of how and why this piece varied across the different nights of the tour.

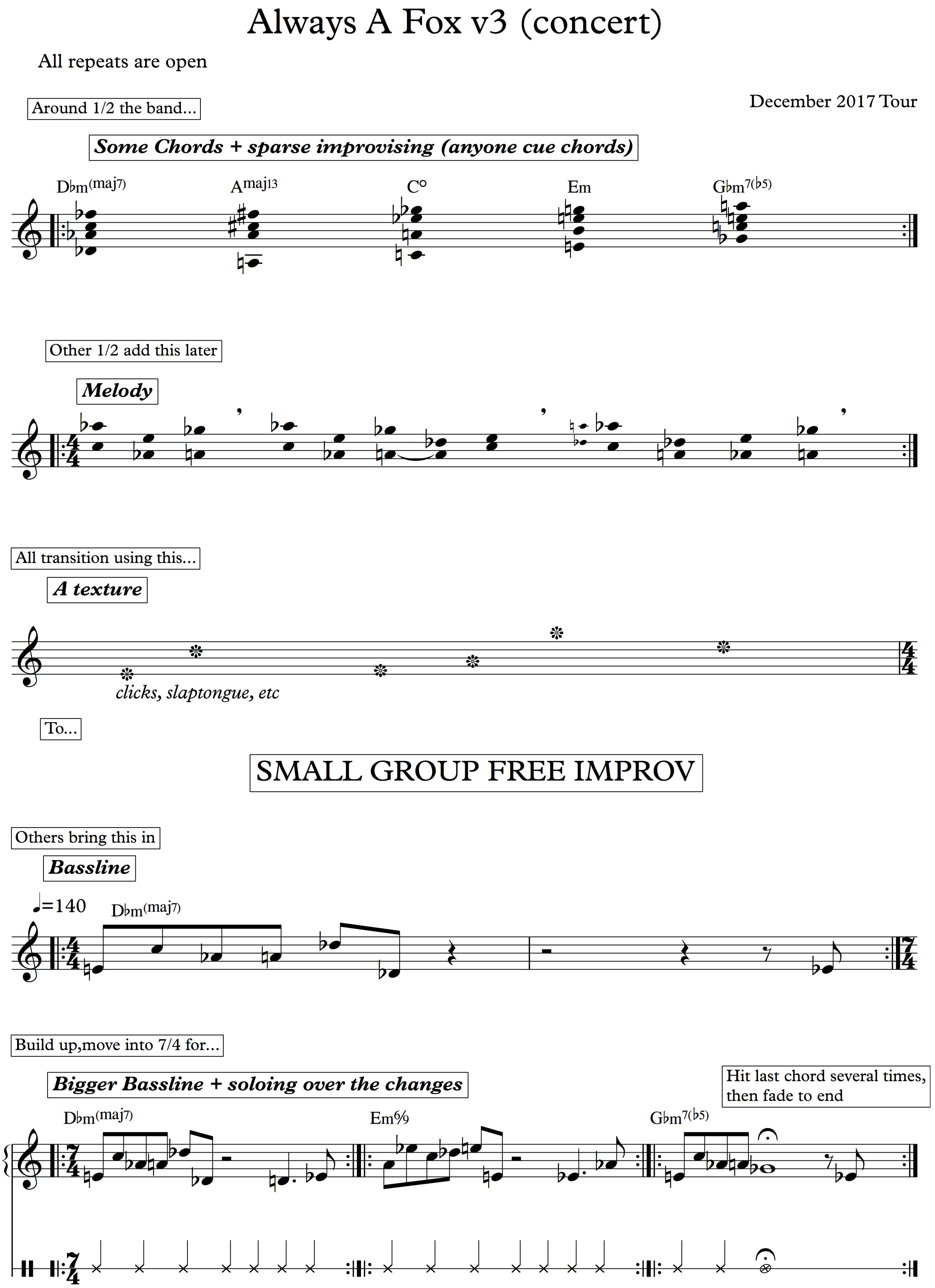

All repeats are open
Always A Fox v1 (concert)
December 2017 tour
Texture
clicks, slaptongue, etc
When established, some people bring in...
1. Melody
Improvise a transition to...
TRIO
Add this underneath trio, timing may vary
2. Bassline
♩=140
D♭m(maj7)
Anton counts into...
3. Bigger Bassline + solo over the changes
D♭m(maj7)
Em%
G♭m7(♭5)
...drone on last chord, move to low Gb drone, then add these chords high up...
5. Some Chords - cued by anyone
D♭m(maj7)
Amaj13
C°
Em
G♭m7(♭5)
Fade out to end

On the first date of the tour, in Birmingham (performing v1 of the score), this transition happens without cueing, but is a little unstable. Initially the baritone saxophonist hints at the riff from section 2 around 3 minutes into the piece, before fully playing the riff for the first time at 4:15. 30 seconds later, a trumpet and flute have joined in, and most of the rest of the band gradually joins in before finally playing it in unison at 5:45. The transition to section 3 happens almost immediately, as the guitar (myself) plays the D natural first (the one different note, signalling the shift from section 2 to 3), the drums half catch it, but the bulk of the band remain in 8/4 for two more loops before all going to 7/4, and six repeats later the drums settle into a minim rhythm, which becomes the written suggestion of crotchets a short while later, and a large portion of the horns join with this, stabbing notes from the chord with each snare hit. It sounds like a band feeling their way into a new piece, and not having quite yet managed to work out the lines of communication.

In Newcastle, the last date on the tour, it is the double bassist who plays the D natural first (24:40), and this time the drums pick up on it instantly. By the third repeat the flute and another horn have joined (24:50), and the resultant sound is effective, not everyone rushes to join in now a new section has been presented, some are happy to continue improvising, making the transition powerful but not a jump cut, the bassline arrives definitely, but organically from within the ensemble.

In this way, the performance improves in ways one might expect from night to night; the players become more familiar and confident with both the material and each other. The differences in how each section is approached in different contexts, however, are quite striking.

For example, the chords from section 5 end the piece in Birmingham in a delicate fashion, with the trumpets leading soft chords over the drone that is fading away underneath them. There is some improvising in between the chords, but it is collectively quite restrained, perhaps more accurately described as embellishing the chord tones. Altogether this section lasts around 1min 20s.


Always A Fox v3 (concert)
All repeats are open
December 2017 Tour
Around 1/2 the band...
Some Chords + sparse improvising (anyone cue chords)
D♭m(maj7)
Amaj13
C°
Em
G♭m7(♭5)
Other 1/2 add this later
Melody
All transition using this...
A texture
clicks, slaptongue, etc
To...
SMALL GROUP FREE IMPROV
Others bring this in
Bassline
♩=140
D♭m(maj7)
Build up,move into 7/4 for...
Bigger Bassline + soloing over the changes
Hit last chord several times, then fade to end
D♭m(maj7)
Em6/9
G♭m7(♭5)

The following night in Sheffield (performing v3 of the score), these chords are the opening of the piece, again led by a trumpet, but played much less delicately, and quicker. This brisker pace adds a sense of urgency to the piece, and those musicians who are improvising (initially bass and drums) are doing so in a more definite manner, creating a contrast to the chords by improvising against rather than with them. This chord sequence is cycled round twice in the opening 45 seconds, followed by a noticeable gap which leaves space to be filled by the improvising double bass and drums, now joined by an alto saxophone. When the chords return, they are continuing the counterpoint suggested by the bass and drums, and in turn become much more grandiose than the previous night in Birmingham. This eventually overpowers the improvisers, and when the melody from section 1 is brought in, this too takes on the grandiose feel from the chords. This transitions through the texture from section 6 into a small group improvisation from trumpet, flute, alto saxophone and trombone, with the lowering of density of the piece allowing room for the small group to improvise together.

When the low bassline from section 2 is brought in underneath the improvising, it too takes on the grandiose character of the earlier chords and melody, being played much slower than in Birmingham. When the transition to the 7/4 riff in section 3 happens, the tempo is still very slow, and gradually speeds up in a crescendo towards the chord change. The feel from the drums hints at the written crotchets that were featured in Birmingham, but this time none of the horns choose to stab the chords.

The very different approaches to the same fragments of written notation, or ‘modules’ in Vandermark’s terminology, reinforces what Vandermark set out to achieve in his work, and has had the same impact when applied to my practice. Furthermore, I would argue that the descriptions above function as useful examples of Garry Hagberg’s concept of ‘collective intention’ as discussed in the chapter on Solo Improvisation. Using the transition from section 2 to section 3 as an example, by not conducting it myself, or specifying how it will happen, when one person moves on to the next section by playing the concert D natural, the rest of the ensemble can react quickly or slowly to this, producing a tight change or a gradual one. These are not things that an individual can decide, if just one person joins the change immediately, as the drums did in Birmingham, it does not mean the transition becomes a tight change. In Newcastle, the group moved gradually across the transition, and, again, this is a collective decision; no one individual can decide to do this alone, and if they did, then communicating their intention to the rest of the band in the split second would be impossible.

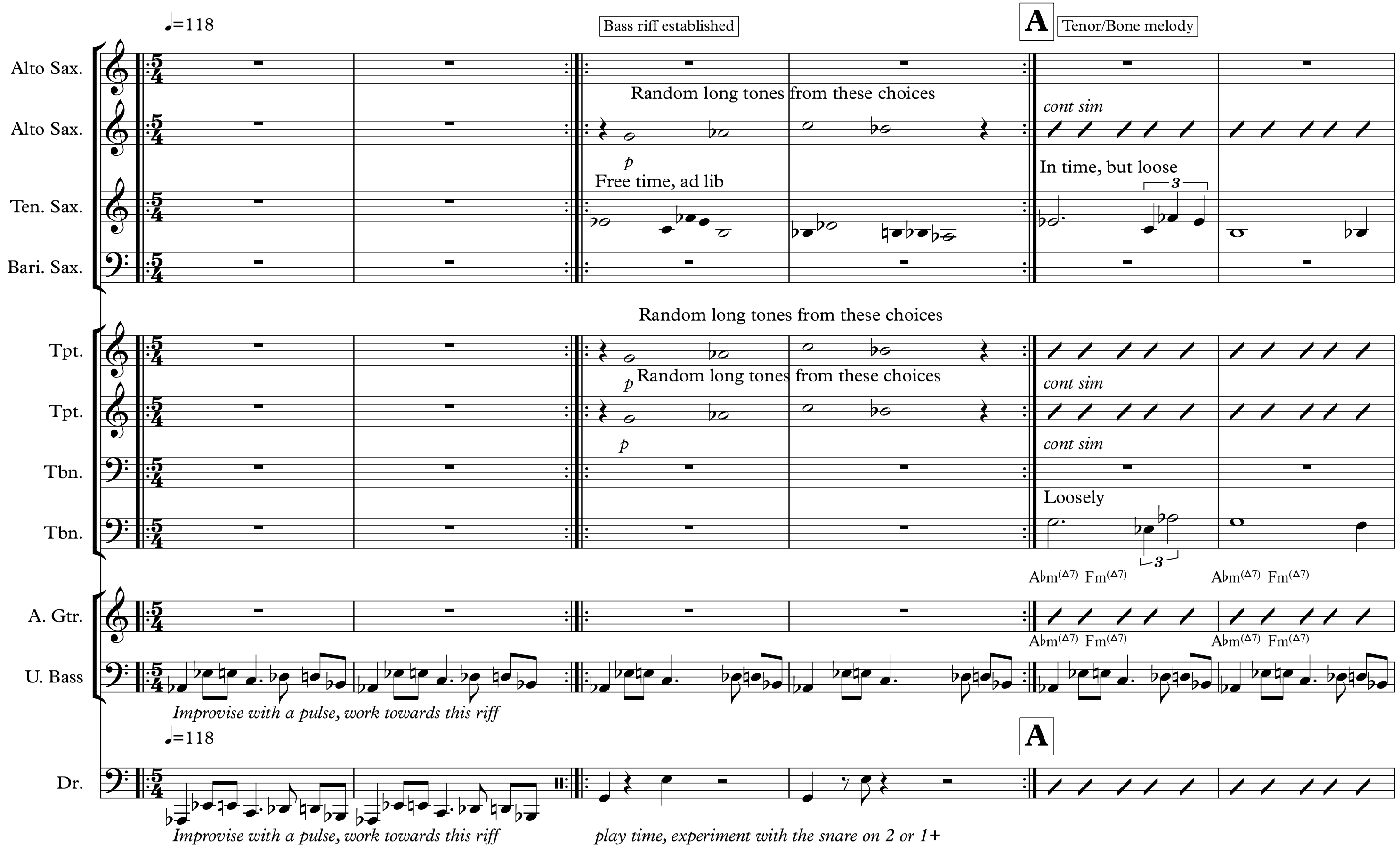
In a broader sense, by not specifying who plays what when, the ensemble works to make these decisions themselves in real-time, working to solve the problems together, as Vandermark would have it.

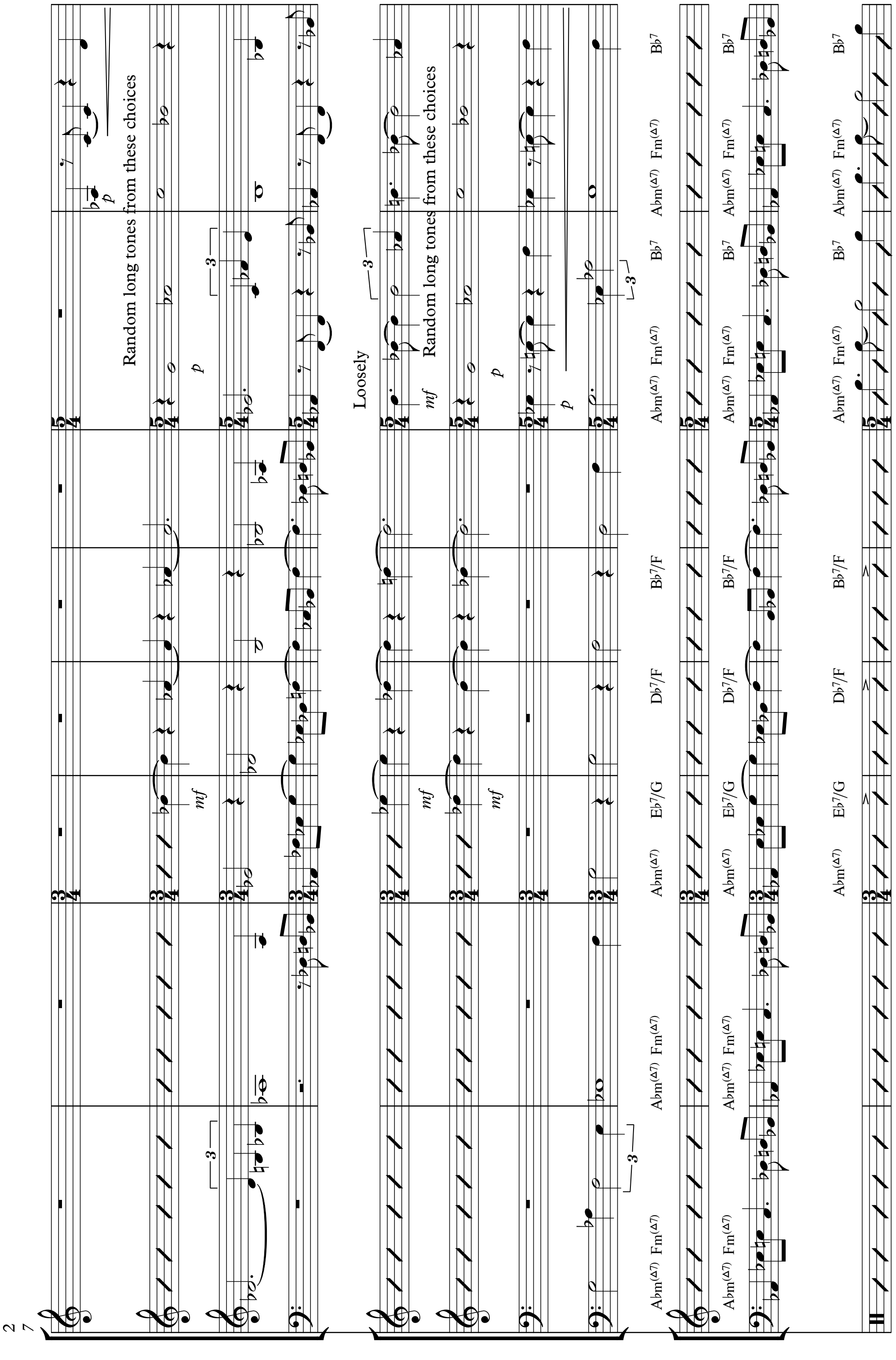
Analysing the performances of Municrination from the same tour reveal more support for Vandermark's assertions about structure, that if the structure is the same each time a piece is performed; 'the band goes to a similar place to get from point A to point B' (Vandermark in Ezana, 2007:online).

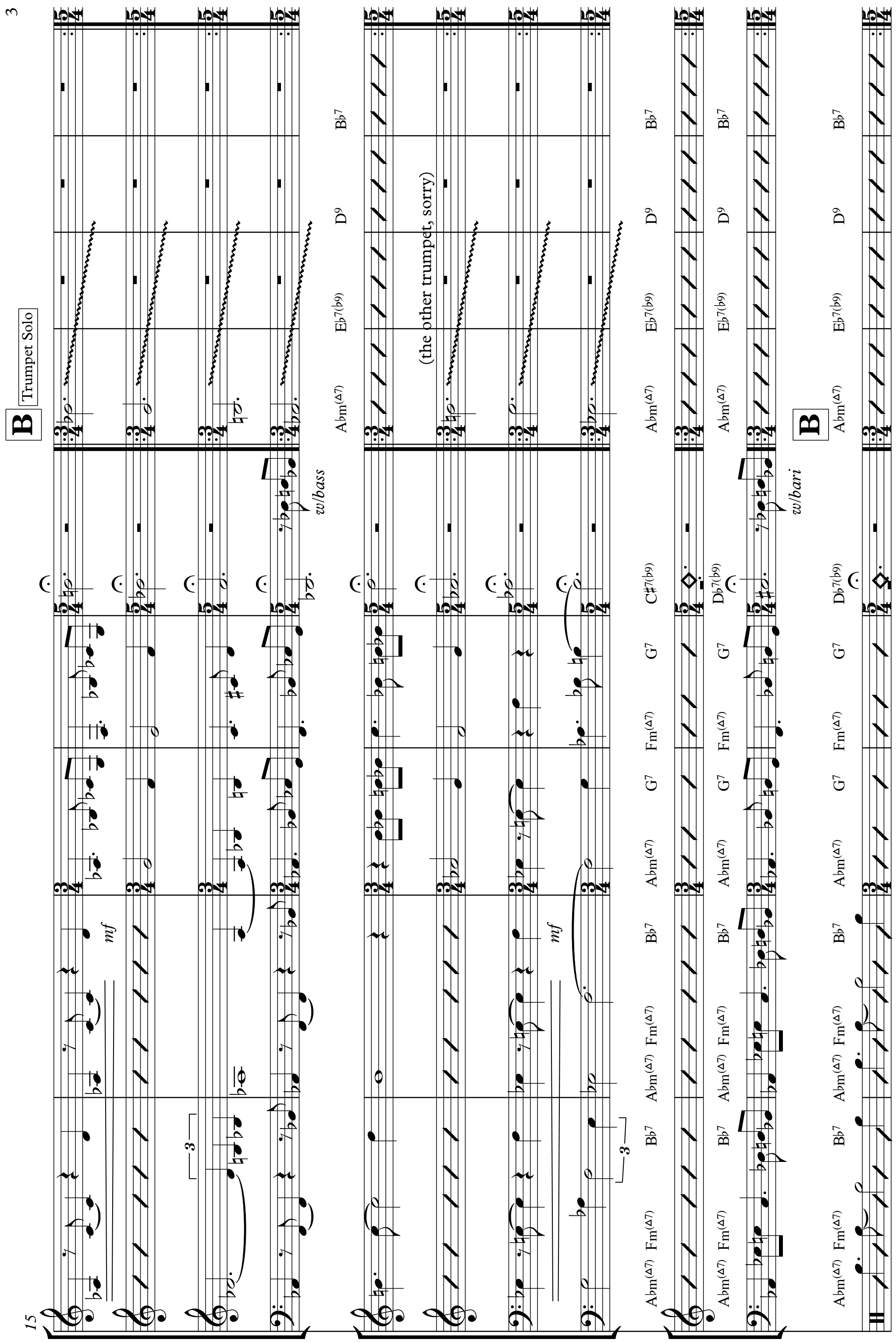
The piece Municrination, written for the tour in December has a linear form that does not change from performance to performance. There are freedoms within this, however; the opening is a joint improvisation between bass and drums, and various other parts contain elements of freedom, as is evident from the score. I will now discuss the open duet section between tenor saxophone and trombone, at bar 32 in the score.

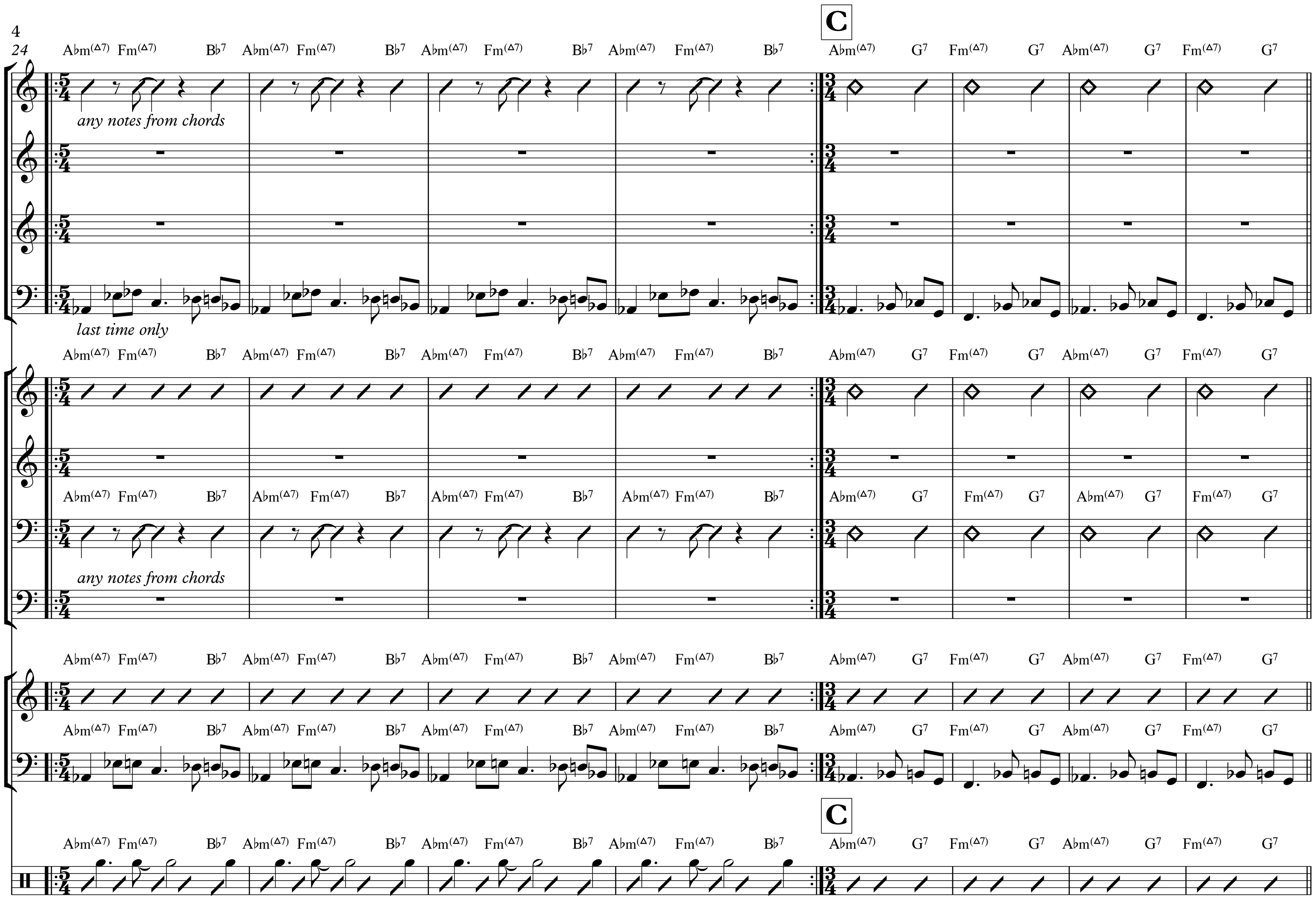
Municrination

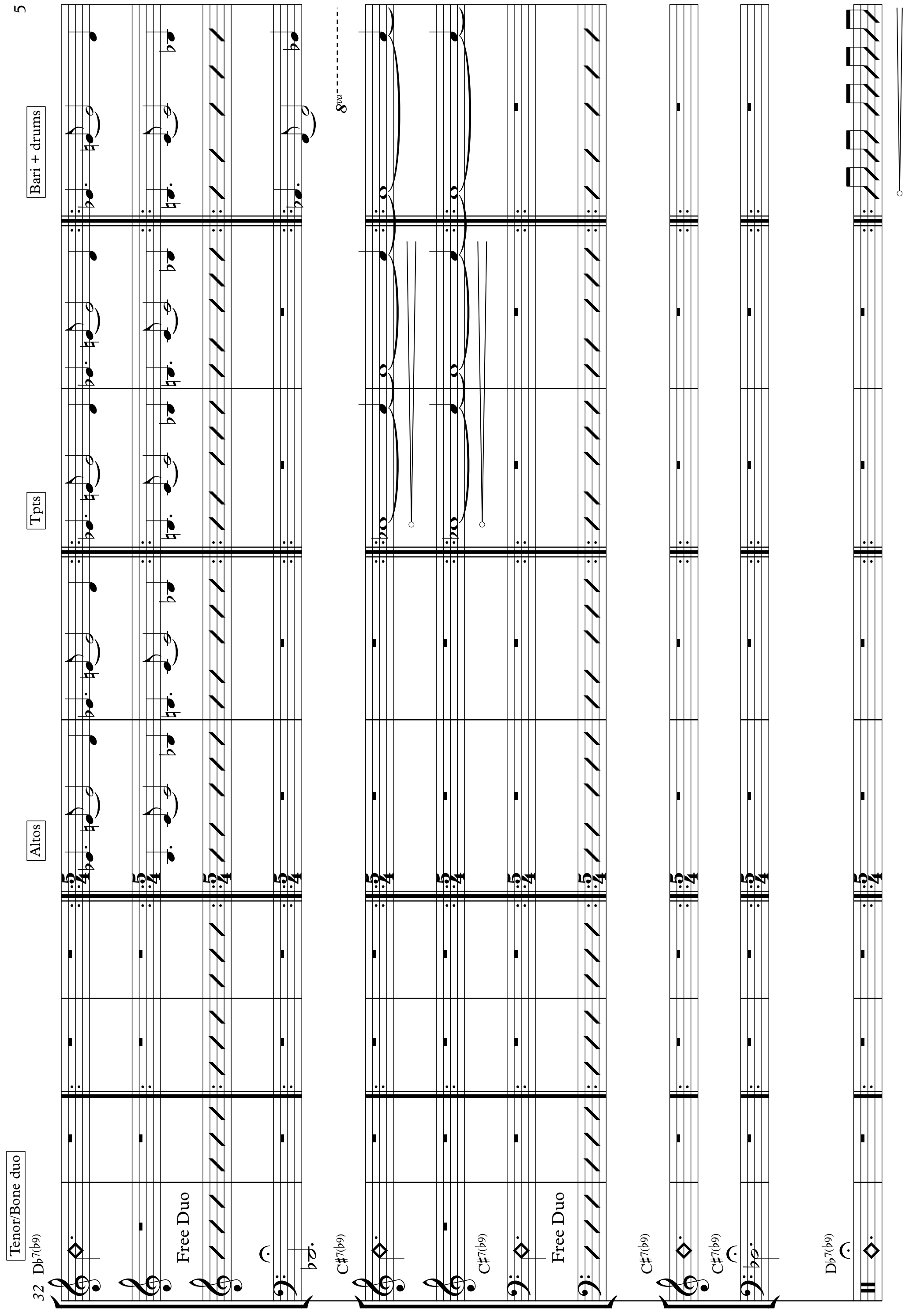
All Repeats are open

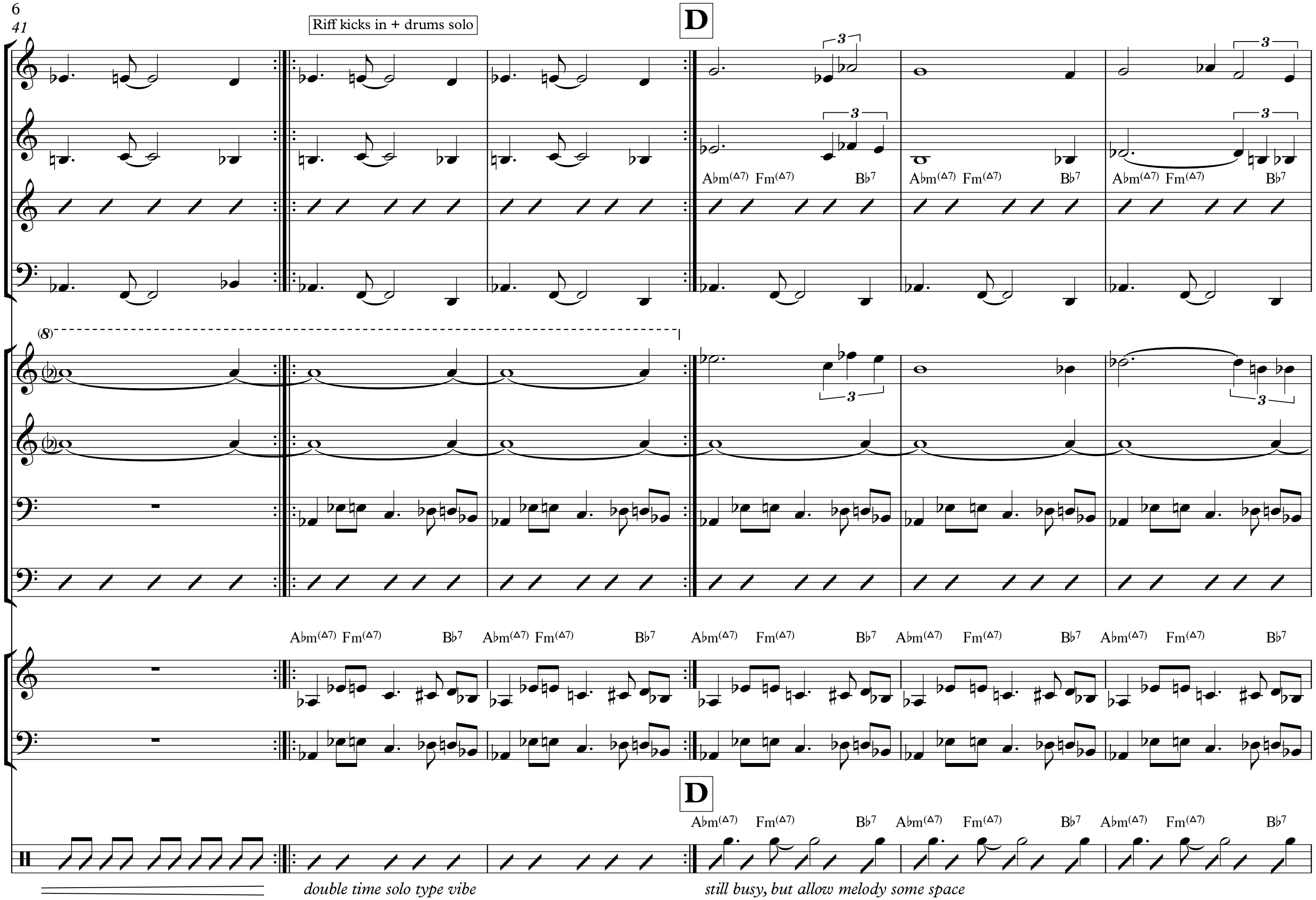

♩=118
Bass riff established
A
Tenor/Bone melody
Alto Sax.
Alto Sax.
Ten. Sax.
Bari. Sax.
Tpt.
Tpt.
Tbn.
Tbn.
A. Gtr.
U. Bass
Dr.
Random long tones from these choices
p
Free time, ad lib
cont sim
In time, but loose
3
Random long tones from these choices
p
Random long tones from these choices
p
cont sim
cont sim
Loosely
3
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7)
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7)
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7)
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7)
Improvise with a pulse, work towards this riff
♩=118
A
Improvise with a pulse, work towards this riff
play time, experiment with the snare on 2 or 1+

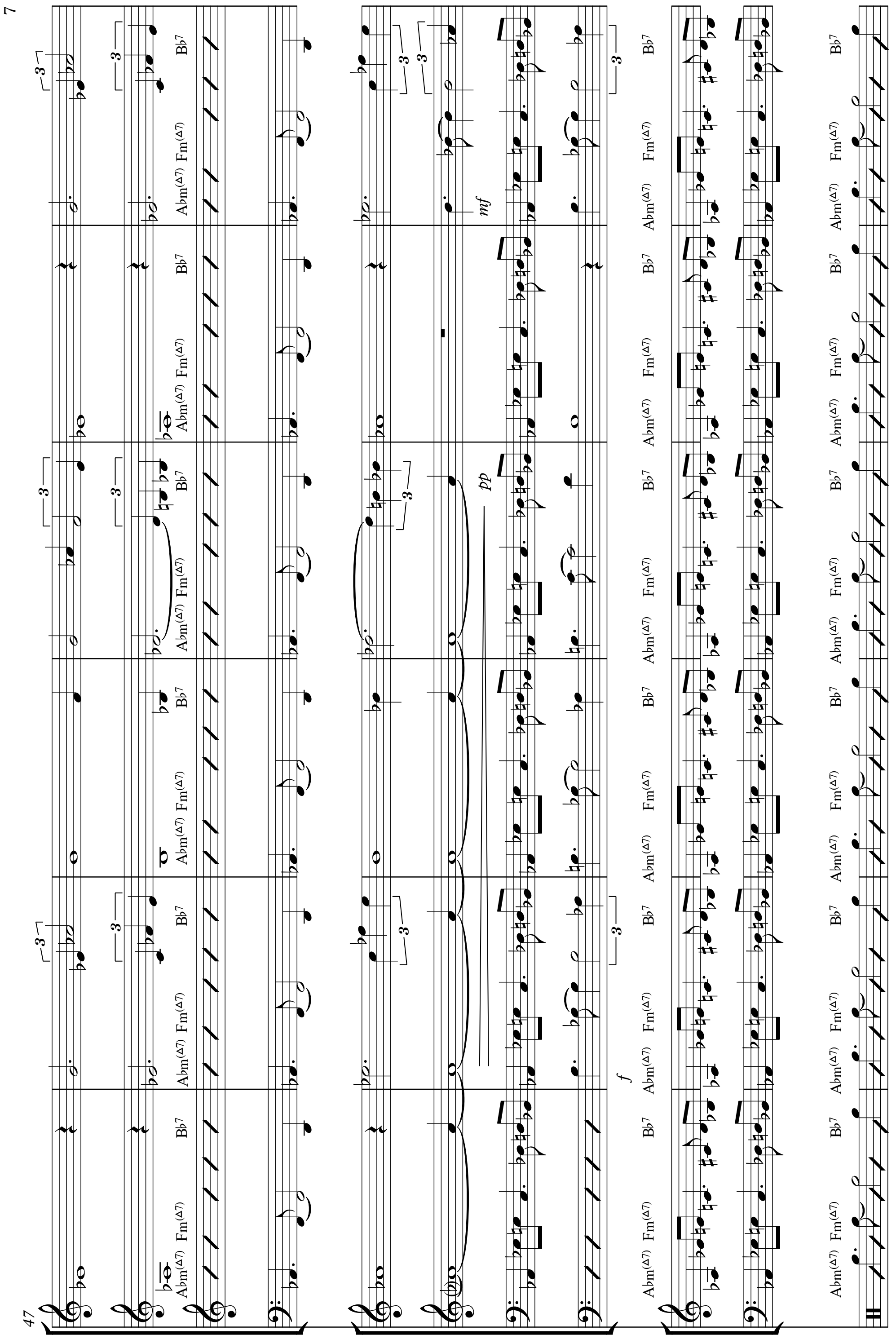

27
Random long tones from these choices
Random long tones from these choices
Loosely
mf
mf
mf
p
p
p
3
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7)
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7)
Abm(Δ7)
Eb7/G
Db7/F
Bb7/F
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7)
Bb7
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7)
Bb7

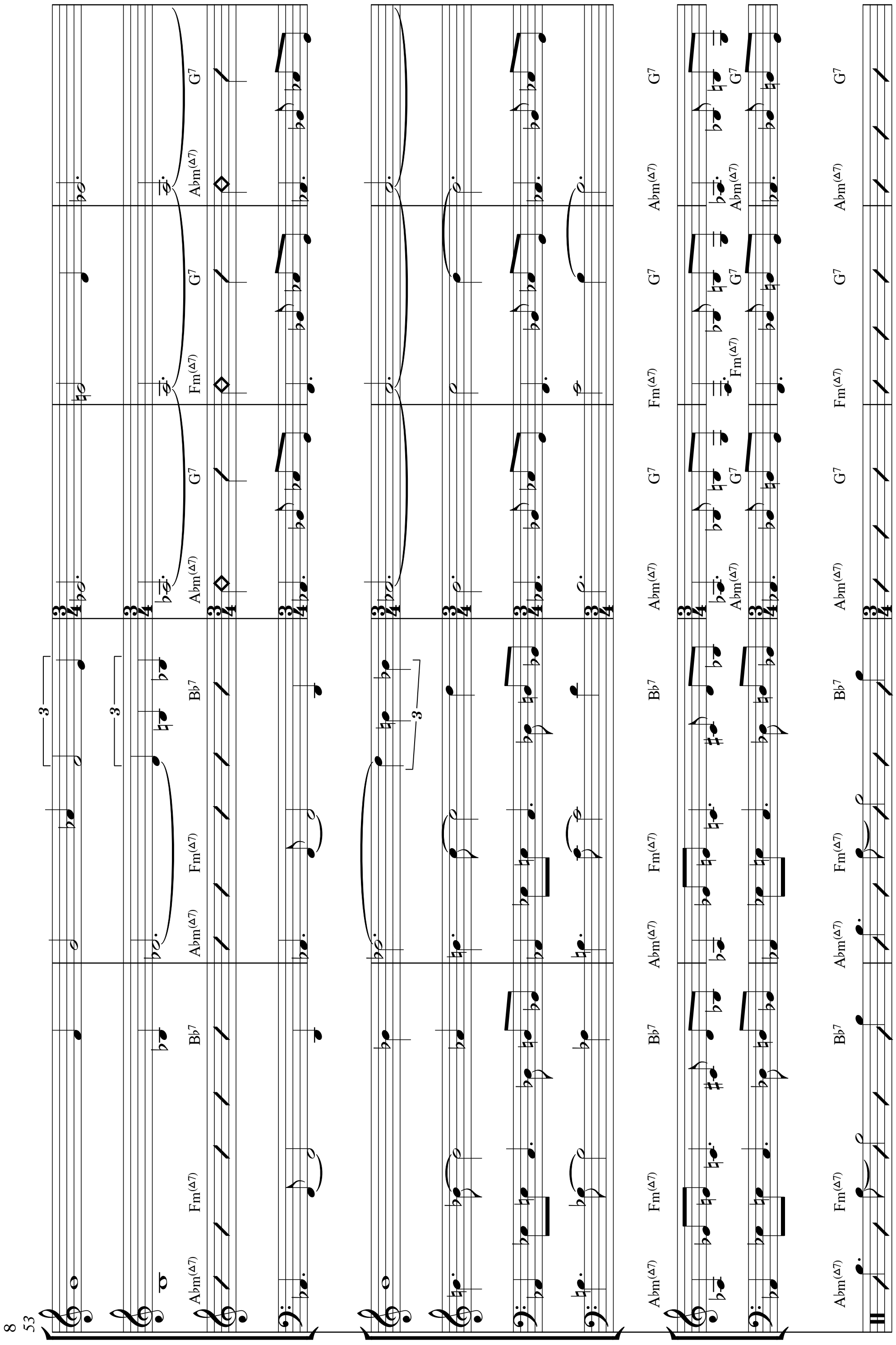

15
B
Trumpet Solo
mf
mf
w/bass
w/bari
(the other trumpet, sorry)
A♭m(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) B♭7 A♭m(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) B♭7 A♭m(Δ7) G7 Fm(Δ7) G7 C♯7(♭9)
A♭m(Δ7) E♭7(♭9) D9 B♭7
A♭m(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) B♭7 A♭m(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) B♭7 A♭m(Δ7) G7 Fm(Δ7) G7 D♭7(♭9)
3

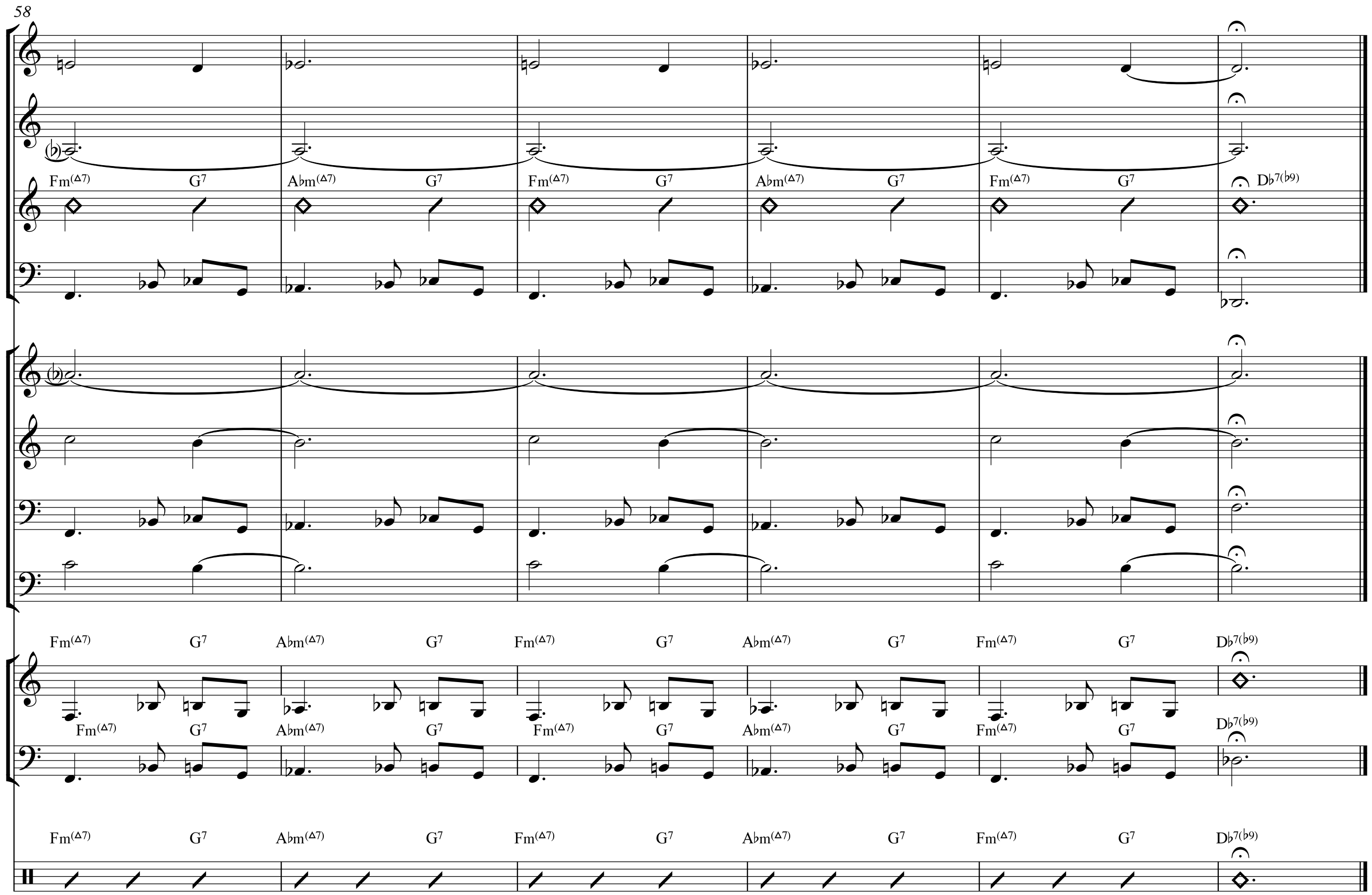

4
24
C
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7 Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7 Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7 Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7 Abm(Δ7) G7 Fm(Δ7) G7 Abm(Δ7) G7 Fm(Δ7) G7
any notes from chords
last time only
any notes from chords
C


5
32
Tenor/Bone duo
D♭7(♭9)
Free Duo
C♯7(♭9)
C♯7(♭9)
Free Duo
C♯7(♭9)
C♯7(♭9)
D♭7(♭9)
Altos
Tprts
Bari + drums
8va


41
Riff kicks in + drums solo
D
3
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7
(8)
D
double time solo type vibe
still busy, but allow melody some space


47
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7
Abm(Δ7) Fm(Δ7) Bb7
3
f
pp
mf


8
53
3
3
3
Abm(Δ7)
Fm(Δ7)
Bb7
Abm(Δ7)
Fm(Δ7)
Bb7
Abm(Δ7)
G7
Fm(Δ7)
G7
Abm(Δ7)
G7


58
Fm(Δ7)
G7
A♭m(Δ7)
G7
Fm(Δ7)
G7
A♭m(Δ7)
G7
Fm(Δ7)
G7
D♭7(♭9)

There are three recordings from the tour; the first is Birmingham. The duo begins (c.6mins) with what John Corbett refers to as ‘free counterpoint’[22], that is ‘simultaneous melodies that are perceived as independent lines’ but with ‘clear communication’ (Corbett, 2016:66). The trombone is muted, and moves away from melodic lines to more abstract growls, leaving the tenor saxophone in the foreground, still playing melodically. This continues until the tenor moves into the altissimo register (c.8mins), at which point the alto saxophones enter with their written backings and the whole thing builds to a climax with both tenor and trombone playing fortissimo over the rest of the band.

In Sheffield, the following night, the duo begins with a high trill from the tenor (c.6mins), before both players begin a ‘free counterpoint’, similarly to the Birmingham performance. The trombone is less muted, but still tends to stay in a supporting role that explores timbres more than notes. After around a minute and a half, the trombone stops playing to leave the saxophone playing solo, (which I take to mean they are feeling more comfortable with each other, often improvisers will overplay in a duet for fear of leaving silence). When it re-enters with some forceful rasped notes, it begins a transition to a section where both players are using breath sounds. Exploring the full range of dynamics by playing as quietly as this adds more impact to the loud crescendo with the full band that is to come. Also, crucially, this is the first time that the two horns have been indistinguishable from each other; they are really occupying the same sonic space as each other.

In Newcastle a few days later for the final date of the tour, the duo starts with lots of space, there are a few long tones from both tenor and trombone, before both revisiting the breath texture from Sheffield, similarly exploiting the full dynamic range of the ensemble. This leads into some more vigorous ‘free counterpoint’, and as the altos enter with their backing, the tenor moves to the altissimo register for some melodic playing[23] before both horns respond to the build in dynamics by blowing over the top of them, as in previous nights.

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[22] Using the term ‘free counterpoint’ rather than just ‘counterpoint’ means that ‘it doesn’t adhere to the harmonic requirements of so-called “strict” counterpoint.’ (Corbett, 2016:67)

So, when compared with the drastically different approaches to the modules in Always A Fox, it seems that this duet in Municrination is occupying similar territory each night, the elements of free counterpoint and the textural playing using breath sounds and recurring themes. That is not to say it is the same each night, rather, there is an evolution of the material, some things suggested in one concert are picked up and expanded upon in the next, and the dynamic range is expanded as the players become more comfortable with each other and more confident to leave space. This has parallels with how jazz solos develop over multiple performances. Andy Hamilton, in a discussion around ‘improvisation as composition’ cites critic Sidney Finkelstein.

> He commented in 1948: “…[the] slow creation of a great jazz solo [from performance to performance] is a form of musical composition.”
> (Andy Hamilton, Aesthetics and Music, pg 213 – quote from ‘Jazz, a people's music’ - Finkelstein, Sidney Walter)

This is not a value judgement on my part, but an affirmation of Vandermark’s stated problem that ‘the band goes to a similar place to get from point A to point B’ (Vandermark in Ezana, 2007:online). He sees it as a problem, and sets his compositions up to mitigate against this. By engaging with this approach in my own practice, my awareness of that practice has grown, and I have re-enforced some of Vandermark’s statements. This is a valuable contribution to knowledge, as it has not been written about in the academy before, except by Golinksi whose thesis is cited above, and he does not engage directly with this aspect of Vandermark’s work, so hopefully my writings will sit alongside his for the interested reader.

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[23] Upon listening back months later, the tenor player identifies the tune as being the Duke Ellington piece *Come Sunday*, specifically as played on bowed double bass from the Eric Dolphy record *Iron Man*. ‘Buried in the attic between my ears is a recollection of this one. It's the tune in the bass that stuck & involuntarily reproduced itself.’ (E-mail to author) There is a lot to unpack in that comment, and how it relates to the sort of poly-free musicians I play with, but perhaps for another time.

Back to Notation

The reason for discussing this structural underpinning of the Resonance Ensemble music within a chapter focussed on notation is because the relevance to my practice came when considering how best to implement this. In an interview with Moandji Ezana, Vandermark goes into further detail regarding where his modular approach led, specifically how he expanded it with his Frame Quartet.

> … there are two scores. One is thematic material that's notated more-or-less conventionally: it's pitch- and rhythm-related. Then there's a page that's more of a flow-chart and a set of activities. (Vandermark in Ezana, 2007:online)

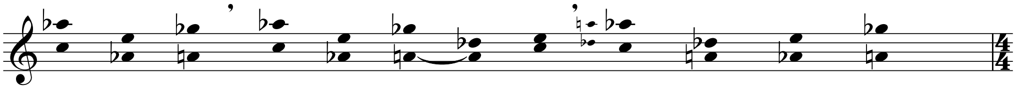
When initially setting up the piece Always A Fox, I had intended for it to be structured in a similar way, with two scores, as shown here. One with all the written material that remains unchanged from one performance to the next, and then a second one to provide the structure, which would vary each time we perform the piece. This seemed like the most logical approach, so that I could simply write out a structure before the gig and discard it afterwards. However, in interviews, musicians commented on this being more difficult, having to keep two separate scores in view and in mind.

This is another potential explanation, which could account for the sluggish version of the piece already discussed in chapter 7 on Distributed Direction. There I suggest that my directing of the piece was hampering it, and found that allowing the ensemble to have more control had a positive impact. Of relevance to the discussion now is a scoring change that I made; I moved from two scores to just one, containing both the written material and outlining a structure, as can be seen in the scores. This meant more work for me ahead of time, as I had to create several different versions, as can be seen from the scores, but it did yield good results. This is supported by Graham Collier's writing, when critiquing his 'universal parts' approach, where '…all the players have all the information in front of them' (Collier, 1995:77). He warns against confusing the musicians with '…too many sheets of paper' (ibid.).

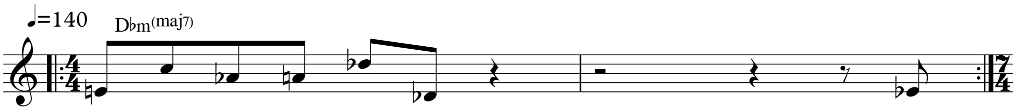
Always A Fox (concert)

All repeats are open

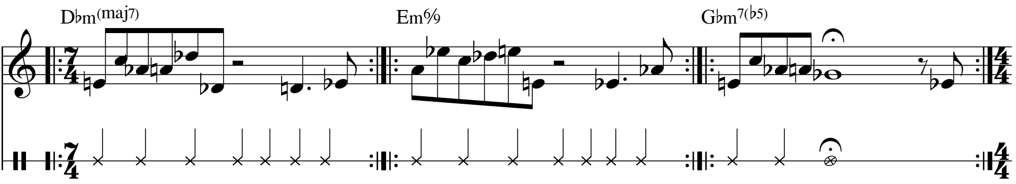
1. Melody



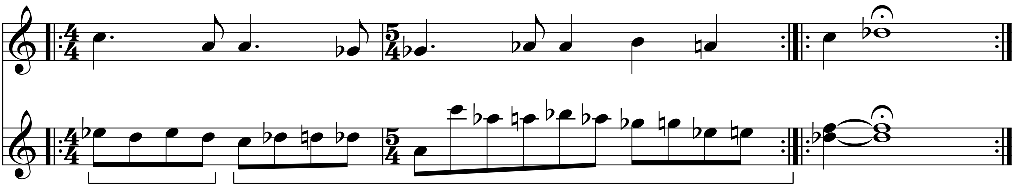
2. Bassline



3. Bigger Bassline


D♭m(maj7)
Em6/9
G♭m7(♭5)

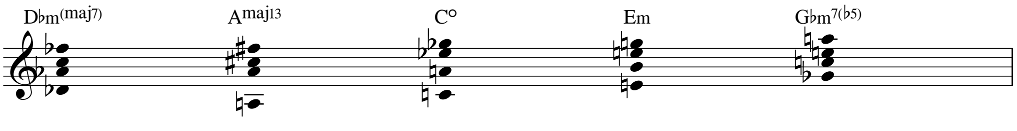
4. Another Melody



loop these

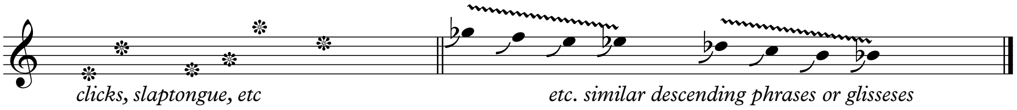
or improvise something similar

5. Some Chords


D♭m(maj7)
Amaj13
C°
Em
G♭m7(♭5)

6. A texture

7. Another Texture



clicks, slaptongue, etc

etc. similar descending phrases or glisseses

Always A Fox - structures

As presented to the musicians alongside the above score

Article XI @ LUME Fest, London – June 2016

6
add 1
transition to: 2
on cue: 3 (tenor soloing)
drone on last chord of 3
transition to: guitar + flute duo
add 7
transition to: 4

LUME Lab Octet, @ IKLEKTIC, London – May 2017

6
add 1
transition to: Drums, Tenor, Trombone trio
add 2
on cue: 3 (Trumpet soloing)
drone on last chord of 3 (move to just root)
5 (high up)
fade out

By having everything on one page again, I was able to reduce the confusion, but still vary the structure each night, achieving what Vandermark suggests is possible, and Collier agrees; ‘In the long term, the piece is meant to be vibrant and alive, capable of change’ (ibid.).

So the main insights drawn from this chapter are largely practical ones; I have refined my practice by engaging with Vandermark’s approaches to structuring pieces, and Collier’s approach to score-making. By engaging with the graphic notation of Cardew, and in conjunction with personal reflections on my own work, the issues that have arisen around over-specifying (whether by traditional western notation with its historical connotations, or by elaborate systems of graphic notation) have encouraged me to look further at this for future study.

Beyond the practical, I have added to the understanding of a particular scene of improvising musicians. I would have faced different obstacles if working only with classically trained musicians, or exclusively free-improvisers. Within the specific context of working with poly-free or pan-idiomatic players, however, I have learned a lot about their responses to different notation types. Over-specifying anything is problematic when working with improvisation, as seen when engaging with Cardew’s Autumn ‘60. In certain contexts, traditional western notation in my work is over-specific, due to the historical attachments to it, specifically; contexts such as there being limited rehearsal time with less familiar musicians. Or rather, musicians with whom I have yet to establish a mode of working together. As mentioned elsewhere (chapters 1 and 4), my methods are in part an attempt to find other ways of arriving at a group sound or mode of working together, where spending a lot of time together workshopping or rehearsing is not possible due to financial constraints on large ensembles, both in the UK and elsewhere.

One possible additional factor when considering why the LUME Lab Octet performance seemed to highlight the hierarchical nature of the notation I used is the unfamiliarity of the band members with each other, as well as the music. Whilst most of the group did know each other to an extent, some had not played together before, and, as Antonelli obverses in his thesis ‘the musicians’ getting to know each other is just as essential as the actual music being played' (2015:146). This was reflected in comments Roberts made that the first rehearsal felt a bit timid, both musicially and socially. There is definitely room for further study around this, although it would need proper funding to allow for time to be spent getting to know each other. Georgina Born's work, especially her chapter in the edited volume *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics* (2017) could provide a theoretical framework to begin this.

Chapter 7: From Distributed Direction to No Specific Parts

In this chapter, I will discuss insights that have arisen around the theme of distributed direction. That is, distributing the responsibility for directing a piece of music amongst the musicians who are to perform it, and thereby allowing musicians to make decisions in the moment about the structure or content of a piece, rather than one conductor being responsible for this. This perhaps has been previously described as indeterminacy, or more specifically as 'indeterminacy of performance' (Simms, 1986:357). I use the more specific term 'distributed direction' to refer to the particular case of requiring performers to direct the music by, for example cueing sections or melodies, or chords for other members of the ensemble, rather than an individual musician perhaps having a free choice of pitches or rhythms to play. Both can be referred to as having 'indeterminacy of performance' (ibid), but here I will be discussing the former.

While not directly related to the line of enquiry I set out to follow, as with chapter 6 on notation, its relevance presented itself during the project, and is investigated here as one way of allowing greater ownership over the music, and more space for musicians' own voices, addressing the issues around composing for large groups raised earlier by Jost (1974) and Fell (1998). This is particularly relevant to large ensemble improvised music as it enables musicians to enact changes on a structural level that might otherwise be harder to improvise with a large group of musicians, as one 'cannot hear 11 other people and everything they're doing' (Vandermark in Shukaitis, 2015:online).

Precedents for distributing direction to the performers in an ensemble can be found in John Zorn's work, most notably Cobra (1984), whereby any musician can make calls to suggest what happens next (such as a change in volume, specifying who should play or signalling an ending). These are mediated through a prompter, who ostensibly is there to communicate these calls to the whole ensemble, but in reality can also exert their own influence over the music, with Zorn himself recognising that he is 'the best prompter there can be because I can be a complete fascist!' (Zorn in Brackett, 2010:50). Oksana Nesterenko in fact sees this as essential to the piece, reflecting that ‘it is first and foremost Zorn’s personality as revealed in the role of the prompter that creates a recognizable character for Cobra’ (Nesterenko, 2017:210). Also present in Cobra are the ‘Guerrilla systems’ (see Brackett 2010 for a full description), which make it possible for musicians to subvert the prompter and either ignore them, or take control of the ensemble themselves for a while.

The approach is summed up neatly, again by Nesterenko; although the musicians are allowed ‘to be free as performers’, Zorn ‘shares only a portion of the compositional authority with them’ (2017:211). Elsewhere in this thesis I detail how I share this compositional authority by involving musicians in the compositional process, but in this chapter I address this by examining different instances of distributed direction in my practice, and discuss their relevance to my central question around ownership and voice of the improviser.

One way of implementing this is through the use of layers that do not need to align rhythmically. This is an extrapolation of the ‘independent simultaneous action’ that John Corbett (2016:54) identifies in free improvisation; the idea that several things can be happening at once, but independently of each other. It is a technique that ensures no two versions of a piece are exactly the same, and has been used variously by Graham Collier, Terry Riley and others.

LUME Lab Octet

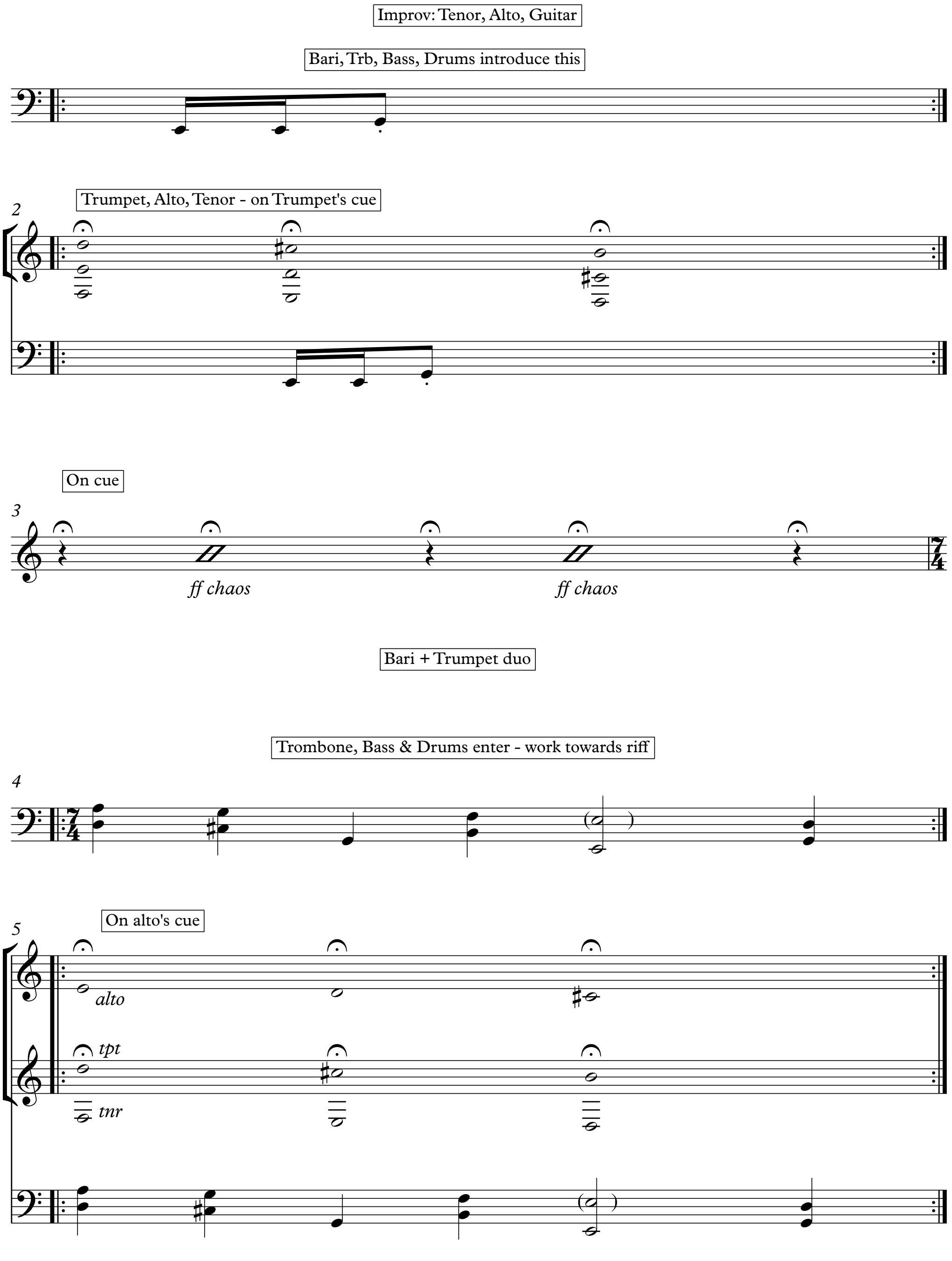
This can be seen particularly well in some of the music written for the LUME Lab Octet. The piece Labrats opens with a trio of guitar with tenor and alto saxophones, underneath which the bass, drums, trombone and baritone saxophone eventually introduce a three-note motif; they can decide collectively or individually when and how to introduce this. As this builds, when the trumpet feels it is right, they cue a third layer of chords with the alto and tenor saxophones, which signals the movement to the next section.

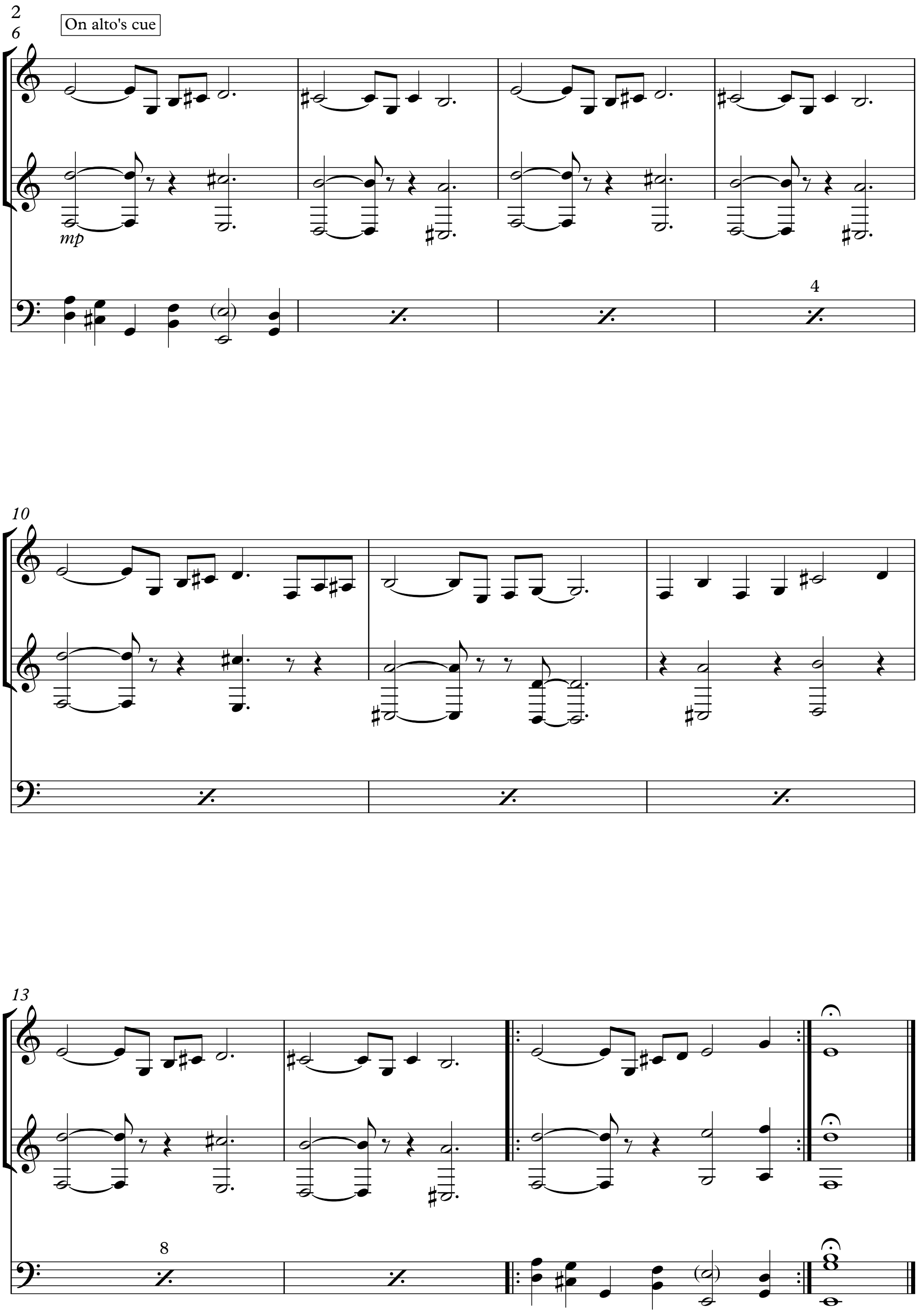
Similarly, the end section of the piece Colin Webster’s Fractured Finger has several layers that, while not being completely independent, are at least cued or directed by individuals. The bass, drums and guitar maintain a constant rhythm in 11/8, the tenor saxophone has a melody to be played freely as often as the player decides, while the alto saxophone and trumpet are freely improvising. The trombone and baritone saxophone are responsible for the pacing of this end section, they play with the guitar, but have a cue consisting of four long-notes that they break away to on three separate occasions, the last of which is the signal to end the piece. By varying the amount of time between these phrases, the trombone and baritone saxophone players control the pacing and length of the end section.

These are just two examples, there are many more throughout the LUME Lab suite, as evidenced in the scores, presented here and in Chapter 6.. This approach functions two ways; firstly it gives some autonomy to the musicians involved, as they can play the material how they like and when they like, encouraging a sense of ownership through sharing compositional authority. Secondly, it takes the responsibility for directing the ensemble away from myself, meaning I can improvise in the moment without being responsible for the overall structure, and this has resonance with what I talk about in chapter 3. There I talk about disrupting my compositional processes, whereas here the benefit of using distributed direction allows me to function more as a member of the ensemble; still disrupting the traditional composer-performer hierarchy, but benefiting myself as a performer. A common thread throughout my work is balancing the voice of the composer with that of the improviser, and this is recognition that I am present in both categories, a reminder that they are fluid.

Labrats

LUME Lab Octet

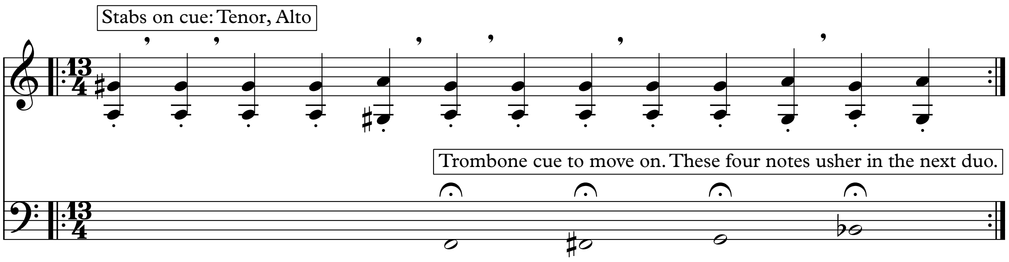

Improv: Tenor, Alto, Guitar
Bari, Trb, Bass, Drums introduce this
2
Trumpet, Alto, Tenor - on Trumpet's cue
On cue
3
ff chaos
ff chaos
7
4
Bari + Trumpet duo
Trombone, Bass & Drums enter - work towards riff
4
7
4
5
On alto's cue
alto
tpt
tnr


On alto's cue
mp

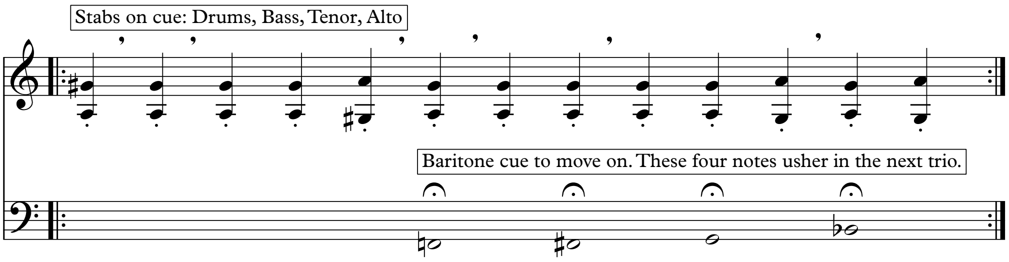
Colin Webster's Fractured Finger

LUME Lab Octet

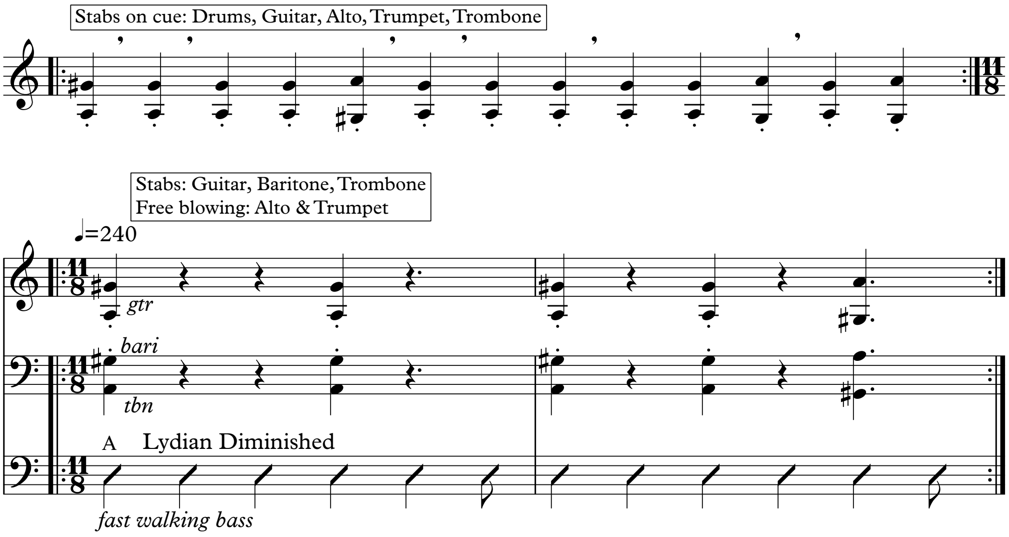
DRUM SOLO

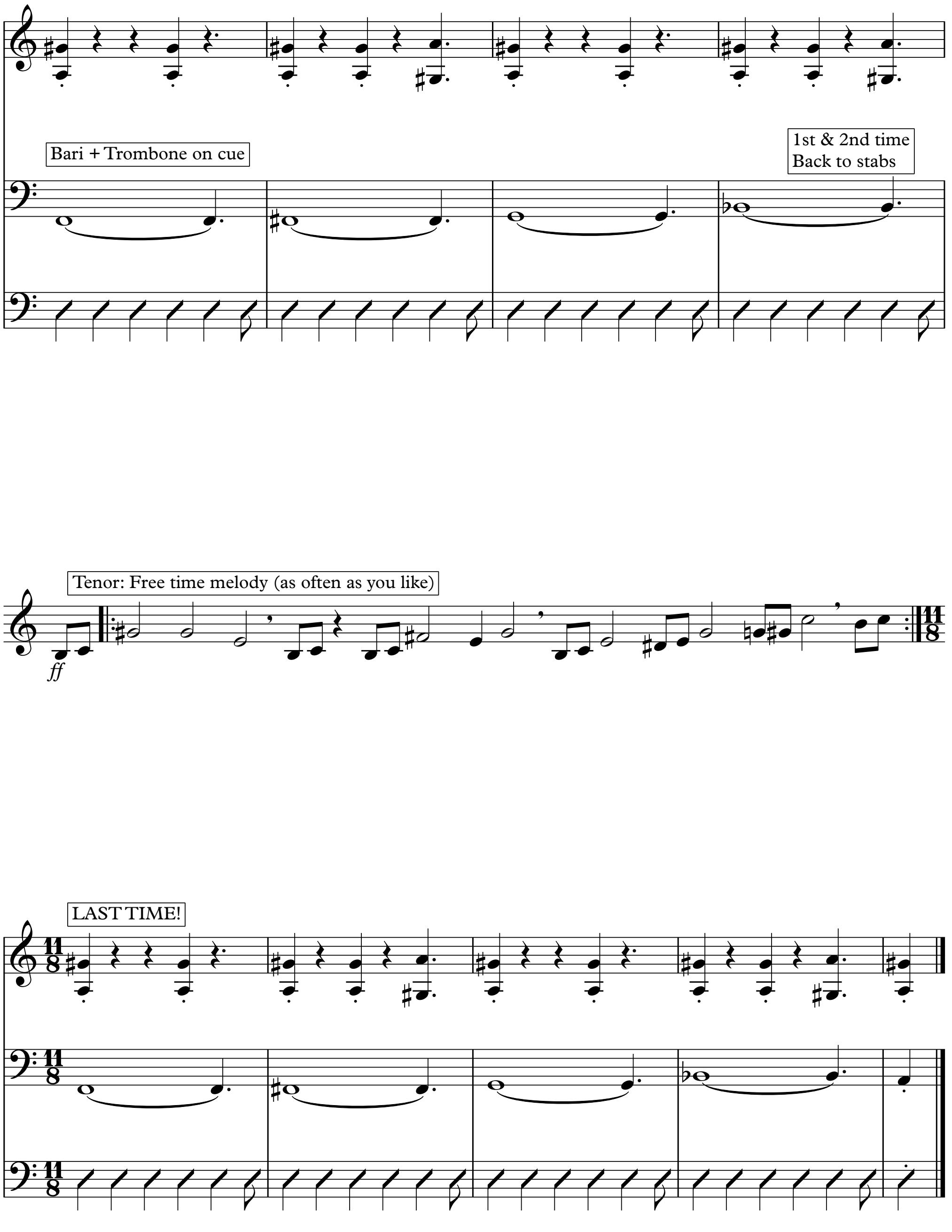

Stabs on cue: Tenor, Alto
13/4
Trombone cue to move on. These four notes usher in the next duo.

GUITAR + TROMBONE: DUO


Stabs on cue: Drums, Bass, Tenor, Alto
Baritone cue to move on. These four notes usher in the next trio.

BASS + TENOR + BARI: TRIO


Stabs on cue: Drums, Guitar, Alto, Trumpet, Trombone
11/8
Stabs: Guitar, Baritone, Trombone
Free blowing: Alto & Trumpet
♩=240
gtr
bari
tbn
A
Lydian Diminished
fast walking bass


Bari + Trombone on cue
1st & 2nd time
Back to stabs
Tenor: Free time melody (as often as you like)
ff
11
8
LAST TIME!

Fox and Kestrel

With the LUME Lab pieces described above, the musicians have specific elements that they can choose when and how to bring in. I explored taking this further in the pieces Always A Fox and LUME Kestrel, by having no specific parts at all, with each player having the same music, what Graham Collier refers to as 'universal parts, transposed where necessary for instruments of different pitches' (Collier, 2009:270).

LUME Kestrel opens with everyone contributing to a particular texture, and slowly evolves to feature pitched notes. At this point 'once most of the band are obviously focussing on their two pitches', the written melody is brought in by any one member of the ensemble, played however they like with regards to tempo, phrasing, dynamics and so on. The ensemble therefore collectively improvises the pacing of the piece; if a critical mass of the band move through the opening texture at a slow pace, then the melody is subsequently brought in later than if the musicians move through the opening texture quickly. Rather than give any one person the responsibility for moving the piece on, this allows the ensemble to shape it together, another example of the 'collective intention' (Hagberg, 2016) discussed in the chapter 4.

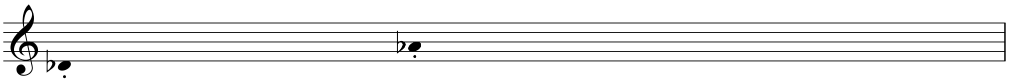
Once (most of) the ensemble reaches the pitched section, any one musician can dictate how the written material is played. This has practical results, as a particularly impatient member of the group could bring it in early and play it quicker, should they wish, perhaps in contrast to how the opening sections developed. Or they could choose to work within the context established by the group, rather than as a contrast to the existing sound-world, and this is the approach taken so far in performances, as evidenced in the recordings. There is the scope for variety there of course, and with repeated performances with the same musicians, one could predict more exploration of this aspect.

ONE

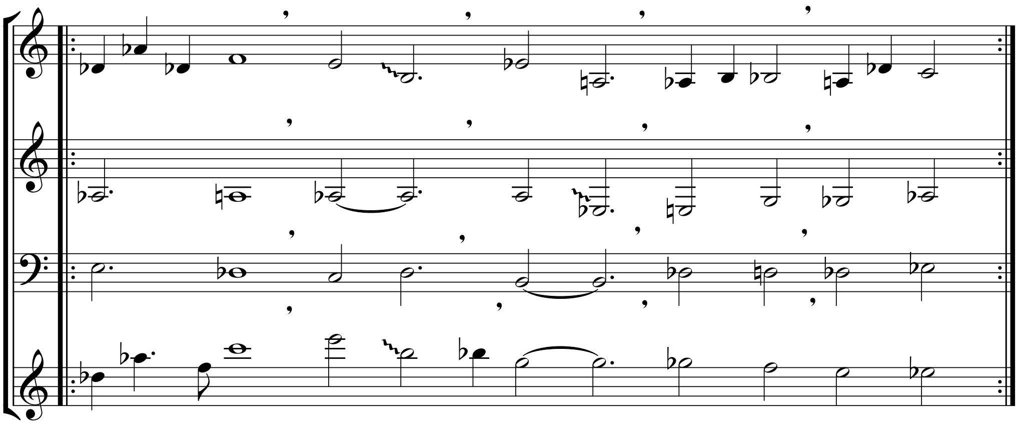
LUME Kestrel

Concert

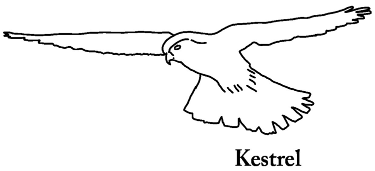
Very quiet improvisation, see how quiet you can make your sounds and still contribute.
Gradually incorporate/focus on these notes. Short, to form a collective melody.
Try to place your note(s) in sequence with someone else, without them knowing. (eg always follow Tullis)



One player decides to move on once most of the band are obviously focussing on their two pitches.
Start the melody. Play it how you feel.
Other players join the melody.
Then gradually add in the other parts one by one.
The first line is the most important one.
Feel free to improvise around the notes, but keep the line present.



Dissolve to original two note phrase (or any other consecutive two notes from above) and end.



Kestrel

Always A Fox is described in chapter 6 on notation, and further below. Of relevance to the discussion at the moment is the way my group Article XI performed the piece on our tour in December 2017, in particular the lack of any indications as to who should play what. On the performance score there is clearly notated pitched material, such as a melody or bassline for example, and the overall structure is defined in terms of the order of the written material, although this varies from night to night as discussed earlier. By not specifying who should play which part, the ensemble collectively improvises its way through the piece, with individual musicians choosing how to engage with the material. The effect this has is to heighten the listening of everyone involved. If musicians do not know who is going to lead out of the current section, then their listening has to be focussed on the whole ensemble, rather than, say, just watching the trumpet player for a cue. In a rehearsal with another group in 2018, one member of Article XI was suggesting taking this approach with some music we were rehearsing. The rationale given was that by ignoring the instrument designations on the collective score we were using, this would make the ensemble more alert, rather than falling back on a pre-agreed way of navigating the material, a concern highlighted by Ken Vandermark in chapter 4.[24]

Winter 16

The piece Winter 16 could potentially also be described as using distributed direction, in that I do not direct the piece in performance. However, this is a little different in that it puts all the responsibility for direction on one person's shoulders and, as such, it does not so much challenge the composer-performer hierarchy as shift it onto someone else. This posed difficulties for the musicians. The trumpet soloist who was responsible for cueing transitions during the premiere of the piece found that 'the biggest challenge, in fact the only challenge (but it's a really hard challenge) is to … contrive some sort of continuity' (author's recording 2016). He is referring here both to the requirement for him to shape the piece by being responsible for cueing and also his own improvising; 'no-one wants to hear me just, like, playing for ten minutes' (ibid.).

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[24] Interestingly, the bandleader commented that they were already treating the material like that, and taking liberties with what was written, and attributed this to having written the music in the first place, thus supporting Picknett's notion that greater ownership results in taking more risks in performance. (2014:33)

This challenge also arose on a later performance with the LUME Lab Octet. The piece was supposed to be performed twice, led by two different musicians, but time constraints led to the second one being dropped from the set list. The musician who was supposed to act as soloist and director seemed relieved at not having to, reflecting the trumpeter's experiences at the premiere.

Despite these pressures, the piece was generally well received by the ensemble, with another member of the ensemble commenting:

> It's a really nice balance of fixed and free … It feels liberating but it also feels like it's got a framework that sits with it. I like that it felt like we felt free enough to follow each other … I didn't feel chained down (author's recording, 2016)

Regardless, it seems clear that putting too much responsibility onto players can impede their improvisation, much as shifting this responsibility away from myself allows me to improvise more freely in pieces such as Labrats discussed above.

As well as allowing more room for the individual voice of the musicians, I also found that using distributed direction had other benefits. When discussing Ken Vandermark's modular approach to composition, I talked about a decision to not conduct a particular section transition in the piece Always A Fox*.* Following the premiere in June 2016 in London (see audio submission) I wrote about difficulties in performance, the version felt sluggish, and I criticised my own directing for not having the conviction to move on at the right time:

> The in London was longer than the rehearsal versions and, possibly related to this, felt less decisive. The rehearsal versions seem to show an ensemble that is quicker to react to section changes when they occurred, as well as being more relaxed and willing to explore extremes of register/dynamics.

> Section 3 was written to happen as the dynamic climax of section 2. Listening to the recording, the intensity peaks at 4:30 in the performance version, but I didn't cue section 3, and the intensity died away. If this were a totally free performance, the ensemble would have adjusted to the dynamic change, but as I set the structure out before the gig, I still had to cue that section, which came at 5:05, 2 minutes and 40 seconds after the introduction of section 2 (compared with 1 minute 15 seconds in the rehearsal version). Spending longer on a section isn't in itself a good or a bad thing, however, throughout section 3, at each cue of mine to move on, there is hesitancy in the ensemble, a feeling of treading water and waiting for the next cue, which is met with an increase in intensity and volume, and then a dying away until the next cue. (Author's personal notes, 2016)

As detailed in chapter 6, we found a group solution to this problem, which worked better than any one person (in this case me) having total control over how and when the ensemble performed this transition, and gave rise to the different versions discussed in that chapter. I also show there that our experiences further support Garry Hagberg's notion of 'collective intention' (Hagberg, 2016). Here I would like to make the point that one reason that the group solution works better is precisely that it is a group solution; suggested by a member of the ensemble in rehearsal, and finessed over the course of rehearsals and tour. This supports the notion that incorporating elements of distributed direction results in greater ownership of the music; by being invested in the compositional process at the rehearsal stage, the ensemble takes greater responsibility for the music in performance.

Conclusion

Again, the initial insights arising here are largely to do with refining my practice after engaging with Vandermark's approach. In Winter 16, handing over all directing responsibilities to one musician helped me as a performer, but at the expense of the soloist/director. Giving specific parts to each musician and allowing them to be cued at will, as with the LUME Lab Octet, raises further questions about whether this is enough to subvert the composer-performer hierarchy, and whether giving people the agency to choose when to move on, or how to cue parts gives them enough of a feeling of freedom. Perhaps these are questions to be explored another time, and indeed this area of distributed direction could be the subject of a PhD in its own right.

The most effective approach appears to have been the one derived from Vandermark's modular practice, coupled with not specifying who has which part, leading to heightened listening amongst the ensemble. What this evidenced was that adopting the sharing of 'compositional authority' (Nesterenko, 2017:211) led to an increased sense of collective ownership over the music, and therefore greater risks taken in performance, and allows for Hagberg's collective intention to be present in the music. Furthermore, this sharing of responsibility led to my being able to be more present and to contribute more in the moment as a musician.

Certainly this seems to have been translated to audiences too, albeit anecdotally, with my supervisor Dr. Fairhall commenting after one Article XI performance that the music had been richer when there were more cues from different people in the band, in contrast to a later performance where I had felt the need, perhaps erroneously, to take more of this responsibility on myself due to a shorter rehearsal time.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Fundamentally, the insights that have arisen from this project are directly related to my practice, I have developed my own strategies for composing for large ensembles, by engaging with those of others and critically reflecting on my practice. As this has been a Practice as Research inquiry into my own creative practice, that should not be surprising, and the insights and experience I have gained have, I feel, vastly improved my work and will continue to do so. In this conclusion, I will first outline specifically what the most significant examples of this have been as well as pointing out where, and to what extent, this has relevance to the wider community, both academic and musical.

I set out to investigate whether, by involving musicians earlier in the composition process, I could better feature their voices, and have a greater sense of collective ownership over the material. As I have shown above, this did happen, although other factors were more important to the musicians, as raised in chapter 6 on notation, and recapped below.

For me personally, the most valuable outcome from this project has been a deeper understanding of my practice, and a refinement of it. This is spelled out below with reference to the relevant chapters, but broadly speaking, the investigation into solo improvising, as well as engaging with aspects of Collier and Vandermark's practices, has changed my methods in specific ways, through enhanced knowledge of how other musicians engage with my work as well as reflecting on the effectiveness of this.

As detailed in chapter 3, the main insight that has arisen has been that, by inviting the improvised input of other musicians into my compositional process, the fundamental change that occurs is an interruption of my own practice. I drew comparisons with how other composers seek to disrupt the improvisational practice of musicians, either overtly like Misha Mengelberg, or by virtue of the fact that improvisers regularly make music without a composer. I found that my methodology was in part an inversion of this relationship, and as such mounted a challenge to the traditional composer-performer hierarchy.

Solo/Devising

The discussion around solo improvising in chapter 4 shows three significant contributions to knowledge. Firstly, as hinted at above, the book-based enquiry led me to question my practice and ultimately changed my practice in a fundamental way. Initially, for the pieces Winter 16 and Always A Fox, I was using individual musicians' solos as a basis to build compositions upon, but after engaging with the critical issues raised I began to use small groups for this purpose, for the LUME Lab Octet and Municrination. The effect of which was that the musicians felt more a part of the overall process than they had done previously, as was shown in interviews conducted, and as I had set out to achieve in the first instance. Despite the issues raised in that chapter around the finished compositions that were produced, it represents an important breakthrough for me, and one I will continue to use going forward.

Secondly, I used Hagberg's notion of collective intention (2016) to offer an explanation as to what Brötzmann (2014), Corbett (2016) and others were hinting at when highlighting the differences between solo and group improvisation. This alone shows a contribution to wider knowledge, but my engagement with this in practice (as a motivating factor in the shift in my working methods) adds further depth to the discussion of collective intention, in some ways providing a practical confirmation of what Hagberg identifies in music, adding further weight to his arguments.

Thirdly, the shift to using small groups necessitated a method with which to do this, and I draw heavily upon Michael Picknett's practice of devising (2014;2016); a practice he himself adopts from theatre. The most important outcome of that for me personally, and the most obvious one, is the change in my working methods, engaging with Picknett enabled me to go deeper into my practice and refine and improve it. However, there is also significance beyond my immediate experience too. As detailed in chapter 4, Picknett's work is rarely done to feature improvisation and seldom with groups larger than a duo, and bringing his approach into both of these contexts offers further investigation of the matters he sets out to address, namely seeking a greater collective ownership over the music. My findings with the LUME Lab Octet set of pieces show that this did indeed result in a greater collective ownership, but that this was not as important to the musicians as I had hoped. Possible explanations offered are that devising is unsuitable for large improvising ensembles, or, more likely that the musicians and I need to take more time engaging with devising as a practice, as it is relatively new to all of us. Alongside this, I found resonances between Picknett's work and that of Parkinson (2014), using the latter's discussion of virtual multiplicities to help explain insights from engaging with the former.

Curation

I set out to better feature the voices of the improvising musicians in my music, and in chapter 5 I reflected on what this means for the voice of the composer, using Ventzislavov's work on curation-as-art (2014; 2016). I came to the conclusion that an element of my composerly voice can be explained as curation, through the selection of musical elements that have been improvised by the musicians I work with. I also have shown the relevance of this beyond my own practice, in two ways. Firstly; I have argued that there is a curatorial component present in all composing for improvisers, where the composer also picks the band, as highlighted by John Zorn (Cox and Warner, 2004:197). Dealing with improvising musicians, all of whom have developed their own voices and approaches, can be seen as analogous with the traditional role a gallery curator performs, as I argued. Secondly, by engaging with Ventzislavov's thesis, and recognising its resonance with my own artistic practice, I have contributed to the arguments he is making. Although I am not arguing that all composers are curators, nor that all curators are artists, but that the distinctions between these roles are increasingly blurred, and that aspects of one discipline can be used to generate insights into another. This is what Nelson refers to as '…resonance in praxis…' (2013:76) and predicts will occur during Practice-as-Research PhDs:

> Given performing arts' connections with many other subject domains in multi- and inter-disciplinary projects, new insights might be produced through resonances between the one and the other which transform understanding of each separately, and the two combined (Nelson, 2006:111)

Notation

The insights around notation have been among the more difficult to draw out, partly because they are tied up with criticisms of my practice, and partly because I did not set out to investigate notation; it has arisen during the course of my project. As demonstrated in chapter 6, this was a greater concern for the musicians involved that I had anticipated and, crucially, of greater concern for the musicians I interviewed than any considerations of the process of developing the music.

In addition to this welcome reminder that process is not everything, engaging with two specific notation practices, namely those of Collier and Vandermark, helped solidify my own approach. An attempt at using Vandermark's 'set-list' approach (Ezana, 2007) for my piece Always A Fox created greater confusion in performance. The return to Collier's approach of keeping all the information on one score (Collier, 2009:270), even though it meant changing the score from one gig to the next, produced better results and reaffirmed my commitment to this.

Looking for wider relevance, I showed that Golinski's ideas of notation, 'most musical instruction treats notated material as an absolute' (2012:29), were borne out to a greater extent than those of Williams; 'scores are … something *on* or *through* which to improvise' (C. Williams, 2016:14). What this says about the musicians I work with is potentially illuminating, that those improvising musicians still hold traditional notation in high regard, potentially due to their musical education. Whether this is widespread or not, and the extent to which it is possible to subvert this is potentially the basis of future research projects. In my own practice, I have become more aware of these potential pitfalls and used them as a motivating factor in investigating non-traditional forms of notation in future.

Distributed direction

Throughout my research, the music has included elements of distributed direction, as described in chapter 7. Once again, the key insights drawn from engaging with this have been a refinement of my creative practice. I found that allowing for collective decision making in Always A Fox, drawing on the working practices of Ken Vandermark, was an effective way of sharing compositional authority and produced a range of different outcomes from the same material from night to night on tour. This cultivated a level of risk in the performances, and allowed for Hagberg's collective intention to be present in the music. Again, although the insights are largely about my practice, by bringing in theoretical frameworks and publishing my findings, I also contribute to understanding in those fields.

Dissemination

In keeping with the multimodal approach to Practice as Research PhDs, my research has been disseminated in ways 'beyond (though not excluding) the written word' (Nelson, 2013:114). This thesis forms the basis of that dissemination through the more traditional written format, and substantial parts of chapter 4 were published in a special issue of the journal Open Culture Studies (Hunter, 2018). Looking beyond the written word, the way in which I have chiefly disseminated my research findings has been through the collaborations themselves. As McAndrew and Everett (2015) have shown, the social networks of composers are vital for the sharing of ideas. Furthermore, as established in the opening chapter, I am largely working with musicians who are themselves bandleaders and composers and as such, I can expect my methods to be engaged with, adapted, and furthered by this community over time.

Future study

As well as notation, as discussed above, other areas that offer the potential for future study, by myself or my other practitioner-researchers, would include a deeper investigation of Picknett's devising music. Picknett's devising takes place over a longer time period than mine, something made possible by the small group sizes he predominately works with. A properly financed project investigating this with large groups, over a prolonged period of time, would allow deeper insights. I made the first step towards this, but, as ever, there is an underlying theme of a lack of resources for this work. The relevance of the work, and importance of future research is underlined by other PhD projects in working with large groups of improvisers currently being undertaken, including Moss Freed at York University and Matt London at Brunel University. It is my hope that this thesis will constitute a part of the growing body of work on large ensembles within critical improvisation studies.

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