

## **Two Questions from Nate Wooley about improvising with Christian Wolff Polansky**

*I. Nate Wooley: You, more than any of the other participants in this issue, have a performing relationship with Christian [in the improvising trio with composer/pianist Kui Dong]. What was the impetus for three composers to start a regular practice of improvising together?*

LP: For Christian and I, improvising had always been an integral part of our musical experience. We had done a few informal things together, or with various people, before Kui arrived at Dartmouth (which was a few years after I did). We were a small community of composers and musicians there, and though Christian and I travelled a great deal to play music elsewhere, the isolation of small town New England encouraged us to play together "at home" for fun, and, well, because we are musicians and enjoyed and needed to play our instruments.

But *Trio* emerged after Kui arrived at Dartmouth, which must have been in the mid-1990s. Kui had a strong but conventional musical training at the Central Conservatory in Beijing, and was (is) a phenomenally gifted pianist and musician. She had never improvised, and asked us if we would teach her. We met one night in a room at Dartmouth which had two grand pianos. Kui sat in the front row and asked us to improvise for her. Both Christian and I insisted that she join us, which she did reticently. But she dove in head-first. We played regularly after that, whenever we were all in town, as three friends and colleagues. I had recently acquired a fretless electric guitar, which I decided to use as my main "axe" for this group, alternating it sometimes with mandolin, fretted guitar, and later, occasionally with live computer (which Christian and Kui didn't seem to like very much).

Our intention was to play, and have a musical reason to get together. We always played in the same room, with the door shut. Kui, whose office was closest to the Music office, signed out the room. I commandeered Christian's old bass amp (still one of my favorite

amps), stored it in Kui's office. We played at night, and never for very long (usually under an hour, consisting of a few "pieces"). We didn't talk about what we did, in a tacet agreement to keep things simple. It's true that we began to notice things about each other's playing, and as a natural process, I think, we tried to always stay fresh individually, and as a group, without ever talking about that. Other musicians were sometimes invited to sit in when they were visiting Dartmouth. We recorded (informally) a lot of what we played, with no intention of doing anything with those recordings. (Ultimately, I transferred all the different formats to an archival set of 15 CDs, made a set for each of us, and a few more to be donated to music libraries).

Importantly, we had no intention of playing for an audience, although occasionally a friend or visitor would come and sit quietly in the hall. We enjoyed the simplicity and clarity of it all, and the half hour minutes or so of just hanging out on cold winter nights chatting. We were (and are), it is important to say, three close friends. We had no professional agenda in this activity.

Though we were relatively circumspect about the group's existence, after a few years we got a few invitations to play in public. We were initially reluctant, since that was not our purpose in playing together. But we performed a bit, and had a good time, nonetheless. At first, we all felt a bit unnatural playing our private music in public, at least I did. After a few more performances, we started to have good time being on the road together, and became more relaxed playing in new places and contexts. On the other hand, we continued to play privately when we could. The public performances undoubtedly had an impact on the evolution of our music.

Due to Christian travelling more and more, Kui's dual residence in California and New Hampshire, and my gradual relocation to California, we haven't played together in a while. I think we all feel that the group had fulfilled its various purposes (the main one, for me, was just to play guitar with two musical friends). Characteristically, none of us seems to care whether the "group" is still a group — we all have busy musical lives and remain close friends and collaborators in other ways. Yet *Trio* in its 15+ years of

existence, was an important and joyous part of my 23 years in New Hampshire, as I hope (and believe) it was for Christian and Kui. As during our cold Wednesday nights in New Hampshire, we don't talk about it much.

*II. Nate Wooley: I'm interested in the characterization of the improvising you've done with Christian and Kui as part of both a musical/compositional practice which I take to be somewhat rigorous and as a truly social and friendly. Of course, I'm sure they're not separate things in your mind, but I feel like they are ideas that are very present in Christian's compositions, as well as your own. What do you think ongoing improvisational practice like this does to the way you structure your music? Do you see things in the compositions of Christian's that you've played that feel like they come out of this practice?*

LP: I think that he and I are each sufficiently developed compositionally so that improvising may not suggest many new ideas in that domain, particularly in terms of structure. However I might describe "structure" (Cage: things in time; Tenney: the relationship between gestalts at different hierarchical levels), it seems antithetic to the kind of playing that *Trio* does, which contains little precognition, or "foresight." Our particular improvisation had very little temporal flexibility or nuanced temporal structure, except over relatively brief time intervals and simpler surface levels.

That's fine, and it's one of the reasons we all like to improvise. My own work as a composer often deals with scores, which allow for "out of time" creation of complex time structures. Improvising offers a refreshing and necessary alternative: a serious musical situation in which one has to think differently, more locally about time.

I think that in *Trio* the structure of improvisation is mostly determined by "communication" with the other musicians. Though I can't remember any of us saying anything to this effect, it has always been implicit in *Trio's* playing. The mechanics of "response" are more salient than those of "structure." In that regard, I think your characterization of the "social" aspect of the group is apt.

Communication requires some form of syntax, or grammar. Music has no clear semantics, which I think is a minimal requirement for a language (along with recursivity, perhaps). One can't play on the piano: "That's a snake" (which is, oddly, expressible, more or less, by some monkeys), much less "That *was* a snake!", or to add recursivity "That was, a few moments ago, a living, breathing mutha' of a snake!" Grammatically correct doggerel like "Mi tío es enfermo, pero la carretera es verde" is several levels above music's semantic powers.

Syntax and grammar in music are style-dependent. A may follow B, but the A's and B's vary widely in different musical styles. Nor does the idea of "following" have a consistent meaning across history, geography, or culture. The more restrictive the style (usually the result of limited pedagogical vision), the more easily musical grammar is codified.

But the words "grammar" and "syntax" are still too strong. At best, they are germane when a musical style is in a kind of beginner "default" mode (like jazz students playing from the *Real Book*, or students harmonizing chorale melodies). In that grammar, there's no real communication, but mainly rudimentary demonstrations of competence, apathy, and what's worse, a disheartening "decay of information."

The idea of *rhetoric*, and in particular, the avoidance of same, is key to Christian's improvising and composing, as well as the relationship in his work between those two activities. By rhetoric I mean: the making of an effective argument within the structure of a language, and using advanced facility in that language, without, fortunately or unfortunately, an objective evaluative criteria for the veracity of that argument. Rhetoric is only evaluated by its ability to convince. Arguing the virtues of a political candidate or reviewing a piano recital can be rhetorical, convincing, fascinating, poetic, misinformed, biased, maddening, or any number of things. But these arguments can't be true (or false) in the same way we talk about the truth or falseness of a mathematical theorem, or even, less rigidly, experimental evidence in science.

Christian has famously expressed that the “New York School” was interested in the *avoidance of rhetoric* (what Cowell called “getting rid of the glue”). That’s an interesting way to put it. If music doesn’t have any “meaning” what is there to be argued? I think what he means by “rhetoric” in this case is in some sense style, and sense itself (as opposed to non-sense). He’s steering clear of any perception of a musical logic not endemic to the structure of the piece itself. In his notated scores, he goes to considerable length to avoid known or familiar logics. Christian’s music is a combination encyclopedia and how-to-book of this — each piece invents new ways to disrupt the possibility of perfunctory and/or familiar musical conversation. He does this by challenging the musician and the ensemble in unusual ways, and through very personal (and to me, sometimes untraceable) compositional methods that guarantee an unforeseen rhetorical result. Simply put, he doesn’t want to argue. He wants a group of friends sitting around a table contentedly reciting poems in different languages.

That’s the connection to improvisation, at least in *Trio*. When people have asked me about playing in the group, I’ve often said, somewhat in awe of my bandmates, that Kui’s astonishing ear allows her to take anything that anyone plays, and quickly imitate it and develop it. Douglas Repetto (who played with us occasionally) once joked that I would play some nasty, noisy, slippery, heavily distorted, six-part scrunch on my randomly detuned fretless guitar, and a half-second later hear it on the piano. Like ear training for aliens.

Christian is the opposite. I always know, when playing, that he is *not* responding in any way that I typically understand response. Kui and I might pose questions, but he doesn’t supply answers. If he asks a question, he doesn’t pay any attention to the answer. As in the text to my set of four graphic rounds (*Christian Music*): “When you play/music with Christian/sometimes you get/questions/before you answer.”

I think that Christian’s idea of musical communication has to do often with not allowing the group to settle into a rhetorical mode, even momentarily. The one exception, which I

find quite lovely, is the occasional moments where it seems that he and Kui are simply enjoying the sound playing four hands piano together. At those times, I sometimes feel like an interloper, not sharing their deeply rooted connection to the piano. This passes quickly, as I remind myself how much fun it is to play electric guitar.

Christian seems to have a readily available, voluminous mental and musical lexicon of non-communicative ideas. That is to say, he improvises like he composes, and composes like he improvises. There is deep method to it, and tremendous discipline. While the latter is apparent, the former is mysterious. That's what makes him so much fun to play with.

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