

Improvising with Alan and Bruce: A Memoir

David Lasocki

When I arrived from England as a graduate music student at The University of Iowa in 1969, I had never studied music before. I was placed in "Review Theory," along with a miscellaneous group of students who had failed to pass the entrance examinations. I never did learn much from the teacher, who had us singing jingles like "The root goes to the root" to help us learn how a dominant seventh moves to the tonic. But the assistant instructor, Alan Moore - a doctoral student who had me in an individual lesson for sight singing - was another story. One day, as I was struggling to produce a more precise difference between a major third and a minor third, he said to me, "Have you ever improvised?" Well, I had - up to a point. As a teenager I used to improvise endless blues on the piano for the enjoyment of the West Indian girls who lived across the road, but I had never actually improvised on the recorder.

Alan had a way of persuading you that you could tackle anything, even if you were in Review Theory and could barely sing a third. So the next day I found myself in a studio used by the Center for New Music, recorders in hand. Alan was already in there, trying out all manner of percussion instruments. I started warming up on the recorder, moving from long, approved, tones, to multiphonics I had picked up from pieces by Rob du Bois and Jürg Baur. Alan smiled. "Cool, man." I was encouraged. We continued like this for an hour. "Far out!" he concluded. Well, it *was* the Sixties.

The next day when I was passing his classroom he pulled me inside to introduce me to his students. "Hey, here's the cat who can play all those far out things on the recorder. I've been telling them about you." I smiled and shrugged apologetically. Was it such an accomplishment?

Alan then dragged me along to several more sessions, in which he played the guitar, I played recorders, and both of us tried out percussion or piano. I didn't worry about pitches much, just tried to get a feeling for texture, rhythm, and pacing. I loved the interplay you could get from just a few instruments.

Within a few weeks we were joined by Bruce MacCombie, another doctoral student in composition. Bruce also loved to improvise, and he had a lot more piano skill than Alan and I did. We started working out some simple routines: crescendo and decrescendo, bar form (ABA), ritornello form (alternating *tutti* and solo sections), "raga" (a whole piece based on one scale). I discovered my favorite combination of instruments. Standing at the vibraphone, I played simple chords with two mallets when I had an accompanying role; then I picked up a recorder (or two) for my *solo* sections. I also developed my vocabulary of recorder techniques: multiphonics, very high notes, finger vibrato, flutter tonguing, singing and playing at the same time, and tapping on the instrument with a ring on the fourth finger of my right hand.

Alan decided that we were ready for public performance, so he invited several faculty members in to hear us: Richard Hervig and William Hibbard, composers from the Center for New Music, and my flute teacher, Betty Bang Mather. Bruce decided that he didn't like the format we were using and started playing away by himself for a long time. I panicked and walked over to him to ask him quietly what we should do next. He just ignored me, so I went back to "comping" at the vibraphone until he had had enough. I was embarrassed. I felt as if I was in one of those jokes that has the punch line "That was the rehearsal; this is the performance." Afterwards, Bill remarked that it was important to *look* as if you knew what you were doing all the time, even when things went wrong: improvisation in the larger sense. It was a good lesson for me.

In a few weeks' time we did a demonstration for the student composers, performing two of our standard routines. The first one, in bar form, went really well, and I felt that for the first time all my recorder techniques had been put to good musical use. The second piece, in ritornello form, was going along fine when Bruce took off on his own again. I hung in there, not wanting to look foolish. But abruptly he stopped playing, stood up, and announced: "I hate this ritornello format." End of performance. Still, I received some

compliments afterwards. One student composer came over and said to me, "I didn't realize you were a composer." "I'm not," I replied. "But you have such a feeling for texture and pacing. I thought that first piece you did was perfect." I was flattered. Had I really become a composer?

Later in the semester Bill Hibbard approached Alan about doing the sound track for a documentary film that had been made on campus. He explained that he had been asked to compose the music, but he would have had to charge too much. We could of course improvise it... Alan tactfully decided not to invite Bruce to the session. So it was the two of us who tried to respond to what was happening on the screen. He brought his guitar and a few drums. As well as my recorders I happened to have my modern flute with me, which Alan thought would make a good lyrical contrast, even though I couldn't play it particularly well. I felt uneasy about having no routines to guide me, so Alan took charge, dictating the combinations of instruments and textures. "You play some high fast notes and I'll play some slow dissonant chords" - that kind of thing. It went well. For this, the first professional performance of my life, I was paid \$50, which amounted to more than half my rent money for the month.

Bruce did join us again for one more performance, that semester's recital for student composers. Alan worked out an elaborate routine for the piece, which incorporated an electronic background that he had composed and lasted about twenty minutes. For half the piece I sat at the piano and waited for my cues, then played fast dissonant notes at random all over the keyboard. Later I walked over to the vibraphone and did my familiar alternations of "comping" and recorder techniques. Probably because this was a real "composition," albeit with improvised elements, Bruce behaved himself and we got through without mishap. Afterwards I was bold enough to ask one of the piano professors how he had liked my piano playing. Naturally, he laughed.

Our final project as a trio was Alan's doctoral dissertation, a piece in Webernesque style for piano, guitar, and tenor recorder. There was no

improvisation, but some of the textures were based on our improvisations. At the time I thought it had gone well. But a few years later I played the tape for a music history class I was teaching and was embarrassed at the clumsiness of my recorder playing. That taught me two lessons: the energy of an improvised performance can make up for limitations of technique; and play your old tapes at home before you try them out on your class.

Alan Moore has been professor of composition and double bass at Kentucky State University, Frankfort, since he left Iowa. Bruce MacCombie went on to become Dean of the Juilliard School and is now Dean of the School for the Arts at Boston University. Is there some correlation between administration and improvisation? Or perhaps the correlation is with the ability to follow your own path, without shame, regardless of the circumstances. Whatever the lesson, improvisation is a great teacher. Now, if only I could remember where that darned root goes to....

Dr. David Lasocki is Head of References Services in the Music Library at Indiana University. He has been publishing his research on wind instruments for over thirty years. His latest book is A Biographical Dictionary of English Court Musicians, 1485-1714 (with Andrew Ashbee, Peter Holman, and Fiona Kisky) (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1988).