EDITORIAL
Soundtrack Co/Improvisation

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Abstract

Screen Sound number 2, 2011, brings together contributors dealing with sound in live performance, feature films (contemporary and ‘silent’ films) and television. Six articles relate to the theme of this issue—Co/Improvisation, or the fluid interface between composition and improvisations—and another four articles offer additional studies relating to songs and performed music in films, and the business of screen composition and synchronisation. This substantial issue demonstrates the broad range and scope of Australasian research projects relevant to screen sound that are currently underway.

Keywords

Improvisation, film composition, comprovisation, live performance, ‘silent’ cinema

Interpreting Co/Improvisation

This Screen Sound 2011 issue features a collection of articles that address the theme of improvisation in screen media sound. There are various terms used to suggest such practices and articles offer a lexicon indicating specific interpretations as well as ethnographic and textual studies of improvisation practices. Ultimately, improvisation operates as musical communication in the moment. Pianist and live computer performer, Sarah Nicolls, argues:

To improvise means at one level to follow one’s instinctive urges, the internal reactions and responses that could be referred to as pre-analysis in the performer’s own cognitive process. (2010: 48)

From one perspective, music and sound cultures have always incorporated improvisation but the most engaging (and perhaps challenging) aspect of defining or identifying the improvised element of a sound work is the point at which it coalesces with composition. Indeed, defining improvisation may require the articulation of composition, which suggests formally notated or recorded structured musical performance. Notated scores may be required so that musicians can perform the musical work as written. However, even the most tightly composed work will be open to interpretations by performers (and conductors). The introduction of new computer software has to some extent reduced the need to notate composition in manuscript form. Ironically, this may create problems for musicologists and other researchers who wish to analyse compositional practice by
studying scores in archives. More frequently today, composers have no scores to be scrutinized and only produce notations of parts that require performance by session musicians or orchestral ensembles. A trained musician/performer may ‘improvise’ around a series of chords that are part of their musical experience, so that, while the performance may be spontaneous, the chord changes (and even additional embellishments) follow accepted Western musical practices. Improvisation may also involve other performers so that artists emotionally and spontaneously respond to each other. Furthermore, musical instruments may be set up to ‘perform’ in ways that are more or less predictable, and this may include the ‘prepared piano’ mentioned in Michael Hannan’s article, or software and computerised interactions such as those outlined by Grayson Cooke.

It seems, then, that improvisation and composition operate along a continuum (or, according to Stephen Nachmanovitch, at a “fluid interface”, 2009: online) rather than as binary opposites. Indeed, new music composer/improviser Richard Barrett suggests that they operate side-by-side:

... I prefer to think of “composition” as defining the act of bringing music into being, and “improvisation” as one element among various means by which that might be brought about. Thus, it isn’t really a matter of bringing “improvisation” and “composition” together, which at first I thought it was: it is more a question of realizing that they aren’t really two different things. (quoted in Nicolls, 2010: 50)

When specifically applied in the screen sound context, improvisation attracts additional questions and debates. Improvisation can be used in the context of tightly composed scoring and/or as a compositional device in response to narrative or image track. Where the image track is fixed by the director/producer (and editor), the approach to improvisation will be notably different to the kind of live performance event discussed in the article by Grayson Cooke. In the latter context, the collaboration occurs between sound and image artists, and very much ‘in the moment’, as distinct from most film and television productions, in which the music (and sound) are largely determined by the image-centred directors/producers. Improvisation may be employed by the composer to search for a musical idea, and it may be part of the performance during recording. However, once recorded and finally edited (the post-production step that enables more or less input from composers and musicians), the film music track is generally fixed.

In contrast to Cooke’s live performance approach, both Michael Hannan and Matthew Hill present models for how improvisation more or less plays a role in the composition of film scores. In one approach, improvisation is triggered by the brief provided by the director and by the rough cut edit of the film, while, in another approach, music cues in a composed film score allow for elements of improvised recordings (and suggest a form of what Hannan identifies as ‘comprovisation’). Hill’s focus on film music composed by jazz artists raises the question as to whether jazz musicians are more accustomed to improvisation in performance, and to what extent this might be reflected in film scores by jazz-experienced composers. Hill’s description of these processes is somewhat different to the method employed by Michael Hannan working under the instruction of concert composer Peter Sculthorpe on a made-for-television drama, Essington (Julian Pringle, 1974), designed for the launch of colour TV in 1970s Australia. The type and capacity for improvisation, then, appears to relate to the requirements of the image track, the

1 An issue, amongst others, explored in Whiteoak’s 1999 study of improvisatory practices in Australia.
audiovisual ‘director’, the composer and compositional process, and the collaborative possibilities and expectations in the creation of the work.

Studies of ‘silent’ film archives and exhibition provide excellent vehicles for investigating the relationship of improvisation and composition, given the sources used for musical performance, each of which would have been unique to the specific screening. Two articles that discuss musical performance in relation to pre-synchronised sound (or ‘silent’) films show how composed elements can work with improvised segments, with variable weighting given to each component. The attitude to the music demonstrates different levels of recognition of historical screening contexts. Jan Thorp and Eleanor McPhee discuss the silent film screenings with live music for the Sydney-based company, The Moving Pictures Show. In contrast to their events based on research into original 1920s presentations, experimental musician Mike Cooper discusses (in an interview with Philip Hayward) his improvisations and sound performances accompanying well-known silent films. Both articles address the adaptation of musical accompaniment for contemporary audiences and this is also raised in an interview with Australian musician and composer Jen Andersen. In the interview-based article by Jeannette Delamoir and Karl Neuenfeldt, Andersen talks about her solutions to problems in creating a music track for a digitally restored version of the Australian cinema classic, *The Sentimental Bloke* (Raymond Longford, 1918).

Different approaches to improvisation and composition may be determined by the performance experience, training and backgrounds of the musicians. While some musicians may not be so attuned to pre-planning and notating music (and sound) but prefer to play by ear or in response to other musicians, highly trained composers may conceive of music tracks that are tightly timed to the required music cues and also require performances by contracted session musicians or ensembles. The differences in views between composers working in various styles sometimes present as debates about the legitimacy of training programs for composers. This was just one issue that arose at a ‘Screen Music Futures’ event co-hosted by the Australian Guild of Screen Composers and an Australian Research Council-supported research team from Southern Cross University, and held at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School in September 2010, an extract of the event transcription of which is presented as one of the articles here.

Non-Theme *Screen Sound* Number Two Articles

Screen composers in the contemporary era are frequently required to compose around songs and other musics, and all of the other (non-theme) articles address these components in different ways. Anthony Linden Jones investigates Australian Aboriginal musician Archie Roach’s songs and their narrative operation in the form of a ‘Greek Chorus’ for Rolf De Heer’s *The Tracker* (2002). Adolfo Cruzado’s interview with the Australian documentary director Curtis Levy covers music as a storytelling device in two films dealing with music topics including concert pianist Hephzibah Menuhin, and the Australian Senate candidate standing on the platform promoting the folksong ‘Waltzing Matilda’ as the national anthem. Two other articles address the business side of composing for screen products: Guy Morrow uncovers the role of synchronisation agents who, like song publishers, work to maximize revenue from songs but, most relevantly, via synchronisation with visual imagery. Linked to this, the transcript extract of the Screen Music Futures event in Sydney, refers to the potential for income generation for composers in the current
and future Australian screen industry. Several of the issues identified in these articles may form the basis of larger studies in the future.

**Screen Sound Update**

Our 2012 issue of *Screen Sound* will focus on the theme of songs in screen sound. We welcome ideas and abstracts relevant to this theme, as well as other research projects on Australasian screen sound studies. Future theme issues planned for the journal include the sound of games and gaming (with relevance to Australasia) for the 2013 issue.

The Editorial Board has an additional member and we welcome James Wierzbicki, originally from the USA and now based at Sydney University, who brings expertise in classical music critical writing and film music research, with many publications including his *Film Music: A History* (2009).

*Screen Sound* is pleased to receive comments on its articles, direction and scope from researchers in diverse fields relevant to Australasian screen sound.

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**Bibliography**

