

Imaginary Birds: John Stevens and Molecular Improvisation

"Being in tune, as close as possible, with all the people that are around you and at the same time contributing within that and never contributing to the extent that you couldn't hear what the other people were saying. So nothing you had to say was more important than an awareness of the whole. A group of people doing that together have a real feeling of: '*This is it!*' And it doesn't matter what it sounds like. You're listening to the interaction and that's what you're giving over to other people. I remember sitting out in the back garden (with Trevor Watts) and saying, 'Look at that tree Trev!,' and there's this tree, a willow tree; 'look at all that movement there, all that stuff, and listen to these birds singing while that tree's doing that' – this was the vision, if you like: 'that's what we can be!'"

John Stevens, in interview with Richard Scott, August 1987

I want to propose a historical and aesthetic model of free musical improvisation, which I will call *molecular*. This model proposes a radically collective image of free improvisation, which prioritises dialogic interaction over conventional line, form and instrumental role. The model derives from my interpretation of the concepts and practices originally developed by the band leader, percussionist and teacher John Stevens, particularly in various line-ups of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble (SME) in the 1960s and 1970s (including Trevor Watts, Evan Parker, Paul Rutherford and Derek Bailey). John also documented his ideas, notably in and in his *Search and Reflect* book and in the sleeve notes from the 1967 LP *Karyobin Are the Imaginary Birds Said to Live in Paradise*. I don't know if John ever used the word molecular, but as far as I am aware he didn't use any other single word to encapsulate his thinking and, based on the understanding I derived from my own discussions with him, I don't think its a word he would have objected to.

In group performances and improvisation workshops John was devoted to the facilitation of musical situations where each player was asked to become part of something beyond themselves, and as far as they could to contribute to a music which intended to break down many different kinds of boundaries: social, political, psychological and musical. His compositions and exercises are containers and springboards for the realisation of a kind of radically collective creativity and the wider ramifications of this for how a human communities might potentially function, were never lost on him. But this way of working was not intended for the purpose of demonstrating or rehearsing any ulterior political

motive or rhetoric. Instead I think his pieces expose a certain fragile kind of human intimacy and seek to construct form from that intimacy. They demand that the musicians, by abandoning the security and independence of their own “lines”, allow themselves instead to become listeners in a way in which their roles and identities are questioned and in which all actions are made dependent on a broader collective interdependent musical structure.

It was never just music that John was talking about. For him music was also a quite direct reflection of other social, political, natural and spiritual realities, and of other ways of connecting and being. When communicating his ideas John would often talk about the movement of a flock of birds, of the branches of trees swaying in the wind, of the rhythmic cycles of breathing and of the interactive speed and rhythm of table tennis. It was these kinds of unselfconscious, organic movements that John seemed driven to express in musical forms. But if these examples represent an element of nature in his thinking, they are always somehow moments of nature occurring in a human context: if we can hear the birds in the trees, we can also always hear the traffic and murmur of conversation in the background. So I'd say John's concept of listening, although no doubt hugely idealised, was also somehow pragmatic, and that it was never exempt from a certain kind of political implication. Listening is given a great priority in his work partly because, unlike action, it is not easily reducible to score, concept or any other kind of authority or discourse: it simply presupposes receptivity. And I think such receptivity is not to be seen as a form of passivity but rather as an activity: an activity which transforms both the listener and the listened-to.

For example, one technique he proposed was “scribbling”; which is as it sounds, an erratic process; creating something like an unconscious stream of musical information whilst focussing one’s attention as fully as possible on the activity of the other players. Scribbling bypasses the received wisdom of the instrument, explicitly questioning the concept of individual instrumental ability or virtuosity. In their place it prioritises egoless, unselfconscious listening, collective dialogism and spontaneity suggesting the possibility of a direct circuit between the listening ear and the tactile surfaces of the body. In the duet composition/exercise *Face to Face* for example the players are instructed to: “Try to be a total ear to the other player, allowing your own playing to be of secondary significance (...) the main priority being to hear the other player totally”. As the actions of another body are given priority over our own, the body is opened, revealed as incomplete and becomes the

site of listening, receiving and giving. The improvisation resulting from this formally unrestrained activity takes place quite outside recognized and conventional musical discourse. It is a conversation made not just of sounds, but of active and receptive listening bodies, of organisms interacting as openly and directly as possible in shared time and space. Through their attempt at complete absorption in the moment, the players perhaps also feel the possibility of going beyond the moment, towards something unspoken, something which is tangible but which refuses definition.

Molecular improvisation not only represents a fundamental questioning of instrumental technique, but perhaps more importantly a radical challenge to received concepts of musical form. Its detractors, especially bop-rooted jazz musicians, commonly attacked the music of the Spontaneous Music Ensemble at the time as chaotic, formless and even effeminate. Although the influence of jazz (the “J-word” as Evan Parker has been known to call it) cast a long shadow on most early styles of free improvisation, I think it may be more helpful to see molecular improvisation less in terms of its precedents than, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, as a kind of flight, as its own line of escape with its own determinations. Early free improvisation, in common with many 20th century avant-garde practices, and in particular with certain movements and concepts born from the 1950s and 1960s (such as Situationism) seemed to fight quite hard both to define itself as a kind of active escape from definition. For example, even though many or all of the musicians in the SME at the time came from jazz backgrounds and were profoundly influenced by jazz musicians, many of the structural and linguistic principles of jazz were perceived by them not as formal prerequisites but as limitations to be overcome. Key to this was not just the abandonment of functional harmony, tonality and swinging rhythm, but a critique of line itself and in particular the disintegration of the traditional functional distinctions between individual lines and instrumental roles and registers, which we find maintained throughout the jazz tradition. In their place these improvising musicians sought not just different lines and trajectories, but different *kinds* of lines and trajectories, which had new formal consequences which could not be contained with conventional jazz structures.

In some respects this disintegration of line and layer no doubt parallels aspects of the aesthetics of pre- and post-war serialist composers. Like them the first generation of free improvising musicians were looking for new territories unmarked by external authority, institutionalized power or by the dangerous certainties of the past. So, in a similar manner to the way in which Anton Webern's chamber music dissolved twelve-tone music into a

series of minute pointillist gestures, the SME deconstructed the familiar linear phrasing of jazz into ever smaller conversational units and eventually into a newly revealed universe of microscopic and molecular musical possibilities.

While molecular improvisation dispensed with conventional line and predetermined form it is a mistake to conclude that was formless. Quite the contrary; the abandonment of structural predetermination and linear phrasing allowed a new, more radically dialogic concept of form to come into being. In molecular interaction we cease to function as individual actors or in ordered and stratified layers. Functioning as molecules we are free to create aggregates with other molecules. The movements of these aggregates, while directed by no one in particular, come to form the waves, vectors and trajectories, which describe exactly the convergences, densities and dissipations that are organic constituents of musical form. Nowhere is the dramaturgical flow of energies, tendencies and desires transforming into events and structures more uncompromisingly self-evident than in the music of the SME. In it we can hear forms taking shape, apparently from nothing, in front of our ears. Form emerges not from predetermination but from desire and from collective interaction: and it is this formal, creative potential of dialogue and interaction that molecular interaction prioritises. Music is the art of the present and in no music is that more radically the case than in this form of improvisation.

John combined a deep and almost childlike naivety with a very real philosophical and conceptual sophistication. Though he was very much engaged with a kind of musical modernism modern, I think his repeated references to collective bird song reveals how these ideas stemmed from more fundamental, and even primordial, perceptions about sound and human relationships with it. Deleuze and Guattari write:

“The same thing that leads a musician to discover the birds also leads him to discover the elementary and the cosmic. Both combine to form a block, a universe fibre, a diagonal or complex space. Music dispatches molecular flows.”

Birdsong and the movements of nature, because we hear them outside our own languages and discourses offer a moment of immediate, innate human reaction to sound quite outside the boundaries of what we know as music. Such an archetypal moment not only suggests the molecular, it also creates the ground for a particular kind of modernism which can allow us to extend what we conceive to be music, including newly complex

relationships of time, layer, tempo, pulse, dialogue and musical space. Deleuze and Guattari again: “The molecular has the capacity to make the *elementary* communicate with the *cosmic*: precisely because it effects a dissolution of form that connects the most diverse longitudes and latitudes, the most varied speeds and slownesses, which guarantees a continuum by stretching variation far beyond its formal limits.”

Through the process of free improvisation I think Grutronic, along with other contemporary improvisers (Bark! And Furt, for example) have somehow rediscovered or reinvented complex, hyper-contrapuntal and molecular modes of group playing that are in some respects very similar to John’s, despite the fact we are predominantly working with electroacoustic tools. Whether we were looking for it or not, I feel we have uncovered a kind of innate ancestral connection not only to John and to the SME but more importantly to some of the elementary musical relationships between human beings that he intuited. I suspect such rediscoveries occur, not so much because of a distinct musical style or musical philosophy but because, as John realised, such insights are intrinsic parts of the potential of sound and of the nature of improvisation; archetypal but always new, waiting to be discovered, celebrated and joyfully explored.

Evan Parker, who is a frequent guest “soloist” with Grutronic, is of course also a key figure in that ancestry, having played with the SME for many years and being at the very least a co-founder of the molecular approach. The role or purpose of a solitary acoustic instrument in an electroacoustic ensemble is perhaps not so obvious. But I love how he addresses the question and plays with us, especially on this recording. Perhaps because Evan’s concept of the soprano saxophone seems at least as much informed by electroacoustic music as our concepts of electroacoustic music have been informed by playing acoustic instruments; the combination seems to make complete sense, and is without translation, redundancy or compromise. Without denying the tonal nature of his instrument he hardly ever emerges as an independent solo voice, instead finding spaces inside the ensemble, interacting as an equal element within our electronic myriad calls and responses, attacks and decays, wobbles, bleeps and smears.

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Richard Scott, Berlin July 2011

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