

Just Making It Up: Structure and Spontaneity in Music and Teaching

An interview with W.A. Mathieu by Noam Lemish

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Résumé de l'article

William Allaudin Mathieu (born in 1937) is a consummate musician, a pianist, composer, author, and teacher — and, in my view, one of the most influential musicians of his generation. In his early twenties he composed music for the Kenton and Ellington Big Bands, was the founding musical director of the famed Second City of Chicago (Improv Theater) and was a pioneer in the 1960s of the application of theater improvisation games into the musical sphere. He is the author of four influential books, including the best selling "The Listening Book" (1991). In a teaching career spanning more than fifty years, Mathieu has been an important influence and guide to many musicians worldwide.

As I demonstrate throughout this essay, W.A. Mathieu reminds us that in highlighting the world of improvisation we must be careful not to romanticize spontaneity, for doing so might well involve our falling into the trap of dualistic thinking that separates if not excludes such activity from composition. Overall, Mathieu implores us to reflect deeply about false dichotomies as improvisation/composition, and by extension think more broadly about the perils of dualistic thinking in general. In exploring themes in discussion of improvisation, I highlight some of the ways in which we can begin to draw connections between Mathieu's ideas and the usefulness of improvisation to pedagogy in music education and beyond.

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Prelude

William Allaudin Mathieu (b. 1937) is a consummate musician: a pianist, composer, author, teacher—and, in my view, one of the most important musicians and philosophers of music of his generation. In the 1960s, he arranged and composed music for the Stan Kenton and Duke Ellington Big Bands, wrote for *Downbeat* magazine, and was the founding musical director of The Second City, the famed Chicago-based improvisational theater troupe. Also, in the 1960s (along with George Marsh, Richard Fudoli, and Clyde Flowers), Mathieu pioneered the application of theater improvisation games into the musical sphere. In 1969, after relocating to Northern California, he founded the Sufi Choir which he directed until 1982. In the 1970s, he taught at the San Francisco Conservatory and at Mills College. Transculturality has been a salient feature of Mathieu's musical life as, in addition to his work with the Sufi choir, he was a long-time disciple of North Indian vocalist Pandit Pran Nath and collaborated extensively with Nubian master musician Hamza El Din.

Mathieu began recording solo piano albums in 1980, many of which involved extensive improvisations. He has composed a large variety of chamber pieces, choral works, and song cycles. In addition, he has written four books on music, including the best-selling *The Listening Book* (1991) and the groundbreaking *Harmonic Experience* (1997) which reconciles the harmonic system of just intonation with twelve-tone temperament.

Over a teaching career spanning sixty plus years, Mathieu has been an important influence and guide to many musicians worldwide. I began studying privately with him in 2002, when I was 20 years old, and continued to meet him on a weekly basis until 2009. During this period, Mathieu became not only the most important musical influence in my life, but an important mentor and teacher in the deepest sense. Our relationship has continued to grow and, since 2014, Mathieu has entrusted me with premiering and recording two new collections of piano works entitled *The Magic Clavier Book I* (2015) and *The Magic Clavier Book II* (2018), both released by Cold Mountain Music. Over the years, we have performed numerous improvisations together and have spent many hours in and outside of formal lessons discussing music, life, and everything in between.

The interview presented here was conducted with Mathieu in the summer of 2014 at his home in Sebastopol, California. Our conversation started when I mentioned that I wanted to speak with him about improvisation and education. Mathieu's ideas presented in this interview challenge the segregation of improvisation studies and the false dichotomies that continue to persist around improvisation. He touches on the perils of separating improvisation and composition while simultaneously highlighting the value of the improvisational impulse to education, teaching, and life.

Interview

W.A. Mathieu: Years ago, I saw a cartoon—I don't know where—showing a guy playing tenor saxophone in the subway. He's got his open case there, he's obviously a busker, and you can tell he's playing very soaring music, lots of notes. A little kid, maybe a six-year-old boy, is looking up at the tenor saxophone player with an ecstatic expression on his face. His eyes are wide; he's totally transported by the music. It's a joyous moment. Meanwhile, his mother is

pulling on his jersey saying, "Billy, come *on*, that's not real music, he's just making it up." [laughs] It's funny every time I tell it.

I'd like to expand on why the joke is funny. There's an obvious level: improvised music is, of course, real music, and the mom's zeitgeist is too narrow to recognize that. But there's a deeper level, at least for people who've thought about what improvisation is, and what education is.

I think the line between musical improvisation, which is not written down, and composition, which is conventionally understood as written down, is much too precisely drawn, especially in the West where notation is our strong point. We are a notational culture, a visual culture. We were the first and best with a sophisticated notational system. No other notational system in the world gets close to the precision of ours and, of course, it has not only influenced but transformed our music while, commensurately, limiting it. Consequently, there's an *apparent* divide between what's spontaneously improvised and what's pre-meditated, notated, edited, teased, erased, and finally frozen. Such a divide appears obvious to many literate musicians.

But I suspect this is a superficially cognized boundary. Regardless of whether your field is music, visual art, literature, dance—anything that involves any kind of ideation—there's a moment of inspiration, a moment indistinguishable from improvisation. The crucial difference is what happens after that moment of realization.

One of my favourite cautions is: Beware of the brainstorm. Brainstorms can be very dangerous. The joyous jolt they give to your mind is actually addicting; it fills you full of pheromones. Brainstorms must be valid because they make me feel so good. Isn't that like any addiction?

And yet we who are writers and composers are intimate with how the process of writing and composing refines our thinking. This seems not only true but endemic in literate culture. But inspiration and refinement are two ends of a single string. One can always begin with raw, seemingly uninspired material. Creative writing teachers often advise their students to take a sheet of paper, grasp your pen, and start moving your hand. For writers, there's an underlying truth to this—because the writing of language is so ingrained with our intuitive selves, they get pretty braided together—but for musicians it's not quite that way.

There are a rarefied few of us who are so adept at notation that they can instantly write whatever they hear, and they can hear whatever, but there are not many musicians who can notate as fast as you can write or type words. Most composers, not all, compose by hunting and pecking, casting about in their minds for what sounds best, whether they are composing with the aid of an instrument or not.

Yet, I can't think of any creative act that isn't mixed with some impulsive, spontaneous aesthetic impetus. On some level, we are *all* the tenor saxophonist playing in the subway; there is always some sort of spontaneous arrival at a connection in the mind that wasn't there before. Remember, though, that the saxophonist has learned to play, he's learned his scales and chords, he's played the subway gig among others ten thousand times, and though nothing he plays is old, nothing is absolutely new either.

What I'm trying to point out about the deeper layer of the joke is that everything we do is improvised, it's just that language and literacy traps us into the refining process. I say "traps us" because you lose certain things when take yourself outside of real time, but of course you gain as well. I think, the likes of us—and I'm speaking for my generation of composers and yours, Noam—we have, most of us, some kind of improvisatory experience, most of us have some

kind of notational experience, and so it's like the intuition and the intellect just duking it out for the whole arc of your life. It's a story that's never ending, a puzzle never solved, a plot with no resolution. We don't *want* resolution. Like all paradoxes, the question goes away after a while. You don't have to solve your old problems because you've risen above them. The old questions are no longer germane.

So, for me, the thing that's funny is that everything is, to some extent, both improvisational and compositional. You and I, both, are very compositional players—more compositional than improvisers who may be more spontaneous and enlightened than we are—but there's some improvisers like Lester Young and Miles Davis who are compositional. They remember what they play to some extent, maybe not even intentionally, but there's enough memory so that patterns keep repeating, and levels of expectations are built up in the many dimensions of music. That's what composers do big time, and almost exclusively. The problem is, if you do that too much the improvisatory impulse can so easily dim, and your music gets stiff. And if you do that too much as an improviser, your improvisation gets stiff and the spontaneity dims. I think the joke is illuminating when you think about why it's funny—you're guided to the continuum between brainstorm and refinement.

Noam Lemish: Another thing it reveals is the given and obvious attitudes, the kind of misperception, about what improvisation really is, that exists and persists, and how marginalized improvised music is in Western music, especially Eurocentric Western music.

W.A. Mathieu: The truth is, when you get down to pre-notational music, if you look at the highly improvisational style of North Indian Raga, which has a very, very, very, very, very set form . . .

Noam Lemish: That's five “very”s, Allaudin.

W.A. Mathieu: . . . and yet it's *impossible* to separate the improvisation from the structure. Same thing is true of standard jazz (post early-60s is different): you can't separate the changes and the 32-bar pop song forms or the 12-bar blues forms from what was evolving improvisationally. The same thing is true, incidentally, in pre-Baroque, Baroque, and Classical music—generally, the heavy composers were the heavy improvisers: Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven to name a random few.

Even if for purely analytical reasons, the separation of improvisation from composition behaves like any duality you can name: it can be treacherous, perfidious. You start thinking in dualistic terms and you leave out the enlightened middle.

Noam Lemish: So, the joke goes right to the point of how we learn music. It brings up the question of the teacher as an improviser, the role of improvisation in teaching itself.

W.A. Mathieu: This definitely broadens the definition of improvisation past what is strictly musical into how we live our lives. It opens up the heading, “I don't teach music, I teach people.” The relationship between a student and the teacher depends on the teacher's ability to realize the student's full capacity in the moment. Both teacher and student need to be present and be fully awake *right now*. Being fully awake is, by definition, improvisational because on one hand you have habits and expectations—you know, the English language, et cetera—but also “we're just making it up” in the moment.

To a conventionally trained teacher who goes by the book, first you do lesson one and then you do lesson two; much the same way as, say, chemistry lectures are droned to two-hundred

Chemistry 101 students in university. But the way you and I teach, Noam, isn't really music teaching *per se*. Our music teaching opens up into the larger domain of the way we live our lives. It involves any and every kind of experience that might come our way, experience that we can utilize according to what's most needed in the moment of teaching. On one hand, we are operating in resonance with the wealth of our own teaching history. On the other hand, anything might happen next.

I don't quite accept the term improvisation as opposed to some other way. There's a gradient between what is improvisatory and what is honed over time just as there is a gradient between now and forever. Could you seriously define *moment* in absolute terms?

Look, in the mid-50s I went to the University of Chicago, an impeccably intellectual school. We didn't concern ourselves with what was unknowable. There was no such subject. I didn't hear the word "mysticism" until I was gone from there. Our default joke as UC students was that we'd always begin a discussion by saying "let's define our terms." Isn't that the way our present culture tends to think? By definition, terms require dualistic thought which is pretty by and large what language causes us to do, unless we try to subvert it like poets and mystics. Language indicates there's life and death, cold and hot, real and unreal, improvised and composed, and on into the night.

One reason Buddhism has caught on in the West is because dualistic thought can have an anesthetic effect on our lives. You have to see the gradient, the continuum, the middle ground, the "middle way" between these terms that both reconciles and transcends them. The salient point is that everything contains its opposite.

If you listen to a really good Mozart composition, say the 40th symphony in G minor, the music seems to magically arise as if spontaneous. You see like forty violinists all bowing the same way, and *they're making it up!* It's a miracle! Conversely, when you or me are improvising really well, it's as if the music is written in stone. That was my feeling when you were recording your F improvisation as part of *The Magic Clavier* CD. I thought: "It must have taken him six years to learn that thing." And you were tossing it off. Of course, it didn't take six years, it took thirty-two, 'cause that's how old you are.

That's the ideal, where you manifest a deep knowledge—a knowledge that's so difficult to talk about. It's why the subway joke is funny, because, obviously, you make everything up as you go along and you refine it in various ways. And so even the most intuitive, spontaneous, crazy, schizophrenic thought is conditioned by the arc and pattern of that person's life. Patterns of learning are embedded in the most seemingly spontaneous utterances. And yet, [Pierre] Boulez's or [Luigi] Nono's serialization of every dimension can, and often does, have an improvisational flare.

One has to be careful not to get caught in the academic trap that your work can be justified only if you separate your terms out, reveling in the discernments you've made between and among them. That's good to do, it's important to do, mind you, but it's only one phase of the aesthetic process. The danger is that you can hardly help but be analytical if you are using analytical language. And, even when we don't express these distinctions in our language it's hard not to employ the cerebral cortex for its born job, which is, of course, to make such distinctions as clearly as possible so as not to get burned or eaten or run over by a truck.

So, what is improvisation then? Let's define our terms. [laughs] A written play is a written play, there's a script. Yet, inside of that, even if the actors are sticking to the script, every

performance is different. Same is true of chamber music, every music. So, there are pre-set patterns nearly wherever you look and there's spontaneous variety wherever you look. This is really all I'm trying to say. I'm just pointing out that as an opening exercise you gotta ask: What are you talking about? What is improvisation?

Incidentally, I need to point out that my own answers to such questions are tempered by the non-bounded fuzziness of my thought because, well, my dear, everything is everything. And *that's* the problem with asking a mystic a question. [laughs]

Noam Lemish: Right. Thanks. [both laugh]

W.A. Mathieu: The deep creative issues that we confront when we ponder our music-making don't make a lot of sense to non-musicians because they don't have that same experience that we do about, say, *where do these notes come from?* When you are improvising, you've already learned ten thousand patterns; you're a literate musician, you know your Beethoven sonatas, you know your harmonic sequences, and your blah, blah, blah. And there's only twelve notes. So, how could anyone *ever* make anything up? Yet at the same time, you yourself are a boss heavy improviser. Ponder, as we are wont to do, the subtle mixings of apparent opposites, I gotta warn you that the special lens we look through is not so clear to those who haven't cognized the subtle mixes of musical expectation and surprise.

Noam Lemish: I think, most appealing to me on some level is the idea of improvisation as teacher of "now." The difficulty is that it's an area that is slippery in a way because it can get fluffy, and I don't have enough substance to back it up.

W.A. Mathieu: Ah . . . let's talk first about the fluffiness. Why does this area get fluffy?

Noam Lemish: Well, beyond saying what is obvious, what else is there to say? I can say it in one paragraph.

W.A. Mathieu: So, say it in a sentence.

Noam Lemish: Okay. When you're improvising music, you are *ipso facto* engaged in the process of being in the present moment in much the same way that any authentic teaching requires.

W.A. Mathieu: Okay. So, why would one make a connection between improvising music and teaching? When you're driving your car you're improvising—you don't know what's going to happen next. Now the question becomes: What's so special about playing music? I'll give you my take: giant feedback loops. There are at least two feedback loops I can think of that are operative here.

First, as we've been saying, there's a feedback loop between your history and your present, between what's intuitively heard and your educated ear. Your cultured ear is constantly re-enforcing what you know sounds good and what doesn't. The *seeming* paradox is that you're making it up as you go along but, at the same time, you're drawing from your life history. The paradox isn't intrinsic to the reality, it's intrinsic to the way we're built to think about it. Paradoxes are in the *brain*, not the phenomenal world. The spontaneous feedback looping between what's coming out of the instrument and what you know to be true to heart defines what your education *is*, both in the long view and in the present moment. And, in a certain sense, you're also educating the audience by manifesting your mastery of this feedback. It is not difficult to sense

this when listening to great jazz, while watching well-played improvised theatre, or even in a good game of charades.

Now, there's an analogous feedback in the education that takes place directly between yourself and students. More specifically, there's feedback between what a teacher does, what the student needs, *and* the posited curriculum. I think the fancy name for that is intersubjective education.

Consider this, for instance: When you're improvising with a rhythm section over a jazz standard, you are being responsible to the changes of the song—the harmonic narrative—as well as the rhythm, the meter, even the original melody, but not bound by any of these. You have the freedom to interpret the boundaries responsibly, so there's a mutual understanding within the small society of your quartet. *Responsible to* but not *bound by*. Can you see the similarity to a teacher working from a curriculum but being spontaneous and interactive? *Responsible to* but not *bound by*, at least up to the point that the outcome is of benefit to the society at large.

The “of benefit” raises the practical issue of how to be spontaneous within what can often be stringent academic demands. In the same way a listener might say of even the most responsible improviser, “that’s not real music, he’s just making it up as he goes along,” someone in a faculty meeting could—oh, so easily—say of a colleague, “he’s not really teaching, he’s just making up the course as he goes along.” Such an instance might not be a very funny joke.

So, *now* it's time to talk about your not “having enough substance to back it up.” Well, as an improviser, you're especially trained to listen to your students in a way that intersubjectively constructs your curriculum according to her needs, her being, what she presents, as well as being responsible to the prevailing ideals.

Coda

Whereas writing and research dedicated to musical improvisation remains a relatively new and still growing field, insights into the improvisational process extend in their influence beyond the musical world. Pushing to bring improvisation out of its segregated corner, several writers (including many published in this journal) have helped shed light on various dimensions of improvisation in a broad range of areas. W.A. Mathieu reminds us that, in highlighting the world of improvisation, we must be careful not to romanticize spontaneity and thus fall into the trap of dualistic thinking that separates and freezes such activity from the world of composition. Improvisation exists in composition, and composition in improvisation.

Going a step further, in sharing Mathieu's thoughts in this interview, I hope to highlight ways in which we can draw connections between the world of musical improvisation and the world of education. If, as W.A. Mathieu claims, we are all that subway saxophonist, making it up as we go along, but making it up based on the patterns and history of our own conditioning, then it is doubly true that in teaching we are constantly engaged in the ebb and flow of this seeming paradox. The teacher's task, it seems, is to stay engaged and aware of this subtle, never-ending negotiation between content, self, student, and the realities of the present moment. Admittedly, much like musical improvisation, this is no easy task, but one well worth pursuing.