Choice, Originality, and Style

by
Mickie D. Willis

In a recent conversation with a colleague, the subject of jazz came up. She expressed the view that jazz soloists were simply playing bits and pieces of things they'd played before, slightly different each time perhaps, but essentially a rehash of things they'd practiced. I'd heard the idea before . . . that improvisers didn't really "improvise" that much. That on careful analysis, and upon comparison with their other solos on the same piece, such similarity can be found, that the so-called "improvised" solo, was little more than a melange of phrases that had been developed over time, and varied slightly with each performance. This is, to some extent, undeniably true. Even among jazz musicians and cognoscenti, it is widely accepted that players have their licks-phrases that often turn up in their solos. Good players will often have quite a repertoire of these. And even the best players often, in times of less creative energy, rely on familiar patterns. But the same can be said of composers as well. Many times, the same or quite similar phrases will be imbedded in works derived, not by fleeting, sometimes almost instantaneous decisions, but through slower, more deliberate processes that allow for reconsideration, and presumably, should minimize the degree of rehashing one's ideas. Of course in composed music, and in improvised music, the more creative, talented, and conscientious the musician, the less reliance on their previous music will be heard, and the more change and growth of their ideas will be manifest.

But the fact is, we humans are simply not that creative. So creative that everything we do within a short span of time - a few days or months, or even years sometimes, can be fresh, original, and completely different from that we produced before. We are, as one of my early teachers described it, "prisoners of our own minds." And this has been the rationale for all kinds of devices and methodologies for both composition and improvisation; procedures to help us escape that prison by imposing outside factors that force us out of the habit patterns that so often constrain our creative potentials. For concert composers, this has often been in the form of chance or aleatoric elements in the compositional process, or to allow performers more freedom to personalize each performance. For jazz performers, paradoxically, it has often been structure that drives the improviser into different musical terrain, to nudge them out of the glib, practiced patterns that fall easily under the fingers. But maybe this is not so paradoxical. For each of these contrivances, in their own way, addresses some need or weakness in the respective processes, be it composition or improvisation, that often limits the full creative potential of the musician: For those who methodically craft works that will be played by others, often the element that's missing is spontaneity, that demanding circumstance that forces us to play or write so immediately that constraint or inhibition cannot interfere, and allows ideas to "fall out" of us that otherwise might not emerge. And for improvisors, the demands of playing, especially at faster tempos, solos that are entirely non-notated, the need for some structure to support this process often causes the music to become stylized and stale. So newer structures must be designed to break out of this rut. So perhaps improvisers and composers have got it right, in their efforts to deal with the stultifying factors in their respective processes.

But are established, familiar styles, some kinds of common practices all bad? Is it necessarily a disadvantage for composers or improvisors to establish a stylistic constancy that gives ease and assurance to the work? Should we always struggle so to be fresh, original, at all times? Is newness all that important? And in connection with this, another, perhaps even more important issue comes up when considering these processes - composition or improvisation: To what extent is established style important as a basis for exploration and creative discovery? And at what point does it become stale, hackneyed, and the enemy of originality?

As composers today, we face a bewildering array of choices. In a liberal environment that is relatively tolerant of all kinds of experimentation, whatever we may come up with will be accepted as at least "interesting" by our peers. Although the academic environment is not as passionately liberal as it was in the 60s and 70s, certainly academic composers have it lucky, in that there is a built-in audience, albeit small, perhaps, of intelligent, educated people who, aware of the naive, sometimes premature judgements that have condemned great works that were unusual at the time of their introduction, are willing to listen to radically new sounds. So without the constraints imposed by audiences - constraints that more commercial composers, or composers in other times and places may have or have had - we are free to compose in whatever tonality, lack of tonality, microtonality, polytonality; to use whatever combinations of non-traditional instrumentation that strikes our fancy; or borrow, mix, and synthesize whatever we want from the past and from other cultures. We have generally thought of this as a blessing. The diligent work of historians and musicologists, with the help of remarkable technology, has given us unprecedented availability of music from other periods and places. We do indeed live in interesting times. But we have so many choices . . . so many decisions to make when composing.

Wasn't life simpler for Mozart? Wasn't he lucky, in a way, to have lived in an era when there was, if not a hard and fast common practice, certainly more of one than exists today? Isn't it possible that part of Mozart's fecundity and prodigy came from the fact that he grew up with and worked his entire life in a style he inherited? One that allowed him so many fewer options than we as composers are permitted. Choice, it appears, can be a mixed blessing. Of course few of us now would opt to live and work in a circumstance that so circumscribed our musical universe. For that is the nature of human will and want. We're never prepared to accept less, especially those of us in the west. We covet more, and consider it our birthright, a function of progress, the standard by which we measure our achievement - as individuals and collectively. But if we can recognize the pitfalls of, let us call it "overchoice," wouldn't it be useful, simply as a procedural methodology, to restrict the options, to facilitate our work, and thereby allow ourselves greater expressiveness? For as paradoxical as that sounds, limitation can be liberating. But again, we're fortunate, in that we can choose the nature of those limitations. We each can establish our own circumscribed musical universe within which we elect to work.

Of course, most of us do that as a matter or routine, wittingly or unwittingly. Sometimes we characterize it as "finding our own personal voice" or "developing a style" or "establishing a working process." However we describe it, we all are essentially doing the same thing: restricting our choices, as an aid to the making of music, and ensuring that the resulting work will have some coherence, consistency (within the piece at least) and not be a hodgepodge of bits and pieces, resulting from whatever aural influences worked on our psyches that day or just before we sat down to compose. For whether we know it or not, recorded music from different eras, is also a mixed blessing. Intellectually, we recognize the vast stretches of time that separate one work from another, even though they may be juxtaposed by only a few minutes in our hearing of them. But on some deeper, unconscious level, they′re all the same: We just heard them! They′re a recent experience. And to that part of out brains, the part of our brain that doesn′t respond to rationality, they all have equal influence, whether they′re sixteenth century or nineteenth century. So the cumulative effects of researching, recovering, recreating music, as well as continuing to expand and develop new sounds, all work to fill our ears with such a variety of sounds and musical styles, that it becomes more of a challenge every year to make the choices that will allow us to have a personal voice and express ourselves in an individual way. Increasingly, we need to establish our own common practice from the overwhelming palette of choices available to us. Even if we have inherited, not a common practice, but a dizzying array of possibilities, can choose to work within an artificial common practice, for lack of a better term. Perhaps a coherence of personal style is a better way of putting it. Some might say this is no more than a mature composer works out for him or her self, normally. After all, most composers (and improvisors too) go though a long period of development during which we are attracted by various styles, and perhaps emulate many before we find a voice that truly feels right for us. Its a little like finding our own personalities through a lifetime of self-discovery; the arrival at some consistency of musical style that supports our ideas and not distract us from a single-minded path, may take a lifetime.

The point at which this imposition of a style becomes a limiting, and not a liberating factor is, of course, one I can′t answer. In jazz, sometimes it is said that the blues is one of the easiest things to play - but one of the hardest things to play well. This because, while it has a simple, well-established phrase period structure, basic harmonies, and a modal pitch reservoir, it has become so stylized, and has such a history of performance that it is hard to escape replaying cliches - one's own or someone else′s. Some other styles/genres are that way too: Dixieland presents real challenges to be original, while remaining true to the style. And Flamenco is another example that comes to mind, of a style that has become similarly well established. Still, great players in all these styles can manage real originality.

So working within a familiar style, whether inherited from the musical community, or artificially created by a composer or improvisor, has benefits and pitfalls: It can be confining - a challenge to originality and real artistry. But it also can be a comfortable, convenient means of stringing out the music - something on which to tie one's musical ideas - a means of fostering productivity, and creativity. Something for us all to think about, when we consider how fortunate we are to have such a wealth of music at the press of a button. A stylistic norm, even a personal one, in a musical environment where none exists, can foster creativity, not just inhibit it.