Roman Stolyar

Bailey, Stockhausen, Braxton. Three Approaches to Free Improvisation

Free improvisation emerged as a reflection on social changes in the 1960s and often used the word "freedom" without any specific explanation. Starting in the 1970s, different concepts of free improvisation were developed to give a clearer picture of how an improviser might act in different circumstances, what to achieve by these actions, and how to interpret the term "freedom" in the context of playing within certain limitations. This essay compares the three main approaches to free improvisation that have appeared since then: Derek Bailey's non-idiomatic improvisation, Karlheinz Stockhausen's intuitive music, and Anthony Braxton's trans-idiomatic improvisation.

This article will engage with several aspects of free improvisation, focusing on three different approaches. It will also grapple with questions that remain open to me as an improviser. First of all: why do we call it 'free' improvisation if we often allow certain limitations? Why, and when, is it still free? And if we talk about 'freedom', from what are we being freed? Just as the term "new music" is often criticised by musicologists, the term "free improvisation" is criticised by many musicians, including many free improvisers.

Let us start with an anecdote given in a book about free jazz by the German musicologist Ekkehart Jost:

> A saxophonist was asked to take part in a 'free' jazz session. When he turned up with his horn he was told to feel free to express himself, and to 'do his own thing'. – Anyway, he must have been feeling a bit nautical, because he played 'I do like to be beside the seaside' throughout the entire session. Apparently, his associates were extremely angry about this and told him not to bother to come again.[1]

This anecdote shows that when we talk about free improvisation, we already mean something; we already assume that there will be some kind of result; we already have an idea of what it should sound like. When free improvisation emerged in the 1960s, it was triggered by an immense expression of freedom within collectives. For example, if one reads *On Spontaneous Music* by Alvin Curran[2] (although written in 1980, Curran, a member of the Italian ensemble Musica Elettronica Viva, was very much a man of the '60s), one understands that anything is possible. Similarly, Frederic Rzewski's score *Sound Pool* gives the impression that anything is possible, as do Cornelius Cardew's series of actions with his Scratch Orchestra. One can involve any kind of sound, one can choose to act in any way and interact with other musicians or even

1 The anecdote goes back to Ian Carr (1971), quoted here after Jost 1975, p. 244.
2 Curran 2006.

non-musicians. However, I find it interesting that a number of different concepts of free improvisation emerged in the 1970s and '80s. For example, there is the mysterious *Harmolodics* of Ornette Coleman; even today, it seems that nobody understands what it means, though it is a concept that was mentioned by Coleman for the first time in 1974. Another concept is *Ankhrasmation* by the American free jazz trumpet player Wadada Leo Smith. Vinko Globokar, a member of New Phonic Arts, postulated the rule that the act of improvisation is a thing that should not be discussed, and this is also a concept that places certain limitations on the actions of improvisers. The list of different concepts seems endless.

In the 1980s, several concepts for *conducted* improvisations appeared, including Butch Morris's *Conduction,* John Zorn's *Cobra* and Walter Thompson's *Sound Painting,* which are now widely used in universities.

The mere notion of devising a concept for improvised music is already a kind of limitation. One of the more serious limitations was generated by Derek Bailey in the form of what he called *non-idiomatic improvisation:*

> Idiomatic improvisation, much the most widely used, is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom – such as jazz, flamenco or baroque – and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom. Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called 'free' improvisation and, while it can be highly stylised, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity.[3]

The question here is: is non-idiomatic improvisation a new language? The American guitarist Elliott Sharp is one of the musicians who have criticised Derek Bailey's concept, saying that real non-idiomatic improvisation is possible if an improviser has a memory that lasts just five minutes. There is, however, no contradiction with what Bailey has said about it: in the reminiscences of Bailey's contemporaries there is frequent evidence that he called non-idiomatic improvisation "playing without memory".[4] It means that you have to forget, reject or deny any traces of style in your playing. You shouldn't play structures that recall, for example, Baroque, or flamenco, or Western European harmony, or this, or that. But if it is like an onion, and you take away its layers one by one, what will you have left at the centre? This is an open question that I am not going to answer. Tim Hodgkinson, in his article "Does Free Improvisation Have A Future?", writes as follows about language structures in non-idiomatic improvisation: "During a concert at Imola in 1976, Bailey, on stage with Paul Lytton and Evan Parker, shouted 'Stop playing that jazz!'"[5] It seems that Bailey was dissatisfied with his colleagues' playing because it was full of idioms borrowed from free jazz and jazz itself. So does non-idiomatic improvisation create a new language? Or is it something else? This question remains open.

Another approach was suggested by Karlheinz Stockhausen, who started exploring 'intuitive music' between 1967 and 1973. He created a series of open scores of intuitive music and gave an explanation in an interview at a festival of his music in London in 1971:

> Intuitive Music should if possible have nothing to do with psychology, which means nothing to do with the subconscious and unconscious. Rather, the musicians must be influenced by the supra-conscious […], by something which enters into them. There is certainly nothing in the

3 Bailey 1992, pp. XIf.
4 See e.g. Eyles. 2005; Bailey/Morrow 1982. See also Hugill 2018, p. 169.
5 Hodgkinson 2010.

> entire history of music, and nothing in that which we have ever done before that even slightly resembles the results which have come out of these texts. Thus, it must be that which we call the supra-conscious, and not the subconscious or unconscious.[6]

In other words, intuitive music, according to Stockhausen, is not a personal music; it doesn't have any personal expression. It is a music that expresses something that lies above any human personality and comes from intuition. We can find a close analogy in the mystical Jewish *Kabbalah,* which says that since the moments during which a human soul feels the presence of God are very irregular, and since human life can probably experience just a few such moments of being united with God, we should try to establish a connection with God that is constant and that we might feel in every moment of our existence. Stockhausen suggested something similar with intuition – to be intuitive all the time during the process of creating music – though again he makes no reference to any style, because for Stockhausen improvisation was organically connected with a certain style. So he rejected improvisation as a thing that was connected with a style and instead suggested 'intuitive music', which, if we translate it into our own musical language, is a sort of very specific improvisation. One of Stockhausen's scores from his cycle *From the Seven Days* is called *Es* (*It*) and contains a very typical expression of intuitive music:

think NOTHING
wait until it is absolutely still within you
when you have attained this
begin to play

as soon as you start to think, stop
and try to reattain
the state of NON-THINKING
then continue playing[7]

This score caused a huge argument between Stockhausen and the musicians involved in the first recording of *From the Seven Days* in 1969.[8] Stockhausen insisted that the music he composed should sound in a very specific way, while other musicians – among them Vinko Globokar and Michel Portal – insisted on their view that this music emphasises the fact that only they would know whether they were thinking, or weren't thinking. As Globokar said:

> We had some strong disagreements, in Darmstadt in 1969, when we were recording *Aus den sieben Tagen.* Example: "When you are sure that you are thinking of nothing, PLAY, when you think, STOP PLAYING." What's wrong with this poetic intention? In that case, I'm the only person who knows whether I'm thinking or not. Since there is no written music, it means that I play what I want and not what the composer wishes.[9]

Perhaps Stockhausen was the only one who had this ability to read musicians' minds and to know when they were thinking or not thinking. In fact, what is interesting here is a sort of opposition: improvisation on the one side and intuitive music on the other. It is similar to Derek Bailey's concept that features an opposition between idiomatic improvisation and non-idiomatic improvisation. However, the respective achievements are different: Bailey insisted on rejecting

6 Stockhausen 1971, p. 1.
7 Stockhausen 1970, p. 27.
8 Stockhausen 1969.
9 Goldman 2014, p. 25.

the conscious use of any kind of idiomatic style, while Stockhausen insisted on a state of non-thinking to be able to play an intuitive music that is not connected with any style and, ultimately, not connected with any personality.

The third approach is that of the American saxophonist Anthony Braxton. In an interview that he gave about a solo concert from 1967 that had led him to start developing his own system, he said:

> I imagined I was just going to get up there and play for one hour from pure invention, but after ten minutes I'd run through all my ideas and started to repeat myself. I felt like, "Oh my God, and there's still fifty minutes to go!" I thought, hmm, I better make sure this doesn't happen again. So the question became, How to proceed?[10]

This was probably the main reason for Braxton to develop his system. It is striking that he has been developing it for over fifty years and keeps on refining it. In the mid-1970s, Braxton generated twelve language structures: long sounds, accented long sounds, trills, staccato lines, intervallic formings, multiphonics, short attacks, angular attacks, legato formings, diatonic formings, gradient formings, and sub-identical formings, which ultimately means 'whatever you play'. Later on, he started using these structures in his compositions. Each composition by Braxton involves improvisation as a necessary component. We can see four fundamental postulates for the interpretation and performance of Braxton's music, as described by the man himself:

I. All compositions in my music system connect together.
II. All instrumental parts in my group of musics are autonomous.
III. All tempos in this music state are relative (negotiable).
IV. All volume dynamics in this sound world are relative.[11]

In 1984, Braxton wrote a book called *Tri-Axium Writings* in which he explained his concept of three centres or 'houses'.[12] The table below summarises their essence:

House of the rectangle	**House of the circle**	**House of the triangle**
Composition	Improvisation	Transformation
Past	Present	Future
Experience	Thought	Intuition

The basis of Braxton's system is three kinds of music: the house of the rectangle, the house of the triangle and the house of the circle. Braxton placed improvisation in the house of the circle, but improvisation of a special kind: "trans-idiomatic improvisation, as opposed to jazz idiomatic improvisation". The house of the rectangle contains compositional techniques that, according to Braxton, belong to the sphere of intellectual activity, a reference to past experience. Finally, the triangle house is, thus Braxton, "transpositional logics: something can be transformed into something else, ritual and ceremonial experiences or symbolic experiences, or transpositional schemas in the way of [going] from solo music to taking that same logic and expressing it in a different instrumentation or with respect to a different set of secondary components."[13] It is clear that this conception unites composition, improvisation and what Braxton called "transformation", which is a ritual, ceremonial aspect of music. Composition is connected with the

10 Lock 1988, p. 27.
11 Braxton 1988, Vol. A, pp. 395f. See also Haring 2008.
12 Braxton 1985, Vol. 1, pp. 11–37.
13 Braxton 2007, pp. 6f.

past, improvisation with the present, and transformation, or ritual, with the future. Composition is based on experience, improvisation on thought, and transformation on intuition.

One more remarkable term that Anthony Braxton uses is "trans-idiomatic".[14] It seems that this term contradicts Derek Bailey's *non-idiomatic* way of thinking, because trans-idiomatic embraces everything: not only improvisation but also composition, music within a style or without any style. It embodies a truly universal approach both to improvisation (which is just part of its conception) and the general concept of music itself.

In the mid-1990s, Braxton began to take great interest in the music of Native Americans; later on, his interest in traditional music cultures led him to develop another side to his concept, which he called "Ghost Trance Music".[15] Its three components are:

- Primary material: long composed melodies based on a sequence of mostly (but not only) staccato notes.
- Secondary material, which consists of trios in a mainly graphic notation, mostly by using the 12 language elements described above.
- Tertiary material: compositions from Braxton's own corpus of works. These can be performed fully or in part. The following excerpt from Braxton's interview helps us to understand his concept of three centres:

> [T]he underlying basis of music has to do with affinity insight: on the third degree, for the individual with respect to self-realization; on the second degree, for the individual with respect to the ensemble and the larger community group; on the first degree, for the individual with respect to establishing a relationship with God or whatever the higher forces would be for the person reading this.[16]

Finally, the table below offers a brief comparative analysis of all three concepts mentioned in this report. We here compare the approaches of Bailey, Braxton, and Stockhausen according to four criteria: the presence and nature of the dichotomy, the approach to improvisation, the attitude towards composition and the personal contribution of the improviser. It thus allows for a clear demonstration of the similarities and differences in the concepts of these three creators.

	Bailey	**Stockhausen**	**Braxton**
Dichotomies	Idiomatic – **non-idiomatic**	improvisation – **intuitive music**	**trans-idiomatic** (no dichotomy)
Method of approach	intellectual (apophatic)	intuitive (mystical)	unification
Attitude to composition	separated from improvisation as an 'alien' method	separated from intuitive music as a rational method, but using text scores as stimuli for intuition	no contradiction with improvisation
Role of the personality	personal expression contributes to collective creation	intuitive music is supra-conscious (trans-personal)	personal contribution is appreciated as a part of the whole in whatever form

14 See e.g. Cauwenberghe 2021; Shteamer 2019; Bynum n.d.
15 On Ghost Trance Music, see also Haring 2008 and Shoemaker 1996.
16 Lock 1988, pp. 231f.

Bibliography

All weblinks in this article last accessed 28 August 2025.

Bailey 1992 | Derek Bailey: *Improvisation. Its Nature and Practice in Music,* London: British Library National Sound Archive 1992.

Bailey/Morrow 1982 | Derek Bailey/Charlie Morrow: *New York 1982* [vinyl LP, liner notes], New York: Recital 2022, quoted after www.lespressesdureel.com/EN/ouvrage.php?id=10046.

Braxton 1985 | Anthony Braxton: *Tri-Axium Writings,* 3 vols., San Francisco: Synthesis Music 1985.

Braxton 1988 | Anthony Braxton*: Composition Notes,* 5 vols., San Francisco: Synthesis Music 1988.

Braxton 2007 | Anthony Braxton: Keynote Address at the Guelph Jazz Festival, 2007, Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, Ontario, Canada, in: *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* 4/1 (2008), pp. 1–13.

Bynum n.d. | Taylor Ho Bynum: On Anthony Braxton, in: *Sound American* 16 (n.d.), http://archive.soundamerican.org/sa_archive/sa16/sa16-taylor-ho-bynum-on-anthony-braxton.html.

Carr 1971 | Ian Carr: Freedom and Fish Soup, in: *Melody Maker,* 22 May 1971, p. 41, quoted here as in Jost 1975, p. 244.

Cauwenberghe 2021 | Kobe Van Cauwenberghe: Een ritueel van openheid. De (meta-)realiteit van Anthony Braxtons Ghost Trance Music, in: *FORUM+* 28/1 (February 2021), pp. 48–57, https://doi.org/10.5117/FORUM2021.1.VANC (English version under www.forum-online.be/en/issues/winter-2021/een-ritueel-van-openheid-de-meta-realiteit-van-anthony-braxtons-ghost-trance-music).

Curran 2006 | Alvin Curran: On Spontaneous Music, in: *Contemporary Music Review* 25/5–6 (2006), pp. 483–490.

Eyles 2005 | John Eyles: Free Improvisation, in: *All About Jazz,* online, 10 August 2005, www.allaboutjazz.com/free-improvisation-evan-parker-by-john-eyles.

Goldman 2014 | Jonathan Goldman: "How I Became A Composer". An Interview with Vinko Globokar, in: *Tempo* 68/267 (2014), pp. 22–28.

Haring 2008 | Christa Haring: Anthony Braxton's Ghost Trance Music. 9 Compositions (Iridium) 2006, in: *Filigrane. Musique, esthétique, sciences, société 8* (2008), p. 1–13, https://doi.org/10.4000/12i4i.

Hodgkinson 2010 | Tim Hodgkinson: *Does Free Improvisation Have A Future?,* online/London, November 2010, www.acousticlevitation.org/doesfree.html.

Hugill 2018 | Andrew Hugill: *The Digital Musician. Third Edition,* Abingdon: Routledge 2018.

Jost 1975 | Ekkehard Jost: *Free Jazz. Stilkritische Untersuchungen zum Jazz der 1960er Jahre,* Mainz: Schott 1975.

Lock 1988 | Graham Lock: *Forces in Motion. Anthony Braxton and the Meta-Reality of Creative Music. Interviews and Tour Notes, England 1985,* London: Quartet 1988.

Shoemaker 1996 | Bill Shoemaker: Anthony Braxton's Hyperlink to Creativity, in: *JazzTimes* 26/7 (1996), p. 76.

Shteamer 2019 | Hank Shteamer: Avant-Garde Legend Anthony Braxton on His "Trans-Idiomatic" Improv Odyssey, in: *Rolling Stone,* online, 18 June 2019, www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/anthony-braxton-interview-nels-cline-quartet-new-haven-844843/.

Stockhausen 1969 | Karlheinz Stockhausen: *Aus den Sieben Tagen* [LP, recording: Darmstadt, 1 September 1969], Hamburg: Deutsche Grammophon 1973.

Stockhausen 1970 | Karlheinz Stockhausen: It – for Ensemble [10 May 1968], in: Stockhausen: *Aus den Sieben Tagen/From the Seven Days* [score], transl. by Rolf Gehlhaar, John McGuire and Hugh Davies, Vienna: Universal Edition 1970, p. 27.

Stockhausen 1971 | Karlheinz Stockhausen: *Questions and Answers on Intuitive Music (1971),* online, n.d., www.intuitivemusic.dk/iima/sh_qa.pdf.

Watson 2013 | Ben Watson: *Derek Bailey and the History of Free Improvisation,* London: Verso 2013.

Roman Stolyar *is a Berlin-based Russian composer and improviser who has performed in 27 countries, collaborating with internationally renowned improvisers including Dominic Duval, William Parker, Vinny Golya, Thomas Buckner, Weasel Walter, Assif Tsahar and Martin Kuchen. He has led improvisational workshops at the University of Michigan, Mannes College NY, the California Institute of the Arts, the Basel Music Academy, in Italy and at the Versailles Conservatory in France. He is a member of the Russian Composers' Union and the International Association of Schools of Jazz and an Advisory Board Member of the International Society for Improvised Music.*