



FABRIQUE DE L'ART N°1 FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART

ত্রিমুখী PLATFORM

ANNÉE | YEAR | 2015

FABRIQUE DE L'ART N°1 FABRICATE (FABRIC OF) ART

TRIMUKHI PLATFORM | is a not-for-profit organisation founded in West Bengal, India. It is born from a desire to create a platform enabling to operate in three different directions: social action, artistic production and theoretical research. Art and thought need to be produced by all strata of society so there is not only a diversity of propositions but also relevance and accuracy. This yearly journal on contemporary arts practices (*Fabricate (Fabric of) Art*) is published in this context.

| est une association à but non lucratif fondée à Calcutta. Elle est née du désir de créer, au Bengale Occidental, une plateforme depuis laquelle œuvrer dans trois directions : action sociale, production artistique et invention théorique. C'est à la condition d'être produits par des individus venant d'horizons sociaux différents que l'art et la pensée acquièrent non seulement leur pertinence mais aussi leur acuité. La publication d'une revue annuelle sur les pratiques artistiques contemporaines (*Fabrique de l'Art*) s'inscrit dans ce contexte.

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ISSN | 2395 - 7131

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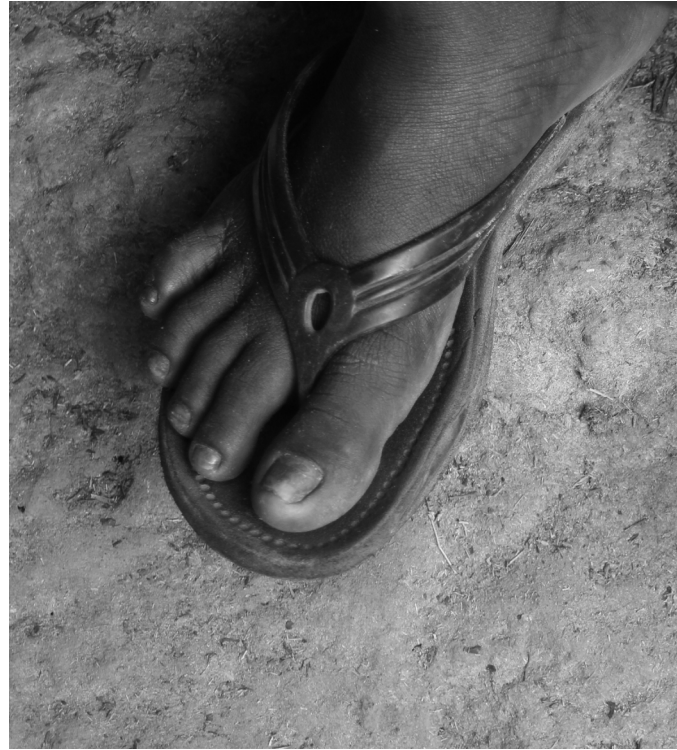
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freedom and sound
this time it's personal
musique et liberté
cette fois, c'est personnel

¹ Cet essai a été originellement écrit pour le livre *Aspekte der Freien Improvisation in der Musik* (Volke Verlags, publisher; Dieter Nanz, editor) où il figure en traduction allemande. Cf. www.volke-verlag.de/aspekte-der-freien-improvisation.html

The last time my soprano saxophone was overhauled, the new pads had been given a special coating intended to keep moisture out of the leather. The instrument has been awkward to play ever since. Half way through a sweaty concert the pads start sticking to the tone holes, and I'm forever having to clean them. It will soon be taken back to the workshop. But last February I played a concert in a quartet that included no-input mixing desk expert Toshimaru Nakamura. The music was extremely quiet, and after a while I stopped blowing into the instrument and worked instead with the sound of the pads as they audibly unstuck and then leapt open under the spring action. This sonic material seemed to interact satisfyingly with the other musicians' input, and had a surprising vitality. The previous week I'd played in the same venue, Cafe Oto in Dalston, with Matthew Shipp, the American jazz (in the broadest sense) pianist. Sticky pad sounds would have been a ridiculous contribution. Equally, most of what I found myself playing in this duo would have sounded nonsensical in the Nakamura quartet. So, what can the

La dernière fois que j'ai donné mon saxophone soprano à réviser, je l'ai récupéré avec de nouvelles clés enduites d'un produit spécial pour préserver le cuir de l'humidité.¹ Depuis, ça a été assez compliqué d'en jouer. Au milieu d'un concert à l'atmosphère un peu moite, les clés se mettent à adhérer à l'instrument, et je me retrouve à devoir les nettoyer tout le temps. Le saxo sera bientôt renvoyé à l'atelier. Mais en février dernier j'ai participé à un concert, un quatuor où jouait Toshimaru Nakamura – expert en table de mixage « *no-input* ». La musique était extrêmement calme, et au bout d'un certain temps j'ai cessé de souffler dans l'instrument : à la place, j'ai utilisé le son que les clés produisaient en se détachant des trous, par effet de ressort. Ce type de sons s'harmonisait bien avec ce que jouaient les autres musiciens, et donnait à l'ensemble une surprenante vitalité. La semaine d'avant j'avais joué dans la même salle, le Cafe Oto à Dalston, avec Matthew Shipp, le pianiste de « jazz » (au sens le plus large) américain. Le son des clés se détachant de l'instrument aurait été une contribution

free in free-improvisation possibly mean?

The choice of how to play in each concert was up to me, and I decided upon what, at first glance, might seem to be quite different approaches. I wasn't, I hope, just being a chameleon. Given a blindfold test, I think anyone who follows this scene would have recognised that I was the saxophonist in both concerts. The freedom that comes with improvisation is actually the freedom to recognise and respect the uniqueness of each individual playing situation. Doing this entails making specific and restricting choices, intimately connected to thoughts about whom you are playing with (and what you do and don't know about them), the acoustic of the environment and your own personal history. Most decisions relate to concerns that have evolved over many years but some are truly formed in the moment. Part of this means continually addressing the question of how to keep your own musical personality without bringing too fixed an agenda to each performance. How to get the right balance between playing what you know and what you don't yet know.

At its core, improvisation, as I practise it, means applying musical methods and thinking that have their origins in actual performance. Some ideas may only be hinted at in a concert yet they plant a mental seed that is then developed back at home, in the routine of private experimentation. The results can be fed back later, forming an ever-evolving loop of experience-experiment-consolidation-experience. I've found that many practical ideas have first appeared comparatively spontaneously, through trying to forget that I'm playing a saxophone and instead thinking "what sound and contribution do I want to make at this point in the music". All of this leads to the store of ideas and memories one draws upon, and anything that might prove workable in the longer term has usually accrued in small increments. Slowly, the pieces come together. Big ideas are of little value in improvisation.

A characteristic of much improvisation of the last four or five decades has been the utilization of "new" sound. Musicians and composers in all realms usually have a passion for sound in the abstract, but

pour le moins grotesque. De la même façon, la plupart des choses que j'ai jouées dans ce duo auraient semblé absurdes dans le quatuor de Nakamura. Alors, quand on dit « improvisation libre », que veut dire le mot « libre » ?

Il n'appartenait qu'à moi de décider comment jouer pour chaque concert, et j'ai choisi deux approches qui peuvent au premier coup d'œil sembler très différentes. Pourtant je ne faisais pas le caméléon – du moins je l'espère. Quiconque s'y connaît un peu en saxo aurait deviné, à entendre les deux concerts, que c'était moi qui jouais dans les deux cas. La liberté de l'improvisation est en fait la liberté de reconnaître et de respecter la singularité de chaque situation sonore. Ça signifie que le musicien élimine des possibilités et fasse des choix, intimement liés à ce que qu'il pense de ceux avec qui il joue, à ce qu'il sait et ignore d'eux, à l'acoustique de l'endroit, et à sa propre histoire. La plupart des décisions viennent de préoccupations qui datent de plusieurs années, mais certains choix sont réellement faits sur le moment. Ce qui est en jeu, c'est de parvenir à garder sa propre personnalité musicale tout en résistant à la tentation d'appliquer un même schéma rigide à toutes les situations : il s'agit de trouver un juste milieu entre jouer ce que l'on sait et jouer ce dont on n'a encore aucune idée.

Par essence, l'improvisation, telle que je la pratique, veut dire appliquer des méthodes et des idées musicales qui trouvent leurs origines dans l'acte de jouer lui-même. Certaines idées qui ne sont qu'effleurées lors d'un concert sèment une graine qui germe plus tard, à la maison, dans la routine des expérimentations personnelles. Puis le résultat est à nouveau expérimenté dans une autre situation, formant un cercle qui va sans cesse de l'avant : de l'expérience naît un essai, et cet essai à son tour consolide l'expérience. Je me suis aperçu que beaucoup d'idées concrètes me sont venues relativement spontanément, quand j'essayais d'oublier que j'avais un saxophone dans les mains et que je me disais à moi-même : « quel son veux-tu produire, et quelle contribution as-tu envie d'apporter à la musique à ce moment précis ? » Tout cela crée finalement une réserve d'idées et de souvenirs dans laquelle on



improvisers have a special, and practical, recognition of how less common sounds lead to new concepts of performance (and visa versa). With conventional instruments the term extended technique is often used and it is one I particularly dislike. It seems to derive from the reducibility of the pen-on-paper composer's world where an instrument plays fixed notes and, after referral to the published lists of possibilities, certain extra colours and articulations are then bolted on. Because they are rarely derived from the player's own needs and personality they invariably end up sounding like the awkward appendages they are. One wouldn't describe Jimi Hendrix's use of feedback, Son House's percussive attacks and bottleneck, or Albert Ayler's over-blowing as extended techniques. They are all an intrinsic, inseparable part of the music and a completely necessary part of the artist's sound. Then there's also the extraordinary use of sound in traditions less concerned with personal expression, such as the overtone manipulation of the Aboriginal didjeridu or Inuit mouth singing games.

It's clear that for many improvisers, the personalisation of sound has been an important driving force. Terms like language and voice are often used, but this has more to do with the listener becoming familiar with a particular player's inclinations and sonic material, rather than with any consensus on what might actually be being "said". Nevertheless, voice is a useful shorthand term for an individual's sound and ways of playing. Inevitably it is created by particular circumstances and times. Formative experiences for me had a lot to do with whom I chose to play with in younger days. I was fortunate to be living in London when there were a number of musicians around my own age interested in exploring ways into free improvisation. It wasn't necessary to try to play with more established figures and this helped the urge to experiment, since falling flat on your face didn't seem so much like the end of the world.

With John Russell and Phil Durrant one thing I struggled with was to find out how to work more transparently with the subtleties of acoustic violin and guitar, how to allow their details to penetrate through my own sound. Working with Chris Burn suggested

ways of interacting with the overtones and attacks of inside-piano, how to think in terms of colour as much as direct pitch. This kind of learning process is ongoing and additive, with many technical and conceptual modifications being fed by new collaborations. Playing with electronic musicians usually involved tackling how to deal with the absence of overtly physical cause and effect. This attitude has itself fed back into more acoustic groups like Polwechsel and the Contest of Pleasures. Of course, it's possible that this kind of approach may lead one away from one's primary instrument, but I've always felt it useful to restrict myself to sonic material rooted in the saxophone's acoustics. To be aware of its traditions but to play with an ear for what lies hidden around the corner. I'm continually engaged with the mechanical and acoustic properties of a tube of metal in my hands and a piece of wood vibrating in my mouth. Even when I work with saxophone controlled feedback (nothing more than a microphone in the instrument's bell connected to an amplifier) it still sounds like a saxophone to me because of the overtone structure embedded in its design and the use of pads and tone holes to change resonances. I'd been playing as an improviser for 10 years before I came to work with any of the 1960s innovators. But the feeling of performing with Derek Bailey or John Stevens had much more to do with responding to their own personalized sounds than with thinking "we're improvising." The small drum kit that Stevens used in the Spontaneous Music Ensemble was perfectly selected to simultaneously allow great rhythmic drive and acoustic transparency. Form and function were completely sympathetic. It wasn't John Stevens improvising on a drum kit; it was John Stevens playing his music with his sound, his voice. What I'm getting at is that the process seemed so natural and intrinsic to the music we wanted to play that the label improvisation tells so little of the story. I was also playing with Anton Webern and Phil Seamen, whom John Stevens revered, adapted, modified, chewed up and made his own. I mean, one sometimes feels aware of the convoluted set of musicians who have been important to a fellow player. Composers also have a wide range of influences, but the collaborative aspect of group improvisation can make the stage feel much more crowded

pioche par la suite, et les choses qui marchent à long terme se sont en général formées par ajouts successifs. Petit à petit, les pièces forment un tout. Les grandes idées ne sont pas d'un grand secours pour l'improvisation.

Ces quatre ou cinq dernières décennies, on a vu apparaître une mode pour les «nouveaux» sons en improvisation. Les musiciens et compositeurs de tous les domaines entretiennent généralement une passion pour le son dans l'absolu, mais ceux qui pratiquent l'improvisation ont une conscience particulière et concrète du fait que les sons rares conduisent à de nouveaux concepts de jeu musical (et *vice versa*). Pour les instruments traditionnels on parle souvent d'« extension de technique », mais cette expression me déplaît singulièrement. Elle semble tout droit venue de l'univers réductionniste d'un compositeur en fauteuil, pour lequel un instrument est destiné à jouer un certain nombre de notes, toujours les mêmes, auxquelles on peut éventuellement, d'une manière secondaire et seulement en référence à la liste finie des possibilités, ajouter quelques nuances et variations. Mais comme elles proviennent rarement de la personnalité et des préoccupations réelles du musicien, ces variations sonnent invariablement comme les appendices maladroits qu'elles sont en réalité. Qui aurait l'idée de parler du *feedback* de Jimi Hendrix, de la *percussive attack* et du *bottleneck* de Son House, ou encore de l'*overblowing* d'Albert Ayler en termes d'« extension de technique » ? Tous ces procédés font partie intégrante de la musique et sont absolument indispensables à l'univers sonore d'un artiste. Dans le même genre, certaines traditions qui attachent moins d'importance à l'expression personnelle savent faire un usage extraordinaire du son : je pense à la montée dans les aigus du traditionnel *didjeridou*, ou aux chants de gorge des Inuits.

Il est clair que pour beaucoup d'improvisateurs, rendre le son plus personnel est une motivation importante. Des termes comme « langage » et « voix » sont beaucoup utilisés, mais cela a plus à voir avec la familiarité de celui qui écoute avec l'univers sonore et les goûts particuliers de l'artiste qu'avec un réel consensus sur ce qui est réellement en train d'être «

dit». Toutefois, le terme de « voix » est un raccourci utile pour parler de la façon de jouer d'un musicien. Inévitablement, cette voix provient de circonstances particulières. Dans mon cas, les expériences formatrices que j'ai eues sont très liées aux partenaires musicaux avec qui j'ai choisi de jouer étant jeune. J'ai eu la chance de vivre à Londres à une époque où beaucoup de musiciens à peu près de mon âge s'intéressaient à la pratique de l'improvisation libre. Je n'avais pas besoin d'essayer de jouer avec des artistes plus reconnus, et cela contribuait à mon désir d'expérimentation : je me plantais complètement, je n'en faisais pas une maladie.

Avec John Russell et Phil Durrant, une chose qui me posait problème était de trouver un moyen de travailler de manière plus transparente les subtilités du violon acoustique et de la guitare, et de permettre à leurs détails de s'intégrer à mon propre son. Travailler avec Chris Burn m'a permis de comprendre comment interagir avec les harmoniques et les attaques d'un piano intérieur, comment penser en termes de teintes plutôt que de simples tons. Ce phénomène d'apprentissage est progressif et incrémentiel, car, au fur et à mesure que l'on trouve de nouveaux partenaires, des modifications techniques et conceptuelles se font jour. Jouer sur de la musique électronique implique de s'habituer à l'absence de liens de cause à effet ouvertement physiques. Cette attitude s'est répandue parmi des formations plus acoustiques comme *Polwechsel* et *The Contest of Pleasures*. Bien sûr, cette approche peut éloigner un musicien de son instrument, mais je me suis toujours restreint à des sons appartenant vraiment à l'acoustique du saxophone : je suis conscient des traditions de l'instrument, tout en prêtant l'oreille à ce qui pourrait apparaître. Je suis continuellement aux prises avec les propriétés acoustiques et métalliques d'un tube de métal entre mes mains et d'une lamelle de bois vibrant sur mes lèvres. Même quand je travaille avec un *feedback* (rien de plus qu'un micro dans l'embouchure de l'instrument relié à un ampli), c'est toujours du saxophone pour moi, car la structure des résonances est inscrite dans la forme de l'instrument, l'usage des clés pour modifier les sons ne change pas.



than it actually is. In performance one has an extraordinarily complex matrix of influences, intentions, innovations, visions, idiosyncrasies, habits, and insights filtered and fed through different intelligences into the music of the actual moment.

In some ways, perhaps connected to electronics, the search for, and use of, new sound for its own sake has risen up the agenda. I can't help but contrast this with an attitude I had in the 1980s. If I discovered something that was, to me, sonically new I would worry that it was too distracting to use. I felt reluctant to introduce it, as I thought drawing attention to the sound might get in the way of hearing what the music was doing. I recognise now that this is a false distinction, but I think it says something about the question of how much we present sound, that is, just let it exist, and how much we put sound to work. This is a continuum, with even the former allowing for both exhibitionism and Cageian absence of intention, but how much we "use" sound and how much we improvise are deeply connected. At the time when Morton Feldman told Stockhausen "I don't push the sounds around", he could have been describing the exact opposite of improvisation. But the situation now is a lot less clear, with much music being "improvised" that has a strong sense of allowing sounds to be themselves. Such music needs a strong consensus amongst the players about what they want the music to sound like. This is nothing new. It could equally apply to many highly interactive, gestural improvising groups. But moves to deliberately step back from the sounding material, to de-emphasise the personal voice also tends to de-emphasise the improvisational input, certainly from the listener's perspective. This isn't a value judgement about the resulting music, more a comment on an interesting blurring of aims.

We all know that intense scrutiny can turn the smallest element into an entire vocabulary. Sachiko M is a Japanese performer who, for periods, has worked almost exclusively with sine-waves; mostly high pitched, of long duration and with only slight manipulation. She has applied this concept to important effect in many situations. I would say that she has made this sound area her own, even though, for long stretches, she just sets up

the existence of the sound. I've heard a solo performance where, for minutes at a time, the principle variation is achieved by the listener becoming the improviser, adopting different head positions to hear the complex ways a single pitch is being reflected within the room. This microscopic area of focus, space and silence is fascinating, generating fresh approaches to listening and concentration. But it is very fragile, and highlights the variable degrees to which different methods might actually serve an improvisational ethos, or not.

In 2006 at the "All Ears Festival for Improvised Music" in Oslo I heard a first time duo of Sachiko M and Lisa Dillan. I didn't know Lisa Dillan's work before, but this occasion made it clear that she is an impressive and experienced singer with a wide ranging technique and an interest in expressive, interactive performance. In the duo the two were like chalk and cheese. Most of what Lisa Dillan was doing caused no obvious aural response from Sachiko M, who played as if she was surrounded by silence. Maybe I imagined feeling the singer's frustration grow, but when, near the end, she began scraping her chair noisily around the stage it was a sure sign that all else had failed. I wondered about the cultural differences in how they'd arrived at their musical voices. On the face of it Lisa Dillan was improvising more than Sachiko M. Perhaps her approach, her actual vocabulary made improvisation more possible, but it could also be argued that they were both equally trapped within their preconceptions. Their different personalisations of sound had developed to serve very different purposes, and floundered outside of the contexts that had produced them. This wasn't just a mismatch of minimalism and expression, but a disagreement about what it means to improvise together. As an aside, I've an amused admiration for the solution to conceptual chasms presented at the famous 1986 Coney Island concert billed as "John Cage meets Sun Ra". The two simply alternated pieces and never performed together. It proves to be a very enjoyable and illuminating listen.

Although most useful improvisational methods are formed in the hot house of actually playing, it seems that they can't always be

J'improvisais déjà depuis bien dix ans quand j'ai commencé à travailler avec les innovateurs des années soixante. Mais avec Derek Bailey ou John Stephens, je prenais plus plaisir à répondre à leur propres impros qu'à penser qu'on improvisait. La petite batterie que Stevens utilisait dans le Spontaneous Music Ensemble était parfaitement adaptée pour permettre à la fois un bon entraînement rythmique et une transparence acoustique. Le fond et la forme s'accordaient parfaitement. Ce n'était pas John Stevens improvisant à la batterie, c'était John Stevens jouant sa musique avec sa « voix » propre. Là où je veux en venir, c'est que ça semblait si naturel et intrinsèque à la musique qu'on voulait jouer, que le mot « improvisation » correspond mal à ce qui se passait. Je jouais aussi avec Anton Webern et Phil Seamen, dont John Stevens admirait énormément la musique : il l'adaptait, la modifiait, la malaxait jusqu'à la faire complètement sienne. On se rend parfois compte soudainement des influences multiples et complexes qui ont marqué un musicien avec qui l'on joue. Les compositeurs, eux aussi, sont influencés par diverses choses, mais l'aspect collaboratif d'un groupe d'improvisation peut donner l'impression qu'il y a beaucoup plus de monde sur scène qu'il n'y en a en réalité. Au moment de jouer, une matrice extraordinairement complexe d'influences, d'intentions, d'innovations, de projets, d'idiosyncrasies, d'habitudes et d'intentions est nourrie et filtrée par la rencontre d'autres intelligences pour aboutir à la musique du moment présent.

Par certains côtés, et peut-être en lien avec la musique électronique, l'utilisation de nouvelles sonorités pour elles-mêmes est devenue à la mode. Je ne peux pas m'empêcher de comparer ça à une attitude que j'avais dans les années soixante : si je découvrais un son qui me semblait nouveau, je m'en méfiais comme d'un élément trop perturbant. J'hésitais à l'introduire, car je pensais qu'attirer l'attention sur le son pouvait empêcher de percevoir où allait le reste de la musique. Je reconnais à présent qu'il s'agit d'une fausse distinction, mais je crois que c'est révélateur de la différence entre le fait de présenter le son, de le laisser exister, et le fait d'« utiliser » le son. C'est un

continuum, et même la simple présentation des sons permet d'exhiber quelque chose tout en restant dans une « absence d'intention », comme aurait dit Cage – mais utiliser le son et improviser sont deux choses intimement liées. Quand Morton Fredman a dit à Stockhausen : « je ne force pas les notes dans la musique », il décrivait peut-être l'exact opposé de l'improvisation. Mais la situation est à présent beaucoup moins claire, puisque beaucoup de musiques « improvisées » cherchent à laisser exister les sons. De telles musiques supposent un solide consensus parmi ceux qui les jouent sur le résultat qu'ils veulent obtenir. Ce n'est pas nouveau, ça pourrait aussi s'appliquer à beaucoup de groupes d'improvisation gestuelle. Mais le fait de se désengager de l'usage du son, d'insister sur autre chose que sur la « voix personnelle » rend automatiquement moins évidente la dimension d'improvisation, en tout cas pour celui qui écoute. Je n'émet pas de jugement de valeur sur la musique qui en résulte, mais je souligne le phénomène intéressant de l'effacement des frontières que cette façon de jouer entraîne.

Chacun sait qu'une observation très attentive peut transformer le plus petit élément en un vocabulaire à part entière. Sachiko M est une artiste japonaise qui, à un moment, travaillait uniquement avec des ondes sinusoïdales, le plus souvent aiguës, de longue durée et assez peu modifiées. Elle a appliqué ce concept à de nombreuses situations, produisant souvent un effet considérable. Je dirai qu'elle a réussi à s'appropriier le son, même si pendant de longs moments elle laisse simplement ce son s'installer. J'ai assisté à un solo où, pendant des séquences de plusieurs minutes, la variation principale advient du fait du public, qui devient responsable de l'improvisation en adoptant différentes positions pour entendre les différentes façons dont une fréquence se réverbère sur les murs d'une salle. Cette zone microscopique de concentration, d'espace et de silence est fascinante, redéfinissant ce que c'est que l'écoute et la concentration. Mais elle est très fragile, et met en lumière comment différentes méthodes peuvent servir – ou ne pas servir – l'ethos de l'improvisation.



successfully transplanted too far away from their origins. Another example was a 1997 concert I heard in London's Purcell Room. Derek Bailey joined the Japanese drums and bass duo The Ruins, and, although overall more successful, I felt that The Ruins made the core of Derek Bailey's guitar playing rather meaningless. Bailey always brought a great sense of pitch organisation to his encounters. It was intrinsic to his view that the guitar itself was the material of his music. But his sophisticated use of harmonics and different attacks and the consequent register leaps and timbral changes often draws attention away from the pitch sequences and brings us closer to hearing his lines as colour — almost Klangfarbenmelodie. The Ruins played with incredible rhythmic attention, but seemed to only respond to the colour of Bailey's sound, smothering so much of the detail in his work, and flattening out the changes in tension that close attention to pitch brings. However, when Bailey worked with more out-and-out noise the music certainly took off. These extreme noise parts were quite radical, so I was surprised to overhear two teenagers outside say "That was pretty good, although the old guy was a bit of a jazzier".

I don't want to give the impression that different cultural backgrounds necessarily impede musicians working together, more that free improvisation has been around for a long time now, and many distinctive and sometimes incompatible aesthetics are at work. Which again begs the question, what is this freedom actually about? I recall with fondness a one-off trio in the 1992 Company week in London. I played with Reggie Workman, the American bass player who worked with John Coltrane in the early 1960s, and Jin Hi Kim, the Korean komungo player. Despite our different histories, the fact that we could meet on stage for the first time and create something that was more than the sum of its parts (as I recall) says something about the potential strengths of free improvisation. Perhaps it hinges on the question of flexibility. Too much destroys the music, but too little destroys the improvisation.

The special value of being willing to change your mind during an actual performance is intrinsic to improvisation. Almost unconsciously you find yourself engaging

with things you hadn't expected, hadn't planned. It's always exciting when the music arrives in a place that no single player could have imagined, or instructed to happen, beforehand, even if this produces the awkward feeling of "if I'd known that was what I was going to do I'd have done it better". One tries to be prepared physically and psychologically for everything except the details of what it is that one will actually play. Whilst ideas gestate long before an actual performance, they have a nebulous quality with no real existence until their execution. Alongside the more considered moment by moment adjustments of intention that occur, the creative use of the accidental is important. My own playing often includes material that exists right on the edge of instrumental stability and control. If it flips to the unexpected side, the need to make sense of the new direction is a good antidote to complacency. So is thinking about one's failures.

A couple of situations (amongst many) where I have been disappointed with my own contribution brought home how much my own way of playing relies on assumptions about improvisation that have little to do with style or technique. One was a performance with the Viennese trio Radian, who had composed a piece that I then improvised with. The other was an improvisation to Paul Bavister's sound installation, which played back repeating sine tones at frequencies chosen to match the fundamental and harmonic wavelengths of the room we were in. In the former I had problems with the pre-arranged discourse of the composition and in the latter the static and recurrent nature of the almost self-sufficient sound work. What they both had in common was that they weren't responding to me, all the flexibility was one way. If I returned to these situations I'm sure the results would be better, but then we're moving away from improvisation and towards composition.

The interaction between players in group improvisation is complex and subtle. A duo is often the clearest, but notably more involved than one improviser plus a fixed entity. With more people the situation has some analogy with the many-body problem in Newton's theory of gravity. The law is precisely known,

En 2006, pendant le All Ears Festival for Improvised Music, j'ai entendu Sachiko M et Lisa Dillan jouer pour la première fois en duo. Je ne connaissais pas Lisa Dillan auparavant, mais ce concert m'a convaincu qu'elle était une chanteuse vraiment expérimentée, disposant d'un vaste répertoire technique, prêtant un grand intérêt à la dimension expressive et interactive du son. Ce duo représentait un peu le mariage de la carpe et du lapin. Ce que Lisa Dillan faisait ne suscitait aucune réaction audible chez Sachiko M, qui jouait comme entourée de silence. Il m'a semblé sentir que la frustration de la chanteuse augmentait – c'était peut-être une impression, mais quand, vers la fin, elle s'est mise à racler bruyamment sa chaise sur le sol, ça m'a semblé un signe certain que tout le reste avait échoué. Je me suis interrogé sur le rôle que les différences de culture avaient joué dans l'élaboration de leurs voix musicales respectives. A première vue, Lisa Dillan improvisait davantage que Sachiko M. Peut-être que son approche, le vocabulaire dont elle disposait la rendait plus apte à improviser, mais on peut aussi penser que toutes deux étaient également coincées par leur propre système. Leurs univers musicaux respectifs servaient des objectifs différents, et s'effondraient une fois sortis (ou « hors ») du contexte qui les avait produits. Ce n'était pas seulement une mésalliance entre un minimalisme et un expressionnisme, mais un désaccord sur ce que cela signifie d'improviser ensemble. (Je porte d'ailleurs un regard admiratif et amusé sur la solution aux fossés conceptuels proposée lors du célèbre concert à Coney Island intitulé « John Cage rencontre Sun Ra » : les deux musiciens se contentaient de jouer en alternance, sans jamais se retrouver ensemble sur scène. Ce fut un concert tout à fait enthousiasmant.)

Bien que la plupart des méthodes d'improvisation soient formées dans le feu de l'action, il semble qu'elles ne puissent pas toujours être transportées bien loin de leur lieu d'origine. J'en ai un autre exemple, un concert auquel j'ai assisté en 1997 dans la Purcell Room, à Londres. Derek Bailey s'était joint au duo japonais *The Ruins* (batterie et basse) et, bien que l'ensemble ait été moins raté, il m'a semblé que *The Ruins* rendait un

peu insignifiant l'essentiel du jeu de Derek Bailey. Bailey apporte toujours un grand sens de l'organisation tonale aux concerts auxquels il participe. Son univers implique que la guitare elle-même soit le matériau de la musique. Mais son usage sophistiqué des harmoniques, des différentes attaques, et les changements de registres et de tons qui en résultent, détournent souvent l'attention des séquences de notes et nous amènent à entendre sa musique comme une couleur – presque comme une *Klangfarbenmelodie*. *The Ruins* jouaient en prêtant une incroyable attention au rythme, mais ne semblaient répondre qu'à la couleur des sons produits par Bailey, étouffant les détails de sa musique et nivelant les variations d'intensité que permet une attention soutenue à la tonalité. Toutefois, lorsque Bailey s'est montré plus audacieux en termes de sorties tonales, la musique a complètement décollé. Ces moments extrêmes étaient assez radicaux, de sorte que j'ai été surpris d'entendre deux adolescents commenter, à la sortie : « c'était bien, même si le vieux était un peu trop *jazzy*. »

Je ne voudrais pas donner l'impression que des origines culturelles différentes empêchent nécessairement les musiciens de travailler ensemble, mais l'improvisation libre existe depuis un bout de temps à présent, et un grand nombre de principes esthétiques y sont à l'œuvre, parfois incompatibles entre eux. Ce qui nous ramène à la question, qu'est-ce au juste que cette « liberté » à l'œuvre dans l'improvisation ? Je me souviens avec émotion d'un trio de la Company Week, en 1992 à Londres. J'y ai accompagné Reggie Workman, le bassiste américain qui a travaillé avec John Coltrane au début des années soixante, et Jin Hi Kim, le joueur de Komungo coréen. En dépit de nos histoires différentes, la première fois que nous nous sommes retrouvés sur scène, nous avons réussi à créer un tout qui était plus que la somme de ses parties (d'après le souvenir que j'en ai) – et c'est révélateur des forces potentielles de l'improvisation libre. Peut-être que tout repose sur un bon dosage de la souplesse. Trop de souplesse détruit la musique, mais trop peu tue l'imagination.



but for more than two bodies it cannot be solved to give complete solutions. Even specific three-body solutions result in chaotic motion with no obvious sign of a repetitious path. There is also a spectrum of philosophies and sensibilities about group interplay, ranging from allowing responses to be overt and demonstrative to actively disregarding another player's input. The various resulting musics are often aesthetically antagonistic, but, away from the extremes, some features remain surprisingly similar.

The trio of Alex von Schlippenbach, Evan Parker and Paul Lovens comprises three powerful and distinctive voices. The sound of each musician is easily recognised, and has been for the 30-plus years of the trio's existence. To some it's a paradigm of free improvisation, but in many ways it works as a compositional unit where the details and life-energy come from improvisation, usually involving very fast reactions. The instrumentation (saxophone, bass, drums) makes it possible for each member to adopt a clear role, which they all choose to do, and their group history generates the structure. I'm sure the players would say that they have exactly the right amount of freedom needed to make the music they want to make.

The Sealed Knot (Burkhard Beins, Rhodri Davies and Mark Wastell) create vastly different music, but would probably say the same regarding their freedom. Each also has a personalized sound, and it is clear who is doing what, but the presentation of three individual voices is minimal, their sound worlds overlap and there is little in the way of speedy back and forth responsiveness. Time feels compressed with the older group and stretched with the younger one. Subjectively, and slightly fancifully, when I listen it sounds as though The Sealed Knot are obeying some precise instructions given from outside the group, whilst the Schlippenbach trio are following some fuzzier plan derived from inside. I like both groups very much, and what they clearly have in common is a sense of mutual intention, of agreement. They don't exercise any spurious notions of freedom to go off the rails they have laid down for themselves. Their improvisations specifically create a very particular kind of music. Moment by moment, both groups

La capacité à accepter de changer d'avis alors même qu'on est en train de jouer fait partie intégrante de l'improvisation. Presque inconsciemment, on se trouve entraîné dans des choses qu'on n'avait pas prévues, pas imaginées. C'est toujours excitant quand la musique en arrive à un point auquel aucun musicien n'aurait pu parvenir individuellement, ou prédire à l'avance – même si ça produit une sensation inconfortable, qu'on pourrait exprimer ainsi : « si j'avais su ce que j'allais faire, je l'aurais fait mieux ». Le musicien peut essayer de se préparer physiquement et psychologiquement à tout, sauf aux détails de ce qu'il va vraiment jouer. Les idées, qui mûrissent longtemps avant d'être jouées, n'ont qu'une existence nébuleuse avant leur exécution proprement dite. En plus des ajustements qui se font de façon réfléchie au fur et à mesure que la musique progresse, il est important de faire un usage créatif de l'accident. Mon propre jeu inclut du matériel qui se trouve tout au bord de la stabilité instrumentale, à la limite du contrôle. Si ça bascule de l'autre côté de la barrière, la nécessité de se réajuster est un bon antidote au contentement de soi. Tout comme le fait de réfléchir à ses échecs.

Deux cas précis (parmi d'autres) où j'ai été déçu de ma propre contribution m'ont fait comprendre combien ma façon de jouer repose sur des idées concernant l'improvisation qui ont peu à voir avec le style ou la technique. Dans l'un de ces cas, j'accompagnais le trio viennois Radian, qui avait composé un morceau sur lequel je devais improviser. Dans un autre, je jouais sur une installation sonore de Paul Bavister, qui diffusait en boucle des sinusoïdes dont la fréquence était choisie pour s'accorder avec les ondes sonores fondamentales et harmoniques de la pièce. Dans le premier cas, j'avais des difficultés avec le discours fixe de la composition, et dans le second cas, avec la nature récurrente d'un système sonore presque autosuffisant. Ce que les deux avaient en commun était qu'ils ne réagissaient pas à ce que je jouais, toute la souplesse devait venir de moi. Si je devais jouer à nouveau dans ces conditions, je suis certain que les résultats seraient meilleurs, mais ce serait s'éloigner de l'improvisation

pour entrer dans le domaine de la composition.

L'interaction entre les musiciens d'un groupe d'improvisation est une chose complexe et subtile. Le duo est la situation la plus claire, bien que nettement plus engagée qu'un musicien improvisant sur une composition fixe. Avec plus de musiciens, la situation commence à ressembler au problème des corps multiples dans la théorie gravitationnelle de Newton. La loi elle-même est connue en détail, mais quand elle s'applique à plus de deux éléments, elle ne permet pas d'obtenir un résultat satisfaisant. Même des ensembles déterminés de trois corps créent un mouvement chaotique ne donnant pas de signe clair d'un schéma régulier. Il existe tout un spectre de philosophies et de sensibilités concernant la façon de jouer en groupe : à un extrême, on trouve ceux qui encouragent les réactions ouvertes et démonstratives, et à l'autre extrême, ceux qui préfèrent ignorer délibérément le jeu des autres. Les différentes musiques qui en résultent sont souvent esthétiquement conflictuelles, mais si l'on ne donne pas dans les extrêmes, bien des caractéristiques restent les mêmes.

Le trio d'Alex von Schlippenbach, Evan Parker et Paul Lovens est composé de trois voix puissantes et particulières. L'univers sonore de chaque musicien est facile à reconnaître et l'est resté pendant toute l'existence du trio, trente années au moins. Pour certains, cela représente un paradigme d'improvisation libre, mais par bien des aspects l'ensemble fonctionne comme une unité composée où les détails et l'énergie vitale viennent de l'improvisation, impliquant souvent des réactions très rapides. L'instrumentation (saxophone, basse, batterie) permet à chaque musicien d'adopter un rôle précis, ce qu'ils choisissent tous de faire, et l'histoire de leur groupe a formé la structure qu'ils adoptent. Je suis convaincu que les musiciens diraient qu'ils disposent de l'exacte quantité de liberté requise pour jouer la musique qu'ils veulent jouer.



don't have too many 'right' choices of what to do. I'm pleased about this. When A could have worked just as well with C to Z as it did with B the music is usually vapid.

Responding and collaborating with other musical intelligences creates a wealth of improvisational possibilities. But what about solo? The degree to which one actually improvises when playing solo is open to question. These days I try to begin each solo with an empty mind, but I have certainly planned things in the past, and I remember them. Room acoustics have a big effect. All musicians modify their playing according to the acoustic they're in, but improvisers have the advantage of actually being able to create the music specifically for their sonic environment. We've all heard orchestral groups struggling to play compositions in rooms with the wrong acoustics for the piece chosen. Playing solo in extreme acoustics, such as on my 2006 "Resonant Spaces" tour of Scotland, highlighted these issues. Each space, including an underground reservoir, a sea-cave, and a giant oil tank, required a different approach. Something that worked in one could rarely be transplanted to another. In a way, this was an amplification of factors involved in more conventional settings. One often finds that something that worked one night fails the next because the room's acoustic is too different, and you have to move the music along a different direction. A psychological corollary to this is that I've noticed on some solo tours a tendency to back off from any material that was too much like the night before, even if it's going well. Only I know this, but it feels necessary to the improvisational process. No matter that it's all a matter of degree, one shouldn't underestimate the importance of not knowing what the music you're playing will sound like a few minutes hence. The brain must be operating in a very different way than when you've mapped things out, let alone when one reads music. This is one of the problems of combining improvisation with imposed structure, it continually pulls you back and forth between different cognitive systems. Often one hears improvisation inside formally structured pieces that seems to be just filling in the space, waiting for the next instruction.

An interesting piece of research recently

suggested that our brains seem to be wired up in a way that makes visual reactions faster than conscious thought. When two pseudo-gunslingers fought a dual the one who drew second pulled his gun out the fastest. That is, the one who consciously decided to draw was slower than the one who just responded to seeing the other draw. Equally, people with Parkinson's disease often find reactive movements easier than intentional movements. I don't know how far an analogy can be made with aural systems, but one of the freedoms of improvisation lies in the possibility of bypassing conscious thought. Very often it's intuition and experience that seem to be making all the decisions. Most players have been in the situation of making a recording, stopping and thinking "that was good, but let's do it again". Nearly always, any attempt to get too close to the original thing fails. Not technically, but in spirit, because a different cognitive system is in operation compared to the one that first created the music. Scientist's at John Hopkin's University have begun to use MRI scans to observe differences in brain activity when jazz musicians play memorized scales compared to their own improvisations. Unsurprisingly, when improvising, part of the prefrontal cortex linked to planned actions and self-censoring (as in choosing your words carefully) is seen to slow down in activity, but we're a long way from a neurological picture of the possible states of mind involving sound production and reception. I do know that it's often only when I'm improvising music that I feel like I'm really existing in the present.

In the notes to *Thirteen Friendly Numbers*, my first solo CD in 1992, I wrote: "Despite their special and distinctive properties, improvisation and composition are not neatly separated activities. For the 'improviser' this becomes clearest with solo-playing, where personal concerns are unmodulated by other musicians' input." I now think that the ambiguity in these categories stretches even wider. If I consider the improvisers who have meant the most to me, following their improvising is a bit like noticing that you have to blow air through a trumpet to get a sound (usually). It's necessary, but it's not the main thing you pay attention to, as a player or listener. For instance, Derek Bailey had a highly personal method of

Les Sealed Knot (Burkhard Beins, Rhodri Davies et Mark Wastell) créent une musique bien différente, mais diraient probablement la même chose concernant leur liberté. Chaque musicien du groupe a un univers sonore particulier, mais les trois voix individuelles ressortent peu, leurs mondes musicaux se recoupent et leur jeu n'est jamais vraiment du type action-réaction. Le premier trio semble jouer dans une temporalité compressée, le second dans une temporalité étendue. Subjectivement, et d'une manière un peu fantaisiste, quand je les écoute, il me semble que les Sealed Knot obéissent à des instructions ordonnées de l'extérieur, tandis que le trio de Schlippenbach suit un plan plus imprécis provenant de l'intérieur du groupe. J'aime beaucoup ces deux formations, et ce qu'ils ont clairement en commun est un sens de l'intention mutuelle, de l'accord. Les musiciens n'entretiennent pas cette notion douteuse de la liberté qui leur permettrait de suivre une voie qu'ils n'auraient tracée qu'à leur intention propre. Leurs improvisations produisent une variété de musique bien particulière. Au fil de la musique, ces groupes n'ont pas trop de "bons choix" à faire, et ça me plaît. Quand A aurait pu marcher aussi bien avec C ou Z qu'il a marché avec B, la musique est généralement insignifiante.

Collaborer avec d'autres intelligences musicales crée une multitude de possibilités d'improvisation. Mais qu'en est-il des solos? La part d'improvisation qui entre dans le jeu d'un musicien quand il se produit en solo est une question qui vaut la peine d'être posée. À ce stade de ma carrière, j'essaie de commencer chaque solo avec l'esprit vide, mais par le passé il m'est arrivé de prévoir les choses que j'allais jouer, je m'en souviens encore. L'acoustique d'une salle a une grande importance. Tous les musiciens adaptent leur jeu à leur entourage acoustique, mais ceux qui improvisent ont l'avantage de pouvoir créer une musique spécialement pour tel ou tel environnement sonore. Nous avons tous entendu des orchestres s'efforcer de jouer tel ou tel morceau dans un lieu à l'acoustique inappropriée. Jouer en solo dans des conditions acoustiques extrêmes, comme en 2006 lors de ma tournée en Ecosse, "Lieux de résonance", m'a permis d'aborder ces problèmes. Chaque lieu, parmi lesquels un

réservoir souterrain, une cavité formée par l'érosion des vagues, et un réservoir de pétrole géant, imposait une approche différente. Quelque chose qui marchait à tel endroit pouvait rarement être réutilisé dans un autre. En un sens, c'était une amplification de ce qui se passe dans des lieux plus conventionnels. On se rend souvent compte que quelque chose qui marche un soir rate un autre soir, parce que l'acoustique de l'endroit est différente, et la musique doit être entraînée dans une autre direction. Le corollaire psychologique de cela, je l'ai remarqué lors de certaines tournées solo, est une tendance à se retenir de jouer quelque chose qui ressemble à ce qu'on a joué la veille, même si ça marche bien. Je suis le seul à le savoir quand je joue, mais c'est essentiel au processus d'improvisation. Peu importe que ce soit juste une question de degrés, il est très important de ne pas savoir à quoi la musique que l'on est en train de jouer ressemblera dans quelques minutes. C'est l'un des problèmes de combiner l'improvisation avec une structure fixe – cette situation tire le musicien entre des systèmes cognitifs différents. Souvent, on entend des improvisations à l'intérieur de morceaux formellement structurés : elles semblent juste remplir le vide en attendant que le reste arrive.

Une étude intéressante a montré récemment que nos cerveaux sont faits de telle façon que les réactions visuelles sont plus rapides que la pensée consciente. Une expérience impliquant deux tireurs en situation de duel a montré que celui qui dégaine en second est celui qui tire le premier. En d'autres termes, celui qui décide consciemment de tirer est plus lent que celui qui réagit à l'action de l'autre. De la même façon, les gens atteints de la maladie de Parkinson ont moins de difficultés à réagir qu'à entreprendre une action. Je ne sais pas jusqu'où tient l'analogie avec le système auditif, mais l'une des libertés permises par l'improvisation est la possibilité de court-circuiter la pensée consciente. Bien souvent, c'est l'intuition et l'expérience qui semblent prendre toutes les décisions. La plupart des musiciens ont fait l'expérience de s'enregistrer, de trouver ça bien, et de penser, « tiens, bien joué, je vais essayer de remettre ça ». Presque toujours, les tentatives de s'approcher trop près de



guitar playing whose internal ingredients were fascinatingly distinctive and malleable. In fact he said that he was involved with “a search for whatever is endlessly variable”. Obviously he wouldn’t have taken this approach if his musical thinking didn’t go hand in glove with a desire to improvise, but it’s his music and his personalisation of the guitar that I hear first, not his improvising. The transience of performance based creation often leads to devalued cultural estimates of it. The improviser’s art occurs in real time but the musician’s oeuvre often only falls into place over many years. Eventually we recognise that their contribution adds up to something as personal and formed as that of a conventional composer, albeit one who has chosen to go out night after night to recreate, hone, challenge and expand their own music.¹

Associated listening:

Toshimaru Nakamura. *Dance Music* (Bottrop-Boy)
Matthew Shipp. *4D* (Thirsty Ear)
Butcher/Durrant/Russell. *The Scenic Route* (Emanem)
The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *A New Distance*
(Emanem)
Sachiko M. Bar *Sachiko* (IMJ)
Derek Bailey. *Lot 74* (Incus)
Schlippenbach Trio. *Gold is where you find it* (Intakt)
The Sealed Knot. *and we disappear* (Another Timbre)
John Butcher. *Resonant Spaces* (Confront)

¹ This essay was originally commissioned for the book *Aspekte der Freien Improvisation in der Musik* (Volke Verlags, publisher; Dieter Nanz, editor), where it appears in German translation. The web address is: www.wolke-verlag.de/aspekte-der-freien-improvisation.html

Originally a theoretical physicist, **John Butcher** published his Ph.D. (1982) on charmed quarks and then left academia for music. His work now ranges through improvisation, his own compositions, multitracked pieces and explorations with feedback and extreme acoustics. He has since collaborated worldwide with hundreds of musicians, mostly involved with improvisation – including Derek Bailey, John Stevens, Polwechsel, Rhodri Davies, Toshimaru Nakamura, Eddie Prevost, Christian Marclay and Andy Moor. Compositions include *Penny Wands* for reconstructed Futurist Intonarumori, *Tarab Cut* for saxophone and Arabic 78rpm recordings, and two larger scale HCMF commissions – *somethingtobesaid* for the John Butcher Group, and *Isola* for Cranes and Freighters. In 2011 he was a recipient of a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for Composers. Butcher is also well known as a solo saxophonist who attempts to engage with a sense of place. The well-received *Resonant Spaces* CD is a collection of site-specific performances recorded during a tour of unusual locations in Scotland and the Orkney Islands.
www.johnbutcher.org.uk

ce qui a déjà été joué sont vouées à l'échec. Pas techniquement, mais dans la tête, parce que ça met en jeu un système cognitif différent de celui qui a été mobilisé pour créer la musique. Des scientifiques de John Hopkins University ont utilisé des scanners IRM pour observer des différences dans l'activité du cerveau quand des musiciens de jazz jouent des gammes mémorisées ou au contraire leurs propres improvisations. Sans surprise, quand on improvise, une partie du cortex frontal lié aux actions prévues et à l'autocensure (comme choisir ses mots soigneusement) semble se mettre en veilleuse, mais nous sommes loin de disposer d'un tableau neurologique des différents états de conscience impliquant la production et la réception du son. Je sais toutefois que souvent c'est seulement quand j'improvise que je me sens vraiment exister dans le présent.

Dans les notes de *Thirteen Friendly Numbers*, mon premier CD solo de 1992, j'écrivais : « malgré leurs différentes propriétés, l'improvisation et la composition ne sont pas des activités nettement séparées. Pour celui qui improvise, cela devient plus clair encore quand il joue en solo, puisque nul autre musicien ne vient interférer avec les préoccupations personnelles de l'artiste. » Je pense à présent que ces catégories sont encore plus ambiguës que je ne l'envisageais. Si je passe en revue les improvisateurs qui ont le plus compté pour moi, m'intéresser à la façon dont ils improvisent est un peu comme remarquer qu'il faut souffler dans une trompette pour obtenir un son. C'est une chose nécessaire, mais ce n'est pas la principale chose à laquelle on prête attention, que l'on soit musicien ou spectateur. Par exemple, Derek Bailey avait une façon très personnelle de jouer de la guitare, une méthode dont les ingrédients internes étaient incroyablement distinctifs et malléables. Il disait, en fait, qu'il était engagé dans « une quête de tout ce qui est infiniment variable ». Bien sûr, il n'aurait pas adopté cette approche si ses théories musicales n'allaient pas de pair avec un désir d'improviser, mais c'est sa musique et sa façon de s'approprier la guitare que j'entends en premier, et non pas le fait qu'il improvise. Comme les créations « sur le moment » sont éphémères, elles sont souvent

tenues en faible estime culturellement. L'art de l'improvisateur se déroule en temps réel, mais l'œuvre du musicien ne se constitue vraiment comme telle qu'au bout de plusieurs années. Nous reconnaissons finalement que leur contribution finit par aboutir à quelque chose d'aussi personnel et organisé que celle d'un compositeur traditionnel... Mais les artistes qui ont choisi l'improvisation sont ceux qui sortent nuit après nuit pour récréer, affûter, défier et élargir leur propre musique.

À écouter :

- Toshimaru Nakamura. *Dance Music*. (Bottrop-Boy)
- Matthew Shipp. *4D* (Thirsty Ear)
- Butcher/Durrant/Russell. *The Scenic Route* (Emanem)
- The Spontaneous Music Ensemble. *A New Distance* (Emanem)
- Sachiko M. *Bar Sachiko* (IMJ)
- Derek Bailey. *Lot 74* (Incus)
- Schlippenbach Trio. *Gold is where you find it* (Intakt)
- The Sealed Knot. *And we disappear* (Another Timbre)
- John Butcher. *Resonant Spaces* (Confront)

A l'origine chercheur en physique théorique, **John Butcher** est l'auteur d'une thèse de doctorat sur les quarks charmés (1982), qu'il a écrite avant de quitter l'université pour entrer dans le monde de la musique. Son travail recouvre à présent plusieurs domaines : l'improvisation, ses propres compositions, des morceaux à plusieurs voix et des expériences sur le *feedback* et les extrêmes de l'acoustique. Il a collaboré avec des centaines de musiciens dans le monde entier, souvent en lien avec l'improvisation, parmi lesquels Derek Bailey, John Stevens, Polweschel, Rhidri Davies, Toshumaru Nakamura, Eddie Prevost, Christian Marclay et Andy Moor. Parmi ses compositions, on trouve *Penny wands* pour le groupe reconstitué Futurist Intonarumori, *Tarab Cut* (composition pour saxophone), et deux commandes de l'HCMF à plus grande échelle : *Something to be Said* pour le John Butcher Group et *Isola* pour Cranes and Freighters. En 2011, il a reçu le Paul Hamlyn Foundation Award for Composers. John Butcher est aussi connu comme saxophoniste solo qui tente d'adapter sa musique aux lieux dans lesquels il se produit. L'album *Resonant Spaces*, salué par la critique, se compose d'une série de concerts enregistrés dans des lieux inhabituels, en Ecosse et dans les Iles Orkney. Plus d'information : www.johnbutcher.org.uk



dance me till the end of time eavesdropping on dj cultures

All I wanna do is stay right here on the floor
Get lost in the night and dance like there's no
tomorrow
Don't care about the sunrise, somebody please just hit
the lights
All I wanna do is dance like there's no tomorrow
Please DJ, don't say it's the last call
Lyrics of "*Dance like there's no tomorrow*"
Sung by Paula Abdul

Ahishek. Age 30 years. Retired DJ. Music was and is his passion. He loved music—listening, the beats, the instruments, the voices. He knew he wanted to spend his life

with sounds. Of course, his parents thought he was crazy. They made sure he got a good education and went to engineering college to follow in his father's footsteps and become a good, regular, middle-class citizen of whom they could be proud. But his heart, his mind was never in it. He listened to whatever music he could. In pre-internet days, that was not easy for a middle-class boy from the mofussil. Bengal had an incredible range of music to offer: Hindi film music of course, but Rabindrasangeet, popular Bangla songs known as the adhunik genre, folk songs, religious songs, political songs and a rich legacy of Western music too. But for a boy from a very small town somewhere between Kolkata and Kalyani with no training, no

mentor and no real access, music had to be gathered from whatever sources possible. He had to depend on small shops selling pirated cassettes or tuning in to musical programmes on All India Radio, Radio Ceylon and BBC or Voice of America when the weather was good and the airwaves were stable.

What really electrified him and tipped the scales forever was a cassette he heard called *Jhankar Beats* in the early 90s which he then bought and listened to obsessively on his little cassette player at home as it captured the magic of music like nothing else he had heard. *Jhankar Beats* was Bally Sagoo's album of remixes of old songs from Hindi films set to a new, dynamic, throbbing rhythm. Abhishek was then in his teens and listening over and over again to the tracks, he realised that the new sound was created by overlaying the original song with a new rhythm, a throbbing exciting rhythm that gave a new life to an old favourite. The new rhythm made the listener tap her feet, sway and want to dance. Fascinated by the sound, Abhishek tried to replicate this. In the pre-digital era this was a difficult and longdrawn out, finicky process. Buying old LPs from street vendors, he would then record them onto his cassettes. Entirely self-taught, he discovered for himself how to convert the analog into the digital at the local cyber cafe where he would sit for hours on end downloading the information he needed and the rudimentary software that was available for free download. Disco beats, African drums and Indian instrumentals would completely transform an old song to toe-tapping music for the young. For his new beats Abhishek often used the sound of the tabla or the dhol.

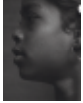
Tentatively, Abhishek asked his friends to listen to some new music he had found, not claiming yet that he had created it. His friends loved it. Experimenting and discovering techniques from the internet and from repeatedly listening to music of all kinds, he began to develop sounds of his own. Napster provided a free and easy way of circulating the music and he was amazed to see the number of downloads of his music from all over the world. Abhishek's obsession with the magical musical sounds helped him close his ears to the desperate pleas of his

parents who saw their son missing college, skipping tests and gradually moving towards that most-dreaded status of middle-class respectability—a college drop-out. Even his professors in college tried to counsel him, to explain to him that he was throwing away his future by not taking his degree seriously.

Then came a breakthrough. Abhishek was asked to be a DJ for a college fest. At once thrilled by the offer and apprehensive that he did not have the proper equipment, that he had never done this before, Abhishek used his technical knowhow to put together a sound machine that may not have been even close to professional standards, but sounded and looked good enough to keep the youngsters on their feet and shout for more.

The decision to follow his heart and his passion was perhaps taken the day he was going into his college with money in his pocket to pay the examination fees. As he passed the local CD shop it was playing new music which caught Abhishek's attention. On enquiring he was told that it was George Michael's latest album which had just reached the stores. Without a second thought, Abhishek took the money meant for his exams and bought the CD album set. Even though at that time, he did not even possess a CD player. When invited to DJ at student gigs, he would plead that taking his own equipment was too difficult so the organisers should make arrangements, though he was aware that no DJ ever worked on hired equipment. But to admit that he did not own such equipment himself would probably cause organisers to re-think their choice.

Gradually, Abhishek started to build up his own collection. He could not afford to buy a computer, so he rented one on a monthly basis. He persuaded his father to help him to buy him a CD player and contributed towards it from his own earnings from his DJ gigs. Soon, he was invited by people outside the college circuit on contracts which were more lucrative financially, but he realised that accepting all kinds of gigs just for the money was as soul-killing as becoming an engineer. The last straw was when he went



to be the DJ at a wedding in Jharkhand. Though he asked repeatedly about the crowd, the expectations of the family, the time he was to be given and other details, he was told not to worry as there was to be a dancing troupe. That made him more anxious as he felt he needed to consult with the dance troupe to be able to meet their requirements. However that was not to be, so Abhishek turned up at the venue overburdened with all possible kinds of music only to find that he was required to play any Hindi songs with a beat for the scantily clad 'dance troupe' to shake their hips in one corner of the huge pandal. After this, Abhishek decided to be more selective about his appearances and to learn from the few experts in the field.

After knocking on numerous doors, waiting for hours in the outer offices of several famous people, being rudely rebuffed for not being able to speak good English, Abhishek got the opportunity to be the junior DJ at the newly created water-based amusement park in Kolkata. Working under an established DJ, he was able to learn the tricks of the trade. This experience was also invaluable for him to learn how to judge the mood and preferences of the crowd. In his own words, he learned to be "like a bartender who tosses the wine bottles to blend and brew an array of cocktails or mocktails to pamper the mood of his clients. Or call me a mother who knows the pulse of her children at every spur of a moment and caters to their needs accordingly".

From that point there was no looking back. Assignments came pouring in from clubs, hotels, events and other new venues such as Fun City and Clown Town. Private parties, often more challenging and lucrative, began coming his way. But most exciting was the flood of assignments from fans of his music from all over the world. Abhishek's website says it all: "He has performed with Apache Indian, Jazzy B, Bally Sagoo, DJ Akeel, Atif, dj Deep Dish, DJ Murk, DJ Gavin Hardkiss for desi dance parties, desi dance cultures, Indian clubs, Desi in UK, USA and many other places²." For a boy from a small town in West Bengal, he has travelled a long way. Abhishek says that the day he performed alongside Bally Sagoo

was the day all his dreams came true. He performed with his guru, his inspiration and what more could he ever want.

For Abhishek, DJ-ing is not merely about playing continuous tracks on a CD player. A true DJ is someone who creates his/her own music. A true DJ will mix his own tracks and will have a signature style just as distinctive as any performing artist. The greatest challenge is to have everyone on the dance floor enjoying themselves to a sound, a music he has created. And, he continues, it is so fulfilling because then he feels that his music and his performance as a DJ have brought everyone together in the collective act of performance. According to him, a good DJ can help create and strengthen bonds between people as the magic of dancing together can create and strengthen a sense of community.

Abhishek may not realise it, but his story is a minor strand in the narrative of the story of music and the variety of relationships people have with music. Digitalisation of sound, downloadable music, international music channels and Youtube have transformed the ways in which we enjoy, store, listen to and share music. While music has always travelled, these new technologies have on the one hand speeded up its traveling, and on the other, made it possible for more and more people all over the world to access music much more easily than ever before. The astounding success of the *gangnam* song is a recent example of this phenomenon as there have been billions of views on Youtube and everyone—Noam Chomsky to Anish Kapoor to my first year students—have been dancing *gangnam* style.

However, this new dimension has also made music a form which is increasingly detached from its historic, social, political and cultural moment of creation. Thus, MIT students can do a spoof on it while Amnesty International releases "Gangnam for Freedom." In other words, music itself is much more easily transformed in today's digital global networks because manipulation is possible, technology is available and audiences are everywhere.

¹ Pramita Bose, "Kolkata DJ gives twist to Rabindra Sangeet", *The Asian Age*, May 27, 2007, p. 35.

² Cf. djabhi.com.

The hundreds and thousands of aspiring DJs in India's cities and suburbs may not be aware that disco dancing and the DJ culture started in New York and Philadelphia where some time in the early seventies, young people, especially those from marginal communities, got together to dance away the night. Though there are conflicting versions of the birth of disco music and dance, all accounts seem to agree that disco music was "...the sound of those who wanted to dance, dance, dance—blotting out everything but their bodies and the beat³." Remembering those times, a regular at the disco 12 West Franz Lebowitz says:

12 West was all the way west, and as soon as you got near enough to hear the music, we would start dancing in the street, because it was a mania to dance. It was an appetite. We would dance for hours and hours without stopping. It was so hot in there—it was a very common sight to see boys come out of these clubs and take their T-shirts off and wring them out, and a quart of water would go into the street.⁴

But, argues Adam Mattera, it was more than just about dance:

In its proud and glorious mid-70s Manhattan heyday, disco was far more than that. It was a four-on-the-four bassline, euphoric strings, fierce cowbells and a soaring vocal straight out of the church and on to the dancefloor. More importantly it created a place — or rather it soundtracked a space — outside the mainstream. A place where black, Hispanic, gay and any combination thereof could come together and dance, love and just be without fear...This wasn't a place where difference was just tolerated, it was actively celebrated. And for the first time.⁵

The disco dance halls and the DJs provided an alternative cultural space for those who were not white, heterosexual and male to enjoy themselves.

Because these spaces were created and driven by dance, DJs became stars. In place of the popularity of live bands or singers, the star DJs were those who could use two or more turntables to keep a non-stop beat for the dancers without a break in rhythm or mood. Most DJs found the singles too short for the dancers to involve themselves and searched for methods by which they could create their own sounds and beats, breaking out of the available moulds. The

regular tracks that were available were overlaid by hard, insistent beats and DJs found ways of adding interludes that kept the song—and the dance—going. The practice of 12" discs as opposed to the usual 7" disc had already become widespread in Jamaica where the trend of popular dance floor DJs had started as early as in the fifties. In America, this format became popular as DJs wanted longer songs with musical interludes and embellishments. Incidentally, it was found that the sound quality also improved and so this format encouraged even more innovation. For a while, disco sound, music and culture remained a phenomenon parallel to the popular mainstream.

Many songs of this time were popularised by the DJs and the dance clubs that played them. A famous example of this trend involves one of the greatest hits of this era "Kung Fu Fighting" a favourite on dance floors even today which became the bestselling single in 1974 and went on to sell more than eleven million records world-wide, topping charts everywhere and winning the Grammy for the Best Selling Single of the Year. Originally meant for the B side of a single, Biddu—an Indian born musician settled in England—recalls that after recording the song meant to be on the A side, he asked the singer Carl Douglas whether he had anything for the other side:

He rattled off about four or five songs...one had the lyrics for "Kung Fu Fighting". Since it was going to be a B side I said "Fine, we'll have a song called 'Kung Fu Fighting'." So I started working out some melody for it. Nothing was taken seriously...We put a lot of "hoos" and "haas!" like someone giving a karate chop.⁶

Biddu reminisces, "It was a B-side: who was going to listen? I played the A-side to the guy at Pye Records, Robin Blanchflower, and he said: 'Can I listen to the rest of the reel?' When he heard it, he said: 'This should be the A-side.' Thank God for Robin⁷." Like many disco hits, this song hardly sold in the first few weeks, but soon became a hit on dance floors as DJs found dancers enthusiastically responding to the beat. Soon it rose up the charts to No. 1 in the

³ Cf. www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2010/02/oral-history-of-disco-201002.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Adam Mattera, "How disco changed music forever", *The Observer*, February 26, 2012.

⁶ Quoted in Biswarup Sen, "The Sounds of Modernity", *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance*, ed. Sangita Gopal and Sujata Moorti, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008 p. 98.

⁷ Quoted in James Ellis, "Biddu", *Metro*, October 22, 2009.



UK, the US, France, Germany, Sweden, South Africa and several other countries.

While he never had such a sensational hit again, Biddu was probably the most successful musician from India until A.R. Rahman. He captured the sensuousness and rhythms to become a truly international figure in the disco era. As Biddu muses, "All my songs had a very sensual samba rhythm, whether it was 'I Love to Love' by Tina Charles, 'Made in India' or 'Disco Deewane'⁸." The album *Disco Deewane* sung by the sister and brother duo Nazia and Zoheb Hassan was the first pop album in Urdu and was a huge hit across South Asia and unexpectedly in several other countries, including Brazil where it reached the number-one slot, proving yet again the international appeal that music has. Biddu also produced several hits for singers in Japan, the Philippines and Hong Kong.

Perhaps then, it was not a coincidence that when the film maker and actor Feroz Khan was looking to introduce the disco sound into Hindi films, he met Biddu and requested him to write a song for the film he was planning: *Qurbani* (1982). Although initially not too keen, Biddu agreed to write one song and also to use the teenaged singer Nazia Hassan whom Feroz Khan had recently met. The song that resulted was the huge hit "Aap Jaise Koi" which went on to win the Filmfare award for Best Female Playback singer for Nazia Hassan. The movie became the biggest hit of the year and the music was a major reason for its popularity. Perhaps most important, it ushered the disco era into Bollywood. However, while in Hindi films the disco sound became popular, the edgy, alternative ethos of the marginal that defined the original disco sound did not remain.

It was the film *Disco Dancer* (1982) with the music by Bappi Lahiri that popularised disco music in popular Indian cinema. Geeta Dayal writes: "*Disco Dancer* (1982), a film that was campy to the extreme, with a plot that was utterly ridiculous even by Bollywood standards. The soundtrack included some sublime slabs of peak-time disco, including the hit song 'Yaad Aa Raha Hai', produced

by Bollywood disco/funk legend Bappi Lahiri. A disco anthem for the ages, and one of the best songs Lahiri ever did⁹."

Bappi Lahiri himself is a living exemplar of the uniquely Indian ability to borrow, steal, or recycle bits and pieces, and fuse them into something seemingly chemically transformed into something different, sometimes better than the original. The website MusicIndiaOnline may have patronisingly dismissed Lahiri with the following words "Known as the Disco King at his peak, the poor man is generally considered the Master Plagiarist¹⁰", but his huge popularity reflected the fact that Lahiri could successfully translate not just the lyrics, but the music for the audience of popular Hindi songs.

Now though, things have changed a lot. While Lahiri was reviled as a plagiarist, today we celebrate the remix as a genuine creative act. Wikipedia defines the remix "a song that has been edited or completely recreated to sound different from the original version". It was the remix album by Bally Sagoo that Abhishek heard and that inspired him to become a maker of music himself. The fact that remixes are now considered to be genuine, legitimate creative products in themselves can be seen in the fact that the 62nd Independence Day of India was celebrated in London by a screening of *Mother India: 21st Century Remix* created by the DJ Tigerstyle and described as a "re-imagining" of the 1957 Hindi film. The original 163 minute film has been pruned to 45 minutes and the soundtrack entirely redone. Positive reviews are witness to the high approval level of the audience—both Indian and British.

Forbes magazine carried a story in 2012 titled "DJs are the New Rock Stars" which points out that due to free downloads and music sharing, rockstars are losing their revenues while DJs are earning lots. Ninth on the list of highest-earning DJs of 2013, Skrillex is singled out for his special qualities: "DJs don't need to create their own music—their art is curation and mixing. While Skrillex and his peers have gained popularity by producing their own music, they generally release it

⁸ | Rachana Nakra, "Pop of the Charts", *Live Mint* and the *Wall Street Journal*, February 4, 2010.

⁹ | Cf. www.theoriginalsoundtrack.com/2010/08/29/studio-84-the-history-of-disco-in-india.

¹⁰ | Quoted in Biswarup Sen, "The Sounds of Modernity", *art. cit.*, p. 87.

free, rendering piracy, the bane of traditional artists, irrelevant¹¹,” the article says. These highly paid DJs make their performances and presence their unique selling points. In 2010, Skrillex picked up three Grammys and is happy with his work, despite music critics panning his work. “All we gotta do is keep the music and keep the vibes, he says. To continue to make good experiences, man, that’s why we live.” According to *Forbes’* List of the World’s Highest Paid DJs, Tiesto who makes an average of \$250,000 per night was number one in 2012.

From Tiesto to Tarun Das may seem like an unimaginable leap. Tarun is young, in his early twenties and one of the dozens of young men who have learnt their tricks of the trade from Abhishek. Because of his own experiences, Abhishek has been more than willing to teach enthusiastic young boys the art of DJ-ing, with one caveat—they have to be passionate. Tarun certainly is. He lives in a very small town on the coast of Bengal called Contai, near the popular seaside resort Digha. Yet he is a sought-after DJ catering to beach parties of the corporate, the hotels lining the beach, private wedding parties and even birthday parties. He is driven by a passion for music, but plays music that he buys or downloads from several internet sites.

He has been working for about two and a half years and chooses songs that will make people dance. He says that he feels the greatest fulfilment when he sees everyone on the dance floor, moving in rhythm to the sounds he is playing. When asked what kind of music he prefers, he says that Hindi film songs or Bollywood remixes are the most popular, but he has found that trance music and house music often work well with his audience too.

In case these terms are unfamiliar, it will suffice to know that all these genres of music are strongly electronic, with 4/4 beats, aimed at and created to emphasise the rhythms and make people dance. According to Wikipedia, trance music originated in Germany around 1993 and house music in the eighties in Chicago. We always knew that music has an universal appeal, but to think of the

holiday-makers on Digha beaches swaying to such esoteric beats brought to them by young Tarun gives globalisation a new twist.

There is a sub-genre of trance music known as Goa trance which had a popular run in Europe and also reflects the way in which music and dance travel from location to location in today’s inter-connected world. First, the Goa trance stars were not Indian, but rather cultural or spiritual exiles who came to Goa from the West and believed in some form of ‘transnational neo-tribalism.’ Wikipedia has the following comments about Goa trance:

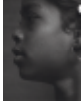
The original goal of the music was to assist the dancers in experiencing a collective state of bodily transcendence, similar to that of ancient shamanic dancing rituals, through hypnotic, pulsing melodies and rhythms. As such, it has an energetic beat, often in a standard 4/4 dance rhythm. A typical track will generally build up to a much more energetic movement in the second half then taper off fairly quickly toward the end. The tempo typically lies in the 130–150 BPM range, although some tracks may have a tempo as low as 110 or as high as 160 BPM. Generally 8–12 minutes long, Goa Trance tracks tend to focus on steadily building energy throughout, using changes in percussion patterns and more intricate and layered synth parts as the music progresses in order to build a hypnotic and intense feel.¹²

It is not surprising to find trance music in a location with a reputation of being a hippie-friendly space. Goa is also home to the Sunburn Festival, billed as the largest party in Asia and drawing about 50,000 youngsters for a dance-filled three-day non-stop party. Goa attracts some of the most expensive DJs in the world; Tarun’s Digha is a different space altogether, but it appears that DJs are doing the same things in these culturally diametrically opposite spaces and Tarun is happy to get 5000 rupees for a night’s work.

The DJ culture in India is actually multi-layered and complex. There are popular websites such as downloads4djs.co.in or djmaza.in which have 3 or 4 lakhs of followers, which offer newsfeeds and have not only music for free download but applications such as “DJ Name Generator” which will find the perfect nom de plume for you once you key in facts about yourself. An entire issue of the journal *Dancecult: Journal*

¹¹ | Zack O’Malley Greenburg, “DJs are the Next Rock Stars”, *Forbes*, August 1, 2012.

¹² | Cf. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goa_trance.



of *Electronic Dance Music Culture* has been devoted to discussing the DJ phenomenon because, as the editors point out, DJs “have become increasingly central to popular culture in its various spatial configurations; translocally, glocally and transnationally.”

All DJs seem to celebrate the moment when the entire crowd is on the floor and dancing in a communal frenzy. However, the evocative phrases used by the DJs who claim to be able to cross the great divides of space and finances while celebrating the temporary creation of a community, ignore the reality that hierarchy, power and politics exist just as rigidly behind the mixing consoles as they do off the floor. Thus DJs are usually male and female DJs are few and rare. In India, DJs are part of the most traditional of all celebrations, that is weddings, which in turn attempt to replicate the glamour quotient and fashion standards set by Bollywood romantic comedies. At such settings, the radical and apocalyptic visions of DJs such as Goa Gil seem very far removed. He describes his vision in terms that would sound completely alien to Tarun:

For me parties have always been a kind of reprogramming session . . . so you just go with the beat, no matter what happens whether it's dark or light or it's the apocalypse. No matter what happens, you're just like dancing through it. . . . When these parties first started to happen and when that electronic body music was happening it was like nuclear disaster could have been around the corner and that was a big theme at that time . . . it was like an apocalypse culture in a way. It looked like an apocalyptic event could be 20 minutes around the corner, and so through the dance, and through going through sound vibration and so many experiences and different pictures which came up in the mind through the course of going from the dark into the light we like to hope that . . . it kind of helped us be prepared for anything that might happen and be able to deal with it.¹³

While for a few of the ‘radical’ DJs, music and dance may be an apocalyptic gesture, for most DJs like Abhishek or Tarun they are about community, togetherness and fun.

Digitisation of music has finally killed off the previous regime of music and listening to music. The ease of access and copying has opened horizons and

demolished the established musical marketplace. Many discussions took place in Kolkata tea stalls and coffee houses when this news article was published in the *Economic Times* on June 13, 2013:

The Rs 14,000 crore RP-Sanjiv Goenka group is moving out of the music retailing business for good. It is in the process of shutting down all its music retail stores under the Music World brand across India. The largest of them all, the store on Park Street in Kolkata has been a crowd puller always and the highest revenue grosser in the whole chain. Even that is planning to down shutters from July 1, 2013.

This is happening the world over. And in the new world of our interfaces with music, the DJ stands as a figure who is both an essential part of the music and dance, and yet outside it. An insider and an outsider. A performer in his own right, yet controlling the performances of the audience and the individuals within that audience. The one with his own headphones, cut off from the music pouring out of the speakers, yet the source of that music. Creating his own sounds, by recreating the already created. A luminal figure, a shaman.

Today, everyone owns music in a sense unimaginable before digitisation. We all have our favourite songs as our ringtones on our mobiles. We make people listen to songs we like when they call. We can modify, swap, mix, tamper with, recreate songs at home. As one of our friends remarked sarcastically, “Nowadays everyone is a musician.” That may be true, but how far away is the day when everyone is a DJ?

¹³ | Quoted in Graham St John, “DJ Goa Gil: Californian Exile, Dark Yogi and Dreaded Anomaly”, *Dancecult*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2011.

Nilanjana Gupta has been teaching, since 1991, in the Department of English, Jadavpur University for a living. However, she spends most of her time trying to figure out what the world is coming to. Perhaps that is because she has two teenage children who seem to inhabit a completely different world, mostly digital. Nilanjana has written and edited several books on topics which range from *madrasa* education to ghost stories to television in India despite her belief that the digital revolution has and will change the idea of a book and how we read: *Dance Matters: Performing India* (Routledge, 2010), *Calcutta Mosaic: Essays and Interviews on the Minority Communities of Calcutta* (Anthem, 2009), *Reading with Allah: Madrasas in West Bengal* (Routledge, 2009), *Critical Edition of Frankenstein* (Penguin, 2007), *The Weretiger: Stories of the Supernatural* (Penguin, 2002), *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Worldview, 2001), *Switching Channels: Ideologies of Television in India* (Oxford University Press, 1998). She is looking forward to the day when she can laze on the beaches on the Andaman Islands without a guilty conscience.

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