

Contemporary Improvisation and Interdisciplinary Collaboration: A Case Study

By Dr. James W. Doyle

A survey of applied lesson syllabi from universities throughout the United States, particularly studios focused on classical study, shows that improvisation is rarely included as a component in curriculum. The National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), an organization that serves as an accrediting agency for schools of music throughout the United States, addresses improvisation in its standards. In the “All Professional Baccalaureate Degrees in Music and All Undergraduate Degrees Leading to Teacher Certification” section of the NASM Handbook, the organization suggest students should develop the ability to create “original or derivative music,” including the ability to create original improvisations, create improvisations on existing materials, experiment with “various sound sources,” and manipulate musical elements in “non-traditional ways.”¹ This standard serves to encourage students to develop a deeper understanding of how music works and to use this knowledge to achieve greater proficiency on their voice or instrument.²

There has never been a better time to develop skillsets in collaboration. There is a proliferation of new music ensembles such as Eighth Blackbird, Alarm Will Sound, and Bang on a Can, who utilize interdisciplinary collaboration. There are many examples of such collaboration throughout the history of the arts. Dance, theatre, set design (visual art), and film are frequently paired with music in operas, musical theatre, and movie scores, and less typical but no less interesting are multi-media collaborations featuring sculpture, architecture, light design, sound/spatial design, and live performance art.

One such interesting and significant example for multi-media collaboration took place in Brussels, Belgium for *Expo '58*, the 1958 World's Fair. The Dutch-based electronics company Philips commissioned the French architectural firm Le Corbusier to build a multi-media celebration of technology. The resulting project was the *Philips Pavilion*, a structure primarily managed by architect/composer Iannis Xenakis who used his work “*Metastaseis*” as inspiration for the building.³ The building was a cluster of hyperbolic paraboloids, a mathematical design similar to a saddle in appearance.⁴ Edgar Varèse composed

▶ Tap to play Video



Delaney Armstrong, a percussion major at Adams State University, improvising music inspired by the sculpture created by an art student from junk and scrap materials. Click here to see a video of Armstrong's improvisation.

“*Poème électronique*” for the pavilion, where it was broadcast over hundreds of “spatially-designed” speakers.⁵ A slideshow of black-and-white photos was projected in the space, synchronized to “*Poème électronique*,” and both the entrance and exit of the pavilion featured Xenakis’ electronic composition, “*Concret PH*.”⁶ This early example of large-scale interdisciplinary multi-media collaboration serves as inspiration for musicians and artists on a smaller scale.

There are numerous opportunities for interdisciplinary collaborations in the university setting. I instituted such a project between the percussion studio and visual art and design class at Adams State University to foster creativity and improvisation through a multi-stage project.

PHASE 1

The first phase of the project begins with the art professor selecting random “junk” and “scrap” materials, such as reel-to-reel film, vinyl records, fishing

line, multicolored cloth material, or rope for the students to use as sculpting material. This first phase involves an abstract set of instructions to the students, such as to “sculpt the sound of glass breaking” or “sculpt the sound and feeling of a cymbal crash.”⁷ Using limited materials and a limited amount of time, students create a sculpture that is abstract in nature and reflects their initial instructions. Once completed, the students deliver the projects to the percussion studio. Depending on the number of students in the art class, eight to ten sculptures are typically created.

As part of the percussion curriculum and in preparation for the second phase of the collaboration, percussion students develop skills in contemporary improvisation. I ask students to experiment with percussion instruments and found objects played with their hands, different sticks and mallets, brushes, and other actuators to discover the variety of tone colors available. After this experimentation, I combine students into small ensembles to create free

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improvisations. Taking advice from William Cahn's book, *Creative Music Making*, students follow two rules⁸:

1. Play (or don't play) anything they want with the knowledge there are no mistakes.
2. Listen deeply to themselves and to others with no penalty for breaking this rule.

We then record these improvisations and listen to them for group discussion. Through this guided discussion and group feedback, students make determinations as to how they might improve their improvisation skills.

Typically, a sense of form is missing in this early phase. The students often struggle to organize the direction of their improvisations when they cannot pre-plan their approach. Inspired by a *Percussive Notes* article by Tim Feeney, "Exercises for Free Improvisation," students work to develop an aural memory through exercises that help develop a sense of form: they attempt to create, without prior discussion, an A-B-A form improvisation while viewing a timer counting a fixed amount of time.⁹ The students repeat this process until they are satisfied with their ability to create form within a free improvisation. The project then proceeds to the next phase.

PHASE 2

We place the visual artists' sculptures on a table in a room full of percussion instruments. One by one or in groups, percussion students, unaware of the inspiration behind a given sculpture, observe it with the intention of creating a 90-second improvisation as a reaction to the art. Students then select the instrument(s) for their work and openly discuss their ideas with the percussion studio. Next, each student or group records a 90-second improvisation with a digital timer to keep track of the time. Once the improvisation is complete, the student(s) and I discuss the live improvisation and review the audio. Discussion points include form, dynamic contrast, technique, tone color variation, and mental and emotional reactions to the work. When the recording is finished, this phase of the collaboration is complete, and eight to ten recordings go to the art department for phase three.

PHASE 3

Upon receiving the recordings, each visual art student chooses one and creates a 90-second short film based on the "soundtrack." Students utilize their preferred video techniques and post-production software to create a film that is inspired by and edited to coexist with the music without any changes to the original recording. This reversed process of adding film to pre-existing audio creates unique challenges in both the screenplay and editing. These short films have included Claymation, animation, large and small casts, no human subjects whatsoever, nature subjects, multiple camera angle shots, and both spoken scripts and non-scripted productions. Once the students complete these productions, they send them to the percussion studio for the fourth phase of the process.

PHASE 4

For this phase, students utilize the university's experimental "black box" for performances on two consecutive nights. We divide the videos created in phase three in half, in order to use new videos each night. The videos are projected above the stage without any accompanying sound, and the percussion students perform a live, improvised soundtrack. Unlike phase two in which students selected any instrument or found object of their choice, they are limited to the instruments already on stage, and we organize and assign chamber groups in advance.

Performance instructions for the percussionists are different each night. For the first night, students pre-screen the videos and discuss a plan of action before the performance. This is valuable because the students have the opportunity to develop ideas and make musical choices before the audience arrives. The second night, the percussionists take the stage and improvise the soundtrack as they are seeing the videos for the first time, allowing their learned and intuitive musical senses to guide the performance. This process is valuable for students and instructor alike as it provides insight into what musical skills they have cultivated and are now inherent within the performers and what areas of musicianship they need to continue to develop.

Often, this live performance is the conclusion of

the process, but in some cases, students return to the project by making a recording of an improvisation for the film in the university recording studio. This opportunity benefits both percussionist and visual artist alike. The percussionists must devise a soundtrack, often moving beyond improvisation to a written composition/transcription of musical ideas and synchronize their playing with the film. The visual artist has the opportunity to work with audio/video editing software while also acquiring a professional-quality recording.

Instructors document the entire process with photographs and several data fields, including which sculpture related to which prompt and which students performed each improvisation. Instructors and students both keep journals with reflections. After the completion of the project, the artists and percussionists meet for the unveiling of data fields and then reflect on each phase of the project.

This multi-phase collaboration provides a unique opportunity for the development of improvisation skills within the percussion curriculum and addresses NASM improvisation standards. Through active practice, discussion, reflection, and live performance, percussion students learn the value and skillsets of contemporary improvisation, develop their abilities to work in interdisciplinary settings, and cultivate an interest in other art forms.

ENDNOTES

1. National Association of Schools of Music. "Handbook 2018-2019" <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/01/M-2018-19-Handbook-1-7-2019.pdf> (accessed June 6, 2019), 101
2. National Association of Schools of Music. "An Advisory for Music Faculty and Administrators: NASM Standards - Composition/Improvisation" https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/02/Advisory-Composition_Improvisation.pdf (accessed June 6, 2019)
3. Iannis Xenakis, *Music and Architecture*, translated, compiled, and presented by Sharon Kanach (New York: Pendragon Press, 2008), 99
4. Félix Candela, "The Hyperbolic Paraboloid" The Princeton University Art Museum. <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/legacy-projects/Candela/paraboloid.html> (accessed June 1, 2019)
5. Xenakis, 100
6. *Ibid.*, 102
7. Claire van der Plas, email to author, January 26, 2014.
8. William L. Cahn, *Creative Music Making* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 35
9. Tim Feeney, "Exercises for Free Improvisation," *Percussive Notes* (May 2012): 26-27.

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