

# EXPLORING WITH ILÉA ENSEMBLE: SHAPING FREEDOM IN IMPROVISED MUSIC

Kevin Gironnay

Université de Montréal

gironnayk@umontreal.ca

## ABSTRACT

This paper approaches the topic of experimental improvised music within an ensemble, and will first present several techniques used in the field of non-idiomatic improvised music, especially in the case of collaborative improvisation such as within Cobra (J. Zorn) and Ensemble SuperMusique. After discussing the limitations of these techniques, the method of Ensemble ILÉA will be introduced along with its techniques and solutions to guide an ensemble without restraining the expressivity of the improvisers or limiting the experience of the audience.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When an improvisation is performed between several musicians simultaneously, the formal direction of the performance is at a risk to be diluted by the many ears and brains involved in the creation process. In comparison, it is much easier to decide on a direction and the path in which to achieve this direction when one improvises alone. How can several musicians improvising simultaneously achieve this connection while they each possess their own different visions of the direction to follow? For example, if a crescendo is being built by the musicians, the decision of when and how to finish it can be problematic: the usual result being some form of crossfade toward somewhere different. However, if a musician decides to stop the crescendo abruptly, there is a risk of disappointment due to the lack of possibility that every other musician decides to cooperate. This abrupt silence of one musician may go unnoticed while the others decide either to continue the crescendo or begin a decrescendo, for example. This scenario may not be uninteresting and may indeed lead to new dynamics in the music, since improvisation is, by nature, potentially infinite, and the ability to react and to adapt quickly is an advantage that allows improvised music to be enjoyable by more than just the musicians playing. The risk of dilution of the decision-making in the musical direction remains, however: a lack of any clear intervention creates a homogeneous performance. Any initiative taken by a musician takes time to be registered and followed by the others, thus running the risk of a music made up of successions of crossfades. Decisive musical moments, that apparently only written music can generate, are unavailable. The researcher Anne

Robineau summarizes this dichotomy of written and improvised music, stating: “In a derogatory way, improvisation is often associated with a lack of consistency, and even with an absence of shape. Composition is criticised for the opposite. It would be too rigid since it implies the writing of the music before the execution.”<sup>1</sup> [1] This sparked the search for an alternative method.

With an aim to shape improvised musical performance, and to avoid the situation where each decision drowns in the continuum of the other improvisers, some methods have already been invented and explored with success; two of which will be discussed here: the game-piece *Cobra* by John Zorn, and the gestures for conducting improvisation by the Ensemble SuperMusique. The method of Ensemble ILÉA, created in response to these two specific examples, will be presented as a solution to avoid both biasing the audience’s listening experience and constraining the musical expressiveness of the improvisers.

## 2. CONDUCTING AN IMPROVISATION ENSEMBLE: FROM JOHN ZORN TO SUPERMUSIQUE

*Cobra* is a musical piece composed in 1984 by American composer and musician John Zorn. Considered by the composer to be a game-piece featuring improvisers and a “game master” [2], *Cobra* is flexible, restricted neither by specific instrumentation nor by size. *Cobra* is a direct continuation of the principle of indeterminacy in music developed by the New York School (led by John Cage, Earle Brown, and Morton Feldman) in the 1950s and 1960s. Open form pieces such as Earle Brown’s *Twenty-Five Pages*, or Terry Riley’s *In C*, influenced younger composers, particularly in the downtown music scene of New York. This new approach to musical form naturally appealed to improvisers, as did soundpainting and graphic notation which are both highly interpretative methods of guiding musical performances.

The soundpainting technique, created by Walter Thompson in the 1970s and consisting of a set of gestures to trigger and modulate interventions of musicians, is a revealing example of the role a conductor bares in improvised music. Some open form pieces needed a conductor, Earle Brown’s *Available Forms*, for example. *Cobra* is another example of conducted improvised music.

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<sup>1</sup> “De façon péjorative, l’improvisation est souvent associée à un manque de cohérence, voire à une absence de forme. C’est tout le contraire qui est reprochée à la composition. Celle-ci serait trop rigide puisqu’elle suppose l’écriture de l’œuvre avant son interprétation.” (Translation: K. Gironnay).

During a performance of *Cobra*, the conductor or “game master” has a set of cards expressing musical directions. Set gestures made by the musicians prompt the conductor’s discretion to display one of these cards. The musicologist John Brackett defines the role of the conductor as a “prompter”: “The prompter responds to requests made by the players by relaying information to the other members of the ensemble and while the prompter often functions as a conduit of information, she/he can choose to ignore requests by the players” [3]. The gestures, as fixed in the score, consist of a combination of pointing to a part of one’s body (mouth, ear, head, and nose) and showing a number with one’s fingers. The musical directions expressed on the cards are versatile and can control parameters such as volume, speed, or instrumentation (by creating duets, making silent improvisers play, and etcetera). The cards can also save a musical state that can be recalled upon later, and can even create an ending to the improvisation. Another feature of *Cobra* is the guerilla system, which allows certain improvisers to play at will with or without consideration of the director’s instructions. Guerilla improvisers can be “terminated” by another improviser under certain conditions. *Cobra* can thus be classified as a musical role-play game where there is a harmonisation of the improviser’s musical decisions. This harmonisation is made by the conductor, an outsider, whose interactions allow the musical content to be more dynamic.

Following this same method of a non-playing entity conduct a group of improvisers, the Montreal-based Ensemble SuperMusique created their set of gestures for conducting improvisation. Like *Cobra*, the conductor takes on a full-time role where their only task is to lead: an outside perspective. The conductor’s gestures control the same kind of musical parameters as in *Cobra* with two main differences, the first of which being that the improvisers cannot ask for directions and instructions, it is the conductor alone who chooses the path. Therefore, the only musical input from the improvisers concerns the near future: they can decide how to express the given directions. Of course, these directions are influenced by what the improvisers play, but the improvisers do not hold the power to redirect the piece. The concept here is to follow the rules and to trust the conductor: non-compliance with directions (i.e. playing loudly when the conductor asks for a *pianissimo*) does not occur. The second main difference from *Cobra*, is that the gestures used by Ensemble SuperMusique are easily interpretable by the audience, providing clues about what is to come (unlike the coded gestures and cards used in *Cobra*).

In both methods, the moment when decisions in the musical direction are taken and applied is visible to the audience. The audience is thus drawn to these gestures and their attention is most likely to fixate on the relationship between the gestures and their musical effects. The discussion following performances using these methods tends to center around the significance of the gestures, the rules, and what was or was not understood, resulting in limited comments on the music itself. This is due to the gestures that are guiding the audience’s listening during the improvisation: the audience tries to categorize the gestures and identify them, in order to recognize their

effect on the resulting musical events. More importantly, the audience begins to anticipate gestures, and they live the musical phenomenon only with these expectations. The audience and its ears become biased.

### 3. ON THE MODEL OF ENSEMBLE ILÉA

#### 3.1 The creation of the Ensemble

Ensemble ILÉA was created with the following intentions: first, to avoid a shapeless improvisation due to decision-making becoming silent when diluted between too many improvisers; and second, to avoid a distortion of the listener’s experience due to an analytic and causal relationship between the music and ostentatious conducting gestures. In this objective, programs of improvisation guides were developed that are only visible to the improvisers.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1.** Example of a combination of members for an ILÉA show: 1 vibraphone, 1 flute, 1 clarinet, 2 laptops. The monitors visible only to the improvisers display improvisational guiding programs.

Creating Ensemble ILÉA was a way for me to continue the development of these guiding programs and to put them into use at the center of an improvisation ensemble, especially while completing my master’s degree at Université de Montréal. My research focused on the use of improvisation in both improvised and fixed music.

My intentions as I continue to develop these guiding programs remain consistent and are inspired by both the conception of the form by Earle Brown as a “result of people’s actions responding immediately to an environment shaped by possibilities...”<sup>3</sup> [4], and by Cornelius Cardew’s interpretation of indeterminacy, summarized by artist Matthieu Saladin as “a means to free what someone else thinks is constrained”<sup>4</sup> [5]. This undoubtedly influenced the relationship I tried to create between the guiding programs and the improvisers of ILÉA: shaping a direction, but not a strict path, so any improviser can explore and feel others exploring around the given direction.

<sup>2</sup> These programs were originally thought and developed within the improvised music collective Unmapped in 2012.

<sup>3</sup> “La forme comme résultante des actions de gens répondant immédiatement à un environnement décrit de possibilités...” (Translation: K. Gironnay).

<sup>4</sup> “L’indéterminé comme moyen en vue de libérer chez l’autre ce qui lui paraît contraint.” (Translation: K. Gironnay)

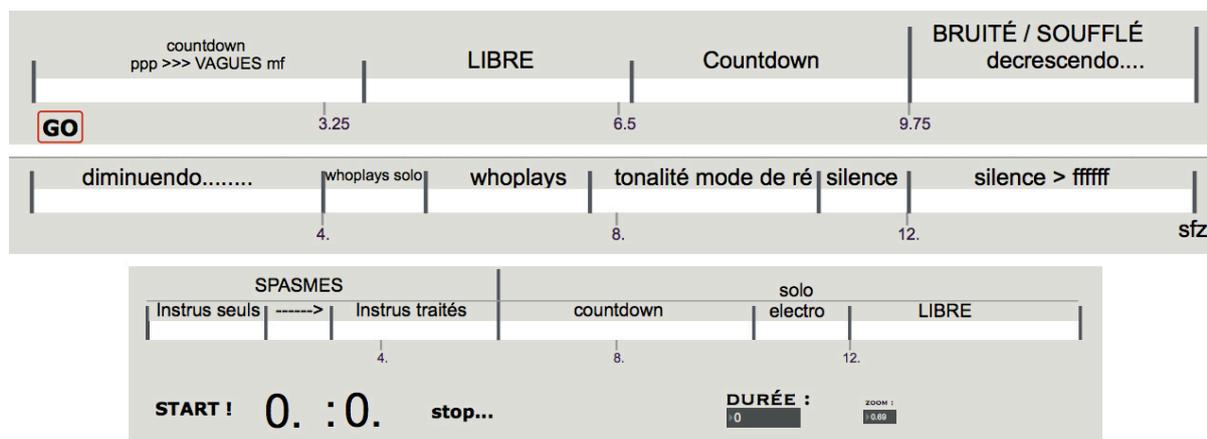


Figure 2. Examples of three different timelines used in three different concerts.

While less graphic, these programs are similar to animated scores developed by composers such as Cat Hope, Ryan Ross Smith, or Guðmundur Steinn Gunnarsson: although they graphically incorporate the time passing, they show conceptual suggestions as opposed to abstract indications.

Ensemble ILÉA itself consists of twelve musician-performers, including myself, of acoustic and/or electronic instruments, while their structure for performances (rehearsals and concerts) is variable.<sup>5</sup> The guiding programs were explained at the first meeting of the ensemble, and their use was introduced as an alternative to the methods of *Cobra* and Ensemble SuperMusique to create conducted or, more accurately in this case, “guided” improvisation. The resulting goal is to create improvised music where improvisers can musically evolve together through concise concepts and follow similar ideas, while eliminating potential confusion caused by deciphering the common direction that is being drawn. Therefore, with a common musical context, improvisers are more inclined to focus on the musical parameters to develop a relationship with the rest of the ensemble. They can also be less concerned about the significance of their involvement. Creating a frame of reference for an improvisation makes every idea relevant, in the way that ideas will be interpreted according to the frame of reference itself. For example, if when improvisers are responding to the concept “sporadic” and most are playing short musical events here and there, one improviser decides to play a sustained note: this decision will be interpreted by other improvisers according to this “sporadic” frame of reference. Is it a way to color the silence that is in between all the sporadic events? Or, is it a way to underline the briefness of the other musical events? Then, maybe the improvisers will start to play with the parameter of duration, and it might result in inverting the sound/silence ratio with a continuous sustained note where silence is being sporadic. In a totally free and not guided improvisation, a sustained note while everyone is playing sporadic musical events would often be directly considered as a proposition to go against the flow, or at least somewhere else. Here lies the

<sup>5</sup> Every rehearsal and concert has its own combination of members. From duets to tutti, the ensemble has a total of 4083 potential combinations.

risk of limiting improvisers’ musical expression by making them uncertain of the actual flow, or of the musical direction.

These guiding programs, of which we will see in more detail in the following section, can additionally suggest who should play, and can also allow for synchronized musical events. It has been made clear to the ensemble since its conception that these guiding programs display suggestions that they may choose whether or not to follow. This is pertinent, since it was never my intention to minimize the improvisers’ field of action, but to increase the consciousness of their actions: if they decide to not follow a suggestion, they should know the musical implication of this action. In the same way, if another improviser apparently does not follow the given suggestion (as in the “sporadic” example), the others should trust this decision as a conscious action. Gaston Bachelard stated in *L’intuition de l’instant* that “an accident is at the root of any attempt to evolve” [6], which is exactly how every action against the flow is observed in Ensemble ILÉA: as an attempt to evolve. In this way, suggestions are sufficient to shape an improvisation while keeping it free. Orders inhibit freedom, and the lack of common direction can easily lead to shapeless improvisations.

Since these guiding programs are displayed on onstage monitors that are visible only to the improvisers, the audience does not view any ostentatious signs of conducting (which can lead to a causal listening of the music, to attempts to try to understand what is happening, and to expectations such as when a conductor is about to make a gesture). With Ensemble ILÉA, abrupt changes are truly abrupt because they are not previously revealed to the audience.

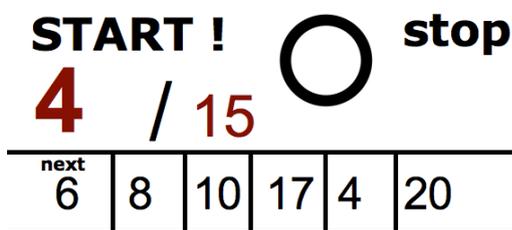
### 3.2 Guiding programs

These programs are currently divided into three distinct parts: the timeline, the countdowns, and the “Who plays?” program.

The timeline program (Figure 2) shapes the whole improvisation. The duration of the improvisation can be set, and the time passing is illustrated in red inside the white bar, which also indicates the current section of the improvisation, and signals the sections to follow. The time-

lines that Ensemble ILÉA creates can be quite complex with many constraints, or fairly simple with rather free indications. These indications are sometimes explicit (such as “crescendo”, “acoustic instruments only”, or “in D”, for example), or other times full of imagery (such as “convulsions” or “blue”). It is also common to include “free” sections, to avoid the feeling of constraint. The timeline program can be viewed as the meta-program, as the two other programs are included within: they are “called” inside the timeline. A section of the improvisation can then be called “countdown”, it then automatically opens the other program.

The countdown program (Figure 3) is one of the most used programs because of its efficiency and simplicity: it creates the possibility of synchronized musical events between improvisers without being seen or even predicted by the audience. This program creates successive countdowns, and is therefore versatile since the synchronizations that it creates can be used in many ways by the ensemble. It can be used to create complex impacts, made up of the different impacts played by the improvisers when the countdown reaches zero. Impacts may vary in length, which can create interesting sound materials: for example, a synchronized electronic impact with a saxophone slap can then slip into a resonance made from a flute’s high note and a bass clarinet’s low note. These complex sound objects surprise the improvisers and can lead to new directions until the following zero. In between these synchronized moments (that can last from anywhere between several seconds to around one minute), improvisers are free to do whatever they want with the new direction given by the last impact. Another feature of this program is that since improvisers have a visibility of the time before the next synchronization, they can create a *crescendo* into it and to shape the upcoming impact. This tension is, in my opinion, an effective way to engage the audience into an active listening, by presenting perceptible breaking points and by giving a shape to the performance.



**Figure 3.** Example of a countdown: a synchronization point arrives in four seconds (bigger, red number), on that last countdown that lasted fifteen seconds. The following countdowns will be of six, eight, ten, seventeen, four, and twenty seconds in length.

Different uses of the countdowns are constantly created within the ensemble: in the first timeline presented in Figure 2, the performance starts with a “dynamic waves countdown”. This is another common use of the countdown program where the synchronized point (i.e. reaching zero) should be a peak of the dynamic (*mezzo forte* in Figure 2), while the rest of the time improvisers should

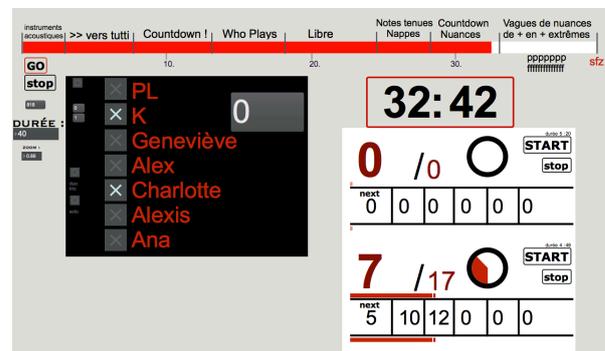
play within another dynamic (*pp* to *ppp*, in Figure 2). The timing of the *crescendo* toward the peak and the *decrescendo* to come back to the original dynamic is absolutely free, and can be articulated quickly by some improvisers and slowly by others. The result is a series of dynamic waves.

The third program is called “Who plays?”, and generates a portion of the ensemble invited to play (Figure 4). It can be programmed to generate soli, duets, trios, and so forth. It can also suggest a *tutti*.



**Figure 4.** “Who plays?” is generating a portion of the ensemble invited to play.

This program allows chosen improvisers to develop a new direction (or a new way of continuing an ongoing direction) with a reduced size of players. As always in Ensemble ILÉA, other improvisers are never prohibited to play: they can join the improvisers selected by the program while keeping in mind that they might be perceived as intruders. Once again, it is also about setting up a common context so that anomalies (i.e. improvisers going against suggestions) can be noticeable and so that others can react. Even when followed as instructed, this program brings musical changes and shapes the performance without disturbing the audience from concentrating only on the musical phenomenon.



**Figure 5.** The guide program with all the programs shown (the timeline, the countdowns, and “Who plays?”)

The specific guiding program for a performance is discussed between the members playing before said performance. Mainly, we decide the form of the improvisation, the sections of the timeline, their duration, and their theme (keywords, concepts, countdowns, or “who plays?”). Then, as shown in Figure 5, all the programs are linked to each other so only a simple push of the “Start” button is required to begin the performance.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Although Ensemble ILÉA is an improvised music ensemble, it is not its purpose to make improvisation visible as an aesthetic. Improvisation is, within the Ensemble, more of a creation process. The whole reason for my research on improvisation through these programs is to create music that can have the effectiveness of written music, and the freedom and innovation of improvisation.

With two albums released and over a dozen shows performed, Ensemble ILÉA is keen to continue to produce music while developing new guiding programs.

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