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**Anthony Coleman:**

“Teaching Composition to improvisers and teaching improvisation to composers:  
New paradigms and their ships”

*Transcript and editing by Francesca Metallinou.*

First of all I just want to say that if I'm talking really fast, somebody let me know cause otherwise it just goes all out of control. I'm going to approach this talk a little bit from the perspective of an improviser which is to say that I set up a few parameters but I didn't really memorize them. Also I'd like to think of myself as an improviser: I like to work in conjunction with other improvisers, because I do tend to work very well in opposition to what other people have said but I can only imagine, by reading the little graces of today's lectures what some of it might have been and I guess I'll operate off that premise, since it gives me a springboard and a place to begin from.

The title of what I'm talking about *Teaching Composition to improvisers and teaching improvisation to composers* comes from the fact that I teach in this very unique department called *The Department of contemporary improvisation*, of the New England Conservatory which is a very interesting school in having a jazz department and a contemporary improvisation department, so a lot of questions get raised about, well, what are the two? Isn't jazz contemporary improvisation? What's the difference? Why are there two departments? What's the need? What do you actually do there? And what do you do that's different that what others would do? If you think about avant-garde jazz, if you talk the music of Cecil Taylor, if you talk the music of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, or if you talk the music of Anthony Braxton what would it be that you would still need to do, that you would need to have a separate department? To which I say: “Well, that's a really good question, and its really worth asking”. But I don't really teach improvisation. I teach improvisation to composers and composition to improvisers. And then there are people who don't fit necessarily exactly into either camps. It's a very interesting society of people who don't necessarily fit in, who have a constructivist urge, people who have been playing heavy metal music with their friends in their basement but then heard the music of Morton Feldman and want to do something like that, or people who have been playing the pieces of Morton Feldman and then hear heavy metal coming out of somebody else's basement and they want to do something like that or people who have been playing heavy metal and the music of Morton Feldman and then heard somebody playing Persian classical music and want to do something like that and every other parameter and permutation of that, that you could possibly imagine.

I remember reading a lot when I was a kid about the Spanish civil war and what happened to those poor anarchists, they really got screwed. The common term under Stalin wanted the left to be represented by the Soviet Union which was the world official representative of the left, and they didn't want anybody to rain on that particular parade. They were going to win or lose, but either way, they wanted to come from mother Russia, so the anarchists who had the idea that a utopian socialist society wouldn't function in any kind of totalitarian sort of way, well you know what happened to them they got their

backs towards the wall, and you know what happened to the Spanish civil war. Nonetheless we still try to run the department this way.

Pluralism is a double edge sword and I actually have this really great text about pluralism by Hal Foster from the book *Recodings: Art Spectacle, Cultural Politics* and its very interesting because critiques of pluralism tend to come from people who are trying to maintain status quo values and generally speaking come from a conservative place. But here's a critique of pluralism by Hal Foster, a very interesting critic because he comes very much more from a radical side of things, from the left side of things and from the avant-garde and he also has issues with pluralism and I have issues with pluralism too, but my issues with pluralism are smaller than my issues with the people that say in order to have a voice you need to define yourself in one way or the other. So this creates some really tricky things, people say: "Well, what is it that you really believe in?" And I say: "I don't know what I believe in but I know that I'm against eclecticism". Well that's a bit crazy right? I'm teaching all these composers who want to be improvisers and improvisers who want to be composers and they all come from all over the stylistic map and then I'm saying that I don't really love eclecticism. Sounds very...not...clear to me, even about myself, but I believe that the stylistic boundaries to what a voice can be, have produced many wonderful things over the years. But there is a new paradigm.

A lot of voices of the last twenty three years haven't been defined by a particular relationship to a particular genre or another and gradually, that has to be taught as a genre as well. So that becomes very, very tricky. How do you address this genre that deals with many genres that get put together? Well, when I moved back to New York after graduate school in 1979, I kind of found myself in the belly of that particular beast not like I was intending to, I just didn't know where to live and I didn't want to get a doctorate, so I ended up moving in with my mother in her loft in Soho. That was a terrible idea...on the other hand, it did put me in the center of the experimental music scene of New York at that moment, I didn't actually know that, but that's what happened, I worked in a record store and was myself, talking to a lot of people, and because of that, within a couple of months I was playing with John Zorn and Glenn Branca, which were two radically different approaches to what people were thinking about at that moment.

My degrees are both in composition, but I came to school as a jazz composition major, studied with Jackie Bard and George Russell and then studied with Donald Martino and other composers like that, so I always had this kind of very split mind. One thing that is very great about the program in New England Conservatory is it can give you all the information that you could possibly want to totally confuse yourself and feel like there's no possible way that you'll ever find a road towards a personal music whatsoever. Well that's not a bad thing, as long as you go to the right places and you take it and you gel. Some people need to move to New York and live in their mothers loft, and other people can do it a different way, but the whole question is, how much information overflows the pot. And everybody has a different idea about this. For me, it was really interesting to come to the table with all that information and then discover that there were a lot of people without necessarily conservatory background, who were asking a lot of the same questions, and maybe because they were not dealing it with an academic way, they were actually coming up with answers. That was thirty years ago and here we are now. That's one of the new paradigms I wanna talk about.

To continue with the binary of jazz versus classical is ultimately not very relevant in 2011. It may seem very that's good and bad about it in the same concert and there's a million concerts like this. So to continue to address in that way is fine, but it actually doesn't really address the curious, interested, engaged musician of today who is really coming to the table already with all these things I described. You may think that I was being numerous, but the guy playing the black metal guitar in the basement who wants to be the Morton Feldman of composers but actually once he's done that now he wants to play Persian classical music exists and I've got them all as my students and they drive me out of my mind. I don't need to make them that way they come to the table like that. Then what do I do with them? I don't know...but one thing I can say is that I don't feel like an academic. So as a result, talking about improvisation, I thought about making a very coherent presentation and I actually worked on it from that point of view but then I thought I really wanted to jump into the unknown. I wanted to set up the same parameters that I would set up if I were improvising solo, and then have that great thing that happens when you go to a solo improvisation, or duo improvisation, or trio or maybe a quartet improvisation: (beyond that its pretty much a disaster) an interesting combination of success and failure. I don't know about you but when I go to that kind of concert, I go for the process, not for the concert and if within the hour, there's a twenty great minutes, I feel like its been an amazing success. I know other people don't agree. There are people you go to these concerts with and they say well this music is really only good live, I would never really want to listen to it from a record at home. I get their point there aren't many of those things that I would want to listen at home either, but occasionally there is one that works. For years there was only this (books) and now there are more things like this (laptops), which they could be incoherence, in order to avoid certainty. I'm not interested in that and I don't think you should be either. I think we can all make fun of Jamey Aebersold or David Baker, but if we start thinking too much about techniques of teaching improvisation then we are becoming the Jamey Aebersold of improvisation teaching too. That may seem like a really mean thing to say, but I think its really true, and I think its something that people should really be aware of.

I have this great passage here which is by Han Bennick and he's talking to Derek Bailey here and its really something that I really want to look at it from a structural point of view. So Derek says here: *"A musician whose approach to improvising is in many ways totally different to that of John Stevens is the Dutch drummer Han Bennink . For a long time he took jointly with Misha Mengelberg, his partner in a regular improvising duo a weekly held class in free improvisation. Teaching at a conservatory the Musik School in Haarlem, Holland, meant that the people taught by Han Bennink were, unlike those in John Stevens class, trained musicians. We had the following discussion about his approach to teaching them free improvisation:*

*-I do nothing when I go there.*

*-Nothing?*

*-We play records some times, say, Korean music, may be we talk about jazz, how it was, we get them to talk about themselves.*

*-Do you play with them?*

*-Yes, we use those little rules we used to use years ago you know, get them into groups, get quiet instruments to play loud, loud instruments very quiet, play staccato passages, long lines, we use those sorts of indeterminate scoring instructions. We used to divide the*

*day into three parts, one part theory, one part analysis, one part playing. Now Misha and I go as the duo, as though we were going to play a gig. We play a little, stop and discuss it, maybe Misha analyze it, maybe we all talk about it, we keep busy, everything develops from that, we try to give a little energy to the pupils.*

*-Give energy to the pupils?*

*-I do nothing when I go there. I ask them to think of their own ideas. Any person who's busy with music can think of better ideas than I can. So what I try to get is the ideas coming from the pupils. When it comes to the point that they offer nothing, then of course I've got some tricks.*

*-Tricks?*

*-If they`re not producing nothing themselves, then I have some simple stages, some ideas on which we can work to provoke them, to start them off. For instance, last week I took the radio and turned it to the end of the FM scale, where you can hear a sort of code here in Holland: it repeats but after a couple of seconds its ultimate, its that sort of sign you know. Well we take that sign and we analyze it. Find the notes, the rhythms and we start to play with it. This week Ill take a kettle with a whistle. When it boils it produces different pitches in a rather unpredictable way. If it`s necessary we will use that, it`s just the idea that counts, certain talks: whats happening with the water, why you boil water, is it music, and what makes music, and what doesn`t make music, examining the idea from every angle, being busy with the idea that's the whole thing, looking for each way to come to the middle of it. You can take anything, a piece of paper, a record. The people that Misha and I teach are either graduates, or in their last year of the conservatory and in addition to being composers and teachers, they all possess a fairly high level of instrumental ability, many of them improvise anyway: simply the blues or something, always a borrowed music, narrow. We try to introduce a broader skill of improvising as broad as daily life, we are teaching them to make music out of their own background, not someone else`s background, learning what you are, in my eyes that`s all you can do. Let people find out what they are, and where they are and where their musical influences and preferences come from. Teach them to explore their own background.*

Well, these are very uplifting words, if we just looked at it like this, but it's actually something else I want to and the way we want to talk about it, because the way that he repeats twice, that he does *nothing* when he gets there, serves as a marker, it has this impression of casualness that masks his deep intentionality. He goes on to come up with every kind of technique you could have to teach improvisation, but it's all framed within that idea-that's the only thing he repeats-that he does *nothing* when he goes down there. And so what's the thing? There is a pretense to be able to be objective or be scientific about these kind of things but what an improviser really create is that relationship and that play between a surface casualness and underneath a very deep sense of intention, there is a very incredible and very deep sense of play inside that. It's mirrored exactly, if you've heard Han Bennick play, his playing is exactly the same: there's a surface level of him seeming extremely casual and mostly concerned with moment to moment kind of crazy events, and underneath there's a deep sense of coherence and what's interesting is by not trying to write anything by not trying to make any new statements about improvisation, he mirrors his life as an improviser in his way of talking about improvising and that's something that I'm trying to do and its a tricky thing but the form of that little text, forget about all of the things he's saying, the form of it is exactly the form of his improvising, even the

repetition - if we think of repetition as creating some sort of boundaries- that fills and creates some sense of structure. The most casual moment the fact where he's denying any kind of agency is actually the thing which creates the boundary which creates the frame. To me that's really, really interesting and that's what I aspire to in talking to you but also in my teaching, I think that fits into teaching the improvisers how to compose. But how does it fit in with teaching the composers how to improvise? That's a good question.

Teaching improvisation beyond the jazz paradigm. The jazz paradigm was central in previous years, it was w time ago, he really made a huge distinction between jazz and free improvisation. Most of the book was meant to outline that difference and to spread the idea that jazz was one kind of branch of improvisation and of course that's definitely been spread since then but it also had a little bit of a problem because it could have a prodigious effect on creativity that people now need to define themselves as either jazz musicians or improvisers, or composers, or then you have the kind of people who do a certain amount of writing down of music that just the fact of making something on paper, they then define themselves as the improviser-composer.

Whether we like him or not, and he certainly didn't like us that much, John Cage definitely redefined a lot of with people playing pieces on pine cones and so on, he said that now he was working on making improvisation a discipline, and this was the end of the seventies, the beginning of the eighties, and so he missed the boat, it had already been done for eight years or so, but in any case be that as it may. One thing about Cagean and post-Cagean thinking, is that defining learning, or practicing, or getting involved in anything, whether its composition or improvisation, or combination of the two there's a shift and I think this is where I might break with the Schuller vision of the world. Between teaching a technique or thinking about things as technique and in the post-Cagean world, we tend to think of things as task as opposed to technique, and the seriousness comes from the seriousness of focusing on the idea of task and the people who don't believe Cage was really a composer, or what he brought forth was really composition, if you look deeply into his work, whatever you're feeling about that you can't deny the intensity and the seriousness of the task, that's a real paradigm shift. If we think of task rather than think of technique, it creates a lot of problems in teaching, like considering when something's being done well or when its being done badly, because how do you critique this seriousness or the focus of task. I don't know the answer to that, I've only been teaching for five years, but I know that its my focus and that's what I really try to concentrate on in my ensembles is really try to confuse all the issues, because I'm really interested in not creating this binary between jazz and free improvisation, or this binary between improvisation and composition, or any of such binaries don't really interest me, but what interests me is to create a field and so a lot of what we work with are that sort of period in the sixties, seventies when a lot of composers asked themselves, how can they change the paradigm to create a new relationship between performer, composer and audience? Of course a lot of these pieces were based on a social relationship that it was very much of that time. I'm talking about composers like Cornelius Cardew who is a paradigmatic example, but there other composers like Frederic Rzewski in a period where a lot of people were working on texts that clearly compositions with a capital C and they didn't include improvisation the way maybe we usually think about it but they did create a space for a lot of performer choice, which the border line between performer choice and improvisation is one of those border lines that we can spend hours talking. When you come to one of those text pieces

like Stockhausen from the seven days, how is that different from the pieces by Cardew? And how does any of that differ from the work that people like Anthony Braxton and Roscoe Mitchell have done?

It was really interesting when Kyle Gann put out his book of a survey of American music. He put all the AACM hundred years we're going to look at that and that's going to look bad, because that saying that there's something inherently more jazz about their work than about the work that's coming from these other composers, which is not to say that there's not more of an Afro-american sensibility inside of that music but in fact the commonalities are just as important as the differences, and that's actually still something which is not very clear. Even in such a basic text as that, it's not said that way, there's still a ghettoizing of those things. The problematic becomes when you have these works by Cardew and Rzewski and Stockhausen and so on where the texts are readily available, so there becomes a kind of situation where the music that's coming from the AACM side, it's very difficult to get the texts so then you can work with these pieces in the classroom situation. Now that's very problematic because it doesn't encourage creating a situation where these perspectives can be worked on together and I've run in to that and I find it really problematic. My mind always goes back to Freddie Keppard when he first went to create a jazz band. We always talk about how the original Dixieland jazz band, how crazy it is that this white group of new Orleans imitators were the first ones to record jazz but actually Freddie Keppard was offered the chance to record in 1915 but he was somebody who covered his fingers with a white handkerchief when he played and didn't want to record because he felt that this music which was so much something that came out of a particular cultural space a moment in time that if it were put out and if people could see his fingers and if this music was put out on record then it would be stolen by white people.

One thing that George talks about in this article is that the reason that the people from the Cage side of the wall are in an Afro-logical way of thinking and that's the biggest binary that were trying to attack. But it's true that it's not enormously helped by having the texts of this one kind of piece and not having the texts of these others readily available it's a little compartmentalism. All these binaries have something true about them but they also have something that creates a kind of anachronistic dialogue. We all know we live in a world that's postal of all these things, and yet at the same time they still raise their ugly head and it's really head to combat that. So this is what I'm talking about when I say the paradigms and their shifts. Am I saying that anyone can be an improviser or anyone can be a composer? I'm not exactly saying that but I wanna shift the attention in both senses to task. When I have students who work with open form pieces and they say get louder and louder, play and gradually get faster, I say ok, you can do it like that, but let's look at what Cardew did let's look at what Cage did, let's look at the specificity even in a text piece to create islands, inlets, different kinds of peaks and valleys. Let's look at the kind of fractal geometry that exists even in these text pieces. They don't just go up, up, up, up, up. Even in pieces like Set sail for the Sun by Stockhausen, where it starts out that you play your own tone, and then gradually you start to meld your tone with the tones of the others, you start out not listening you gradually listen and then once you listen you go into a different kind of listening. It's a process it's not a straight line. So even in writing a text piece, there's what I like to call task. A piece that says get louder and louder, faster and faster, play as loud as you can is not very nuanced. What does play as loud as you can mean for an ensemble

that has a violin, a tuba, an electric guitar, a piano? That's just bad orchestration. Even in a text piece, you need good orchestration. Even in a piece which is all chance, even in a piece which is all open form you need to think play as loud as you can, well that's fine so are you saying that you want the louder instruments to wipe out the quieter ones, is that part of your piece? Well no, I didn't think about it that way. Well, that's composition, that's technique if you want to call it that, or its task, so I really feel like if you change those paradigms and you just have that sense of responsibility you create an open field where things can happen. Its not very schematic what I'm saying, but its definitely where I'm going.

*Transcript and editing by Francesca Metallinou.*