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Duo Independent Study

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### Studying the Language of Duo Playing in Freely Improvised and Standard Settings

This independent study was designed to examine the many facets of improvised duo playing in the context of jazz standard repertoire, as well as freely improvised music. In this case, we drew our focus on the specific duo genre of trumpet and piano: a setting with many variables and a staggering set of musical possibilities. This context is one with which I'm specifically enamored, as it requires both musical participants to have a sense of honesty and trust in one another. That this is the case draws me to it through the beauty within its human aspect as well as its flexible potential for beauty within the actual music created. The independent study was conducted in cooperation and with the support of professor Harold Danko, who was and continues to be a valuable foundation in his instruction and familiarity with this particular subject. His prolific experience is showcased in the records he has put out in the duo context specifically, seen with musicians such as Rich Perry, Lee Konitz, and Dick Oatts: respective powerhouses within the jazz community. I thought this study with professor Danko interesting, however, due to the differing roles we each would have within the duo. He, after all, is a professor of piano, and I a trumpet player. This would provide me with insight and clarity in consideration for both roles while improvising.

In general, meetings between professor Danko and I would be to define or describe the

roles and their functions in a duo, or else to find where lines could be blurred. During our meetings we would also address areas to improve in improvisation over chord changes as well, ensuring clarity, and learning how to curate trust between two individuals in this setting. Some meetings would consist of my performance with another student, acting as benchmarks and milestones for my improvement as a duo partner as well as a test for generating trust between the individuals with whom I would perform. Professor Danko emphasized that his role, that of the pianist's, is most times to create an accompaniment and a platform that serves as a pseudo-composition—that is, a successful performance might convince the average listener into believing that the improvisation was actually a composition for solo instrument and piano accompaniment.

This emphasis led me to my own conclusions about my role: the confidence with which I portray my improvised content must be strong, as if I were reading from a part or inciting a memorized piece. Though the idea of this was not one that was foreign to me, as it is most similar to the way a trumpet player must think about many sorts of ensemble playing, it helped me realize the similarities that this setting has to the many others with which I am familiar. In particular, the ideas of comfort and confidence are helpful when in an exposed context, as there are many such contexts within music improvised by only two musicians.

We also talked about the fluidity between roles. There are times when the piano must take up the role of the solo instrument as well; when, during a standard repertoire performance, the improvised solo of the instrument being accompanied finishes, it is common for another improvised solo to take place. If this is the case, in a duo setting, the pianist is the only instrument left to improvise, and must take a chorus (or as many choruses as he or she likes) on the piece's form before the piece can end via the head melody again. Since duo contexts do not

allow for much accompaniment from the solo instrument, I took this as an opportunity to theorize and conceptualize ways in which my instrument might become the platform over which the pianist can improvise. Though there were certain techniques I could use to fit under a piano solo, in general, my instrument draws too much (sometimes unwanted) attention to itself to allow for very musical accompaniment throughout whatever improvised content is going on before the head melody is to come back in, or in the case of free music, before the players switch accompanying roles or before the piece comes to an end. Therefore, I devised several ways that my instrument might fit into such a context; however, I found that in most cases, it was best to simply not play, as the role of accompaniment can often be taken up by the piano simultaneous to soloistic playing.

The first method of trumpet accompaniment to solo piano requires concentrated and mindful listening to the content being played; in this style of accompaniment, the trumpet player listens to the line created by the piano, and finishes it in a tasteful way suited to the music. This is not to be confused with playing the content that was just played, or parroting, as parroting does little to suit the flow of music, and instead brings the motion of phrases or ideas to a halt. This method fulfills a sense of unity within the music, and it creates a flow between the two players as well. It allows not only the trumpet to listen mindfully, but allows the pianist to relate the content he or she is creating to the content then played by the trumpet.

The second method involves a tradition partly incepted by Earl Hines in which he used content in a higher octave to accompany his soloistic material, which existed in the octaves below. These higher octave accompaniments were meant to emulate the role of the trumpet in a big band setting, and were reminiscent of hits or figures that are common in that style of writing. Though on most occasions I did not find figures reminiscent of big band hits agreeable during

improvised performances, I did take both of these concepts to heart. Higher octave accompaniment is an effective tool when the pianist's content is in a lower one, and when the trumpet's content is shorter (as well as existing in a higher octave), it sometimes incites specific sounds that suit the music's goals or intentions.

A third method includes the creation of a wash of sound by means of scalar playing, or else a great deal of notes, or sometimes just one note played for a longer duration. This method most directly creates a platform over which to improvise, though it requires a concentrated effort to be conscious of the quality of the content being issued by the pianist. For example, if the content is in a certain key, then the accompaniment must either be in the same key or the conscious decision must be made to stay out of that key. Considering these methods, and touting the experience and knowledge I had garnered in previous meetings with professor Danko, I sought out to perform with students Julian Garvue, Jonathan Fagan, and Andrew Links: three pianists I had enlisted to assist with my study.

The meeting in which I brought Julian Garvue in to examine our duo improvisations consisted of a performance comprising a freely improvised piece, as well as the standard tune "Alone Together." It's imperative to note that the number of times I had performed with Garvue previous to this one is limited. Though we have a definite sense of mutual respect and trust because of our respective familiarities with one another as musicians, we had not had the chance, during the four years we had spent together in the same program, to play in a setting like this. Of course, I had seen Garvue play many times, as he had seen me during many occasions. This helped garner trust between us as partners in a duo context, and gave us comfort in improvisation, something I believe is an infallible faculty to such an exposed setting for improvised music.

The first piece we had played in performance for professor Danko was a freely improvised duo piece. The piece begins with short flurries of phrases orated by the trumpet, and Julian creates an accompaniment of similar flurries, making a platform on which the trumpet phrases can exist logically. Julian's accompaniment is malleable, and can change harmony or texture in accordance to what I am playing. I start to quote the tune "Like Someone in Love," and Julian, clearly the intent listener, follows the harmony of this piece that is common in our respective vocabularies. He is careful, however, to see if I will deviate from the melody in any way, as we are not completely committed to playing this tune specifically. I go elsewhere, and Julian follows, creating a minor, flurrying accompaniment to fit my now contrasting, longer phrases of melodies. Julian is listening intently to the direction and intention of my lines, altering the harmony to create cadences in tasteful spots. After a major cadence, Julian leaves space, and I choose to bring back the content of the beginning of the piece: the short, flurrying phrases. Julian this time, creates a pseudo-fugue, and posits the content I played in phrases fitting the subject, counter-subject, etc. As this continues, I gradually extend the tessitura and volume into a climax. The piece then falls into the post-climax resolution, and ends with a held note.

The next piece we performed was the standard tune, "Alone Together." The piece begins with improvised, out of tempo content in D minor, melodically ambiguous, but still alluding to the form and shape of the tune's melody. Julian's accompaniment follows the blues oriented content I am using, and he creates a beautiful harmonic and textural platform over which the content could be most effective. The melody solidifies on the second half of the first A section. During the second A section, Julian follows as I imply tempo, and the tempo solidifies as the resolution to D major occurs at the end of the second A, allowing the bridge be the definer of time. After the last A section, I start the improvised solo proper, deviating from the melody of the

tune, but using the harmonic changes of the form to inform my content. During my lines that emphasize the triplet rhythm, Julian chooses to accompany using contrasting eighth note off-beat content rather than making similar rhythmic patterns. During a standard tune like this, it is imperative that both musicians have trust in one another's time. In this performance in particular, the "air ride cymbal" is present, signifying a solid lock-up in tempo between both participants. Toward the end of my solo, I create a series of many-note runs, with the end of each run voice-led upward; Julian chooses this time to make his line in a similar direction, but using a different and more uniform fashion. My solo ends on a long note as Julian continues his ascent into his improvised solo. I pick lines stated by Julian to finish his phrases, and I choose to make use of similar rhythms. We trade eights and sixes until the last A section, when the dwindling energy befits a solo piano tag ending to end the piece.

During my next performance for professor Danko, I had the pleasure of performing with Jonathan Fagan for the first time. Both Jonathan and I experienced interesting results during our first performance in particular: this had been our first time together in this context, and his relative newness in the school made for an interesting combination between two players trying to feel each other out. This was, to me, a wonderful study in galvanizing trust between two duo participants.

The first piece performed for professor Danko was freely improvised. I choose to begin the piece with long notes, and Jonathan chooses to root these notes in tonality, selecting chords to contextualize the harmony. When I use a line to get to the next long note, Jonathan leaves space, then when the line lands, he again creates a harmonic bed on which the long note can lay. Taking this concept, I choose to root my content tonally as well, and I make use of simple phrases and longer notes over a tonality that Jonathan has defined. This strategy makes gives the piece an

approachable folk quality; however, wishing not to stagnate the piece, I take the initiative to change the texture, and choose to make flowing atonal phrases with wide tessituras. Jonathan changes his accompaniment to mirror mine, making use of single lines played in a similar manner. We both catch each other's rhythms and make logical rhythmic phrases relative to one another's improvisations. There comes a point when I fixate on one rhythm via only one note in an attempt to create a platform over which Jonathan can create more complex lines. He instead chooses to mirror the pattern I created, and the piece ends fading on this pattern. Though the intent was different, this is a great example of the reason expectations should be limited in playing freely improvised music. I would call this performance successful, but perhaps it would have been even more effective had I not had any expectation over Jonathan's content.

The next performed piece was the standard tune "I Love You." Jonathan begins with a piano ostinato, giving the piece a gentle texture and implying tempo right from the start. The texture is rooted in a swing two feel, and I begin to play the melody as Jonathan alters the texture's chordal structure in accordance with the form of the tune. The texture remains as my solo begins and the head melody ends, and it invites a sense of unity. That the accompaniment continued in this way allows me to be patient with the content of my improvised solo, and makes me be wary of progressing the energy of the tune too quickly. The solo makes use of bebop vocabulary as to give the time clarity, and to define the eighth note with as much intent as possible. The lock-up, because of this, gives the listener the sense of the "air ride cymbal." When Jonathan inserts more action in his accompaniment, I follow using similar rhythms or complexity. Jonathan favors the use of a pedal point over the first four bars of the tune, and catching onto this, I select the scale degree five for the sole note of my accompaniment when his solo begins, creating a texture reminiscent of that pedal. After his solo ends, we trade for two

choruses before using the head melody again to end the piece. The last head is more implicative of the melody than literal, but we both understand where we are, and what function this last chorus serves formally. The piece ends with a long, Ivesian chord.

The final duo I studied was one I performed with Andrew Links, one of my closest friends. Unlike the duo with Jonathan, Andrew and I already had a strong bond between us—one branching beyond the music we often perform together into the friendship we share. This bond is clearly reflected in our improvised music. Contrasting both duos with Julian and Jonathan, the duo I performed with Andrew was incredibly natural, and the communication and trust implicit in our performance produced a successful, artful performance.

The tune we played in our performance for professor Danko was the standard “Stella by Starlight.” The tune begins out of tempo, with the trumpet playing the iconic minor second. I take many liberties with the melody, but Andrew catches exactly their direction or harmonic natures, creating a malleable accompaniment for my melody. Though the tempo is not defined, we are both communicative, and we guide each other to points of resolution or cadences. As the improvised solo begins after the head, there is still no tempo, and Andrew's accompaniment feels like a pseudo-composition, as if we were playing an art song and I was the solo instrument. As the first A section comes around again, I imply time, clearly defining placements of eighth notes, leaving plenty of space for Andrew's accompaniment to shine through as well. Andrew catches it seamlessly, implying a two feel. He finishes the phrases I leave space after, as if finishing a sentence I had left hanging, or inciting the feeling of call-and-response. The last head melody begins at the last A section, going out of tempo again, without Andrew having had to have soloed. The piece, though it did not have any one thread unifying it, felt like a unified and contiguous composition.



The conclusion I can draw after this study is that there exists an incredible amount of depth within duo playing, and that, with Harold's guidance, I have a substantial scratch in the surface. The honesty and trust required to create a successful performance is not only a requisite of the music, but also of being a human, and an interactor and participant of the creation of something that might be beautiful. These performances I had given for professor Danko with my peers comprised choices I might not have made before becoming conscious of those facts, now clearly evident to me. I'd like to thank professor Harold Danko for helping me along this semester, and to come to these realizations; his help and guidance, as well as his depth of knowledge, have all been infallible resources to this study.