

Free Improvisation: field of study for extended oboe techniques

COMUNICAÇÃO

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Abstract: The objective of this research project is to determine whether *free improvisation* is a viable field for studying extended oboe techniques, in hopes of aiding oboists with the integration of these techniques into their musical vocabulary. Selected techniques were taken from Libby Van Cleve's manual "Oboe Unbound" and utilized in rehearsal and performance sessions with a free improvisation group made up of university professors and students. Partial results indicate that oboists gain technical control of these techniques while developing other important skills such as conscientious listening, thoughtful decision-making, and purposeful interaction – all elements useful in both improvisation and fixed music.

Keywords: Oboe. Extended techniques. Free improvisation. Conscientious listening. Musical interaction.

Resumo: O objetivo dessa pesquisa é determinar se a *improvisação livre* é um campo viável para o estudo de técnicas estendidas no oboé, na esperança de auxiliar os oboístas na integração dessas técnicas no seu vocabulário musical. Algumas técnicas foram escolhidas do manual "Oboe Unbound" da Libby Van Cleve e utilizadas em ensaios e apresentações com um grupo de improvisação livre composto por professores e alunos universitários. Resultados parciais indicam que os oboístas ganham controle mecânico dessas técnicas enquanto desenvolvendo outras habilidades importantes como o escuto consciente, tomar decisões bem pensadas e interação intencional – todos elementos úteis ambos na improvisação e música fixa.

Palavras-chave: Oboé. Técnicas estendidas. Improvisação livre. Escuto consciente. Interação musical.

1. Introduction

Historically speaking, the oboe is the oldest reed instrument in existence. (The earliest we know of dates from 2800 B.C.). There have been some changes to the instrument over time, but none so radical as to alter the fundamental concept of the instrument. Throughout time, oboe technique has evolved largely due to composer/performer/instrument builder relationships. The introduction of "extended techniques" occurs every time a composer or performer pushes the limits of the standard technique of the day. Beethoven himself was notorious for writing difficult music, and

...continually demanded substance from his instruments that was totally unprecedented, requiring from his players the will to extend their expressive and technical range of performance. The oboe was no exception. It must be remembered that during the period Beethoven was composing his Symphonies Nos. 1-8, the classical oboe was in an obsolescent state, while the mechanized instrument was taking very tentative steps of evolution towards the oboe for which Berlioz and Wagner composed (GOOSSENS & ROXBURGH, 1993: 26).

Relatively few alterations have been made to the modern French conservatoire system oboe (c.1906) of Loreé, introduced in its basic form by F. Triébert in the late 1800's. It is upon this modern instrument that extended techniques are executed in works such as Ernst Krenek's "Four Pieces for Oboe and Piano" (1967), Iannis Xenakis' "Dmaathen" (1976), Elliott Carter's "Inner Song" (1993), and Luciano Berio's "Sequenza VII" (1969, rev. 2000) (GOOSSENS & ROXBURGH, 1993).

Études have been used consistently in the formation of oboists of all levels, for about the last century and a half. Composers who were also oboists created many of these *étude* books, and their studies were able to "capture what was happening musically and technologically [technically] at the time as seen through the eyes of an oboe player" (ZOLLER IV, 2011: 3). The *étude* is used for learning basic musical gestures, techniques and fingerings. There are a plethora of Method and *Étude* books for the developing oboist, incorporating "traditional" techniques. The first well-known tutor for the oboe dates back to 1695, called "The Sprightly Companion". But it wasn't until the invention of the Lithograph and high-speed printing machines (1818) that Method and *Étude* books became accessible to many oboists. After 1830 we start to really see a rise in the number of publications of oboe Method books and *Étude* books (McPHERSON & GABRIELSSON, 2002; ZOLLER IV, 2011).

Christopher Redgate, in his article "Re-inventing the Oboe" (2007), indicates that the extended techniques found in recent compositions, as compared to those found in works from the mid-1950's, have created "a re-inventing of the sound world of the oboe" (REDGATE, 2007: 179). Redgate is an oboist/composer interested in pushing the limits of today's techniques even further, through composition and possible redesign of the instrument's keywork. Although Redgate is referring to extended techniques found in several recent compositions, this author believes that the same can be said about all extended techniques when encountered for the first time by an inquisitive oboist. Therefore, it seems plausible to deduce that learning extended techniques on the oboe can be like learning a new instrument.

For the oboist interested in learning extended techniques, there are several extremely detailed and highly esteemed handbooks, manuals and method books on contemporary oboe technique. "Oboe Unbound" by Libby Van Cleve (2004), "The Techniques of Oboe Playing" by Peter Veale and Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf (1994), "Pro Musica Nova, Studies for Playing Avant-garde Music for the Oboe" by Heinz Holliger (1972), "New Sounds for Woodwind" by Bruno Bartolozzi (1967), to name a few. These

manuals are very helpful in learning and experimenting with these techniques, but after dedicating much study time and thought, the following questions arose:

- How does the oboist go about incorporating these techniques into his or her musical vocabulary?
- If, as has happened repeatedly in the past, the extended techniques of today are eventually to become part of the oboist of tomorrow's set of "standard" techniques, then what steps does the oboist of today need to take in order to help make that happen?

With only minimal aid from resources such as *étude* books and with the idea in mind that we (the oboist) are essentially learning a new instrument, perhaps it would be useful to take a look back in time to see what beginning oboists did to learn the instrument when there were very few *étude* books and method books to choose from. According to Gellrich & Parncutt (1998), up until the mid-nineteenth century the goal of composers and teachers was to develop "an all-round musician by integrating technique with other aspects of general musicianship." (apud McPHERSON & GABRIELSSON). Newer students were taught to learn musical passages by ear, and more skilled students were encouraged to "invent their own passages to develop the expressive and technical skills needed to master the musical language of the repertoire being learned." (GELLRICH & SUNDIN, 1993, apud McPHERSON & GABRIELSSON, 2002). Improvisation, along with composition and sight-reading, were important skills for all musicians to possess.

Through improvisation, musicians could demonstrate not only technical mastery of their instrument, but also how well they understood the harmonic structure of a piece (GOOSSENS & ROXBURGH, 1993). With the growing precision of notation used by composers, and the eventual separation of roles – performer/composer, improvisation slowly faded out of everyday musical use. The second half of the 20th century saw a sort of revival among performers and composers of the Western Art Music tradition (MOORE, 1992; RUVIARO & ALDROVANDI, 2001). Composers such as Lukas Foss and Earle Brown, among others, encouraged their performers to explore creative freedom within several of their pieces, while composers such as Cage and Stockhausen experimented with indeterminate and aleatory compositional techniques (BROWN, 2008; FOSS, 1962; GRIFFITHS, 1987).

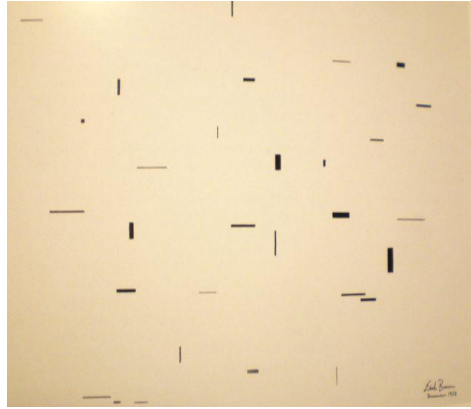


Figure 1: Earle Brown's "December 1952" – exemplifies the creative freedom he often gave his performers

Influenced by contemporary Western Art Music composers such as Cage, Stockhausen, Boulez, and Messiaen, as well as Free Jazz musicians such as Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and John Coltrane, the European Free Improvisation movement began experimenting with new sounds and new ideas in the early 1960's. Founding musicians of this movement were Derek Bailey, Tony Oxley, Gavin Bryers, and Evan Parker, to name a few (BAILEY, 1992). Free Improvisation, also known as "non-idiomatic improvisation", is an ideal musical field for practicing experimentation and exploration. It crosses cultural and musical boundaries, because there may or may not be "rules" dictating how or what to play, and no specific musical vocabulary that must be applied. Musicians may come from any musical background – jazz, classical, folk, traditional, etc (BORGO, 2002; BAILEY, 1992).

Extended techniques have been accepted within the world of Free Improvisation from its inception. However, the oboe is not an instrument commonly found within this setting. Contemporary oboists such as Christopher Redgate, Kyle Bruckmann, and Brenda Schuman-Post are a few who successfully cross between contemporary Western Art Music and Free Improvisation, utilizing extended oboe techniques in both musical genres. For oboists interested in integrating extended techniques into their musical vocabulary, the Free Improvisation setting seems to be the perfect place to experiment creatively.

2. Fundamentals of Extended Oboe Technique

There are basic fundamentals that are consistent and essential in both "traditional" and "extended" playing – a) air support, b) blowing through the phrase and c) embouchure control. But in many cases, they are taken to the extreme in the execution of extended technique.

In the "extended" form of playing, oboists must at times blow more air or less air than they would in "traditional" playing. Oboists must be able to push their embouchures to

the extreme – controlling lip pressure by tightening or loosening their lips exaggeratedly around the reed; controlling reed placement in the mouth by playing on the very tip of the reed or bringing the entire reed into their mouth; even using teeth on the reed in some cases – all with much more speed and agility than in traditional playing. Other mechanical factors that are completely different are fingerings (different combinations of keys as well as different use of keys – covering keys half way, for ex.) and finger movements (VAN CLEVE, 2004).

Depending on the technique to be executed, the oboist may be required to use *weighty fingers* or *light fingers*, or to slide the fingers slowly off keys, which may involve a new set of movements for the fingers, wrists and arms. In addition to the differences in mechanical techniques, the oboist must also work at developing alternative ear-training skills – for example, when two instrumentalists are given pitches an interval of a microtone apart, they must be able to identify and maintain their individual notes, a skill that contradicts the “traditional” listening skills utilized in tuning with other instruments.

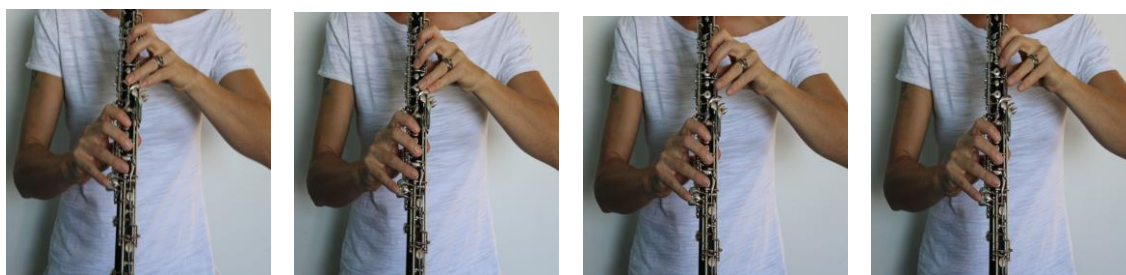


Figure 2: Glissando – Lab₆-Do#₇ - Demonstrating sliding of fingers and outward and upward movement of left wrist and arm

3. Materials

Libby Van Cleve’s “Oboe Unbound” is the contemporary techniques manual chosen by the author for individual study. Cleve touches on a variety of extended techniques including harmonics, microtones, glissandi, multiphonics, double trills, flutter tonguing, etc. She also acknowledges that certain fingerings and techniques work better on certain brands of oboe. She tested all of her fingerings on five well-known oboes and chose only the fingerings that worked best on all five instruments. (VAN CLEVE, 2004)

4. Methods

Of these techniques the author selected a small list with which to begin practice. The selections were based on practical usage (techniques found in actual contemporary pieces being studied by the author) and affinity (techniques that were attractive and interesting to the author). Those techniques are:

- Glissandi

- $Mi_5 - Do\#_6$ (Krenek's *Four Pieces for Oboe and Piano*, mvt.1, m.4)
 - i. Van Cleve, pg. 20 and 27
- Double harmonic
 - Sib_3 and Fa_5 (same as above, mvt. 3, m.26)
 - Mi_5 and Si_5 (Carter's *Inner Song* for Oboe Solo, m.19-20)
 - ii. Van Cleve, pg. 35-36, 49
- Double harmonic tremolo
 - Mi_5 and Si_5 to $Re\#_5$ and $La\#_5$ (same as above, m.105-106)
 - iii. Van Cleve, pg. 61-63
- Double trills
 - $Re_4 - Mi_b_4; Fa\#_4 - Sol_4$
 - iv. Van Cleve, pg. 55-58
- Microtonal intervals
 - v. Van Cleve, pg. 12-25
- Selected multiphonics
 - vi. Van Cleve, pg. 43 (first 10)
- Flutter tonguing
 - vii. Van Cleve, pg. 69-72

In order to practice these techniques in the field, a free improvisation group was formed, consisting of university professors and students. The group has been meeting on a weekly basis for several months. Video and audio recordings of the practice sessions and performances have been made. The author gradually began introducing extended techniques into her improvisational playing when the group began meeting.

The main difficulty, and perhaps consequently the main source of growth and development that has arisen from integrating the chosen list of extended techniques into the free improvisation sessions, has been in choosing when to say what, in a way that makes sense within the overall musical context. It is easy to play a plethora of extended techniques, make many new and interesting sounds, and essentially flaunt your extended technique skills. But to actually incorporate them into the collective improvisation, in a way that makes musical sense, is another skill altogether. A skill that requires intense listening, open interaction between players, and thoughtful decision-making. According to Borgo (2002):

Since, on hearing the initial sound in a free improvisation, neither the performers nor the audience know what direction the music will take, open and attentive listening is

essential to creating and maintaining the flow of the music and to extracting meaning and enjoyment from the experience (BORGIO, 2002: 176).

Practicing these extended techniques under those circumstances has allowed the author to feel as though the techniques are gradually becoming a part of her existing musical vocabulary, and that she can now use those techniques without hesitation. The selected techniques are gradually making their way into her musical comfort zone.

The author has also noticed that as she experiments with these techniques within the free improvisation setting, her relationship with these techniques when found within written music has changed. She sees the written notation and hears and feels (physiologically) what the resulting sound should be, before she plays. The execution of these techniques while playing these pieces is no longer a source of tension, but fun and exploration.

5. Conclusion

Oboists venturing on the path of learning extended techniques need a setting in which experimenting with new sounds, body movements, fingerings, embouchure placements, and the utilization of breath control are considered legitimate and even encouraged. They need a place where the definition of what constitutes a beautiful sound is openly challenged and constantly reinvented, and where the only pre-requisites for entrance are an open mind, and a desire to learn and try new things. Supplementing for the lack of available “Étude” resources, they need a field in which they can diligently practice these techniques to the point of complete integration into their musical vocabulary. Free Improvisation together with the study of extended techniques can provide this setting, enabling all of the above conditions to co-exist in one field.

In addition to providing a field suitable for developing a musician’s musical vocabulary through experimentation and creative thought processes, Free Improvisation can create a setting that incites conscientious listening, thoughtful decision-making, and purposeful interaction. Free Improvisation enables the oboist the freedom to experiment organically with new sounds and techniques, similar to the process of experimentation through improvisation undertaken by avant-garde and experimentalist composers of the 1950’s and beyond such as Lukas Foss, Terry Riley, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Earle Brown, among others.

This research study will continue the quest of using the field of free improvisation to explore extended techniques on the oboe, in hopes of eventually providing

oboists with an additional pathway for integrating said techniques into their musical vocabulary within the context of contemporary music.

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