

IMPROVISATION, A PATHWAY OF KNOWING

Andrea Breen

Coding improvisation, whether as dots and stems on blank manuscript, sentences on a page, or recordings for armchair listening feels like a contradiction in terms. Indeed, the desert of defining material reflects the unwillingness of artists working within that moment-of-expression to speak about their experiences. Any discussion is deflected to abstract terms and intuitive responses so that even the predicted improvisations rarely come off as expected. My sense of this gap in theoretical concerns is that improvisation complements a deep level of intuition, intersubjectivity and personal process. It is not only suffocated through verbal forming but has a catch-it-if-you-can air about it which musicians particularly are hesitant to describe for fear of losing its impulse.

To place improvisation in a spiritual context is to tune to this resonance – this deep spring of becoming where the moment signifies something unformed, beyond conceptualisation. In this sense, every event in speech, writing, thinking, feeling and doing is improvised and within the everyday experience of us all. Yet most of us keep to the safety of the tracks, unaware that to take risks can lead us into more playfulness, freedom and spontaneity. Perhaps then, improvisatory practise can be a broad metaphor for self-expansion and release. As they say in psychotherapy, “there is always more”.

This paper tinkers with intentionality such that its presence post-printing crushes the moment of ephemerality, intuition, echo of desire and play that created it. The moveable in time and space became a composition as soon as it dried on the page – or in the case of the CD I am about to describe, in the moment of playback. That being so, all I can do here is present some captured moments, which should then, if I was to honour their moment of becoming, be recycled or scrapped. CDs as coasters and essays as becoming-humus perhaps? But if the charge that there is always

more is true, then each moment of re-experiencing takes me further into self-awareness and exchange.

Improvisations-Image-Voice is a collection of improvisations to poems by non-indigenous women writing on Tasmania's landscape. While caught for posterity by digital tape, these acoustic scatterings refract mood, relational transfer and mythopoetic imagery. The improvisations play with signifiers while making room for shared moments of sound, a meeting ground where inhibition and conditioned discourse can be laid aside for a while. There has been a fascination for me in potential space and time between the written word and the unformed intention. I can read the poems many times beforehand, make compositional drafts and yet when the moment of dialogue happens, a totally unrehearsed musical gesture emerges.

These moments are now down for all to hear, defying any rigid rules that improvisatory practise must join the ether after invention. Any cringing or hesitation post-event is useless unless performance is regarded as the only means of expression for this art form. If I were to improvise again to these poems, the recorded or performed events would find other melodic motifs or *ostinati*. I like to think they would be richer: more deeply myself and more reciprocal, more female and humorous and certainly more risk-taking. But that would be for those as yet un-lived moments, not the ones represented here, so it is to these I turn.

You may well ask if these finely crafted poems need any additives for their digestion. In view of the still marginalised status of women's poetry, political expediency seemed one valid reason for presenting them as embodied forms: that is, recording them in the voice of their creators (with the exception of one), while providing an ambience for closer listening by using accompanying musical phrases. Each of these poets, Gwen Harwood, Sarah Day, Angela Rockel and Margaret Scott look to the land to focus their craft. Their connection with the land sings through as echo of their inner muse. To separate these parts of themselves would be to rupture their soul-place. So it could be said that in reading their poems they read themselves into the land they love, as corporeal dwellers, and the addition of

improvised music serves that emplacement through endorsing all it signifies.

For my part, these poems have been channels for my own land-soul songs, and so to improvise alongside has been a metaphor for all that the land is to me: diversity, playful exchange, nurturing mother-father, sleep-song, animal-voice and hope. For to understand the land is to preserve and care for it; to resonate with and to that understanding is to indwell its silence as much as its sonority. I too have felt embodied by the experiences of this recording process, though for me it has been through bowed and sung phrases, interactive play and the possibilities for silence. It represents, too, a journey of discovery beyond the harbour of core-learning into the shoals and depths of periphery and collaboration.

I cannot deny being influenced by the beauty aesthetics of the European traditions of music. The act of using the violin and viola subscribes to those shapes which signify the grandeur and imperialism of the mainstream artist's evolution. If I cast my constrained thinking back beyond the seventeenth century, I find communal ritual, women's song and monastic chant that signify the beauty of the human voice and bird song, winds across the plains and whale song. This is the omnific fluid from which I surface to create while picking through the fabric of tightly composed structures and the gallery of finely sanded surfaces. The intention to include moments of my own singing voice as companion to the string sounds has emerged from a sense of this legacy and self-understanding. The use of the three timbres may well signify parts of myself: the extrovert, introvert and soul-Self.

There is something about the paucity of material comforts that I think is also a becoming. African-slave experience gave us jazz, and gypsy dislocation created the soaring virtuosic arpeggios that European traditions appropriated. As a child I teetered on the cusp between the immigrant Irish working class and postwar domestic dreams of the restored middle class. Survival was through the local Salvation Army junk-shop, fixing cars and bikes with second-hand parts in the driveway, and walking when times were tough. Yesterday's sponge cake was revamped in today's trifle, a

cousin's hand-me-down dress lengthened for the Sunday School Anniversary, or the life of a favourite record extended by flattening it with an iron.

Through all these improvised moments, a patriarchal education leached through clamping spontaneous desire. I learned to read words and music, but for a long time almost lost the key to self-agency. I lost the awareness that it was improvisation, that thread of spontaneous events, that gave life its sonority and crispness. And it was a return to hardship that reawoke that freedom. I fell into the underclass. In our culture a single woman with children drops beneath the identity-building scaffolding. Through that swirl-pool of experiences, I became less intensely devotional and vertical in my goals and improvisation became the speech of every day. So the donkeys and goats were at times contained with bailing twine fencing, a plastic vinegar drum replaced the rusted header tank, a \$2 Remington bashed out paragraphs under candlelight when the solar panels remained dormant.

But to return to the seriousness of the arts. Improvising is fun; like word play it requires little rehearsal and there are really no wrong notes because you can always go up or down the scale from the one you didn't mean to play. Is this why improvisatory practise has the reputation of being a vulgar joke to the some sophisticated musicians? For this project there were some re-runs because the inner critic, so conditioned to classical training, would not let a scrape or pitch-slip pass untrammelled and because poets do sometimes stumble over their words. The improvisations are non-idiomatic but hark to a symphony of influences: Irish tunes, hymnody, gypsy fantasias, indigenous musics and creature-calls.

There are some shared themes in the work of the poets represented which resonate with my life experiences. Each is an immigrant to Tasmania as well as a traveller between urban and rural experience and so brings a sense of exile to their work. The poems reflect too a journey from self to community and back again, that search which for women arcs between those two necessary worlds. Musical metaphors, water and attunement to the inner world are common figures. The poems are searchlights in a numina

of potential belonging, interconnection and acceptance of *genius loci*. These are women for whom creative expression has come at great personal cost in a world where women poets and composers are still seen by many as a passing phase, or as hairline cracks in the shelves of the canon.

Gwen Harwood left Brisbane after the Second World War to come to the foothills of Mount Wellington. She later lived on a small farm at Kettering before returning to inner Hobart where she died in 1995. She left a rich reservoir of highly refined poems. But these have not been her only gift: she has been the most influential voice in the evolution of other writers in Tasmania, the three in this collection being no exception. Her bright, kind voice echoes on and on, and along with many others I feel deep gratitude for the time she gave to aspiring wordsmiths and astonishment at the sheer genius of her poetry. The dichotomy in her writing captures much of the Tasmanian conundrum. The grace, shown in metaphors of light and music, is met by agonistic seams which frequently leave the reader suspended between two worlds: the beautiful and tragic, landscape and the finite human condition, joy and pain. In *To the Muse*, you will see that even a poet of this stature struggles with the inspiration which male poets have for so long taken as female and outside themselves. It is read by the poet Sue Moss, who says she owes much to Gwen's encouragement and craft.

To the Muse (from *Oyster Cove Pastorals*)

My fowls with heroes' names
Hector, Achilles, Ajax,
crow me out to the pasture.
Helios gilds their plumes.
Fossickers in the rye,
they trust me with the axe.

If by some chance I wrote
a fine immortal poem
it would have a mortal theme.
All that excess of life
in the museums of the mind
still there to contemplate!

Light fits a world together
from fragments of a dream:
another place, another

morning; a motto: Summa
Supremo, best and ablest.
Some happiness is forecast.

What consent do we ever
give to dreams that embrace us
with the energy of art?
Why do you come at morning
when frosty air is burning
my empty arms? I split

wood, light the day's fire,
warm my body at flame
invisible in sunlight.
That brief motto in Latin,
on what door is it written?
Tell me, what is your name?

New Zealand expatriate Angela Rockel has made the Huon Valley her home for many years now, after spending some years in a Benedictine Community. She lives on a windswept hill overlooking the Huon river and the fringe of mountains which hint to the wild South West. Deeply metaphoric in all aspects, her poems are steeped in water and earth, shaped as clay in the hands of the potter. In the poem *The dam is hearing water*, the land and self meet with mythopoetic sonority.

They say you shouldn't disturb a spring.
Dig too close, it might choke.

I'm happy to make my dam some way off,
never wanted to trouble
what feels like my birth-place;
little fish glancing silver-green
in the well's trembling throat.

Cupped to a rock-lip,
the dam's empty ear catches this word
and the sky's shouted answer
falling from miles high inside cloud
that has made its house here,
where smallest frog is a creaking door
onto a rainy world.

If this talk goes on,
eavesdropping grass will grow
till only lizard remembers sun,
holding blue sky in her mouth,
flicking towards me a promise
I'll ride the lumbering hay-beast
when water has had its say.

If you thought Margaret Scott was a serious poet, she is, some of the time. Humour though, characteristically, shines through, bringing with it the light of the Tasman Peninsula where she now lives and the wealth of experience she draws on. Her poems often startle with their wit and length of line. In this recent unpublished poem, *Moon Bow*, she uses the image of a new moon to captivate the intimacy of a sense of place.

Clouds come over the hill at the back of the house.
 In the garden there's nothing but squat sticks
 dark with wet. At evening a bent moon
 looks out of the pine tree like an old woman
 who keeps a pair of silver dancing shoes
 in a yellowing shoe-box.
 I think of friends in Oxford, Brisbane, Stanford,
 leafing through new books and shouting
 from cool verandah to leaf-shadowed kitchen
 in the heat of debate.
 Out in the night the rain comes in again,
 fretting at roots and walls, loosening their grip,
 edging them down the slope to the dark sea
 as the moon on her knobbed feet goes plodding along
 through misty gullies
 and sodden thickets of cloud in search of kindling.
 And then in the black pit under the hill
 she lights a moon-bow
 a ghostly, luminous arc like a dancer's spring.
 O queen and hunters! You make my flesh creep
 back to wandering life.

Sarah Day is an English immigrant poet who has taken on Tasmania as world-earth-home, to use ecofeminist Carol Bigwood's catch word. She has moved between the urban and rural both in Tasmania and Europe and has a eye to the sky, an ear to the wind and feet in the sand. Her poems, in all their rich diversity, spring from experience, from that hub of knowing which is for the female poet both the muse and the act of writing itself. In *Eating the Sea with Lunch*, the rhythm and sound of the waves cuts through, just as the island coastline crumples the edge of the Tasmanian landscape.

This mechanical dumping, the combing of water
 through pebble bank, sitting on the shore in the spray,

listening to the dredge that follows every dump
is like having my hair brushed firmly,

each stroke from the roots; brushing out tangles,
debris, bits of leaf, seaweed, feather,

brushing from the roots, brushing through my head,
combing through me as if my atoms were countless round stones.

Water combing through them, through me, washing,
rearranging particles. with a thunderous, a marvellous knocking of rock

on rock and drawing of water to wave.

I am eating sandwiches at the sea's edge, biting salt air,

swallowing the motion of the waves as they motion through me;
eating the sea with lunch and it is consuming me.

In Gwen Harwood's poem *Reflections* she says, "two worlds meet in the mirror/ of the quiet dam". This line expresses my still evolving, ever changing understanding of this intertextual process. Words and music seemed like worlds apart when we began but in coming together their mimetic moments took a deeper plunge into the intersubjective, where there is always more laughter, play and the potential for soul-journeys. Improvisation, the cell from which all modalities begin, has provided a web for those possibilities. As a tribute to Gwen Harwood, herself a musician, I would like to finish with *Reflections*, written after she had been diagnosed with breast cancer and demonstrating the pull of polarities which crosshatched so much of her work and yet evoking the continuum of experience which is life itself.

Two worlds meet in the mirror
of the quiet dam. The trees
lift stem and crown above
their own calm images.

Rest, in the heart's dry season,
where the green reeds stitch light
to light, where water levels
unendingly the bright

ripple of leaf or wind-breath;
inverts the bowl of sky
to a cup of deep enchantment,
as if some perfect eye

saw memory and substance
as one, and could restore
in depth, in flawless detail,
time as it was before.

Why does the body harbour
no memory of pain,
while a word, a name unspoken
in the mind cuts to the bone?

When time is turned to anguish,
lastborn of nature, rest,
where shade and water offer
solace to all who thirst.