

# Fiddling towards Performance, from Couch to Venue

*The process of incorporating a new technique producing new sounds into your musical practice*

Alterations lead to a new and unmapped territory. Time and energy are needed to explore this new territory on the part of musicians and eventually the audience. This writing is about the process of incorporating a technique derived from 'fiddling' with a large vibrator on an acoustic guitar into my musical practice.

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## RELATIONSHIPS

When new sounds are discovered (or at least new to oneself) on and around an instrument, a relationship has to evolve into a natural place within ones playing. The first stage is often an infatuation with that new sound or approach; a perhaps not so interesting stage caused by the inward focus creating an impenetrable world. When at dinner with two people passionately in love, one can feel redundant like a '5th wheel on a car'. A similar situation occurs with a musician in love with a new sound: he/she neglects the ensemble and audience. The infatuation stage needs to develop into a more mature relationship which is more responsive towards the surrounding situation.

## TOOLBOX

In my piano set up I use a range of vibrators; small, large or remote controlled. Being curious by nature, I try all my piano altering devices on any of my other instruments. In this particular situation this accumulated into the combination of four elements: large vibrator, acoustic guitar, third bridges<sup>1</sup> using wooden paintbrushes and/or stainless steel chopsticks; and resonating material, such as EPS.<sup>2</sup>



**FIGURE 1**

**A** - EPS (later replaced by a second vibrator), **B** - large vibrator on top of the strings, **C** - third bridge (in this case a small paintbrush) underneath all 6 strings.

## VARIABLES

After experiments exploring combinations of the above mentioned elements I found that while in general the outcome was unpredictable there was potential for an improvisational setting. The outcome depended on: - the *speed* of the vibrator, the *angle* in relation to the six guitar strings, the *pressure* towards the strings and the *position* relative to the third bridge, - similarly the EPS device in relation to the main bridge, - the *tuning* of the strings, - the *position* of the paintbrush, - shape of your body, etc.

## FORMALIZING I

I then attempted a composition using choreographic instructions on dealing with such variables. This then appeared artificial and mainly based on an academic need to present visual proof of your research. I thought of a more realistic and fruitful compositional idea by creating a context for the new technique by juxtaposing it with composed material using normal finger plucking. I compare plucking the strings to the activity of running: I have to initiate the first step in order to cause movement. The method using the vibrator I compare to skiing down a steep hill: the motion is already

<sup>1</sup> 'Third bridge' is a technique on guitar where a device, such as a screwdriver, is placed underneath the strings on the fret board to divide a string into two separate parts. From the 1960s onwards, guitarists such as Keith Rowe, Hans Reichel and Fred Frith, have extensively explored this territory. The 19th century cimbalom uses a similar principle sometimes using two additional bridges to create three parts of a string, in this way making it highly efficient space wise.

<sup>2</sup> Expanded Polystyrene, a material that amplifies sound very well and weighs very little.

there; all I have to do is channel it as much as possible. Both running and skiing are fascinating sports relating to speed that require different skills and mindsets. The same applies to plucking and the use of actuators.

My first piece, *Angle your Tune & Tune your Angle*<sup>3</sup>, starts with a large section of 15 – 20 minutes with minimal instructions (by now the EPS is replaced with a second vibrator in that position), followed by a short composed section of 1 - 2 minutes. This final part consists of an open number of plucked chords. First using the third bridge, then ‘normal’ guitar (using harmonics from both left and right hand) and the final chord is the open tuning (with the instruction of 1 or 2 random strings being tuned down via the tuning pegs). In this way the different stages of preparation of the guitar can be heard, ending with the familiar open strings.

## DRAWINGBOARD REVISITED

I next experimented with different third (and fourth) bridges, using a number of chopsticks, wooden and stainless steel, which gave various rhythmical options. Because of their length, the steel chopsticks vibrate in a more or less stable way, depending on the speed/frequency of the vibrator, which I used for other chopsticks to be bounced off to add percussive sounds. By now I had enough control over the new technique to create sound patterns/fields predictable enough to write a composition in a more formal way. I just had to find a realistic format.

## FORMALIZING II

For this second piece, the idea was to alternate between the new technique and more traditional extended preparation techniques that produce pulsating chords and sounds. This was based on the idea of a series of still lifes.<sup>4</sup> Playing the guitar required a static position of the body and devices, suggesting a logical link between my new technique and the art of still lifes. The piece consists of 8 parts: 4 A parts and 4 B parts, all played exactly once and in any order but the following rules must apply.

- Alternate between A and B starting on A.
- There must be 2 Bs in a row somewhere.
- A1 and A2 must be used as the beginning and end.

Following the rules there are 3 ways to position the two Bs in a row:

ABBABABA - ABABBABA – ABABABBA

This then leads to 288 performance options.<sup>5</sup> The result can be heard in the composition *Scordatura Angels al Dente* (8 variations on a still life).<sup>6</sup>

## FORM A BAND

A logical next stage was to confront other instruments and musicians with the new technique, and perhaps add amplification. I decided on a trio after considering the question: *how does one present one's new technique in the best way possible?*

Firstly, an issue of logistics. A new technique inevitably generates ‘dodgy’ musical moments. In a guitar solo (for arguments sake) one-third of performance time is unreliable, so if playing in a duo with someone with a similar approach, the chances for simultaneous edgy moments are  $1/3 \times 1/3 = 1/9$ th. When playing in a trio  $1/27$ th: acceptable for live performance.<sup>7</sup> A clarifying example is James T. Reason’s Swiss cheese model from 1990<sup>8</sup>, used to explain failures in the medical world.

<sup>3</sup> Because there are already so many variables, in this version I used my usual tuning, DGcfad’ (in Helmholtz notation from VI to I).

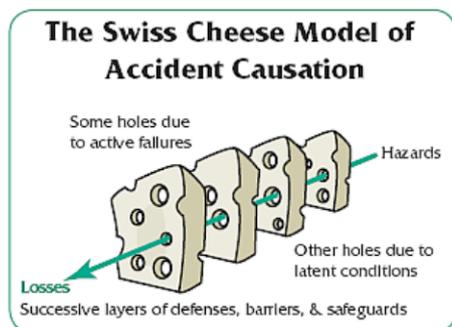
<sup>4</sup> A still life is a visual work of art depicting everyday inanimate objects such as food, books, flowers, vases, shells, pipes or musical instruments.

<sup>5</sup> First I had a version with 1,152,000 options to perform it, then subsequently 34,560, 1,728 and ending with 288 (=  $3 \times [2 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 1 \times 1]$ ). This often happens when one makes decisions based on musical values to steer an open piece in a certain direction.

<sup>6</sup> The outcome in this 20’ version was: A1 - B3 - B2 - A4 - B1 - A3 - B4 - A2. An option for performing this piece is to do it behind a large picture frame. This will make the analogy with still lifes very clear and will help the audience in their interpretation of the piece.

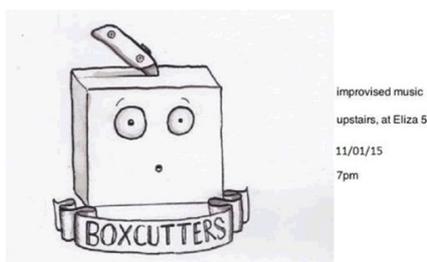
<sup>7</sup> ‘Dodgy’ moments are not necessarily musically ‘bad’. From conversations with Tristan Honsinger and Evan Parker, I understand that Derek Bailey was especially interested in moments that ‘didn’t work’ and for cd releases he often choose those sections.

<sup>8</sup> Reason, James T. *Human error*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Reason’s model depicts how a number of events can align, whether due to direct or more indirect factors, that unexpectedly allow a hazard to slip through layers of defences and so cause an ‘accident’ or adverse event.



**FIGURE 2**  
Oops, a 'bad sound'.

I knew a number of musicians working with unpredictability, for example, via preparations of the alto sax with plastic bottles and plastic bags; by means of self made electronics incorporating existing motherboards played by random wires as though it were an electronic ecosystem; or via an 'air pump system' channelled to a number of unpredictable reeds, membranes and resonating objects. This similar approach to sound and chance allows common ground and a coherent concept for performance. Different sound sources (strings, wind/reed, tubes, membranes and electronics/speakers) assure a variety of colour, projection and physicality.<sup>9</sup> This combined leads to an even balance between unified ensemble playing and clear independent voices.



**FIGURE 3**  
The flyer for a performance at Boxcutters by 'Scordatura Angels': Cor Fuhler, Peter Farrar and Dale Gorfinkel. This was one of the first tests for my new technique.

## SUMMARY

So, I developed a new technique, wrote new pieces and formed a band. I can sum up the process as follows.

### STAGE 1

- Experiment, improvise and practice, building up physical skills and a healthy love/hate relationship with the new technique and its sounds.
- Record an improvisation, setting it up for a real-time concert. If not satisfactory, can the technique be used as recorded sound material in a 'comprovisational'<sup>10</sup> way? If not, then all ends right here. However...

### STAGE 2

- If suitable for live performance, are there aspects of the technique that can be controlled sufficiently to create a composition? Can the technique respond quickly enough in an improvisational setting?
- If so, find a suitable format and write a composition using aspects of the new technique.
- Record the composition(s) to double-check the results and if a live performance seems realistic.

### STAGE 3

- Form or join an ensemble in which all aspects can be used for a larger improvisational, conceptual, instructional and/or composed piece. As a result, your technique will build up a relationship with other musicians and their instruments, and they will provide a context for it to mature.

These steps lead towards a functional place within the musical community: the musicians and the audience.

<sup>9</sup> Physically, an alto saxophone, and to a lesser extent my guitar, have to deal with an all-or-nothing approach, electronics and pump systems juxtapose this with an opposed type of non-strenuous physicality.

<sup>10</sup> Comprovisation is a term used by Michael Hannan, 2006. It is a term for the making of a new composition from recordings of improvised material, nowadays usually done by editing, mixing, EQ-ing etc. on a computer with an audio-program such as Logic or ProTools.