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**Challenges and complexities of virtual artistic sound improvisation**

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## **CHALLENGES AND COMPLEXITIES OF VIRTUAL ARTISTIC SOUND IMPROVISATION**

Lockdown regulations and protocols in South Africa (and globally) brought challenges for the arts industry to turn to online platforms for artistic engagement and interaction. Esther Marié Pauw and Pierre-Henri Wicomb, associates of the Africa Open Institute for Music Research and Innovation, saw this challenge as an opportunity to engage with online, virtual sound improvisation. This interview, with Pauw and Wicomb, is focused on understanding the process of working with sound improvisation via online platforms while aiming to record the sound improvisation sessions for creative output purposes. The Africa Open Improvising<sup>1</sup> group exists locally and virtually as an endogenous organism<sup>2</sup> that creates sound knowledge from within the virtual online platform.

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1 For more information about the Africa Open Improvising group, please see the SoundCloud page that includes various artists (and their instruments) that formed part of the online improvisation project <https://soundcloud.com/user-610733588>.

2 Endogenous in this interview comes from the work of Arturo Escobar in “Latin America at a Crossroads”. In my own PhD thesis, I propose that endogenous suggests organic systems of vibrancies that are biological and potentially activist for their capacity to bring change to sound and sounding practice (Liebenberg, “Artistic Experimentation through decolonial sound projects for clarinet”).

*How did the process of online improvisation start and develop to its current structure and what were the initial technological challenges?*

**Pauw:** We did quite an amount of practical research looking into ways of improvising online but my first process of practical experimenting was with Garth Erasmus.<sup>3</sup> We recorded individual sound samples with our cell phones and shared it with each other to play and re-record on existing sound. The more Garth and I explored, the more particular we got about the sound quality of our sound samples. Most of my work with Garth was with sound and not visuals. This was almost six weeks into lockdown, and I hadn't been able to see any of the usual improvisers. We then scheduled our first online improvisation session through the online platform Zoom to see if we could play together virtually from our individual locations. Working with Zoom was difficult. We found that Zoom cuts out sound in different ways. For us to keep track of what was happening during an online play session, our trial sessions had an order of playing where Pierre-Henri would start, then I would play, and then Garth, and so on to include all the other improvisers that were part of this project. This helped to play 'together' but we still couldn't hear the familiar specific sounds from each other.

**Wicomb:** We couldn't figure out why Zoom was cutting out different frequencies. It has something to do with the attack of sound that grabs the attention of the microphone and then over rules other sounds that have mutually been sustained through the online meeting. My piano attack sound and the hammer mechanism is a strong sound just like any other percussive instrument. The flute, clarinet and saxophone can have a piercing sound that is also heard immediately, but if the notes are then sustained, it fades away quickly. We could see each other play but not hear the sound that was coming from the visual impression. I like to think we had to anticipate what the other person would play without knowing really what they are doing. I hosted most of the meetings through Zoom and recorded the meetings so that we have the meeting sound as an audio file. When I listened to it, I noticed that a lot of the sound went missing during this early phase, so we just went back to playing more freely without the order of playing.

**Pauw:** The first couple of online improvisation sessions loaded on to Soundcloud are called 'trial online play' and you can really hear how each sound heard through the online platform functions like a refresher button on a website's home screen. It was in this initial stage of the project that Stellenbosch University made research funding available for innovative projects in respective artistic disciplines. Through the Africa Open Institute, we successfully applied for a portion of the funding

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3 For more details about the multifaceted artist Garth Erasmus, visit [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garth\\_Erasmus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garth_Erasmus).

made available from Stellenbosch University. I then consulted with Pierre-Henri to asked him what sort of recording device he uses for his own work. He suggested we purchase a couple of ZOOM H6 portable recording devices for fellow improvisers to record their individual sound, while being tuned in on the live virtual play session on Zoom. Recording our individual sounds posed a different problem to find 'unity' to create a final sound file of each session. We then created a method that would assist the collation of multiple individual sounding tracks that, if edited together, can sound like the actual improvisation session we had virtually on Zoom, or even better. We needed to have an indication of when the actual improvisation session started. This goes slightly against the idea that free improvisation is an open-ended form of engagement, but we had to adjust. What we would do then is start our recording devices, turn back to the online Zoom meeting and have a countdown of '1,2,3, clap (hands)' that served as a beacon for Pierre-Henri when he received the individual tracks from each improvisation session.

**Wicomb:** The beacon helped when working with the individual tracks and also revealed how the online improvisation made it difficult for each of us to hear what the other person is doing. Most of the improvisers used headphones to tune into the Zoom meeting, while others didn't. The ZOOM H6 recording device is so sensitive to sound, the sound of one person's track would include another person's track creating a ghosting sound effect if they didn't use headphones. The sound effect creates a three-dimensional experience when one person's sound travels across another person's track or sometimes two people's tracks. I then cannot pull the different tracks over one another because of that ghosting sound delay, regardless of what it sounds like, so the countdown beacon really did help with lining up the tracks 'correctly'.

*When it came to editing the different tracks together, what did that process look like, or was it left to its original sounding form without adjustments?*

**Wicomb:** With every improvisation session that we had, I slowly came to realize that I am spending more and more time collating the individual tracks to one sound file that we uploaded to the Africa Improvising Soundcloud page. In the case of my own instrument, the piano was sometimes very loud, so I did adjust the sound balance on Ableton to be less aggressive to the rest of the improvisers. That was one of the ways to incorporate a textural aspect to the general sound. Another was to change the reverb of every soundtrack to share the same acoustics of a small room. I sometimes worked towards selecting a chamber group setting by placing the instruments within different acoustic regions to build a stereo image for the final tracks. It became a poetical process, but I never tampered with the individual soundtracks of the instrumentalists because every person knows their sound very well. I don't want to change that. In some of the tracks there would be some distortion depending on how close the microphone was placed to the instrument,

and also the clash of frequencies with other frequencies is something I made softer in volume.

*In terms of the future of online improvisation, was there a difference in improvising together when the group met again for the first live play?*

**Pauw:** There was a big amount of joy in working and doing real live improvisation again, and also how experimental we could be with interacting with one another. On the virtual platform, I think we really struggled to let silence play a bigger role in the improvisation sessions. I remember Pierre-Henri encouraged us to play more aggressively online. Then we started to play face-to-face again and the idea of silence gave the improvisation sessions a much bigger space to work with contrasting sounds, silence, our reaction time to sound and dynamics. Online play really taught us to recognize each other's voices even better than we did before and it brought a different form of interaction with free improvisation. There is a different form of creativity involved with online play.

**Wicomb:** Online play does create a different pursuit for creativity and creating art. When we were challenged with not being able to play face-to-face anymore, different ideas and new forms of creativities found their way and were discovered through sound. It is very exciting to create new things through sound and be creatively challenged in that way. In the long-term, this project really brings a big change to include fellow improvisors from any location and space to join our online improvisation sessions, on top of the face-to-face improvisation sessions that we can do in our immediate context and surroundings.

### **List of references**

**Escobar**, Arturo. "Latin America at a Crossroads". *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 1–65.

**Liebenberg**, Visser. "Artistic experimentation through decolonial sound projects for clarinet" PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2021.