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## Instant Composing – Playing Your Arse Off!

**A Conversation between Peter Brötzmann  
(Germany), Reuben Derrick and Cindy Zeiher (NZ)**

**RD:** Thank you immensely for taking the time to talk with us about your music.

**PB:** It's my pleasure. Thank you for this invitation!

**RD:** Your dedication to music is important to so many people who are in working in various creative, artistic and scholarly fields – and although it has been said that writing about music is sometimes thought of as dancing about architecture, let's take up this challenge and talk awhile about what music means to you. So, for you, what *is* music?

**PB:** Music. I mean, it's a question of the question. Every morning in my back yard, the sparrows have their morning chat. And if you listen carefully, it turns out to be wonderful music. Or a delivery truck passing by my window on the way to the supermarket around the corner, the engine humming in front of my window. That is another kind of music. So it depends on your brain, on your ears, what you make out of it. On the other hand, to be serious about music, I think originally it was a very social thing; once upon a time, you had a day full of work, you had dinner in the night, if you were lucky you had a fireplace, and somebody starts to sing or drums a bone on the rock and the others join in. So that is the kind of music I have in mind. I mean, I'm just a player, I like my horns, I like the guys I'm playing with, and I like

being on the road and, to just play, excuse my language, my arse off! That's all I know, it's nothing very special, but that's what I like to do. And of course, after such a long life and being on the road for so many decades, you have your preferences. For example, one of the drummers in one of my trios is Michael Wertmüller. On one hand he's quite a famous contemporary composer here on the continent. Sometimes I join him as part of his other work, because I'm invited to play a solo piece or something. And this gives me a chance to see his way of working on a score: he is writing operas and for symphonies – complicated, very difficult pieces. I would not be able to read the score if I played one of his pieces! I am fortunate to have my freedom to do what I think I should do. But the other guys have to read all that shit! This is another way of looking at music, and it's also a completely different way of doing it. I'm always thinking about these two extremes. My old friend, Misha Mengelberg, coined these very nice words to describe what improvisers do on stage. It's not free jazz, it's not improvised music; it's really a kind of instant composing. And I like that. What I want to say is, there's many millions of ways of doing music. And the trick is, to find out for yourself, what your way is.

**CZ:** How you describe music is all encompassing; individual music-makers comprising a collective. Can you tell me more about “instant composing”?

**PB:** It's a pity we can't ask Misha more about this. But the process of playing on stage, especially during my later years, is more that I put the sounds I have in mind together: let's call it an ensemble or collage of sounds. It's difficult to fully describe. I think what Misha meant was that you do both things at once; you play and try to find a form simultaneously.

**RD:** Perhaps it similar to when you are aware that you have to play within a specific time-frame – such as, “we'll probably we will play for an hour”, so you choose to be fully in the moment and very spontaneous on the one hand, and yet on the other hand you're thinking about how to sustain this for an hour, “how do I pace myself”. Is this might be what you are referring to?

**PB:** In some ways. If you play for such a long time, you tend to create certain patterns in your head. You have melodies and fragments from other people's music always in mind. All this material you can use during a performance and explore what fits and what does not – much like a puzzle. Let me try to describe further: When I begin to play the horn I sometimes find a little melody, or the horn gives me the melody to

work with. From this melody I might develop or find another one and so on and so on. And putting these things together deliberately makes a kind of form.

**RD:** So you're at the same time assembling familiar material in different ways and also inventing completely new material as well?

**PB:** Of course! Always!

**RD:** Might you say that the functions of performers, that is, those singing or playing instruments, and others who might call themselves composers, and also those who are listeners, are distinctive?

**PB:** They are very different. I think if you sit at your desk to write a piece for a symphony, you have a big picture. You know the beginning, and you even know the end. You have the whole form already in your head. But when I go on stage, I have nothing. I have my horn. That is it. I have to hopefully face an audience, and I have my comrades with me. But there is nothing which is already fixed. We start with nothing and the endpoint is always open and wide. Whatever I say about music, I say for myself. It is very personal. Of course, there are those in jazz music, doing improvisation completely differently. If I think, I just recently heard a piece of Mr. Braxton's, one of his latest scores. I mean, Anthony thinks differently to me but he has found his own way. And I'm still on my way to find my way.

**CZ:** One interesting question I find that music lovers and makers grapple with is, what makes music, *music*? As you say, there is something about this question which speaks to form and function but also about the willingness to unapologetically grasp a sort of freedom no matter how small – to play your arse off! Have you ever been in a situation where in order to recognise and grasp the small freedoms to sustain a performance you have needed to traverse a harsh limitation?

**PB:** Of course, I've been in situations where after the set, I have thought "oh man, what do I do now? I'm in the wrong place!" Once I even left the stage. I was playing with so-called improvisers, or jazz musicians, and they asked me to join them because of my name. Once I became aware of this, I didn't know what to do. From time to time during my small career, I worked with people in the contemporary field of music because I'm always adventurous enough to try things. But sometimes I have had to say "no man, this is not working for me". Mainly because for some reason or another I was feeling so limited. I'm not there to deliver, I am there to

investigate, to check out what can be possible. It has to be an adventure to play with others, not “oh, Brötzmann plays this loud strong tenor – we need that!” If somebody approaches me nowadays I would at least know of them. But when I was younger, I fell into these traps from time to time. But I always made sure I had the chance to get out!

**CZ:** I resonate with what you say about how music is a curiosity you always carry.

**PB:** I mean, it sounds a bit pathetic and certainly it does in a European sense but the curiosity music brings *is* my life. I mean I'm still on my way to find out what I'm able to do and what I want to do. There is always a little corner I haven't discovered, and exploring these kinds of curiosities are still important for me. I have done so many things but it never ends. My [visual] art pieces for example: either they end up on the wall, or they end up in the garbage! But once it is done, it's done! The next piece to explore is always much more interesting. This is the same with music. I'm still always looking for those the little adventures!

**RD:** Thank you for mentioning that you are also a visual artist. Can you talk a bit about the relation – if you think that there is any relation – between aesthetics and music?

**PB:** Of course everybody has their own aesthetic of musical taste. For me it's all about beauty. For the last two years I've mostly been playing the horns for myself, and mainly the two clarinets. The good thing is that I found out something of beauty about both clarinets; I have this metal, silver Conn b-flat clarinet and another American Selmer clarinet. One is wood, the other is silver. And, with the same mouthpiece, they render different sounds. This for me is an interesting aesthetic which of course has to do with music. But at the same time I think aesthetics and music belong to each other. Because my particular aesthetics, in a way, makes the music I play.

**RD:** Yes. And those others who you work with will bring their own very particular aesthetics, and hopefully they can work together.

**PB:** Yes! And this starts to get really interesting when the aesthetics are, let's say, very different. I don't have to go too far with this example with the likes of Hamid Drake, who I play duos with, and who comes from a completely different background; his education is completely different – everything actually! His aesthetics are, for sure,

different from mine. But when these things clash together, interesting things start to happen. For example, as you know I have been working with Heather Leigh for the last eight years, and sometimes my old comrades say, "Oh, what's Brötzmann doing now? Why is he playing with that girl with the funny instrument?" [pedal steel guitar] I do this because she is so very different from me, and the instrument is so far away from what I'm used to. I've been used to bass and drums all my life, so playing with pedal steel is a challenge – and playing with that strong woman is a challenge too! Challenge is the part of the whole business. It's very important. I think I can say that I have played with the best drummers in the world you can find: in Europe, in Asia, in the States of course. Drummers have always given me the most challenge. I played with Han Bennink for more than 12 years, and we still play together. Even today, if I'm on stage with Han Bennink, we face the same old challenges. Playing with Milford Graves was a big challenge for me, I would say. The interesting thing is that in such situations you never know how strong you are yourself until you are in it and can do it. I mean, Bennink and I don't have a friendship on stage, it's a fight on stage! And I like that. I mean, it's a friendly fight of course, but a fight nevertheless for your part of owning the stage! For me this kind of tension makes music interesting and it is what living a life dedicated to music is about.

**RD:** I love playing with drummers too – they can be formidable challengers. Much of the time you have to play the horn in a way that is very physically intense, and work fucking hard sometimes. Is this what attracts you to play with drummers?

**PB:** I like the physical side of playing the horn very much, always. I want to give everything and after an hour or two hours playing, I want to feel completely empty; everything is gone. In my experience, I can do that best with drummers. Of course I was always looking for the heavy-weights, like Bennink here in Europe, or with Andrew Cyrille, or Milford Graves, or Takeo Moriyama in Japan, and so on. But on the other hand, I have worked with drummers I like, but have had to kick their arse! I must say the drummers always gave me the strongest challenge and I am always looking for that.

**RD:** The physical and musical challenge go hand in hand – it comprises a unique aesthetic form.

**PB:** Of course! You know my way of playing the horn. I've changed my style a little bit, especially as I become older. But in my younger years I was focusing on the

physicality of playing more so. But I always strived for this sense of emptiness at the end; when you were finished, everything was gone. There's nothing left in the brain.

**RD:** That striving for emptiness is a really interesting experience for the player, as well as for those who are listening. It's a cathartic thing, I suppose. I'm thinking here about working with people from cultures and backgrounds different from my own and who bring with them implicitly an aesthetic which I must struggle with. I've been working with Sri Lankan drummers over the years. Of course I have no idea what they are doing as intricate and amazing drummers, but the physicality of the sound is something that allows us to talk to each other during a performance. Can you tell me more about your experience playing with such musicians from other cultures – not necessarily free-jazz musicians.

**PB:** The best example I can give are two Moroccan guys I used to play with. One brother, Ghania Mahmoud, has sadly died, but I'm still playing with the other, guimbri player Moukhtar Gania. The interesting thing was that for them, music was always a familiar meeting, like I mentioned before, sitting around the fire, knocking the bone on the rock. It was really a unique communication with song and timing developing their own life and form. Once, Hamid and I toured with Mahmoud for two weeks here on the continent. We performed our usual concert programme of one hour, or one and a half hours, in the concert venue, and afterwards, he thought we had just started! The timing was completely different! I once visited the guys in Rabat and the festivities went on for three days. The music never stopped in Rabat; it was fucking crazy! Players were spontaneously joining each other's groups and on and on it went. We were so physically exhausted by the end. This of course is so different to our western way of thinking about music.

**RD:** It reminds me of the Sri Lankan drummers I know, who perform these rituals which go all night, for 12 or 14 hours sometimes. During these rituals everybody's mind goes somewhere very different. And afterwards, there is an emptying out feeling...

**PB:** Yes! That sounds like it.

**RD:** Music takes on many forms outside of the performer also. I am just reflecting upon what you said at the beginning of our conversation about listening to birds and trucks; what is it about those sounds, which are not about other people making music, that is musical for you?

**PB:** That might be a little process that is going on in my brain! I used to have a very old fridge from the Bosch factory – it was so old! In the night time it would sing and make sound, which I'd listen to during my lonely nights, with a bottle of schnapps. Here I was, sitting and listening to this fridge. Unfortunately I had to get rid of the fridge but I am angry with myself because I didn't think to record this shit at the time! It was really fantastic! What I want to say is that you have to be ready to listen to things in a special way. I suppose that for most people, sparrows chatting is just sparrows chatting. But if you try a little bit, get into it and really listen, open up to it, chatting sparrows starts to become music. All this depends on how open you are to listening.

**RD:** Do you think then, that your ears can be a musical instrument?

**PB:** It's not so much our ears as it is how open we are to sound. For example, I have a huge barrel in my garden for the rain water. And sometimes to water my inside plants I fill bottles of water from that big barrel. This makes a very nice sound – the water being filled and the air being pushed out making bubbles. I think I will have to record that! This kind of attention to detail comes from my painting. I was lucky to have had good art teachers who taught me to really look at things. You can find, in any shitty corner, something you really can see! There's always something, but you have to be ready for it.

**RD:** That's right. It's a readiness to notice a spontaneous thing which arises. Perhaps in some ways it doesn't matter whether it's something you see, or hear, or observe, or whether it's the drummer you're playing with. You're always curious.

**PB:** Yes, that's it!

**CZ:** Can I ask you about your work on the film, "Great Freedom", which is about a fight for freedom only to be faced with one's emptiness and ultimately the surrender to one's fate, which perhaps contains the fantasy of freedom. How did you come to work on this film?

**PB:** I received a phone call from the director of the film and he described what he wanted. I found that very interesting because the film is about a certain paragraph which existed in German law for quite some time, paragraph 175. The Nazi's exploited the paragraph and it remained as law as late as the 70's. So the paragraph

insisted that homosexual people were to be imprisoned for engaging in consensual homosexual sex. Just a terrible situation. So, I thought, okay, let's do this because the scene in which I am in takes place during the 60's – and this is exactly what I was doing at the time. It was right place, right time. So we, me and my comrades, delivered kind of free jazz out of the 60s, more or less. Usually I am not asked for these kind of things. I would love to work more with good filmmakers and make some music, but they tend to look for guitars and other kinds of fashionable things! So I was very pleased to be asked to do this.

**CZ:** It's a very moving film. I loved it!

**PB:** Wonderful! I enjoyed being part of it.

**RD:** Thank you so much for your time, Peter and your words. Really wonderful.

**PB:** Thank you, Cindy and Reuben!