Composition as Improvisation/Improvisation as Composition

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"Improvisation is not composition." Thus wrote Lukas Foss in a 1962 *Musical America* article. "It relates to composition," he continued "much in the way a sketch relates to the finished work of art" (1962, 48). In isolation this apparently polemical statement raises immediate questions, not least of which would be over the definition of a sketch or a "finished work of art." These are hardly new questions but they invite creative investigation. Lukas Foss's perspective as a composer and performer of both improvised and notated music cannot be dismissed. That he saw the two as comfortably separate entities is hardly unusual, but his view is worth challenging. We encountered this in the various stages of an ongoing research project involving Melinda Maxwell (MM), an oboist, improviser, and composer, and myself, David Horne (DH). We started with initial improvisations; these were subsequently transcribed by DH, reinterpreted by MM in performance, and recomposed separately by both. The improvisations also involved our playing together as a duo. This work not only explores the fertile confluence of composition and improvisation but also draws on other creative processes as part of an essential mix: transcription, arrangement, interpretation, performance, recomposition.

Until we started the research project my own music never employed what could generally be recognised as improvisation techniques. My notational approach favoured what I would consider to be precision. As a performer I've always embraced flexibility of interpretation when governed by musical impulse and I cherish it in performances of my own work. While these are undeniably vague terms, I'm clear that my own decisions are not axiomatic, but rather choices that have ultimately worked for me or, at least, have been those I've favoured. Despite this, the semblance of improvisational qualities in my own music has held an attraction, and I have sought various means within my own musical language to achieve this.

One such means is through using improvisation as a starting point in composition, though this generally results in short motifs to be subsequently developed. An early work, my Piano Concerto (1992), employs such a device. The opening piano gestures were generated through improvisation; no recording equipment was available, but each phrase was notated immediately. That method already encourages a type of pre-compositional analysis, one we have attempted to avoid in our current project, where every moment has been

recorded on video. In the concerto there was no harmonic or structural preplanning; the idea simply arose through touching the keys and quickly notating the results.

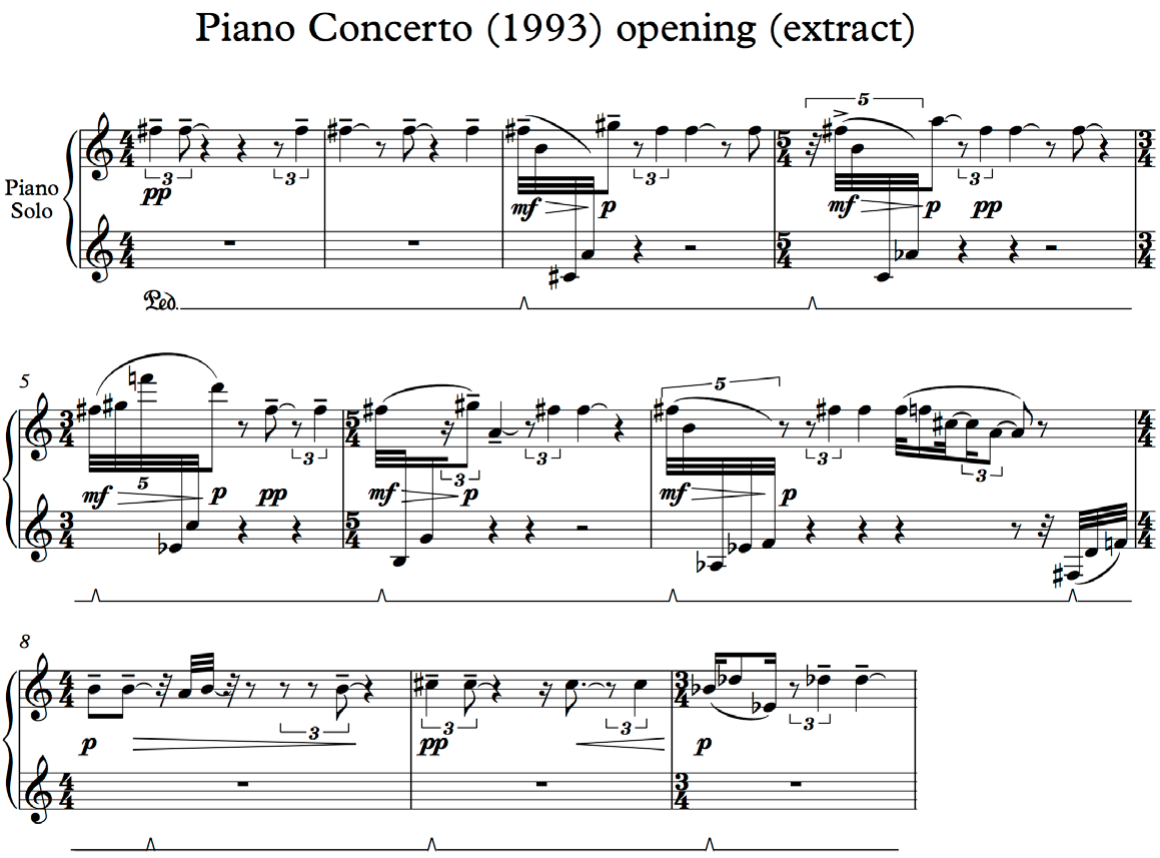

Figure 15.1.

The first fifteen bars (figure 15.1) present a reasonably faithful transcription of the improvisation in the piano part; the orchestral haze around the piano (video example XX [19.01]) was in my mind as I initially played, but by its very nature it was amorphous, with details that could be worked out in a number of ways later. I acknowledge that Luciano Berio's *Chemins* series, in which the orchestra augments an original solo (a *Sequenza*), is a clear model here. If there was any strategy prior to improvising, I'd been recently considering various harmonic problems at the time, and some of these are addressed in the opening. But I clearly recall that the pitch structure was not in my mind as I improvised it; I played those notes because I liked the sound *and* the feel of them. Compositional ideas built from the intrinsic physicality of the instrument are common; naturally, a crucial aspect of our ongoing project has been the nature and physicality of our instruments as a key instigator in improvisations.

Figure 15.1. David Horne, Piano Concerto (1993), opening (piano part).

In the concerto's piano part the initial offbeat tuplet entries and arabesques are written in a manner that promotes flexibility. This approach to rhythm is certainly a personal preoccupation but again a very common phenomenon; notation is not just a means of conveying performance information but also an engine for provoking performance reaction. Whether in the opening of Liszt's B-Minor Sonata or in Debussy's *Voiles*, the composers' decisions to notate their respective first events following a rest and on a notionally weak beat change the performers' approaches; essential information is conveyed without verbal explanation.

There are other subsequent works of mine that employ similar opening strategies, including another concertante work, *Flex* (1997). In both works I planned to be involved as a performer, so I clearly had an additional investment in the process as both performer and composer. While there are other works in my output with similar improvisation-related beginnings, none have the same direct tactile connection, the only exception being a solo marimba work that I composed on the instrument. Even then, there is a marked difference between my amateur relationship to an instrument (i.e., the marimba) and my professional one to the piano, with which I have lived my entire musical life. My piano improvisation is inevitably informed by the larger repertoire that exists within both my mind and my fingers. It is a given that composers don't operate within a musical vacuum; we are utterly informed by things that we know. If I may call these "influences," we are affected by them at conscious and unconscious levels. Similarly, all performers are surely directed by the totality of their musical experience, and improvisation draws on this experience as well as exhibiting the physical characteristics previously mentioned.

Ultimately, while I enthusiastically embrace the previous types of analyses as informing my creative processes, my overriding concern is commonplace: simply put, I want to create good music. I want my music to be convincingly expressive within the compositional universe that each piece inevitably carves out for itself.

From my language so far you could draw the conclusion that I have tended to view the compositional process as an intimate and personal one. Certainly, there have been frequent collaborative elements in my output; and there is no doubt that much of the creative work has been inspired by specific external influences, from working closely with performers to even such wider aspects of performance as the venue for the premiere or the surrounding repertoire in the programme. But ultimately I've felt in control; even in my transcriptive work, such as for the London Sinfonietta's Warp project (London Sinfonietta 2006) or my more loose, Velvet Underground–inspired work for Porto's Remix Ensemble, I have personalised the process: it has become my work, I am responsible for it. Once it is completed, the music's successful performance depends on its interpreters and to an extent is no longer under my control.

Paradoxically, perhaps, I have found the ongoing project with Melinda Maxwell invigorating precisely because this insular approach to the process isn't a possibility. From the outset, Melinda and I have engaged in a wide spectrum of improvisational strategies. Returning briefly to Lukas Foss (1962), he criticised efforts to blur the boundaries between composition and improvisation, preferring to emphasise their differences and arguing that the latter would therefore exert a "fertilising influence" on the former. In one sense it is a given that a fully notated composition is not a one-off improvisation; yet we have increasingly found the boundaries between composer, improviser, *and* performer blurred in our work.

The first improvisation session took place in September 2010. In this we performed several times alone and together, employing a variety of pre-negotiated strategies, as well as none. Video example XX [19.02] documents an improvisation based on figure 15.2, which I presented to Melinda. No further direction was given other than length; around two minutes was suggested.

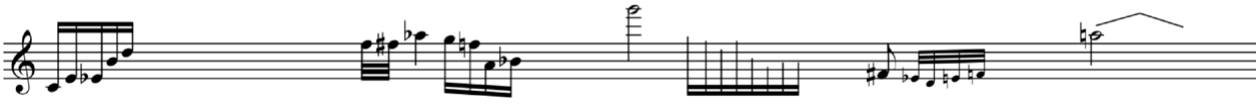

Figure 15.2.

Attempting to capture as accurately as possible the performance nuances of the original, I subsequently transcribed this (figure 15.3). Later I made a clearer version (figure 15.4).

Figure 15.2. David Horne, visual stimulus for improvisation (video example XX [19.02]).

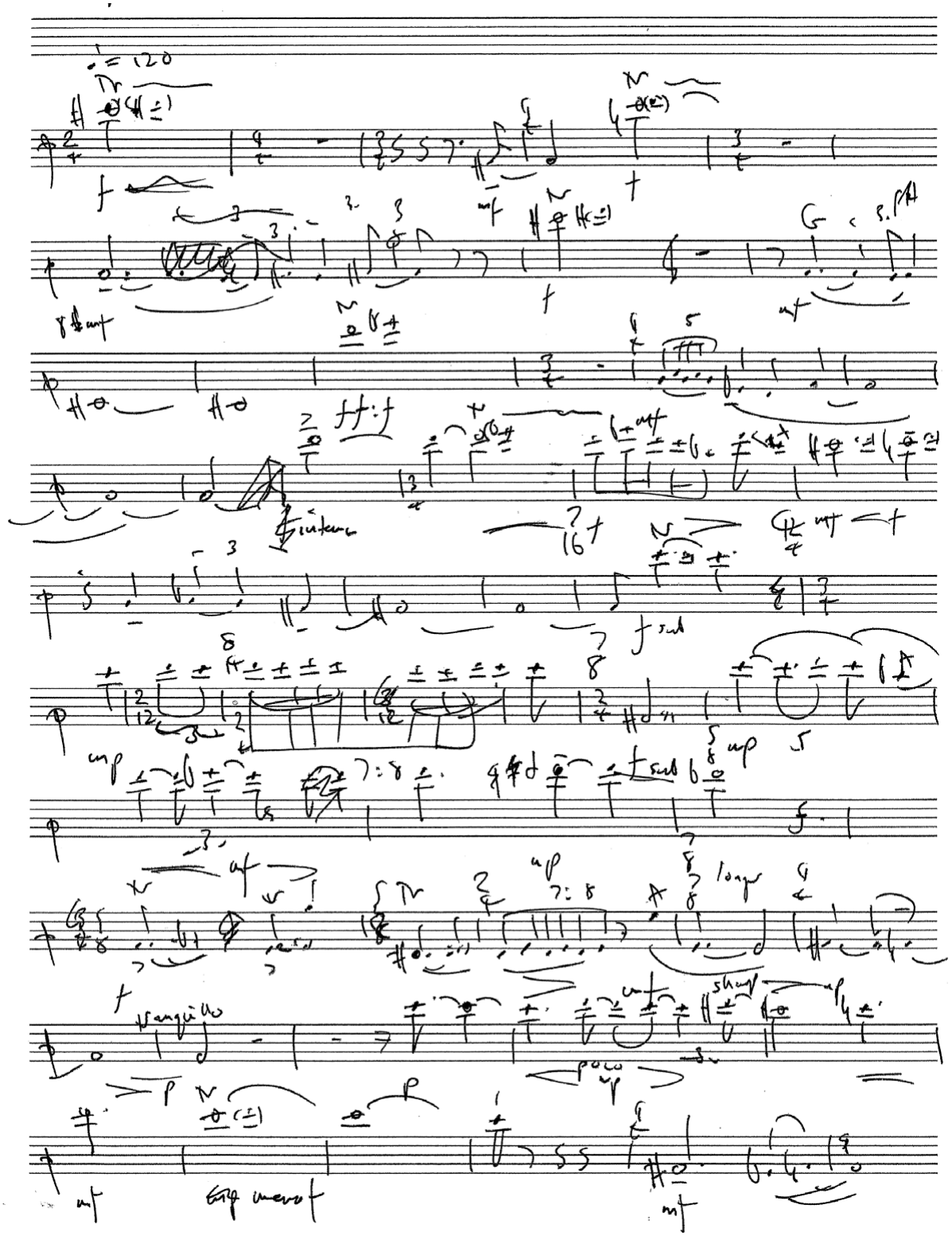

Figure 15.3.

Figure 15.3. David Horne, transcription of first improvisation, handwritten version.

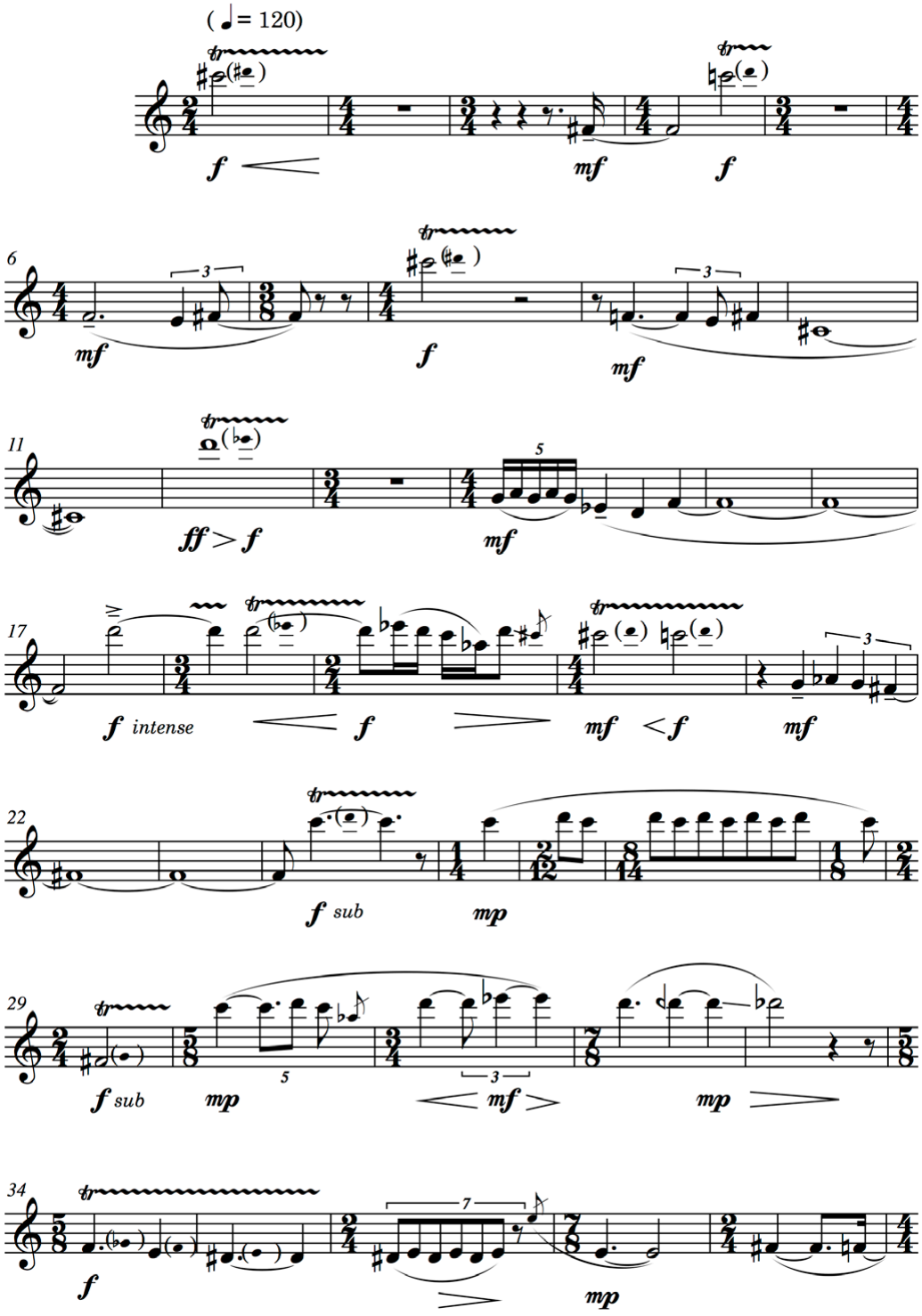

Figure 15.4.

Figure 15.4. David Horne, transcription of first improvisation, clearer version.

Melinda was then presented with this transcription the following December, when enough time had passed that the initial improvisation would be considered reasonably "forgotten." Video example XX [19.03] presents Melinda's initial sight-reading of the transcription. In the next video example (XX [19.04]) we see Melinda's reaction, which is humorous but nevertheless indicates the real problems involved in attempting to recapture through notation a spontaneous improvisation.

We then listened to the original improvisation and discussed the differences in performance; there was a second reading. Both readings (particularly the first) lack the spontaneity of the original, perhaps unsurprisingly. The difference in the performance of the opening trill alone is remarkable. While harder to gauge from an audio recording, the function of dramatic silence (in the rests) is more marked in the original and less so when they become notated rests in the transcription. Video examples XX, XX, and XX [19.05, 19.06, 19.07] contain the openings of the initial improvisation, the first reading, and the sec-

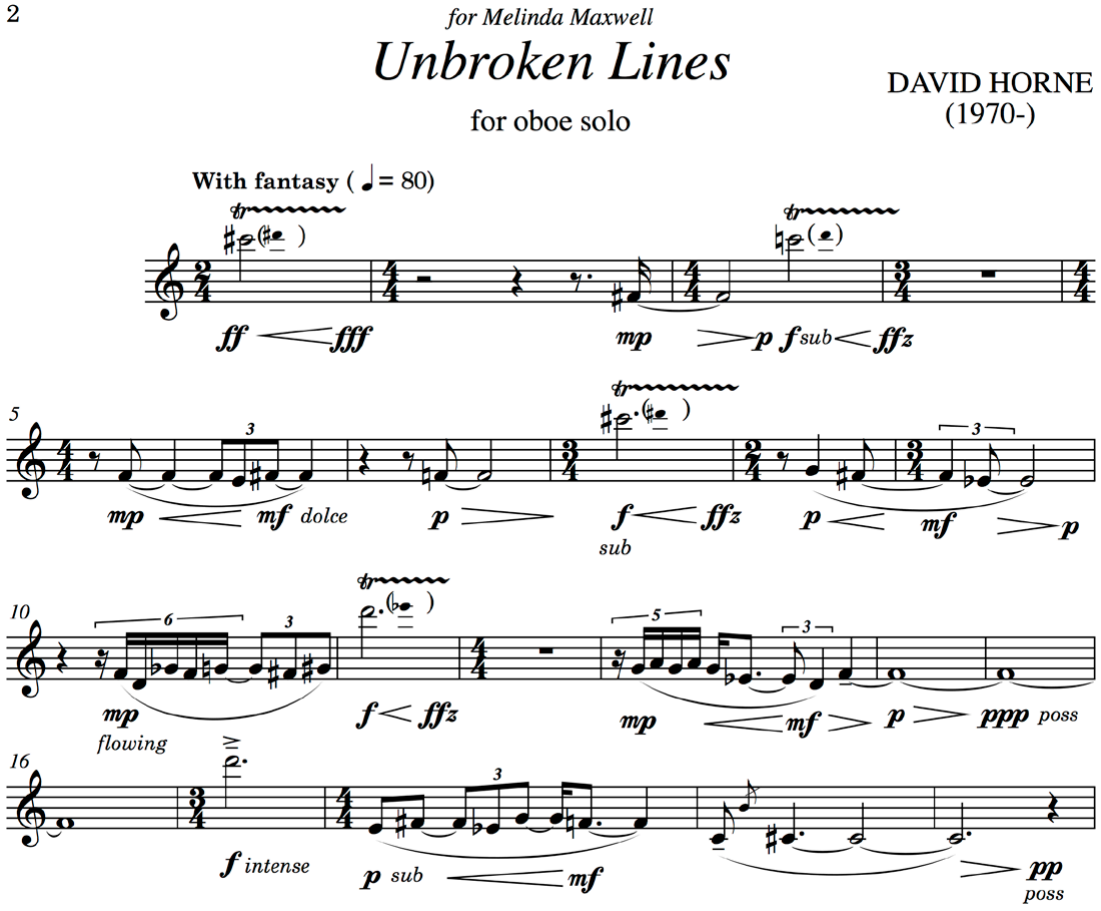

Figure 15.5.

Figure 15.5. David Horne, *Unbroken Lines*, opening.

ond reading, respectively. During this session I also improvised on the piano, using Melinda's initial improvisation, though I had the added "familiarity" with the work that I had gained through the transcription process (video example XX [19.08]). I then wrote an original composition for solo oboe strongly influenced by the initial improvisation and its subsequent reinterpretations; figure 15.5 contains an excerpt from this composition, a performance of which can be seen in video example XX [19.09].

The process covered thus far develops one short improvisation out of many we performed in our first session in September 2010. Others have also been transcribed; and in addition to myself, Melinda has also composed notated works inspired by our collaborations. Connections can be seen between my transcription of another of Melinda's solo improvisations (figure 15.6) and a solo work she subsequently wrote (figure 15.7).

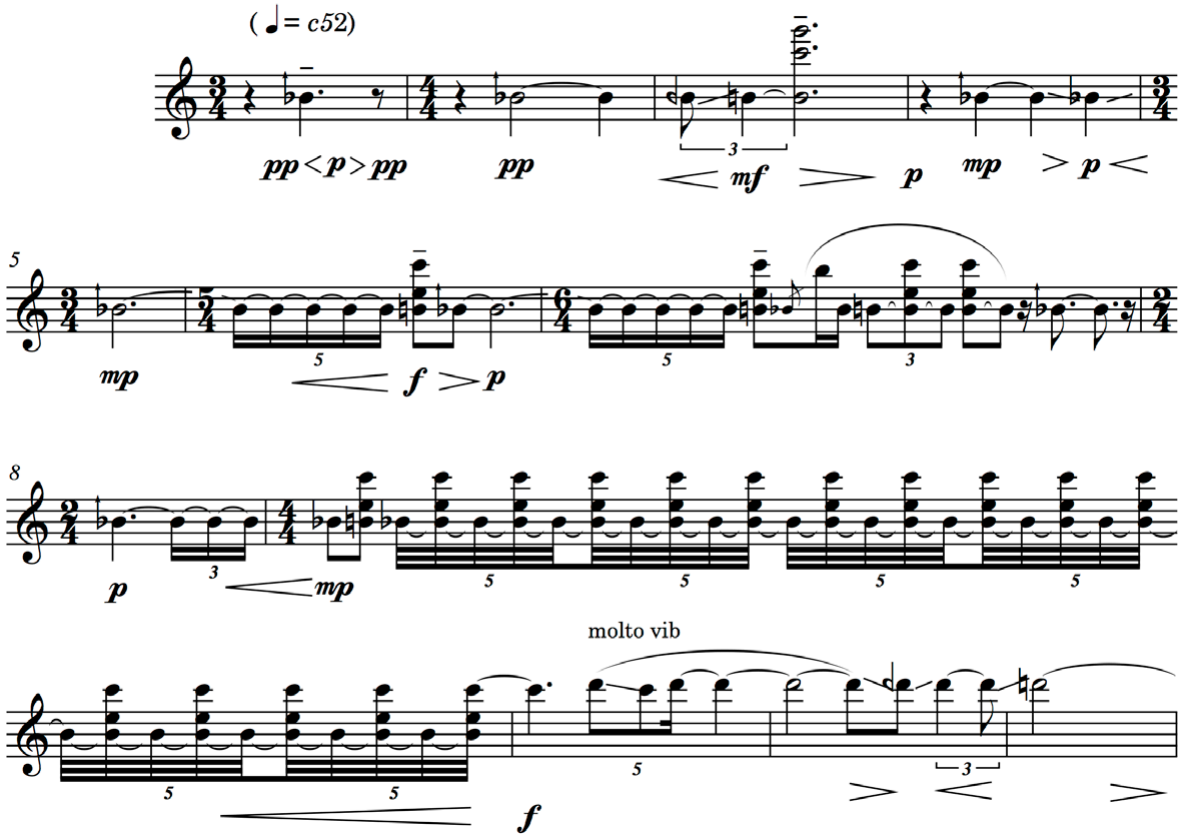

Figure 15.6.

Figure 15.6. David Horne, transcription of second improvisation (opening).

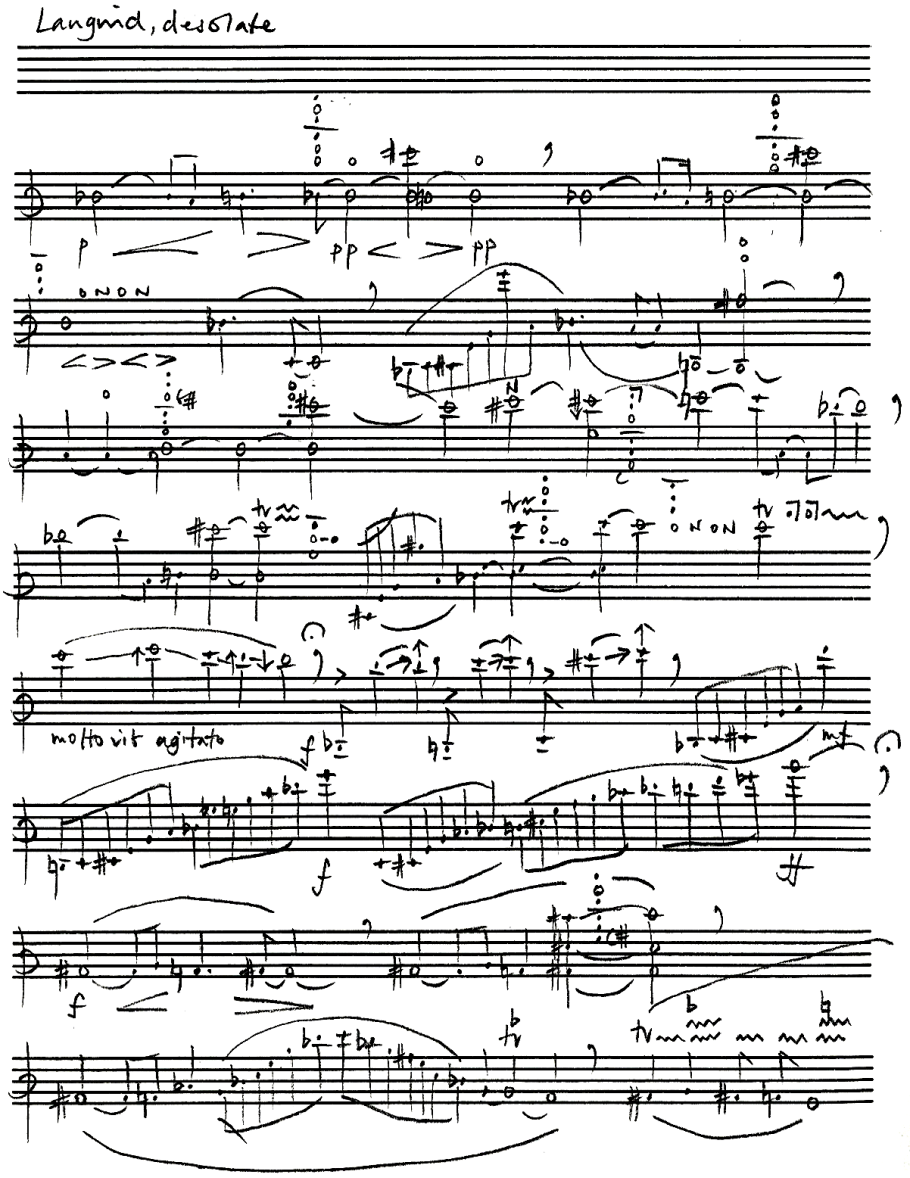

Figure 15.7.

The first improvisation session alone has borne much fruit in later work that includes both improvised and notated compositions. I previously wrote that we had found the boundaries between improvisation and composition to be increasingly blurred. In fact, they have become blurred, smudged, and, frankly, at times fully erased. We have improvised individually and as a duo employing a variety of pre-negotiations, ranging from simple notated cues to more abstract planning and, of course, to no discussion at all. We have transcribed our

Figure 15.7. Melinda Maxwell, *Arabian Air* (opening).

improvisations and performed *them*, analysing not just the notes themselves but also their performance. We have improvised on the improvisations, both from notation and from our memories. Finally, we have written our own fully notated compositions taking the various improvisations as initiators; perhaps this again establishes a necessary boundary, but there is no doubt that these notated compositions are inextricably linked to the entire collaborative process of music making that we have entered into. While they are the latest mileposts in our creative journey, we see them not as an end product but instead as one facet of our ongoing research.

Manchester, March 2013

References

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