

CREATIVE MUSICAL IMPROVISATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND FORMATION OF
NEXUS PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE

Olman Eduardo Piedra

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Committee:

Roger B. Schupp, Advisor

Gregory A. Rich,
Graduate Faculty Representative

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ABSTRACT

Roger B. Schupp, Advisor

The percussion ensemble is a vital contemporary chamber group that has led to a substantial body of commissions and premieres of works by many prominent composers of new music. On Saturday May 22nd, 1971, in a concert at Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, NEXUS percussion ensemble, hailed by many as the world's premiere percussion ensemble, improvised the entire program of their inaugural, 120 minute concert as a newly formed group, while using non-Western instruments with which the majority of the audience were unfamiliar.

NEXUS percussion ensemble has been influential in helping create new sounds and repertoire since their formation in 1971. While some scholarly study has focused on new commission for the medium, little attention has been given to the importance and influence of creative improvised music (not jazz) in the formation of NEXUS and its role in the continued success of the contemporary percussion ensemble.

This study examined the musical and cultural backgrounds of past and current members of NEXUS percussion ensemble, and the musical traditions they represent and recreate. The author conducted and transcribed telephone interviews with members of NEXUS percussion ensemble, examined scholarly research related to drumming traditions of the world and their use of improvisation, researched writings on creative improvisation and its methods, and synthesized

the findings of this research into a document that chronicles the presence of creative improvisation in the performance practices of NEXUS percussion ensemble.

The combination of a collective interest to express musical ideas in a non-traditional way, paired with an abundance of sound sources and instruments that would fall under the “exotic” category, an atmosphere of social and political change, the lack of written music for their newly-formed percussion ensemble, and the fact that one of the founding members did not read music, came together to contribute to the NEXUS sound.

To my wife, her parents, my parents, and my brothers.

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INTRODUCTION

The Contemporary Percussion Ensemble has long been at the vanguard of new music composition, performance, and musical experimentation. Dating from the earliest pieces written for the medium in the 1930s (Amadeo Roldán's *Rítmica 5* and *6*¹, and Edgar Varèse's *Ionisation*²) composers have turned to percussionists for new sonorities and new textures for their music. This has aided in establishing the percussion ensemble as a vital unit amongst contemporary chamber groups and has led to a substantial body of commissions and premieres of works by many prominent composers of new music. While some scholarly study has focused on these compositional contributions to the medium, little attention has been given to the importance and influence of creative improvised music (not to be mistaken with jazz or free jazz) in the formation and continued success of the modern percussion ensemble. I wish to commence this research into the nebulous, unwritten, spontaneous, and often overlooked genre of contemporary concert music.

This document will begin with a review of literature pertaining to the topic, followed by material comparing and contrasting improvisational styles in contemporary music and jazz. Subsequent sections will include biographies and member rosters of NEXUS percussion ensemble (both past and present), and information gleaned from interviews with some of these

¹ Aurelio de la Vega, "Roldán, Amadeo," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/23705> (accessed July 7, 2013).

² "Ionisation," *The Oxford Dictionary of Music, Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t237/e5217> (accessed July 7, 2013).

members addressing the role that improvisation played in the creation of and continued success of NEXUS Percussion Ensemble.

CHAPTER I. IMPROVISATION AND MUSIC HISTORY

The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians defines improvisation as “The creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed. It may involve the work's immediate composition by its performers, or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between”.³ It further asserts that the fleeting nature of this type of music makes it a less desirable area of study for researchers. Etymologically, the word “improvise” comes from the French *improviser* or the Italian root *improvvisare*, meaning unforeseen, without preparation (provisions) for. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines the word improvise as: “create and perform (music, drama, or verse) spontaneously or without preparation”.⁴ A long standing tenet among musicians, be they improvisers or not, is that preparation and individual practice are paramount to the successful execution of and respect demanded by the art form. It seems that both dictionaries, in their definition of improvisation, suggest or tacitly point to the absence of a plan or the lack of musical means, rendering improvisation by definition as a musical work of lesser proportions and inferior artistic quality than those that are notated on paper.

Historically, improvisation has been a part of Western art music since the late 1400s. Namely, it was used to identify those aspects of the composition such as variations in text, melodic ornamentations, and solo cadenzas found in concerti, which were left to the discretion of

³ Bruno Nettl et al., “Improvisation,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com.maurice.bgsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/13738> (accessed July 7, 2013).

⁴ Angus Stevenson, *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press).

the performer, based on performance practices of the time. As music progressed and became a more complex ensemble enterprise, so did the need to notate and preserve the different voices and embellishments that occurred in order to avoid unwanted or imperfect voice leadings, thus marking the beginning of carefully and skillfully notated music as the premier basis of performance in Western Europe.⁵

In the Baroque period, composer/performers such as J.S. Bach, Sweelinck, Frescobaldi, Buxtehude, and Handel, were renowned for their improvisations on the organ, and it was expected of their colleagues and fellow organists to also excel in the art of improvising fugues. At the time, musical developments such as the *basso continuo* or figured bass and unwritten cadenzas in concerti, demanded that players be well versed in improvising and creating contrapuntal harmonic foundations, as well as improvising over popular dance pieces.

In the Classical and Romantic periods, improvisation (mostly on the piano) was associated with virtuosity and pyrotechnical displays of musical aptitude. This was often done near the end of a performance to impress audiences with a showing of technical facility. Some music critics, who suggested that the performers were merely playing complicated arrangements by memory, were shocked and dissuaded from their faulty assumptions when performers began taking requests from the audience for pieces on which they then improvised musical content. These improvisers were some of the most important composers of the era: Hummel, Liszt, Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Beethoven. Interestingly, Liszt, Chopin, and others, began utilizing their newly-found improvisational genres of extended preludes and cadenzas, airs, fantasies and complex or unorthodox key changes in their written piano music, which in turn made improvised

⁵ Nettl et al., "Improvisation."

music less exciting to the audience, as they were already familiar with such musical devices.

In the early years of the 20th century, with the invention of moving pictures, improvisations (on piano) that were meant to enhance the images occurring on the screen became necessary to accompany silent films. However, there was a bigger style brewing in the United States that brought improvisation back to the center stage: jazz.

Jazz music had an impact on many 20th century composers (American and European), although improvisation was not the influence in this case. Advances in recording technology allowed performers to record how they intended their music to sound, and in turn revealed the degree of freedom that could be taken with some of these composers' printed material. These liberties addressed rhythm and articulation alterations, but were not improvisatory in nature. Such performance practices may be related to the licenses a jazz musician takes when performing an American song book standard, in that the chord progressions are given or notated (or as in most cases, memorized), as well as the printed rhythm of the melody, but it is accepted that the performer will make his or her interpretations both unique and personal.

As Western music started to bend some of its more rigid harmonic and melodic traditions, and as the movement to equalize the 12 notes of the scale and to systematize composition with mathematical processes became more prevalent, some composers embraced the idea of aleatoric music, which, as I will show, is not to be confused with creative improvisation.

The practice of musical aleatory commenced in the first part of the 20th century, most notably with Charles Ives, and then followed by his contemporaries Henry Cowell, John Cage, and later Karlheinz Stockhausen and Pierre Boulez, among others. These composers wrote in their scores certain "liberties" for the performer(s), such as boxes instead of note heads

(permitting the performer to choose pitches based on the position of the box within the staff), or the choice to order musical segments of a work at will. John Cage, the father of Indeterminacy, began using aleatory and chance operations in his compositions by writing down musical instructions on pieces of paper, then, using the Chinese Book of Changes (I Ching), selecting the order and durations of those compositional events. Such indetermination, can be thought of as a musical system of “paint by numbers”, in which traditional compositional aspects have been randomized or been made to look “free”, when in reality the composer has already conceived of them in advance. Other types of aleatoric musical procedures include graphical notations, texts, or abstract pictures, through which the performer is charged with creating musical gestures that resemble the instructions ascribed by the composer.

Composer Lukas Foss, when discussing differences between improvisation and composition, said the following with regards to aleatoric music:

It has been my experience that musicians find no cause for rejoicing in these morsels of free choice, distributed high-handedly, as to a child: 'Here, you may do this or that (because it matters little one way or the other).' It would appear to be more far-sighted to subject the musician to a methodical study from which he emerges trained and practiced to function creatively. A performer wishes to be more than a mere instrument in the hand of chance. If one desires a gratifying task for him, one must let him have a measure of power. He must be helped to develop initiative on his instrument. A talented instrumentalist, even though lacking the gift of composition, can achieve a certain 'inventive technique' on his instrument. (This we know from jazz.) Indeed, improvisation is opening up a whole new field of study here, one which has its challenges and of course its limitations.⁶

One of the main differences between musical improvisation and aleatoric music is that in improvisation, the musician is both performer and composer, and in aleatoric music, the

⁶ Lukas Foss, "Improvisation Versus Composition," *The Musical Times* 103, no. 1436 (1962): 685.

musician is offered choices that might appear to be free, but as I have expressed, is not allowed complete improvisational freedom, as the piece already belongs to the composer.

In the decades leading up to the 1960s and beyond, social and political changes enabled jazz to embrace almost all music that grew out of the contemporary classical branch, and conversely, contemporary improvisation found shelter in the realms of jazz, under the categories of “free jazz” or “free improvisation”.⁷

The transitory nature of improvised music is commonly misconstrued as being directly related to jazz. This unique American creative musical genre is the artistic-combination of Western European musical harmonic vocabulary with African rhythmic traditions. This musical conglomeration became one of America’s greatest contributions to music in the world. Improvisation is a necessary feature in order for jazz to be correctly labeled as such. I define jazz as American Creative Music, because it is a fact that only in the United States of America could a musical, cultural, and social amalgam of such proportions have taken place.

David Beckstead, in an article on thinking and playing music, describes how from an early (musical) age, students have misconceptions of which musical genre(s) includes some form of improvisation:

If you ask a group of high school music students (as I have many times) to say the first word that pops into their minds when you mention improvisation, their most common response will likely be “jazz,” and if one could somehow measure this, their most common emotion may well be fear. So how can it be that an essential element of musical expression and performance, one practiced by musicians in countless cultures and idioms for thousands of years, has been relegated to a single genre of music and associated with

⁷ Paul Griffiths, "Aleatory," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://0-www.oxfordmusiconline.com/maurice.bgsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/00509> (accessed July 11, 2013).

such anxiety?⁸

Who is to blame? Why has musical improvisation been given a secondary role in the formative development of contemporary musicians? Is improvised music better than written, academic music, or vice versa? Who decides which music is better suited to be taught and performed by the next generations of artists? All questions that might generate varied responses depending on who answers and what point(s) of view they share. Composer Larry Solomon, wrote a harsh criticism of universities and conservatories and the weight given to some styles of music over others:

The influence of academic indoctrination lies heavily on contemporary composition. Maximum control and certainty, antithesis of improvisation, were common maxims of composers in the 1950s, especially with those of the post-Webern camp. The assumption seemed to be: the greater the control, the greater the use of structure, the greater the music. An incorrigible dogma arose that is intolerant of any alternative view-pronouncing all else "primitive" and "artless." The doctrines of serialism find shelter in academia, where verbose, analytic rationalizations, charts, and other platonic artifices serve to sanction an academic art. Music becomes a geometrical ornament or an excuse for elaborate theories. The structure becomes more important than, or identical to, the music itself. Emotional content, so foreign to academic thought, can be ignored.⁹

Author Robert Moore offers a differing opinion. He suggests that improvisation was a part of the lives of most of the prominent composers and performers before the 20th century. He writes that culturally, musicians who lived with patrons, were able to make a living and also exposed their children to an environment of music, rehearsals, composition, performance, and plays, which helped them become important musicians in their own right. Implicitly, art music

⁸ David Beckstead, "Improvisation: Thinking and Playing Music," *Music Educators Journal* 99, no. 3 (2013).

⁹ Barney Childs et al., "Forum: Improvisation," *Perspectives of New Music* 21, no. 1/2 (1982): 74.

(which is what is taught at music schools to this day) in a pre-20th century society was a privilege of the rich. Poor people had no access to or knowledge of art music until the time at which music was printed and more readily available for purchase by the public at large. But still, access to instruments and music lessons was a luxury. Since the poor had little access or exposure to art music, they enjoyed, performed, and developed their folk music traditions, which often featured improvisation.¹⁰ Moore continues:

Popular music, without the benefit of institutionalized support, had by 1910 taken the world by storm. Acknowledging no class hierarchies, and finding no venue too modest or demeaning, popular music gradually found a place in the lives of virtually everyone. Even members of the wealthiest families, who at one time might have danced to a minuet or waltz, found themselves more often than not after 1900 learning the Charleston or Tango. The development of popular culture as an integral part of turn of the century cultural and social life enabled it to flourish while academic art steadily lost popular support.¹¹

A key issue in this narrative may be the cultural importance and role of improvisation in our musical society. Post 20th century musical improvisation has traditionally been viewed as a secondary art form in Western culture, due to the fact that art music and its discursive preconceptions denote some mastery on the subject matter, and also perhaps because extemporaneous music has a long-standing association with jazz. This perception may be further exacerbated by the fact that jazz, at its inception was a creation of African-Americans, who at the time, were not regarded as societal equals by their Caucasian Western European oppressors. Their music and cultural heritages were regarded as primitive.

¹⁰ Robin Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23, no. 1 (1992).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

In contrast, improvised music is the ideal music in some countries in Asia, because of the freedom and the flow it allows the performer to exude.¹² Improvisation thrives in many cultures around the world, but it is bound to certain rules that enable its existence. In Indian classical musics, for example, improvisation is allowed and encouraged (in either *Carnatic* or *Hindustani* styles), but it must carefully adhere to the chosen *raga* or scale, and follow strict rhythmical patterns or *tala*. The brilliance lies in how successful (virtuosic) the performer can be and how his or her improvisations can excite the audience and convey the general feeling (mood) of the piece. In Turkish, Iranian, and Arab music, melody types or *maqam* (Turkish *makam*) resemble Western modes from scales. But by means of predetermined shapes, motives, contours, and pitches that have more musical stress than others, musicians can perform solo improvisations (Arabic *taqasim*, Turkish *taksim*) on a wind instrument called *nay* (Turkish *ney*), which happen as introductions to religious ceremonies, and are original manipulations of a mode.¹³

In Afrodiasporic countries, the traditions of complex rhythms and abundance of layers of percussion survive between the traditions of the past and the innovations of performers in the present. Above all, the highly improvisatory textures trace back to Africa and the relationships between vocal melodies and drum patterns, which direct dance troupes and signal different movements and sections, while always interacting (improvising) with the dancers.

In West Africa, rhythm is paramount. Music cannot be removed from social life, as its function is to accompany songs for all communal activities. According to David Locke, improvisation in West Africa is bound to strict training, technique, practical knowledge, and pre-

¹² Nettl et al., "Improvisation."

¹³ Karl Signell, "Improvisation in near Eastern Musics," *Music Educators Journal* 66, no. 5 (1980): 134.

existing styles, much like jazz in America.¹⁴ He explains how in vocal ensembles, that are largely of the call and response type, the leader slightly improvises on the main melody, so as to maintain the original structure as intact as possible for the choir to respond. Musical scales (when applicable) tend to be fixed, and either pentatonic or hexatonic, which might seem to make improvising on a single scale less daunting, and also a valid pedagogical tool to allow students to become less afraid of composing in a more spontaneous fashion.

According to Gerard Béhague, indigenous Latin American people believed music had supernatural implications as it was often used by a Shaman to accompany ritual ceremonies.¹⁵ He continues to say that little improvisation was allowed in their songs and dances, because performance practices only permitted restricted melodic and rhythmic variations. However, when Spanish and Portuguese cultures mixed with Native American and African traditions, improvisation became a way to embellish and vary folk songs and dances.¹⁶ In Afro-Cuban *Santería*, religious ceremonies are accompanied by bells, shakers, *batá* drums, and singing. The bigger, lower-pitched drum, or *iyá*, not only plays pre-established calls or cues while navigating intricate ensemble music, but also performs heavily syncopated improvisations that help incite and excite participants of the ceremony.

As I have shown, both context and content of musical improvisation are very important, and will impact on how contemporary percussionists (and other improvising musicians) recall musical vocabulary into their spontaneous compositions. What other aspects are present in

¹⁴ David Locke, "Improvisation in West African Musics," *ibid.*

¹⁵ Gerard Béhague, "Improvisation in Latin American Musics," *ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

creative contemporary improvisation? Are there any traits in jazz improvisation that also appear in contemporary improvisation?

CHAPTER II. IMPROVISATION AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

There seem to be differing points of view with regards to theorizing improvisation. Departing from the belief that improvisation as a valid art form is less desirable than pre-conceived music, the so-called “motif” theory, a term coined by psychologist Philip Johnson-Laird, proposes that (jazz) improvisers are inclined to construct solos with previously memorized phrases, a belief that is often conventional wisdom. This theory positively downplays spontaneity and creativity, as well as ensemble dynamics, making improvisation a formerly rehearsed, mundane activity. If music is viewed as a language, and since improvisation is part of this idiom, the way in which this “motif” theory postulates the process that foments generation of musical “words” fails to pass the so-called speech test. As Johnson points out, “Discourse would be intolerably difficult if it consisted solely in stringing together remarks that one had committed to memory. It is this sort of stilted jumble of phrases that one is forced to produce in a foreign language where one's only guide is indeed a book of 'licks,' i.e., a phrase book”.¹⁷ Conversely, John Cage, a staunch adversary to jazz as an artistic art form ¹⁸, would use “prepared” responses (or, as Johnson wrote, previously memorized phrases) to answer questions, giving a completely random and indeterminate answer, just as his philosophy of sound proposed.

Trombonist and author George Lewis proposes a theory of Eurological and Afrological approaches to improvisation, which as he explains, are metaphorical constructs based on social

¹⁷ George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996): 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

and historical characteristics of music hailing from Europe (Western) and Africa (via colonialism, in this case, jazz). He focuses on composer/visionary John Cage and master alto saxophonist Charlie Parker as contemporary musical revolutionaries, each representing a different camp. The Afrological approach refers to how jazz and jazz sensibility influenced and informed improvisation, improvisers, and audiences, whereas the Eurological improvised music alludes to compositional devices that might mimic or suggest a liberation of music, such as indeterminacy, aleatory, and chance. Eurological music strived to purify music by removing sounds or *clichés* that might stylistically influence the direction of the music. Afrological music capitalized on the fact that tradition is the shared language from which all innovation and improvisation comes, and since it is rooted in tradition, the new from the old can be traced, imitated, and morphed into something else. Interestingly, neither of these theories suggests the performer's race as a defining factor in determining the musical and historical characteristics of the music, nor the validity of the approach.

A more encompassing view of contemporary improvisation is one that merges musical attitudes from the *avant-garde* classical and jazz, electronic, popular, and world traditions, and shares the notion that freedom is the key to combine, negotiate, and mediate all these influences together.¹⁹ The freedom to create a musical landscape, where society functions better, and perhaps humans act as brothers, is a common thread among contemporary improvisers. Concepts such as Zen, spirituality, and deep and profound listening in order to connect with the collective conscious, allow improvisers to channel their personal struggles, feelings, and energy into works

¹⁹ David Borgo, "Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music," *ibid.* 22, no. 2 (2002).

of art. This way of presenting improvised music often poses a challenge to musicians and audiences alike.

The socio-political environment and cultural challenges of the decades leading up to the 1960s and beyond, brought into improvisation musical textures that resembled the changes of the time: revolution, angst, confusion, struggle, power (or the absence of it), war, peace, equality, and hope. As these elements made their way from the performer out into the performance space and into the audience, the listener had to adjust to a different paradigm of musical sounds, in which unusual sounds that might appear to be mistakes from the performer's part, where indeed extended techniques.

Extended techniques are instrumental devices that allow for a wider range of musical colors and textures, permitting musicians to produce two sounds at the same time (multi-phonics) on an otherwise monophonic instrument, or creating more percussively-oriented sounds (prepared piano, key clicks) from traditionally melodic instruments. Listening then, becomes a more involved activity, demanding utmost attention and acceptance for music to be developed, and for all nuances to come to light. David Borgo adds:

Since, on hearing the initial sound in a free improvisation, neither the performers nor the audience know what direction the music will take, open and attentive listening is essential to creating and maintaining the flow of the music and to extracting meaning and enjoyment from the experience.²⁰

As a way to summarize the discussion about improvisation thus far, I agree with Robin Moore's definition of improvisation, in which he states that "in an important sense, improvisation is not free. It is only an effective means of expression when incorporating a

²⁰ Ibid., 177.

vocabulary, whether cognitively or intuitively understood, common to a group of individuals".²¹ There is a shared vocabulary, which when used well, enables a message to be delivered, acknowledged, and preferably, respected and understood. Part of the equation with this vocabulary, has to deal with appropriate instrumental techniques and skills. Just as classical musicians practice orchestral repertoire excerpts on their own, and then incorporate them into the orchestra during rehearsals and performances, the improvising musician must also maintain his or her technique and creativity to the optimum. More so than orchestral musicians, because an orchestral musician already knows what the outcome of a pre-conceived, pre-rehearsed piece should be, whereas the improviser will have to react and make individual and ensemble choices in real time.

Composer and poet Harold Budd shared some of his experiences regarding improvisation, when he wrote: "The only difficulty with some improvisation, I think, is people who aren't terribly skilled at it. They're not really basing their language on anything that means very much to other people, including their compadres in the ensemble. So, improvisation shouldn't be mistaken for counterpoint and antagonism in music: when it's done well in an ensemble, it's an excellent manifestation of non-competitive music".²²

Creative improvised music requires years of discipline and serious mastery of one's instrument and its sonorous capabilities, plus a vast proficiency of past and present musical styles and cultural practices from around the world. This is especially important for contemporary percussionists, whose musical world continues to broaden and deepen, with the

²¹ Robin Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23, no. 1 (1992): 64.

²² Barney Childs et al., "Forum: Improvisation," *Perspectives of New Music* 21, no. 1/2 (1982): 53.

introduction of many more instruments upon which the percussionist must achieve proficiency, from cultures that value and foster improvisation. While all these aspects constitute a great deal of improvisational content, the creative, curious imagination of the musician is vital for performances that can honestly connect to audiences. Musical creativity, however, is usually removed or purposely omitted from most music training programs because it is considered inconsequential or unnecessary for the performance of pre-conceived music. As Solomon states, “perhaps this is partly due to a prevalent notion that imagination is the antithesis of discipline”.²³

Discipline is attained from practice, and even though the notion of rehearsing something that has not yet been conceived might seem erroneous, in fact, the practice of improvisation allows performers to embrace their creative side, engaging necessary chamber music and ensemble skills, analogous to those needed for the performance of written and printed music. Some improvisers employ solo and ensemble practice devices such as handicapping, which refers to self-imposed barriers that foster creativity and generate new possibilities of sounds. An example of handicapping is to only allow (oneself) to play on a certain range of the instrument, or to only play a set number of notes in a row, this to foster the habit of (deep) listening and to allow for rests (or the absence of sound) to be a natural part of the improvisatory vocabulary, a common mishap of inexperienced improvisers of any kind. An example of this would be one in which I devised a handicap for an improvised piece on a concert where the percussion trio was to be situated in a way that a Chinese opera gong would be in the middle, and once the player struck this gong, he or she would then stop playing and allow another member to join, leaving always two players performing at the same time. My experience with this handicap was one of

²³ Ibid., 76.

great success. After weekly rehearsals throughout the semester, the performers use of self-editing and self-restraint (by way of silence) had increased immensely and became evident in their playing in what might be described as a more organic, thoughtful, and musical approach to the performance.

Jazz educator David Baker, shares the view that early intervention is important in improvisatory matters in both contemporary and jazz idioms, and that it is necessary for the proper development of the modern musician. While he supports the idea that improvisational and (Western) compositional processes are learned through the tasks of score studying and its posterior imitation, he also includes some jazz-related techniques such as question and answer (present in African-American music as call and response) in his discourse on improvisation pedagogy. Baker offers melodic and rhythmic techniques that are devised not only to aid in the formation of jazz musicians, because as he points out, “creating situations in which a student is permitted and encouraged to experience and to use new information as he or she acquires it can only speed and enhance the learning process.”²⁴ As Baker explains, some important tools for the development of jazz vocabulary can be achieved by slight modifications performed on a given melody. A known tune can be altered by means of embellishments (similar in concept to trills, mordents, or appoggiaturas), rhythmic variations (both meter and/or note lengths), and more importantly, and very particular to jazz vocabulary, is the use of different modes and scales, that impart a different flavor to the (same) melody, in all 12 keys. Other approaches to melodic modification that come from 20th century Western compositional techniques that are used in jazz improvisation are those of polytonality and polymetricity.

²⁴ David N. Baker, "Improvisation: A Tool for Music Learning," *Music Educators Journal* 66, no. 5 (1980): 42.

The use of modes comes from the Gregorian practice of church modes in which variation of themes can be achieved in a more formulaic procedure by making adjustments to the original scale upon which the melody is based. Church modes are generally taught in music history courses, but are seldom put to use in art music on a practical sense. Therefore, it is not uncommon to find jazz musicians whom have a deeper understanding and command of harmony than their classical counterparts. As Baker declares:

The study of scales, modes, chords, and other tonal materials could not be more profitably approached than through jazz improvisation. Often in art music, a particular scale will be used only briefly or will be disguised via orchestration, rhythmic encumbrances, or through the use of other sophisticated techniques, making it difficult for a novice to hear the scales in question and how they are used.²⁵

In jazz style improvisation, after working on the fundamentals from above, students traditionally learn the vocabulary by imitating the masters that came before them, whom, in their own way, established and in many cases transformed and modernized the tradition. By doing so, the student will first repeat musical information (as close to the original as possible), assimilating and later transforming that material in his or her own fashion. This approach is similar to a living and breathing history of American improvised music, where those involved function in their own way as both composers and performers. It is also important to note that in this day and age, a study of some of the most important styles of popular (and folkloric) music from around the world is a necessity for improvising musicians who wish to remain relevant with the times. The fast-paced innovations of social media and globalization, not only are maximizing the

²⁵ Ibid., 49.

possibilities of learning about other societies and their music, but are also blurring the lines of cultural and musical barriers, making them almost seem a thing of the past.

Precisely on the subjects of globalization, music, and improvisation, it is important to mention that jazz was considered to be the earliest specimen of world music, as diverse sociopolitical situations brought various immigrants and elements of their cultures to the land of opportunity at the turn of the 20th century. For example, New Orleans, Louisiana is considered to be the birthplace of what is now called jazz, and was a territory inhabited by people of Spanish, French, British, African, and other European descents.²⁶

Trumpeter and educator Ed Sarath is a firm believer and proponent of improvisation as an implement for a well-rounded musicianship. Because of improvisation's impromptu nature, musicians are faced with the challenges of perception, reflection, reaction, composition, and performance, simultaneously, which makes improvisation an idiosyncratic cognitive process. Sarath adds, "the improviser cannot change the past and does not know the future, so she or he can only respond to the present".²⁷ This realization of self as a conceiver of musical thoughts can be a fountain of creativity and a channel for communication.

What about other types of music besides jazz or contemporary art music as grounds for improvisation? Some believe that it is possible to introduce young students to improvisation through familiar popular music, rather than with complex jazz or contemporary art music. It is important to note that most contemporary music composers and improvisers grew up in a society where jazz had been the popular music of their youth. Later came rock, funk, rhythm and blues,

²⁶ Edward W. Sarath, "Improvisation for Global Musicianship," *ibid.* 80, no. 2 (1993): 25.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

disco, pop, hip-hop, and so on. As one listens to a particular style of music over and over again, some of its language is assimilated and becomes familiar. Michael Bitz suggests that introducing simple improvisation activities over commonplace songs or styles might be a possibility to generate creative ideas and begin improvising.²⁸

A further approach to creative contemporary improvisation is the use of non-traditional instruments, a well-known practice familiar with most percussionists. The use of “found” instruments can be traced back to three important composers for percussion of the 20th century: Lou Harrison, Henry Cowell, and John Cage. These gentlemen were influenced by Asian (Gamelan) music and Eastern philosophies, and they devised a way to recreate those exotic (and very expensive and difficult to import), non-Western sounds into their music by using everyday objects not created for music making, such as tin cans, brake drums, car horns, kitchen utensils, and cacti. The “preparation” of instruments, in essence an alteration of the natural sound of the instrument (mostly piano) by the placement of foreign objects inside its mechanism, was a creative evolution of the practice of accepting unusual sounds as valid material for reproducing music. These rudimentary instruments create a non-conventional palette of sounds that can be accessible to musicians and non-musicians alike. If they are combined with established musical structures such as call and response, imitation, variation, or canon, the improvisational and pedagogical potential can be beneficial for students and mentors alike.²⁹

Quite possibly, the most concise, straightforward, and detailed method for fostering improvisation can be found in William Cahn’s book *Creative Music Making*. Mr. Cahn is an

²⁸ Michael Bitz, "Teaching Improvisation Outside of Jazz Settings," *ibid.* 84, no. 4 (1998).

²⁹ Arthur Welwood, "Improvisation with Found Sounds," *ibid.* 66, no. 5 (1980).

accomplished percussionist and founding members of NEXUS percussion ensemble. His approach to improvisation consists of four steps with two main rules, and requires a mediator with extensive experience in dealing with the subject matter. This method is designed not only for percussionist, but also for musicians from all genres of music, and can be enacted in solo or ensemble settings as a workshop, then turning itself into routine music performance.

The main goal in *Creative Music Making* is to attain musical synchronicity through the practice of deep listening and profound communication among the ensemble members (as few as two and as many as wanted). Synchronicity is that moment in the performance “when communication among the players is at a peak”.³⁰ This musical consonance can be perceived as an arrival at a whimsical implied metric pulse or at a rhythmic texture, or at the appearance of a collective tonality or key center, all in the present, without a plan or discussion. To be able to communicate extemporaneously, and to be able to reach agreements at this level, there must be superb listening skills in place, which can be realized through extensive repetition.

The four steps in this approach are:

1. Playing
2. Recording
3. Listening
4. Questioning

Step number one is the act of coming together, opening (oneself) up to the other musicians, and crafting and shaping sounds into a work of beauty. It is important to remember

³⁰ William L Cahn, *Creative Music Making* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 42.

the relationship of performer/composer/listener that all musicians involved share at the same moment. Everyone is a responsible contributor to the piece.

In step two, the performance(s) is documented for posterity, for study, and for further discussion and observations.

Step three is to be enacted soon after the performance has ended, while the memory of experiences felt is still fresh in the musician's mind. This is to consciously and objectively dissect the piece, not to critique it, but to listen to the piece as a whole, and observe how all the different parts, instruments, and ideas did (or did not) fit together.

In the last step, an open forum for discussion is enacted, not to critique or regret "mistakes" in performance, but rather to highlight important arrival points, cohesion, and how magical, spontaneous, and creative, did in fact the music become. With some guided questioning from the mediator, students become observers of their creative powers, and also of the wealth of sound possibilities available for expression.

The rules that are to be observed in *Creative Music Making* are few and simple. Musicians are allowed to play (or sing) anything they wish. They are also allowed not to play if so moved. Most importantly, and very different from traditional classical composed music, there are never any wrong notes. In addition, the other tenet is to listen attentively in order to be open for and reactive to the musical material that is being created in their surroundings. However, this rule can be infringed upon, for which there is no penalty. In fact, just like any normal conversation, musicians can agree, disagree, or ignore the topic and completely start a new one. Again, there are no negative consequences, and even though there may be bad sounds present, there are no wrong notes.

William (Bill) Cahn wrote this book after many years, opportunities, and experiences with collective improvisation, that officially began in May 1971, when NEXUS percussion ensemble improvised the entire program of their inaugural, 120 minute concert as a newly formed group.

CHAPTER III. NEXUS

NEXUS percussion ensemble, hailed by many as the world's premiere percussion ensemble,³¹ officially came into existence on Saturday May 22nd, 1971, in a concert at Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, although the name NEXUS would be adopted at a later date, with all six founding members present, in 1972.³² Forty-two years later, they have performed throughout Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Brazil, Scandinavia, Europe, and North America. The group is known for their mastery of all genres of percussion music, both classical and world, ranging from a long list of collaborations and commissions from influential contemporary composers, to the revival of ragtime xylophone music, and the reason for this document, their groundbreaking ensemble improvisations. NEXUS is the recipient of the Banff Centre for the Arts National Award and the Toronto Arts Award, and in 1999, just before celebrating their 30th anniversary season, NEXUS was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame, at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention, held that year in Columbus, Ohio.³³

According to Bob Becker, the name NEXUS originated when he and Bill Cahn (classmates at the Eastman School of Music) formed an experimental percussion duo ("the nexus"), after reading *Genesis of a Music* by Harry Partch.³⁴ Warren Benson, whom at the time

³¹ Lauren Vogel-Weiss, "Nexus by Nexus," *Percussive Notes* 36, no. 5 (1998): 61.

³² Lauren Vogel-Weiss, "Nexus," *Percussive Notes* 37, no. 6 (1999): 19.

³³ NEXUS, "Biography," Accessed October 2 2013, <http://nexuspercussion.com/about/>.

³⁴ Bob Becker, "Answers to Questions About the Beginning of Nexus," Accessed September 18 2012, <http://nexuspercussion.com/2011/12/answers-to-questions-about-the-beginning-of-nexus/>.

was Bob Becker's composition teacher, suggested that the improvisations Becker and Cahn had been performing (and recording) should be presented to the public.

In my phone interview with Bill Cahn, he related that Warren Benson "was the one who said: Why don't we do a concert of this kind of stuff in Kilbourn Hall at the Eastman School? And we did. He set it up. John and Robin came down from Toronto with a truckload of stuff. We filled the stage and improvised the concert. But Warren Benson was the catalyst that made it all come together. It would have happened any way at some point, but he was the one at that particular time that got it started".³⁵ Warren Benson even wrote a poem for the evening:

. . . instruments from all the world
musicians from two countries
and four private universes
coming together
to celebrate being together

joining together to search for
individual meaning
making music, an act of searching
responding to another in answer to
one's self

finding beyond reasoning . . . and
very far inside

sculpting sounds from silence
. . . exploring inner space.³⁶

Four of the original six members were present at that performance, namely Bob Becker, Bill Cahn, John Wyre, and Robin Engelman (see figures 1-4 for pictures from the concert). They

³⁵ Bill Cahn, telephone interview by the author, June 7, 2013.

³⁶ Robin Engelman, "Perspectives on Improvisation," Accessed June 12 2013, <http://robinengelman.com/?s=Perspectives+on+Improvisation>.

improvised an entire two-hour concert, utilizing an assortment of traditional percussion instruments, as well as non-Western drums and cymbals, homemade and found instruments, mostly of the metallophone classification (see figure 5 for the concert program of the first NEXUS performance and figure 6 for a review of the first NEXUS concert). Wyre and Engelman were living and working in Toronto at the time. The remaining two members, Russell Hartenberger, and Michael Craden would join them in the coming months. Craden had just relocated from Los Angeles to Toronto, and Hartenberger could not be at the inaugural performance because he had booked a plane ticket (for the same day as the concert) to study African music in Ghana for the summer.³⁷

³⁷ Russell Hartenberger, telephone interview by the author, June 13, 2013.

Figure 1: John Wyre . Kilbourn Hall, May 22, 1971. Photo by Warren Benson courtesy of www.nexuspercussion.com



Figure 2: Bob Becker. Kilbourn Hall, May 22, 1971. Photo by Warren Benson courtesy of www.nexuspercussion.com



Figure 3: Warren Benson (left), Bill Cahn (right). Kilbourn Hall, May 22, 1971. Photo by Warren Benson courtesy of www.nexuspercussion.com



Figure 4: Robin Engelman. Kilbourn Hall, May 22, 1971. Photo by Warren Benson courtesy of www.nexuspercussion.com



Figure 5: Program from the First NEXUS concert

EASTMAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC
of the University of Rochester

Walter Hendl, Director

KILBOURN HALL

Saturday Evening, May 22, 1971 at 8:15

The Department of Composition presents

"...Great drums and gongs
hung on spiked frames
sounding to perfect rule and rote
about the King's calm crescent moat.

Tone unto tone, of drum and gong.

About the King's calm crescent moat
the blind musicians beat lizard skin
as the tune weaves out and in."

from the Shih Ching

Robin Engleman Toronto
John Wyre

Robert Becker The Nexus
William Cahn

Figure 6: Review of the first NEXUS concert

Meditative Music

BY THEODORE PRICE

After "Sculptured Sound," percussionists Robin Engleman, John Wyre, Robert Becker and William Cahn in concert at Kilbourn Hall last night, one could say it was the most meditative, contemplative evening of music all season.

But that's not right.

One could, on the other hand, call it a highly stimulating and innovative evening.

But that's not quite right either.

For me, it was both.

Engleman and Wyre are members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. Becker, an Eastman School graduate assistant, and Cahn, member of the Rochester Philharmonic, are better known as "Nexus," subjects of a recent Upstate article.

But those statistics don't begin to relate the excitement of their international art.

How they germinate, grow, then gyrate a musical idea — from a few fundamental sounds into a sonorous symphony orchestrated with spontaneous, original composition-on-the-spot — is utterly fascinating.

The Kilbourn stage was cramped with three playing areas, islands of instruments:

Gongs, bells, beakers, drums, cymbals, inverted flower pots, brass blows, a xylophone, a vibraphone, racks and rugs covered with pitched and unpitched tools of music.

While an early deadline eclipsed attending the entire second half of "Sculptured

Last Night In Review

Sound," I detected a few contrived, false echoes after the rich counterpoint of Afro rhythms in its opener.

The first half, an entire 52 minutes of uninterrupted performance, was a series of swells. An idea, a comment would be made, as if one player wished to initiate musical conversation. Then another would respond, often molding a chip of the original block of sound. Gradually the players, in joint, extemporaneous colloquy, let the piece take its own shape.

Becker, Cahn, Engleman and Wyre create the force of powerful music without any J. Arthur Rank theatricalism, but with imaginative improvisation.

Rochester, (NY)
Democrat & Chronicle
Sun. May 23, 1971

NEXUS remained a sextet from 1971 to 1982 when the untimely passing of Michael Craden from cancer left the group as a quintet. From 1971 to 2003, the only other percussionist to perform with NEXUS was Timothy Ferchen, a percussionist with the Helsinki (Finland) Symphony Orchestra, who was Bob Becker's classmate at the Eastman School. The quintet with Becker, Wyre, Hartenberger, Engelman, and Cahn remained intact until 2003, when John Wyre retired from the group, to be replaced by former Black Earth Percussion group founder Garry Kvistad. Mr. Kvistad recalls a so-called "musical passing of the torch" at Wyre's last performance with NEXUS, which was Kvistad's first. The two performed on opposite sides of an amadinda (constructed by Kvistad), which is a traditional idiophone from Uganda, homologous to a xylophone, during one of their celebrated improvisations.³⁸

On occasion, when other players were needed, the positions were filled mostly by former students of Russell Hartenberger and Robin Engelman from the University of Toronto (e.g. Ryan Scott, Mark Duggan, and Paul Ormandy).

The newly reformed quintet became a quartet when Robin Engelman retired in 2009 due to vision problems, leaving the membership of the group in its current status. When an extra player is needed, they supplement their ranks with Ryan Scott, although John Rudolph, principal percussionist of the Toronto Symphony, and Jason Treuting, from SŌ Percussion, also have performed once each.³⁹

The members of NEXUS were in many ways interconnected prior to the foundation of the group. For instance, Bill Cahn and John Wyre both grew up in the same neighborhood of

³⁸ Garry Kvistad, telephone interview by the author, June 13, 2013.

³⁹ Bill Cahn, e-mail message to author, October 5, 2013.

Philadelphia, PA where they studied under the same teacher (Fred D. Hinger). Both continued their musical education at the Eastman School of Music in the 1960s (Wyre 1960-64, Cahn 1964-68). It was at Eastman that Bob Becker would meet Cahn (Cahn was a sophomore when Becker was a freshman). When Bob Becker graduated, he moved to Washington, D.C. to join the U.S. Marine Band. There he met Hartenberger, who had joined the Air Force Band.⁴⁰

Russell Hartenberger, originally from Oklahoma, studied with the influential percussionist Alan Abel during his time as principal percussionist with the Oklahoma City Symphony, prior to the latter's appointment to the Philadelphia Orchestra. Hartenberger continued his musical studies at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia with Fred Hinger. He became involved with Alan Abel's Settlement music school percussion ensemble, where he met Cahn, and Wyre had been a member.

Meanwhile, John Wyre accepted the position as timpanist with the Milwaukee Symphony, while Engelman was the orchestra's principal percussionist. Robin Engelman subsequently departed Wisconsin for Rochester, NY, and became principal percussionist with the Rochester Philharmonic. At the time, both Bob Becker and Bill Cahn were members of that percussion section. Engelman then left Rochester to become principal percussionist with the Toronto Symphony and reunite with Wyre, who had become the orchestra's timpanist.

Michael Craden, who was not a trained musician, but in fact a visual artist, moved to Toronto in 1967. Through an introduction by the Los Angeles percussionist Emil Richards,

⁴⁰ "Nexus," 19.

⁴¹ John Wyre, *Touched by Sound, a Drummer's Journey* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Buka Music, 2007), 25.

Craden contacted, became good friends with, and started improvising with John Wyre⁴¹, who had already started the practice of collecting non-Western, hard to come by, exotic instruments.⁴²

In 1968, Becker, Cahn, Engelman, Hartenberger and Wyre united collectively for the first time at the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont as percussionists for a performance of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*. As Bill Cahn recalls:

John was in residence there, and during his stay he had been visiting the local antique shops. In one of those shops he found a set of Japanese bronze dome-shaped temple bells, which he purchased and suspended in the percussion storage room. After one of the Stravinsky rehearsals, we had some time to kill and we started fooling around with instruments in the storage room. We were playing orchestral excerpts, but distorting them in any imaginative way possible. The temple bells came into play for a moment in a distortion of the xylophone passage to "Porgy and Bess." Of course, the pitches were wrong and the intonation of the bells fell in-between the notes of the chromatic keyboard scale, all of which made for a great outpouring of fun and laughs. The outcome of this was that our musical friendship became deeper and a mutual willingness was sparked to get beyond the restrictions with which our musical thinking had been educated. Which is to say that over time, in our own music making, "notes" and technical issues became diminished in importance and expression became more of a concern.⁴³

As these series of events transpired and influenced the genesis of NEXUS, Garry Kvistad was to also have encounters with some members of NEXUS prior to his inclusion to the ensemble. Before joining the Steve Reich Ensemble in 1980, where he would perform along with Hartenberger and Becker, Kvistad moved to Buffalo, New York (around the time of NEXUS's creation) to work with Lukas Foss' "Creative Associates". He was aware of NEXUS and their concerts, and decided to form the Black Earth percussion group with percussionists Allan Otte,

⁴² Kalman Cherry, "John Wyre," *ibid.* 34, no. 4 (1996).

⁴³ James Snell, "Integrating Improvisation into Your Curriculum. An Interview with Bill Cahn," *ibid.* 42, no. 2 (2004): 38.

his brother Rick Kvistad, and Michael Udow. Kvistad relates an early experience that contributed to the formation of the Black Earth percussion group:

Rick and Al came to Buffalo for an organizational meeting to start the group, and we got this idea of contacting the guys at NEXUS in Toronto, this would have been Spring of 1972. So we went up there, and met the guys who were living in Toronto at the time, who were Robin Engelman and John Wyre.

John was teaching at the University (I think they both were), and he had a wonderful studio in the conservatory area, filled with instruments, like they used for their improvisations, so we spent an entire afternoon improvising together. So there was a cross-pollination there from the start.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Garry Kvistad.

CHAPTER IV. CREATIVE MUSICAL IMPROVISATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND FORMATION OF NEXUS PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE

..... have access to an instrument, voice, body, or any other sound-maker which you are intuitively "at home" with. Forget all notion of your "favorite" music; even of what you think music is at all If you are alone, listen only to silence inside If you are playing with others listen more closely to them than to yourself.

Always begin with silence. Let things happen Do not get outside the sound in anyway Do not make value judgments of the sound as it occurs. Once it begins, be committed to it. Expect the impossible to happen

Davey Williams⁴⁵

Sound. An exceptional, discerning quest for beautiful, rich sonorities, is one of the many things that the percussionists from NEXUS have in common, and one could argue that sound is one of the threads that brought them together, that allowed them to grow as performers, composers, and artists (both collectively and individually), and continues to move their creative minds forward. Sound was (and still is) at the center of their development as musicians, as is evident by their musical upbringing, with teachers such as William Street, Alan Abel, Fred Hinger, and Cloyd Duff, among others, who were known for their superb musicality and outstanding ability to create beautiful sounds on their instruments. As if having an outstanding education and professional work experience in Western classical percussion was not a big enough source of sound material, the members of NEXUS would become enthralled with the possibilities and the mysticism of instruments from cultures around the world: gongs, bells, drums, shakers, and rattles, all of these would end up in the group's inventory.

⁴⁵ J. K. Randall, "Are You Serious?," *Perspectives of New Music* 23, no. 2 (1985): 80.

John Wyre is credited to have sparked this interest in non-Western percussion instruments among the others members of the group. In a telephone interview discussing Wyre's influence on the group, Russell Hartenberger said:

...he was the first one to start collecting instruments and he was one of the first ones to become involved with Japanese music and culture. He made a trip to Japan early in his life, working with Takemitsu before NEXUS was working with Takemitsu, and collected instruments there. But he also got interested in Zen Buddhism. I know he used to go to a Zen place in Rochester, doing meditation and things like that, sort of more in that life style. He brought into the group this sensibility of the spaciousness of bell tones and long gong sounds, rather than a really busy typical drummer approach to playing.⁴⁶

In Wyre's own words:

All percussionists collect sounds. In the 1960s I began collecting instruments from many different cultures. My first assignment from John Galm, my Big Brother at Eastman, was to go to the music library, take out a recording of a gamelan orchestra from Indonesia and listen to it. I will love John forever for opening that door, and for showing me that there was an extraordinary wealth of music in the family of humanity. In 1959 he told me to get myself a ticket to hear Ravi Shankar, then on his first North American tour, and it was at that concert that I first heard a master of the North Indian tabla, Chatur Lal. My imagination was set afire and I was mesmerized by a whole new world of music. In 1962 I was blown away by Babatunde Olatunji, Nigeria's musical ambassador. He was the first African musician I had ever heard. Thus began for me a dialogue with a continent that is one the cultural treasure houses of the world.⁴⁷

Wyre would eventually embark on a musical instrument "treasure hunt" to Asia in 1970 with colleague and future NEXUS member Robin Engelman. He narrates in colorful details the journey of these two "hippies" and their adventures navigating airports and custom checkpoints while carrying various percussion instruments.⁴⁸ The discovery of new sound possibilities would

⁴⁶ Russell Hartenberger.

⁴⁷ Wyre, *Touched by Sound, a Drummer's Journey*, 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

eventually make the rest of the group curious as to what could be available to them, and so began their routine weekend expeditions to antique stores, import stores, and estate sales; access to non-Western instruments was only available to those who travelled, or those who brought instruments back, either as novelty or souvenir. Since people did not understand the uniqueness of the instruments they had purchased, they ended up in antique stores, and since most customers would not purchase them, those instruments were reasonably inexpensive at the time.⁴⁹

While John Wyre was exploring the Zen side of music and life, Michael Craden would challenge the artistic approach of the other classically trained musicians in NEXUS. He was an experimental artist who had great facility with complicated rhythms. Craden had experience with Harry Partch and his instruments, and he discovered a new sound source in what Bill Cahn calls the previously “unmusical world”,⁵⁰ which then was assimilated by the rest of NEXUS, and became part of their musical world. Craden’s influence on Wyre (and consequently on the rest of the ensemble) is evident in John Wyre’s account of his first musical encounter with Craden:

Answering a knock on the door, I met Michael Craden. He introduced himself, brought greetings from Emil Richards in Hollywood, and we proceeded to my basement music room. Here, of course, were suspended bells, gongs and cymbals, as well as drums of all sizes and shapes from a variety of cultures, homemade instrument of wood, metallophones constructed from different types of metal tubing, shakers, scrapers, and a collection of found objects (brake drums, metal springs, slinkys, pot lids) that were simply beautiful sounds.

Michael and I began to improvise. The lighting in the basement was very subdued, almost non-existent, as we listened our way around the room. I was playing very softly, fading in and out of what Michael was doing, trying to listen and accompany him. Suddenly he stopped, turned to me and shouted, “Hey man! If you’re going to play with me you’ve got to mean it!!” One of the greatest performance lessons of my life. Michael and I became fast friends.

⁴⁹ Bill Cahn.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Michael was one of the founding members of NEXUS. His improvisational skills were magical. He found places to play that were unimaginable, charming, and challenging, on his way to new horizons in spontaneity.⁵¹

Craden and Wyre were not the only two members of NEXUS that had been exposed to improvisation prior to the group's formation. Russell Hartenberger improvised with a percussion trio early on while in high school, then with members of the percussion studio in college, and eventually he and fellow section members would "play the percussion room" (all of it: doors, walls, etc.) when he was a musician in the United States Air Force Band. This he said, seemed as a "natural thing to do."⁵² Garry Kvistad, turned to collective improvisation during college. Although it was not a part of the traditional education, it was something students often did. Before college, he was introduced to improvisation by Michael Ranta, a teacher at the Interlochen Arts Academy. Ranta had an interest in group improvisation and would frequently program works of this nature.⁵³ It is fair to say that jazz and other types of popular American music were also present in the formative years of the members of NEXUS (before and during college), via the drum set, which is one of the gateway instruments in which young percussionists will become interested, because of its presence in recorded and live popular music.

Let us now examine the early years of NEXUS, starting with the aforementioned concert from 1971. Perhaps it is best to frame that performance historically. The tumultuous preceding decade brought social, political, cultural, scientific, educational, gender, race, and artistic

⁵¹ Ibid., 25.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

changes to the United States and to the world. It was a time of collective experimentation, of boundaries being questioned, and it was in this social and cultural atmosphere that musicians and audiences alike were interested in new and innovative creative outlets.

A perfect storm occurred at the inaugural NEXUS concert when music was conceived and performed in real time while using exotic instruments that were unknown to the majority of the audience. Bill Cahn recalls that the audience was completely aware the music they were about to experience was going to be created on the spot.⁵⁴ It turns out that the concert was a first for the performers as well, because they had not yet staged such an event in public. Most of those exotic instruments were new to the performers, and they would often create techniques to extract the best sounds possible, often in unorthodox ways. But it was indeed that ability to discover good sounds that allowed them to be as creative and as daring as they wished to be.

What initially led NEXUS to embrace improvisation as a way to make music? There are a few factors that facilitated the creation of music in real time: the collective interest to express musical ideas in a non-traditional way, the abundance of new sounds, an atmosphere of social and political change, the lack of written music for the medium, and the fact that one of the founding members did not read music whatsoever. Michael Craden would pioneer the use of the “percussion table”, something he did when the group revived xylophone ragtime music, and he improvised percussion parts. The number and length of improvised materials in their subsequent performances began to decline as the group embarked on commissioning and premiering works from composers who saw in the percussion ensemble a new vehicle for music making worth

⁵⁴ Ibid.

exploring. Owing to Craden's inability to read music, Hartenberger mentioned that in the beginning, commissions had to include a part written to be performed "freely."⁵⁵

As the group's repertoire grew, the time on stage for improvisation diminished or was completely eliminated, depending on the type of performance and what the organizers would like for the group to play. As the performers began to formally study African, Indian, and Asian music during a group residency at Wesleyan University, where Becker and Hartenberger were studying, and as audiences would become more interested in repertoire by John Cage, George Hamilton Green, and Steve Reich, as well as compositions by NEXUS members, improvisations moved to the background of the ensemble's repertoire list. Garry Kvistad, who joined the group most recently (2002), recalls that they have not done a large number of improvisations in the eleven years that he has been with them.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the members of the ensemble interviewed in this study all agreed there have been some memorable instances of improvisatory bliss. For example, in 1984 they were invited to perform at a church in Amsterdam. For the performance there were no time restrictions, and subsequently the ensemble improvised a performance over the span of five hours. Russell Hartenberger mentioned that a special performance for him was the Vancouver Expo in 1986, where John Wyre organized a World Drum Festival. Eventually this was made into a documentary with help from the National Film board of Canada. Hartenberger recounts that NEXUS shared the stage and improvised with two

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

hundred musicians from all over the planet. By the end of the festival, the performance turned into a very large improvisation session.⁵⁷

Other notable improvisations have featured musical guests such as The Kronos Quartet, and clarinetists Richard Stoltzman and Phil Nimmons. In an article about NEXUS and improvisation, Robin Engelman writes “In a spirit of collegiality, Nexus usually lets our guests lead, thereby creating a “concerto” experience.”⁵⁸ Garry Kvistad recalls a very special performance at a Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC) in October of 1977 in Knoxville TN. The performance led him to realize that the audience was experiencing something rather unique and special:

I was still with the Black Earth Group, and they [NEXUS] did a whole concert of improvisation at the gigantic stage, and it was so incredible! Everybody there felt the magic, and it really taught me that these guys have that down! I was really quite impressed and it was a very influential moment, so I thought, wow, they not only play ragtime music like nobody else, they improvise like mad, and also can play and write a lot of very interesting music. I thought that at some point it might be fun to do something like that, and I got my chance in 2002 to do that.⁵⁹

How is it that NEXUS seems to thrive when given the freedom to create music on the spot? What is the preparation before and during the performance? I was surprised to learn that NEXUS does not discuss improvisation. During my phone interview with Bill Cahn, he recalled that once during the early stages of NEXUS’ development, the musicians would deliberate on the direction the creative improvisation should take, resulting in a less meaningful and musically boring performance, because the group “was thinking about the theme, instead of listening to

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Perspectives on improvisation.”

⁵⁹ Ibid.

each other.”⁶⁰ It seems unconventional that six individuals (now four) could synchronize their collective creativity and come together with great success, functioning as one musical organism, let alone bring together instruments from different cultures, shapes, and sizes, to create a soundscape where everything and anything has melodic potential, and where timbre and texture are paramount. And all of this with no previously ordained strategy. In the words of retired founding member Robin Engelman:

Nexus’ early free improvisation era has been credited, at least in part, with spawning new professional percussion ensembles. Yet today, all the younger percussion ensembles play written music and, to my knowledge, none of them improvise in public. As my colleague Bob Becker said, “People were more interested in how we played than what we played”. Nexus was an unanalyzable anomaly.⁶¹

As I would discover, the musicians of NEXUS often arrive at their performance bearing instruments and then proceed to improvise collectively, sometimes for ten or fifteen minutes, sometimes longer, or perhaps not at all. In the beginning, the common theme for these improvisations was the quest for unique sounds often produced via unorthodox playing techniques on unconventional instruments. Robin Engelman briefly discusses how the improvisational process in NEXUS evolved with time:

Particular sounds became signals for change, i.e., a low gong would change loud, fast and dense to soft, slow and sparse. A sudden sharp attack might precipitate a frenzy. Our improvisations tended to be in A-B-A form – fast, slow, fast or loud, soft, loud etc. We gradually quelled our tendency to “vamp until ready”, and our improvisations became shorter, more compact. We learned the values of less-is-more.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Garry Kvistad's improvisation experience with the group, follows the same rules: show up and play.⁶³ When they do improvise, the musicians consult on how long the improvisation should be, so as to avoid an element of their program that is disproportionate to the programmed works and concert length. He recalls a humorous anecdote about an idea for an improvisation that never came to fruition:

I remember hearing the story before I was in the group about how Bill Cahn had this great idea to go out onstage with all these instruments and pretend to be playing but actually not hit anything to start with, so that it was kind of a mime, and maybe give the illusion that there was sound happening even though it wasn't happening, and gradually over time, start playing softly. The idea was a terrific one, and it was ironic that it was Bill's idea, because as soon as they went out there, he accidentally hit a gong immediately. They never did try that idea, but it was a good one.⁶⁴

NEXUS improvisations started with a collection of random instruments, selected by the musicians for their richness in tone and potential for blend, and placed on stage in stations belonging to each member. It was customary to move to different stations, and to play on someone else's set up, so as to keep ears fresh. Hartenberger recalls that at one of their early concerts in Ontario, no one moved on to the next set up (as had been their precedent), as if previously planned. In reality, it was a subconscious decision that changed the way the group would deal with future improvisations.⁶⁵ To this day there are no instances of instrument sharing in their improvisations.

Thus far, I have discussed how and why the improvisations of NEXUS came to be. But what is happening when the musicians perform? Hartenberger's view of hierarchy in the group's

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Garry Kvistad, "Russell Hartenberger," *Percussive Notes* 34, no. 4 (1996): 16.

improvisations seems to suggest a reliance on the musician rather than on the timbre of the instruments:

...obviously certain people have ideas to play something and maybe dominate for a little while, but for the most part, the music really just kind of plays itself, and I as a player just seem to be taken along for the ride and know what I am supposed to be doing. I don't have to think about it too much. And I think that part of what makes that work is knowing the instrument, the kinds of sounds that instruments can produce. So you don't have to think "will this gong sound here?" or "will that woodblock be appropriate?", you just kind of know the instruments well and you know what will sound good.⁶⁶

When asked the same question, Bill Cahn answered:

If I could characterize the improvisations we do, they tend to be open, they tend to be non-metric, although almost every improvisation has a little section that is in time, with a groove of some kind, but generally we avoid the grooves. But they still show up in every improvisation. You think that drummers are going to tend to be mostly groove oriented, but the NEXUS improvisations are basically about sounds, and if the groove adds to the sound in some way, it's likely to show up in an improvisation.⁶⁷

Bill Cahn's response brings up two interesting points, the use and validity of "grooves" in creative contemporary musical improvisation, and the fact that many grooves found in non-Western musical traditions rely on soloing or improvising, as they do in jazz. In drum language, a groove is a repetitious rhythmic cell, which may or may not include many layers of syncopation, timbre, and pitch. Grooves often emphasize a certain section (or sections) of the musical pulse (such as beats 2 and 4 in traditional jazz), and can feature one or more of its musical components prominently, such as the *iyá* (or mother drum) in Afro-Cuban music, or the *atsímevu* (cigar-shaped master drum) in Ghanaian music. Grooves are sometimes referred to as "beats", such as

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

the Mambo, the Tango, or the Foxtrot, to name a few. All of these share in common the fact that frequently they are musical devices created to facilitate the social context of dancing, a closely related activity to drumming.

When asked if NEXUS borrowed improvisational techniques from jazz, Cahn said that when a player chooses to go in the direction of jazz, blues or bebop, they are free to do so.

Russell Hartenberger's opinion differs regarding NEXUS and jazz improvisation, in the sense that the group's improvisations could be linked to early jazz:

Jazz improvisation tends to be more of a solo music. When somebody is improvising in a standard jazz setting, it tends to be a series of solos, and that doesn't happen too much in NEXUS, it tends to be more of a contrapuntal group improvisation, with more polyphonic or polyrhythmic stuff going on all the time. I guess a little bit more in the sense that early ragtime music was a group improvisation. We have played with some great jazz musicians. It's been my experience that jazz musicians tend to adapt to our style rather than us adapting to their style.⁶⁸

The use of non-Western instruments and grooves is an interesting topic. In NEXUS percussion ensemble it was subject to a transitional period, as it changed from a source for unconventional sounds and colors, to a culturally respectful and educated display of proficiency on world instruments and their musical traditions. When asked about the process of selecting instruments for performances and improvisation, Bill Cahn suggests that it varies:

I have a house full of stuff, so I just walk through it and see what fits in a suitcase, or what I have room to take, and it is different every time, and I improvise what I want to bring. For instance, if I see a cymbal I haven't played in a while I'll take that, or these two gongs might go together, I haven't done anything with them for a while, so I might just

⁶⁸ Ibid.

bring those along, or this drum I think might be really nice with this particular gong so I'll just bring it along. So, it is really intuitive and on the spot, there's no real plan for it.⁶⁹

When asked if the instrument(s) he had chosen for the improvisation would have an impact on his musical approach, Cahn said:

Yeah, in fact, that was the advantage that we had in trying to play on world instruments without the baggage of hundreds of years of tradition. We were simply exploring the sound possibilities, and the performance capabilities, as best as we could. Of course, when you study the traditional musics you find out there are other possibilities that you have to consider. The instrument does dictate, to a certain extent, always, no matter what instrument you're playing, even if it's not a percussion instrument, the instrument itself is an extension of your musical spirit. Some gongs for example have certain sweet spots and certain combinations of overtones that are very entrancing to listen to, and that can impact the way you structure your improvisation, and how you relate it to other instrument, so yeah there is a lot of that going on.

It is interesting to observe the group's evolution towards studying and understanding the musical and cultural contexts of the chosen instruments, and the subsequent influence on their improvisations. Hartenberger discusses the use of grooves during creative contemporary improvisation:

I'd say that's a good thing! The more you know about an instrument, the better, and the more you know about the style of music, even better. For me it's been two things: one is the sound, the technique of the instrument, but the other thing that is important is a better understanding of the musical culture that the that instrument came from. I think both of those things affect the improvisation, since you have more of an understanding of it. For example, if you're feeling that the improvisation is in some kind of groove, you have a feeling for the kinds of possibilities for that groove based on experience in some non-Western music, that adds imagination to the improvisation that might had not been there without that knowledge. So, I think it's good that more than one of us has studied that music is good too. In particular Bob Becker and I have done more professional studying of non-Western music than some of the other guys, although everybody has played some, so he and I might for example be thinking that something we're playing ends up being like a rhythmic structure of Indian music, because we both have a sense for what that is

⁶⁹ Ibid.

like, or we might play a pattern that is similar to an African bell cycle pattern, just because we know that it exists and it is a possibility and it adds just a little bit of intrigue to it. I think it really adds a lot to the possibilities for improvisation.⁷⁰

On the topic of instrumentation for the improvisations, selecting the right sound often leads to the creation of that sound. Garry Kvistad and Bill Cahn are both instrument builders, and they modify or devise new instruments as the need arises, sometimes for a new piece, or sometimes just to facilitate the ease of performance. For example, Bill Cahn created a pedal operated water gong, which frees up the performer's hands to enable them to play two instruments at once. Garry Kvistad has modified *Baschet* musical sculptures and constructed wooden log drums tuned to specific pitches. When asked what instrument combinations are more common amongst the members of NEXUS for improvisational purposes, Kvistad said that he uses Hang drums (Swiss-made metallic vessels that produce a sound that resembles that of a steel drum), Bob Becker tends to use steel drums, Bill Cahn utilizes some of his many bells and gongs, and Russell Hartenberger, being a great hand drummer, often uses cymbals and a lot of drums.⁷¹

When asked what skills or techniques they contribute to the ensemble, each member's answers were modest, yet each musician exposed wisdom that only years of experience can bring. They suggested that the best strategy for creative musical group improvisation is to abandon one's self to the music, and stay out of the way of the creativity. In the words of Robin Engelman:

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

NEXUS' most successful improvisational moments were achieved when everyone did what they want to do, without regard for homogeneity. This rare occurrence created a fantasy of concurrent, individual expressions in exquisite balance, and the music floated over us and the audience."⁷²

It seems that this perceived lack of structure when compared to written music contributes to the performers' creativity and inspires their musical intuitions. Dr. Hartenberger believes that NEXUS has an advantage via the group's longevity that allows the musicians to anticipate and react to things in a very natural way, even though the music is being created in real time. He continues:

For me the thing that I find most stimulating about improvisation is when I lose track of actually what I'm doing, and I feel that I'm a part of whatever the overall sound of the group is making or developing, so that I'm not actually aware of what I'm doing, but I know, I just kind of automatically know what sounds I should be making to fit in, and so, it's quite a different feeling than playing composed music where you are prescribed to do certain things at certain times. This almost becomes an instinctual thing, and I think all the members of NEXUS have talked about that same kind of thing.⁷³

The members of NEXUS view their approach to improvisation as second nature. Garry Kvistad believes he was able to assimilate with the group's established *modus operandi*, while broadening their soundscape:

The group has a really good rapport of the individuals of the group. I think we really understand where each of us are coming from musically, so we're able to respond and to improvise (I think) in a way that works, and what I brought to the group (I think) was a new approach in terms of instruments, where mostly the guys in the group brought in a wide variety of gongs of all sizes and pitches, drums, and all that, and I brought in instruments I built, or that were built by friends, and a lot of things that sounded like electronic music, but were acoustic. I think, in all modesty, that I expanded the sound palette there.

⁷² "Perspectives on Improvisation."

⁷³ Ibid.

Bill Cahn confirms that each member of NEXUS brings his own unique musical tastes to the improvisations. He suggests that the six (now four) spirited personalities have strong likes and dislikes, but that their ability to accept, to tolerate, and to learn from such differences is somewhat responsible for allowing NEXUS to do what they do for as long as they have.

When asked to discuss their feelings regarding contemporary musical improvisation and music education, their answers proved to be thought provoking. The interviewees were asked about the presence of creative contemporary musical improvisation in their specific teaching studios, and also about the effect and reactions with their students. Russell Hartenberger works on improvisation when time and the conditions permit it; otherwise his students get to practice creative improvisation on their own, perhaps following their teacher's model of improvisation. When Garry Kvistad taught at the university in the 1970s, there was little attention or interest in the improvisatory arts. He was, however, able to introduce concepts of aleatory in his teaching, which were at the time (and still are) accepted and encouraged by contemporary composers.

Robin Engelman writes about his experience teaching a class on improvisation, and his students' journey as they travelled from excitement to apathy in making music on the spot:

In 1971 I accepted a teaching position at York University in Toronto conditional upon me being able to do "whatever I wanted to do". I chose to oversee, a course in improvisation. The students were majors in music, dance, visual arts and liberal studies. In my studio I hung bells, drums, gongs, cymbals, temple bowls and other exotic percussion instruments from around the world. No specialized skills are required to play these instruments-one has only to hit them, and their sound possibilities are almost limitless. I did not include a melodic instrument. The students, about 8 of them, met with me two hours, two days a week for one semester.

I asked them to play these instruments, but gave them no instructions on how. I wanted to find out what would happen if they could "do whatever they wanted to do." I had some

practical knowledge of improvisation, but was as new to this studio experience as were they. The prospect of hearing their music excited me and I wanted them to discover sounds without being influenced by me. I hoped they'd be captivated by their explorations. They were eager; delighted by the instruments and thrilled with the idea of no rules.

After a few sessions, even the most enthusiastic students had exhausted their ideas and for the most part, sat self-consciously mute. At that point I began playing with them, individually and groups of two or three. For a while the students were rejuvenated. But these collaborations, as well, lost their spirit. During one session a student began to sing and this reminder of melody encouraged one or two other students to bring melodic instruments to class. But their playing and singing was too timid and rather than broadening the scope of their improvisations, the inclusion of pitch made the music more awkward. Aware of their quandary, the students suggested ideas for guiding their improvisations and I gave them some instructions from compositions I was playing as a professional.

Nothing worked for long. The students were frustrated and perplexed, but couldn't give voice to their feelings. Our sessions had not even given them a repertoire of ideas and techniques to help them launch new explorations. (They were familiar with Pop music, but couldn't isolate its elements and apply them.) Their music was almost expressionless, though occasionally enlivened by sparks of energy. We finished the semester listening to recordings of contemporary music and discussing our studio experiences. The classes went on for three more semesters, but even with fresh blood, the music continued "dribbling-to-a-tacit".

The novelty of the course had quickly evaporated. For youngsters with little or no background in music, four hours a week of free improvisation were too much, and too much even with rules to guide them. They lacked experience with the basic elements of music: rhythm, tempo and dynamics. And, though we discussed and experimented with duration, silence, form and structure, they could not comfortably apply these ideas to their playing.⁷⁴

Contrary to Engelman's somewhat negative instance, Bill Cahn, author of a book on free-form improvisation entitled *Creative Music Making*, enjoyed successful experiences when teaching improvisation. Mr. Cahn explains the way in which his class functions. He follows the four rules stated in his book (also mentioned in chapter two of this document), and through these

⁷⁴ Ibid.

rules he ensures that every student, regardless of experience level with improvisation, gets a fair and equal chance to grow as a contemporary improviser. After quickly assessing how many students have had previous exposure to improvisation, the majority coming from a jazz approach, he then has everyone “introduce themselves” musically by way of a three minute solo. As the students loose their inhibitions and become more comfortable performing real-time music, the improvisations grow in length and complexity, to the point that many of the students go on to program improvised pieces on their recitals.

Mr. Cahn believes in the importance of teaching students the foundations of his method for improvisation and also the value it holds for teachers:

Even though there is a reluctance to start, if you’ve never done it, you don’t know what the expectations are, but it is a real challenge for the facilitator or teacher (in this case, me) because you have to assess the students and you have to allow a lot of space, and not be critical, but allow the participants to be self-evaluating what’s going on, rather than dictating it from the teacher. I think the self-learning aspect of it is where there is real good value, and it’s not so much top down learning, it’s more lateral learning, they learn from each other.⁷⁵

Cahn and Kvistad agreed that exposure to (free) improvisation should not be specific to a particular instrument, in this case percussion, but rather, it should be made available to all musicians. Kvistad continues:

...the free improvisation I think is very helpful, because in some cases it exposes students to an aspect of music that they would never ever have been exposed to. It gets them really thinking about expression, and a lot of elements of music, that when they’re realizing a written composition, they will have a very different experience.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid

Bill Cahn advocates for the instruction of improvisation to all musicians, through his teaching of a course at the Eastman School of Music on creative music making. In this class, students participate in performance exercises as well as guided discussions based on the recordings of those performance exercises. These discussions encourage the students to be more critical of their music making, and to be able to describe, politely and positively, the musical events that occurred during the performance. This can only be achieved by a discerning and careful listening experience. The advantage to this type of learning is that students become aware of ways they can connect to other musicians and experience the possibilities inherent to being a good ensemble player. In Mr. Cahn's own voice:

To side-track a little bit, a lot of the instruction today is on solo repertoire, on all instruments, not just percussion, and the art of playing in an ensemble, give and take, is not all about me, it's about us. That way of thinking about music making is in trouble right now and I think that creative music making in ensembles of mixed instruments is the best way to address that. Even to have creative music making with only percussion players is better than nothing, but I would advocate to having mixed instruments if possible to extend, and voice too!⁷⁷

Mr. Cahn also believes that when musicians improvise in performance, new, original, and "custom made" music may allow the audience to feel a connection to the performers in such a way that often leads them to say that the improvised piece was the most interesting and engaging piece on the program.

Regarding music education and improvisation, the interviewees were asked to share their opinion on perceptions from the traditional classical music community towards creative contemporary musical improvisation., They also were asked if there is an issue with the

⁷⁷ Ibid.

perception of improvisation as a valid art form. The answers obtained are a candid insight into the state of affairs that exists between composers, performers, audiences, and academia.

Garry Kvistad believes that creative improvisation is not a problem for a larger, lay audience, because “they will listen to whatever we have to offer, and not really know or understand any difference.”⁷⁸ In his view, the contemporary music establishment is a comparatively small group, far from being mainstream, which is comprised of different camps who accept and define things differently, that there is in fact, a division between academics (also intellectuals) who consider improvisation as a valid art form and those who do not. He mentioned that when the Black Earth Percussion Group was formed, the members discussed improvisation and decided not to duplicate NEXUS’s performance practice; they would instead focus on performing existing written works and commissioning new ones. Kvistad also shared an interesting anecdote involving a contemporary composer with whom Black Earth collaborated:

We worked with a composer in the early 1970s at the University of Illinois by the name of Herbert Brün . . . (H)e was very much opposed to the concept of improvisation, which is interesting because at one time he worked as a piano player playing standard tunes, and he must have improvised a little bit, but he called improvisation “Redundant Auto-Biographical Material”. When musicians were making music on the spot, he said they were really just doing stuff they had done before, and it wasn’t advancing the world of composition at all.

Whereas [with] NEXUS, I really believe that composers didn’t know much about percussion, and that by NEXUS improvising with instruments they liked and with techniques that were maybe unknown to many composers that they were helping to advance that, quite a bit. This is a huge topic that one could spend a lot of time on, and that’s kind of it in a nutshell.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Russell Hartenberger suggested that perhaps a dilemma exists between composers and performers in that some composers invite performers to contribute to the creative process, by “composing” improvised or partially improvised sections in their works. His issue with this scenario presents itself when the composer then takes credit for, or is believed to be responsible for the final musical product. Hartenberger also reflected on the reception of improvisation between the classical and the jazz communities:

I guess some people probably look on completely improvised music as not having the same kind of structure or forethought that a composed piece does. But then you have the jazz community who really appreciates the virtuosity and originality of the performer’s approach. They tend to give it a little bit more credence.⁸⁰

Bill Cahn explained his point of view in a very honest and factual way. His answer to the question of the existence of misconceptions for improvised music came from a place of struggle and the quest for acceptance:

Yes I do think that that exists. It’s unfortunate, but it does. Especially in the classical world, with some good reason, and also in the jazz world, improvisation tends to have a very limited interpretation about what the word means and what’s possible with it, defined by the styles, the various kind of jazz styles. So yes, there are pre-conceptions about just the word improvisation and what that implies, and unfortunately, it’s difficult to promote improvisation because of these preconceptions, so that’s why I use the name creative music making. That was the one reason I decided not to call it free-from improvisation, which is exactly what it is.⁸¹

Mr. Cahn shared his experiences as a classical percussion student who later became an authority in the area of ensemble improvisation:

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

When I was in school, there was no interest in it whatsoever. In fact, until just a few years ago, there were no places you could go to experience free-form improvisation, at least in the US. But that's changing slowly but surely.⁸²

I have had opportunities to perform and to teach creative musical improvisation and agree with Bill Cahn and his view of the state of affairs in academia. Improvisation is seldom considered to have the same value as printed music.⁸³ This situation may be attributed to ignorance, or perhaps to the lack of exposure and education on the art and useful skills necessary for improvisation. Mr. Cahn believes that the competitive world of music is indeed contributing to the industrialization of education and the production of highly skilled, technically proficient musicians. These individuals may not be aware of the other side of music performance, where spirituality connects with intuition, and can be used as an effective means for connecting with and attracting future audiences of new music.

The subject of creative contemporary musical improvisation is slowly gathering momentum. Proof of this may be seen in the continued success of NEXUS percussion ensemble and their improvisatory feats, and the fact that Bill Cahn has written a book and teaches a university level class on the subject. It is my hope that this document will draw more attention to the practice of real time music making, not only with percussion ensembles, but also within mixed ensembles as well. Contemporary percussion groups are also turning to the idea of improvisation as an acceptable and valid way to create musical works. Such is the case of SŌ Percussion and their involvement in the recording of the album *Bad Mango* by jazz trumpeter Dave Douglas, volume three of a series called *Greenleaf Portable Series* (GPS). This album

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

features compositions where improvisation and composition are heavily featured, to the point of bridging the division between written and intuitive music. Maybe this is the direction into which contemporary music will move, and that we are in the midst of the genesis of a true contemporary musical experience, where music is truly music of the now. A music that relates to our political, social, and geographical surroundings that, just like the present, cannot be predicted or foreseen, and is influenced by intuition and instinct, guided by the purity of sound, and a quest for honesty and truth.

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APPENDIX A. BIOGRAPHIES

No introduction to the membership (both past and present) of NEXUS would be complete without the inclusion of their individual biographies. In most cases these biographies were written by the individual members and taken from their personal web sites or from that of the NEXUS ensemble web page. For the members who are now deceased, biographical information is taken from obituaries and remembrances.

NEXUS⁸⁴

The first, entirely improvised NEXUS concert in 1971 marked the formation of a group that would touch and entertain people of all levels of musical learning, in all genres of percussion music. Bob Becker, Bill Cahn, Russell Hartenberger and Garry Kvistad are virtuosos alone, and bring elements of their knowledge and character to a distinct and powerful whole. They stand out in the contemporary music scene for the innovation and diversity of their programs, their impressive history of collaborations and commissions, their revival of 1920's novelty ragtime xylophone music, and their influential improvisatory ideas.

NEXUS' firm commitment to music education and a steady output of quality CD recordings and compositions by its members continues to enhance the role of percussion in the 21st century. NEXUS' music, with its widespread appeal, has taken the group on tours of Australia, New Zealand, Asia, Brazil, Scandinavia, Europe, and regularly to the United States and Canada. NEXUS is proud to have been the first Western percussion group to perform in the

⁸⁴ NEXUS, "Biography," Accessed October 2 2013, <http://nexuspercussion.com/about/>.

People's Republic of China. They have also enjoyed participating at international music festivals such as the Adelaide, Holland, Budapest Spring, Singapore Arts, Tanglewood, Ravinia, and Blossom Music Festivals, as well as the BBC Proms in London, Music Today and Music Joy festivals in Tokyo, and many World Drum Festivals. NEXUS is the recipient of the Banff Centre for the Arts National Award and the Toronto Arts Award. NEXUS was inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame in 1999, just before celebrating their 30th anniversary season.

Especially renowned for their improvisational skills, NEXUS was called upon to create the musical score for the National Film Board's *Inside Time*, which won the 2008 Yorkton Golden Sheaf award for best social/political documentary and the 2008 Robert Brooks award for cinematography. TV and radio broadcasters such as the CBS TV, PBS, and CBC have regularly featured this leading percussion ensemble. NEXUS also created the chilling score for the Academy Award-winning feature-length documentary *The Man Who Skied Down Everest*. NEXUS' list of high-profile collaborations includes Steve Reich, the Kronos Quartet, the Canadian Brass, and clarinetist Richard Stoltzman.

Toru Takemitsu, a great friend to NEXUS, composed one of their signature pieces, *From me flows what you call Time*.... This work, written with each NEXUS member's personality in mind, was premiered for Carnegie Hall's centennial celebration in 1990 with Seiji Ozawa conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra (recorded on Sony with the Pacific Symphony). In 2005, Pulitzer Prize winning composer Ellen Taaffe Zwilich composed *Rituals* for NEXUS and Chamber Orchestra. New Music Box calls it "one of Zwilich's most exciting compositions to date...[a] blockbuster piece!" The recording features NEXUS and the IRIS Orchestra.

Among notable NEXUS events have been their 2007/08 performances at the Ojai Festival in California that reviewer Charles Donelan called “thrilling” and said would “certainly stand as one of the most memorable of 2007 in any venue, anywhere”, and the L.A. Times music critic commented, “Ojai felt, for that hour, like holy ground.”. In 2008/09 NEXUS premiered two new commissioned works from Juilliard’s Eric Ewazen, and from marimba virtuoso Gordon Stout. A solo CD entitled *Wings* was also released in 2009. The group’s previous solo CD was the Juno-nominated *Drumtalker*. NEXUS launched their 40th season with the premiere of the new co-commissioned Steve Reich *Mallet Quartet* in 2010, followed by 2011 sell-outs at the Minnesota Beethoven Festival and in Japan, and critically acclaimed concerts with the Syracuse NY and Austin TX symphony orchestras. Following their featured appearance on the Canadian Brass’s best-selling CD *Stars and Stripes – A Tribute to the USA* the two ensembles appeared together in concert in upstate New York in July 2011. In 2012 NEXUS toured to California, Arkansas, Georgia and Ohio, appeared at Percussion Rochester, and performed the Reich *Mallet Quartet* for Soundstreams’ 30th anniversary. In Fall 2012 NEXUS honoured John Cage’s 100th Anniversary at Bard College’s Fisher Center in New York with an unusual performance and recording of Cage’s once-lost 1942 radio play *The City Wears A Slouch Hat* in collaboration with renowned film maker Mikel Rouse. NEXUS realized the percussion and sound effects score, which involved live actors, the film and the NEXUS performance featuring new instruments created by NEXUS for the event. Spring 2013 finds NEXUS performing with the Eastman Wind Ensemble in Toronto, and with the Rochester Philharmonic in Rochester NY. NEXUS wishes to thank Pearl/Adams, The Canada Council for the Arts, and the Ontario Arts Council for their

ongoing support. This year the OAC is celebrating its 50th anniversary, and we thank them for supporting NEXUS for a large number of those years!!

Bob Becker⁸⁵

Born on June 22, 1947 in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Bob Becker holds the degrees Bachelor of Music with Distinction, and Master of Music (Performance and Literature) from the Eastman School of Music where he studied percussion with William G. Street and John H. Beck, and composition with Warren Benson and Aldo Provenzano. As an undergraduate he was also awarded the school's prestigious Performer's Certificate for his concerto performance with the Rochester Philharmonic. He later spent four years doing post-graduate study in the World Music program at Wesleyan University where he became intensely involved with the music cultures of North and South India, Africa and Indonesia. As a founding member of the percussion ensemble NEXUS, he has been involved with the collection and construction of a unique multi-cultural body of instruments as well as the development of an extensive and eclectic repertoire of chamber and concerto works for percussion.

Becker's performing experience spans nearly all of the musical disciplines where percussion is found. He has been percussionist for the Marlboro Music Festival and timpanist with the Marlboro Festival Orchestra under Pablo Casals. He has also performed and toured as timpanist with the Kirov Ballet and the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra. For several years he toured as drummer and percussionist with the Paul Winter Consort. He has performed and recorded with such diverse groups as the Ensemble Intercontemporaine under Pierre Boulez, the

⁸⁵ Bob Becker, "Biography," Accessed October 2 2013, <http://www.mostlymarimba.com/artists/451.html?itemid=27>.

Ensemble Modern of Germany, the Schoenberg Ensemble of Amsterdam, and the Boston Chamber Players. In 2003 and 2004 he performed as percussionist with the Grand Teton Music Festival Orchestra. He has worked with today's most significant conductors including, among many others, Seiji Ozawa, Zubin Mehta, Christoph Eschenbach, Sir Andrew Davis, and Michael Tilson Thomas. In 1988 he directed and performed in the show SuperPercussion at the Tokyo Music Joy Festival, which brought together NEXUS, the Korean percussion group Samul-Nori, drumset artist Steve Gadd, and Ghanaian master drummer Abraham Adzenyah.

His work with African percussion traditions includes study and performance with master drummers Abraham Adzenyah, Gideon Alorwoye, and Freeman Donkor, as well as with mbira specialist Paul Berliner. In 1986 he traveled to Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, and Kenya as the representative of the World Drums Festival of Expo '86. He was co-founder and the first director of the Flaming Dono West African Dance and Drum Ensemble in Toronto, a group devoted to learning and performing the dance-drumming styles of the ethnic groups in present-day Ghana.

A disciple of Pandit Sharda Sahai, the foremost exponent of the Benares tabla style, Becker began his study of Hindustani music in 1970. He has since appeared with many of India's leading artists including sarangi virtuoso Ram Narayan, sarodist Amjad Ali Khan, composer and flutist Vijay Raghav Rao, and vocalists Laksmi Shankar, Pandit Jasraj, and Jitendra Abisheki. In addition, he has worked closely with some of the most significant American exponents of Indian classical music – sitarist Peter Row and bansuri flutist Steve Gorn. For several years Row, Gorn, and Becker performed together as the Vistar Trio. Becker made his tabla solo debut in 1982 at the Nagri Natak Academy Concert Hall in Benares, India.

Becker co-founded the percussion group NEXUS, which gave its first performances in 1971 and continues to perform around the world. The ensemble has toured extensively throughout North America, Europe, and Asia, performing in chamber music venues as well as with symphony orchestras, and has recorded over twenty-five CDs. With NEXUS Becker has appeared as soloist with the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Chicago Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, among many others, and has received the Toronto Arts Award and the Banff Centre for the Arts National Award. In 1999 he and the other members of NEXUS were inducted into the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame.

Becker has been a regular member of the ensemble Steve Reich and Musicians since 1973. With this group he has appeared as soloist with the Israel Philharmonic, the Brooklyn Philharmonic, the New York Philharmonic and the London Symphony and recorded extensively for Deutsche Grammophone, EMI and Nonesuch. In 1998 the ensemble won a Grammy award for its recording of Reich's Music for 18 Musicians. Becker has been a featured performer in all of Reich's percussion music, including Drumming, Piano/Marimba Phase, Six Pianos/Six Marimbas, Sextet, and Nagoya Marimbas; the large ensemble and orchestral pieces, such as Tehillim, The Desert Music, and City Life; and also the recent large-scale theater works, including The Cave and Three Tales.

Generally considered to be one of the world's premier virtuoso performers on the xylophone and marimba, Becker also appears regularly as an independent soloist and clinician. In particular, his work toward resurrecting the repertoire and performance styles of early 20th century xylophone music has been recognized internationally. He has appeared as xylophone

soloist at the Blossom Festival, the Eastern Music Festival, the Meadow Brook Festival, the Grand Teton Music Festival and with orchestras and concert bands throughout the United States. Since 2000 he has directed an annual ragtime xylophone seminar at the University of Delaware, Newark, DE, which has attracted an international student body. In 1998 he was concertmaster, marimba soloist, and xylophone soloist with the 164-member Musser Festival Marimba Orchestra, conducted by Frederick Fennell, at West Point, NY. In 2005 he was again concertmaster and soloist with the Clair Musser World's Fair Marimba Orchestra at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. In 2011 he was concertmaster for the 50th Anniversary Marimba Orchestra at PASIC, 2011 in Indianapolis, IN.

Becker has performed and lectured for music departments and percussion programs throughout North America and Europe. His clinics and workshops cover a wide variety of percussion topics including North Indian tabla drumming, West and East African percussion, "melodic" snare drumming, rudimental arithmetic, creative approaches to cymbal playing, and ragtime xylophone improvisation concepts. In 1996 and 2001 he was a Guest Lecturer for the Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta. In the fall of 2002 he was a jurist for the Geneva International Music Competition in Switzerland and in 2005 he was a member of the jury for the International Percussion Competition Luxembourg. He has served as editor for the contemporary percussion issue of the British publication *Contemporary Music Review* and served for two years on the board of directors of the Percussive Arts Society. For the fall term of 2005 he was appointed Lecturer in Percussion and Director of the Percussion Ensemble at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ.

Since 1988 he has been associated with the Malletech Company, where he helped design the Bob Becker Concert Xylophone as well as a successful line of signature xylophone mallets now used by percussionists around the world. As an endorser for the Sabian cymbal company he has helped design special instruments for applications in symphonic and contemporary chamber contexts, the Becker Bowing Cymbal being one result. In 2005 he received Sabian's Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2006 he was recognized as a "Master Drummer" by the International Association of Traditional Drummers, an organization founded by the legendary rudimentalist John S. Pratt.

Becker's compositions and arrangements are published by Keyboard Percussion Publications and are performed regularly by percussion groups world-wide. He also has a long history of association with dance, and has created music for the Joffrey Ballet in New York, among others. In 1991 he and Joan Phillips were awarded the National Arts Centre Award for the best collaboration between composer and choreographer at Toronto's INDE '91 dance festival. Recent works include *There is a Time*, commissioned by Rina Singha and the Danny Grossman Dance Company, *Noodrem*, commissioned through the Canada Council by the Dutch ensemble Slagwerkgroep Den Haag, *Turning Point*, composed for the NEXUS ensemble, *Cryin' Time*, a setting of poetry by the Canadian artist Sandra Meigs, *Never in Word and Time in the Rock*, settings of poetry by the American author Conrad Aiken, and *Music On The Moon*, commissioned through the Laidlaw Foundation by the Esprit Orchestra in Toronto. Five of his compositions are included on his solo album, *There is a Time*, released in 1995 on the Nexus Records label. In the spring of 1997 he was selected to be composer-in-residence for the Virginia Waterfront International Festival of the Arts which featured the United States premiere of *Music*

On The Moon by the Virginia Symphony, conducted by JoAnn Falletta, and a concert of his chamber works by his own group, the Bob Becker Ensemble. In April, 2005 he was featured during the 25th Anniversary of the Budapest Spring Festival as guest soloist with the Hungarian percussion ensemble Amadinda in a concert of his own compositions. In July, 2009 he was showcased at the first International Belgian Percussion Festival as soloist with the Swedish percussion group Kroumata in a concert featuring his own compositions and arrangements. He recently completed work on a book titled Rudimental Arithmetic, an in-depth study of the mathematical bases of the rudiments of snare drumming and their applications in composition and polyrhythmic theory, released by KPP in 2008. His most recent composition, Preludes, was premiered in August, 2011 at the Roots and Rhizomes Percussion Residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Banff, Alberta, with Steven Schick conducting. The 20-minute work is in two movements, scored for string quartet, piano, glockenspiel, vibraphone, marimba and timpani, and was commissioned by the Banff Centre. In November, 2011 Becker's music was showcased in a concert at the Percussive Arts Society's 50th Anniversary International Convention.

Becker was instrumental in the development of the "Bob Becker model" Malletech Ragtime/Soloist Xylophone and offers a signature line of Malletech mallets especially suited to xylophone playing.

Bill Cahn⁸⁶

Bill Cahn has been a member of the percussion group, NEXUS, since 1971, and was principal percussionist in the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra from 1968 to 1995. Born in Philadelphia in 1946, Bill has performed with conductors, composers, ensembles, and artists representing diverse musical styles – Chet Atkins, John Cage, Carlos Chavez, Aaron Copland, Jimmy Durante, Chuck Mangione, Mitch Miller, Seiji Ozawa, Steve Reich, Doc Severinsen, Leopold Stokowski, Richard Stoltzman, Igor Stravinsky, Edgard Varese and Paul Winter.

He has conducted educational and pops programs with symphony orchestras, and his compositions for solo percussion, percussion ensemble and percussion with orchestra/band are widely performed. His fourth book, “Creative Music Making,” was published by Routledge Books in 2005.

In addition to his position at the Eastman School of Music, Bill is a faculty artist-in-residence at the Showa College of the Arts in Atsugi, Japan, and has served at the Banff Centre for the Arts.

Bill has received the Rochester Philharmonic League’s FANFARE AWARD (1988) for a “significant contribution to music education in Rochester,” Mu Phi Epsilon’s MUSICIAN OF THE YEAR AWARD (1993), and with NEXUS, the TORONTO ARTS AWARD in music (1989), the BANFF CENTRE FOR THE ARTS NATIONAL AWARD (1997), and induction into the Percussive Arts Society’s HALL OF FAME (1999). In 2006 Bill received a GRAMMY Award for his performance with Paul Winter on the DVD titled, “2004 Solstice Concert”.

⁸⁶ William L Cahn, "Biography," Accessed October 2 2013, http://www.esm.rochester.edu/faculty/cahn_william/.

Russell Hartenberger⁸⁷

Russell Hartenberger began his percussion studies in Oklahoma City with Alan Abel. After Mr. Abel left Oklahoma City to join the Philadelphia Orchestra, Russell studied with Tom Gauger and K. Dean Walker. He received his B.Mus degree from Curtis Institute where he studied with Fred D. Hinger. Upon graduation from Curtis, he joined the U.S. Air Force Band and toured throughout the US, Europe and South America as xylophone soloist. While in the Air Force Band, Russell received his M.Mus degree from Catholic University where he again studied with Alan Abel.

Russell holds a PhD in World Music from Wesleyan University where he studied mrdangam with Ramnad Raghavan of South India, tabla with Sharda Sahai of North India, Javanese Gamelan with Prawotosaputro and West African Drumming with Abraham Adzinyah. He is Professor of Percussion at the University of Toronto and is currently Acting Associate Dean and Chair of the Performance Department.

He has been a member of the Oklahoma City Symphony, Philadelphia Lyric Opera Co., percussionist at the Marlboro Music Festival, Principal Percussion of the New Haven Symphony, timpanist with the Canadian Opera Company and performs often with the Toronto Symphony. He has performed with the Paul Winter Consort, Ensemble Modern of Germany, John Wyre's World Drums, Woodstock Beat, and New Music Concerts of Toronto. He also has worked and/or recorded with such diverse musicians as Gil Evans, Jimmy Garrison, John Cage, John Adams, Steve Gadd, Peter Erskine, Glen Velez, Iannis Xenakis, Pablo Casals, Canadian Brass, Kronos String Quartet, Peter Serkin, Trichy Sankaran, Richard Stoltzman and Yo-Yo Ma.

⁸⁷ NEXUS, "Biography".

Russell has been a member of Steve Reich and Musicians since 1971, and with them he has recorded for ECM, DGG and Nonesuch Records. He performed on the Grammy Award-winning recording of *Music for 18 Musicians*. With the Reich Ensemble, Russell has toured throughout the world and performed with the New York Philharmonic, Israel Philharmonic, Cologne Radio Orchestra, London Symphony and Brooklyn Philharmonic. The conductors he has played under include Zubin Mehta, Michael Tilson Thomas, Kent Nagano, Peter Eotvos, Paul Hillyer, Brad Lubman and George Manahan.

Russell lives in Toronto with his wife, artist Bonnie Sheckter and their two daughters, Laura and Carla.

Garry Kvistad⁸⁸

Garry's passion for music started when he joined the school band in the 4th grade. Little did he know then that 40-some years later he would win a Grammy! At age 14 Garry attended the Interlochen Arts Academy and went on to earn a Bachelor of Music from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. He received a Masters of Music from Northern Illinois University, where he studied music, art and physics in the pursuit of building musical instruments. In 1993 Northern Illinois University honored him with its Distinguished Alumni Award. In the 1970's Garry worked with composer/conductor Lucas Foss as a Creative Associate in Buffalo, New York, after which he joined the faculty of Northern Illinois University before moving on to the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. During this time he co-founded the Blackearth Percussion Group, which recorded and toured in the U.S., Canada and Europe.

⁸⁸ Garry Kvistad, "Biography," Accessed October 2 2013, <http://www.woodstockchimes.com/t-biography.aspx>.

It was also during this time that Garry built his first metallophone, a xylophone-like instrument made with metal instead of wood. Being a recent college graduate, Garry found the materials for his metallophone at the local landfill - it was made from the aluminum tubes of discarded lawn chairs! Garry was fascinated by the Scales of Olympos, a 7th century Greek pentatonic scale that can't be played on a modern piano. His metallophone experiment was so successful that he had the idea to cut and tune lawn chair tubes to the exact frequency of the scale and create a wind chime from the tubes. It was the perfect instrument that the wind could play randomly. Plus you don't need formal musical training to appreciate the beautiful sound. The Chime of Olympos® was the first Woodstock Chime and is still one of our best selling products.

Garry has served as the timpanist and percussionist with the Chicago Grant Park Symphony, was a summer Tanglewood Fellow and worked as a percussionist with the Cabrillo Music Festival Orchestra in California. He has been featured in performances with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Cleveland Orchestra, and Israel Philharmonic, as well as many other orchestras in North America and Europe. Giri Mekar, the Balinese Gong Kebyar Gamelan ensemble which he formed in 1987, is currently in residence at Bard College in Red Hook, New York.

In 1980 Garry started performing with Steve Reich and Musicians, and he is one of 18 musicians to win a Grammy award for the 1998 recording of Steve Reich's Music for 18 Musicians. During this time he met and performed with Bob Becker and Russell Hartenberger, two of the original founders of NEXUS, a world renown percussion group. Garry has been performing and touring extensively with NEXUS since 2002, when John Wyre, one of the

founding members of the group, retired. Considered one of, if not the, premier percussion ensembles in the world today, the New York Times has called NEXUS "the high priests of the percussion world."

Garry and his wife, Diane, are active in the Woodstock Community helping to reinforce support for the arts and food and shelter programs. Through their charitable foundation, The Woodstock Chimes Fund, they have assisted artists and humanitarian efforts mostly in the Hudson Valley. They are proud of the attitude their employees take toward these values, as well as the company's commitment to sustainable business practices. 2009 marked the 30th year of Woodstock Chimes, which are now and have always been "Powered by the Wind."

Michael Craden

Likely due to his early passing, and perhaps owing to his prominence as a visual artist, biographical information for Michael Craden as a performing musician is limited. The narrative that follows is a tribute by long time Los Angeles musical luminary Emil Richards regarding his memories and thoughts on Michael Craden.

Michael Craden remembered⁸⁹

I met Michael Craden in 1959 when I moved to to L.A. I was working with Paul Horn at the Renaissance Club on Sunset Strip, where we would play opposite Lord Buckley, Lenny Bruce, Jimmy Witherspoon and Paul Mazursky, who was a stand-up comic before he became a

⁸⁹ Emil Richards, "Michael Craden Remembered," *Percussive Notes* 34, no. 4 (1996): 12.

famous producer. Michael used to hang out there with people like James Coburn, Dennis Hopper and Kim Novak.

Michael was studying at Chouinard Art Institute; art was his main thing. He was listening to jazz but getting involved visually more than musically. Michael and I became fast friends and began talking about how art and music were related. Before long, we decided to start a group called AHA—the Aesthetic Harmony Assemblage. The other members were Don Preston, who worked with Frank Zappa, Don's wife, Rowena, and probably the first electronics nut on the West Coast, Paul Beaver, who helped put the Moog synthesizer together and who turned Michael and me on to Harry Partch.

At that time, I was doing a lot of recording work behind Columbia Pictures, and they were throwing away work prints of space shots. So I was collecting all the film I could get and Don Preston and his wife were splicing all this stuff together. We found this place right next to Drum City called the Cosmic Star Auditorium; it was kind of a metaphysical place. We were putting all these weird films together, and Michael would be painting on stage while we would play to his painting.

All of a sudden one night, Michael decided to start playing my vibes. So I went over to his canvas and started painting—and he literally pushed me off. I asked him, “What are you doing?” He said, “Man, you can't paint.” I said, “Then get the hell off my vibes!” So we got into a total argument as to the validity of “anybody can play music but not anybody can paint.” Finally he said, “Okay, you teach me as much about music as you can and I'll help you with painting.” I didn't do too good with painting and he never wanted to take the time to get that involved with music because art was his primary thing. He never developed a structured

knowledge of the vibraphone, and if you were to put a piece of music in front of him, it was out of the question. But he could do the modal thing pretty well.

Hari-Har Rao was a tabla and sitar player from New Delhi who came to L.A. to teach, so Michael and I, Joe Porcaro, Don Ellis and a few other musicians around town started studying Indian rhythms with Hari-Har. Michael just ate up the Indian rhythms. He was able to absorb rhythms readily.

None of us had enough time in our life to become really prolific on tabla, so Michael's medium became congas. By this time I had sponsored Harry Partch's move to Los Angeles, and we were messing around with Harry. Through him we met Erv Wilson, who was another theorist. Harry's theory was forty-three tones to the octave; Erv Wilson's theory was thirty-one tones to the octave. Thirty-one made a lot of sense to us; it's a magical number. Erv helped us build all these wonderful, strange, microtonal instruments. Michael was really into it. Now he had two voices—the rhythmic voice and the microtonal voice.

We were really close buddies and we hung night and day. Michael was still very prolific as a painter, but he got more and more into music and we were doing more and more of these concerts.

Then we met King Moody and Rachael Rosenthal, who were husband and wife. They were doing Instant Theatre where they would go in and improvise with a group of actors, and they needed musicians to help in the background. So Michael and I would bring down some of the strange ethnic instruments I had collected and some of the microtonal instruments that he and I were building, and we would play behind these people. King Moody became Ronald McDonald and left Instant Theatre. Rachael Rosenthal became very important in the acting world.

Through our studies with Edgar Cayce we kept hearing that big earth changes were going to come, and when the earth tilted on its axis, Toronto would become a subtropical climate and the cultural center of the world. So Michael and his wife went up to Toronto, and he met the guys in Nexus. He would call and tell me that these guys were collecting instruments like I was, and I should get to know them. Little by little he joined their group. They loved all the instruments he had.

Michael was a lot different than the other guys in Nexus; Michael was a looser soul. I used to kid him, “What are you doing with those stuffy guys up there? C’mon back to L.A.” I think he helped them get into improvisation a lot better than they probably would have without his personality rubbing off on them. He really added a lot of qualities to that group that would not have otherwise been there. When they did their rags, Michael did all the kooky sounds—the “boing” gongs and whistles and woodblocks, and all the things that helped make the rags a little more comical and rhythmical.

Michael, along with some of us kooks down in L.A., was one of the fore bearers of the free-form movement in the early ’60s. By the time it got popular again in the later ’70s, to us it was passé. By then, even Michael was looking for a much more structured approach, and I think that was what Nexus gave him. They brought him in a little bit from being as totally out as he had been and gave him some structure.

Michael was staying pretty busy working with different people, playing a lot of congas, hand percussion and auxiliary percussion. He met a poet up there who would take a word like “meditation” and do an hour changing that word around while Michael played. “Medi-taaaaaa-tion. Meda-meda- taaaaaaa-tion. Tion-ta. Ta-tion.”

We stayed in touch by phone at least once or twice a month all the time he was in Toronto. Michael had a colostomy when he was nine years old as a result of cancer of the colon. He didn't go to the doctor regularly to get it checked and just let it go. He called me one night in January of 1982 and said, "The cancer has spread and the doctor doesn't give me too long. Do you have time to come up?" I told him I could come in four days. Two nights later he called again and said, "Can you come sooner? I don't think I'm going to make it." I said I'd be on a plane as soon as I could. I booked a flight for the next morning, but I got a call in the middle of the night saying that he didn't make it.

Michael's last wish was that his ashes would be scattered in the Pacific. My wife and I contacted the Board of Health and got the permits, and Jerry Williams, a percussionist whose brother is John Williams the composer, had a sailboat, so we took Michael's ashes out to sea and put him to rest.

My favorite memory of him is that most of his artwork made me laugh. There was such humor in his art. And there was nothing he couldn't do rhythmically. In the Indian system we never had to worry about quarter notes, 8th notes, any of that. All we did was play on these elaborate patterns of numbers. Michael would often call me from Canada and say, "Hey man, I came up with some good ones," and he'd recite a long line of numbers and tap out the rhythms on the mouthpiece of the phone. He started to get into art with his rhythms too, towards the end. He was a very talented man.

Robin Engelman⁹⁰

Robin Engelman studied percussion and composition with Warren Benson at Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York. He is a founding member of Nexus - formed in 1971 - and a member of the Percussive Arts Society Hall of Fame; a recipient of the Toronto Arts Award and the Banff School of Fine Arts Donald Cameron Medal.

Robin is conductor and director of the University of Toronto Faculty of Music Percussion Ensemble. Its spring 2004 concert featured Canadian Highland Dance champion – ninth in the world - Georgina Muir, piper and professor emeritus of Far Eastern Studies at the University of Toronto, David Waterhouse, organist Andrei Streliaev, a choir and vocal soloists, six piccolos and field drums. The percussion Ensemble recently released a CD titled Rondino that contains music by Nexus member Bob Becker, John Cage, Jo Kondo, Terry Hulick, and Faculty of Music composer John Beckwith. Highlights of a recent concert were premiers of four works by University of Toronto graduate Bruce Mather and five by John Beckwith, all written expressly for the ensemble.

Robin has conducted contemporary music concerts and recordings for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, New Music Concerts of Toronto, Chamber Concerts Canada and faculty recitals at the University of Toronto. In January 2004, he conducted Schoenberg's Ode to Napoleon with the Art of Time Ensemble at Glenn Gould Theatre and five performances of Mauricio Kagel's Variete, a large theatre work for actors, aerialists, comedians etc. and chamber

⁹⁰ Robin Engelman, "Biography," Accessed October 2 2013, http://www.music.utoronto.ca/faculty/faculty_members/instructors_a_to_e/Robin_Engelman.htm.

orchestra presented by the Volcano Theatre Company of Toronto. Variete has been nominated for five Dora Awards.

Robin's career as a percussionist began in the North Carolina Symphony and continued with the New Hampshire Music Festival Orchestra, the Louisville Orchestra, the Milwaukee Symphony, the Rochester Philharmonic and the Stratford Theatre and Music Festival Orchestras. In 1968, he became principal percussionist of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra under Seiji Ozawa and later, Karel Ancerl. During the 1980's and 90's, he was principal percussionist with the Canadian Opera Company Orchestra. For more than fifteen years, he performed with New Music Concerts of Toronto. Founded by flutist Robert Aitken, its concerts featured the works of prominent contemporary composers who supervised the preparation its concerts.

During the last ten years Robin has become increasingly busy as a composer. His latest composition, *She Dances* (August 2003) was written at the request of the internationally known marimba soloist, She-e Wu and premiered by her in January 2004. Robin is at present working on a solo commissioned by Toronto percussionist Ray Dillard. Two works scheduled for completion in 2004-05 are commissions from Toronto's Ergo ensemble and the San Diego California Noise ensemble.

Robin's *Songs for Soldiers*, an arrangement for the Canadian Brass and Nexus of four historic songs associated with military history, was premiered in October of 2002 at the Glenn Gould Theatre and was featured on the C.B.C. Television show *In Concert* broadcast in February 2003. Also completed in 2002 were four arrangements for percussion quintet of songs by Toru

Takemitsu and Handmade Proverbs *Four Pop Songs that Takemitsu wrote for the King's Singers.

His composition Dance Movements for Harp and Marimba (2000) was written for the Toronto duo ArpaTambora – Faculty of Music graduates Sanya Eng and Ryan Scott - who commissioned the work. Dance Movements was premiered by ArpaTambora at the American Harp Society International Harp Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Three of his compositions, Bridge, for five percussion, Remembrance, for five percussionists, trumpet and two trombones, and Lullaby for Esmé, for double lead (steel) pan solo and four percussion, are performed and have been recorded by faculty resident ensemble Nexus.

During the 1970's, Robin became interested in the large rope tensioned field drums used during the 16th - 19th centuries. He began collecting historic fife tunes and fife and drum tutors and began reading books and diaries to better understand the development of the drum and the lives of drummers prior to the 20th century. He has arranged more than one hundred historical tunes for various instrumental combinations and is preparing a book that will trace in melody and song the history of the Field drum from Renaissance England to the end of the Civil War in the United States.

In 2002 he was artistic director of a major concert for the Percussive Arts Society International Convention in Columbus, Ohio called The Drummer's Heritage. That concert was a survey of field drumming styles from the American Revolutionary War to the present and featured solo artists from Scotland, Switzerland, Canada and the United States, along with university, college and elementary school marching units. The concert was the largest in the

history of the Percussive Arts Society and was documented by two major articles in the June and August 2003 issues of *Percussive Notes*, the Journal of the Percussive Arts Society.

The following obituary of John Wyre appeared in *Percussive Notes*, the official journal of the Percussive Arts Society.

John Wyre in memoriam⁹¹

John Wyre, one of the founding members of the world-renown percussion ensemble Nexus, died on October 31, 2006 in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, after a long illness. He is survived by his wife, Jean Donelson Wyre.

Inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame with the other members of Nexus in 1999 at PASIC '99 in Columbus, John told *Percussive Notes*, "We're just one of the ripples on the pond. Through technology, music has exploded exponentially. We're aware of so many different things happening around us now. Our world keeps growing; who knows how vast it will be in another hundred years. How deep will the archives be? How much stuff—good and bad—will people have to wade through to even find our music? Some future percussionists might come along and resurrect something that Nexus has done the way Bob Becker did with George Hamilton Green. The fact that we've reached out and touched some people, inspired them to continue along the trail— that's enough for me. I feel good about what we've done and we've made a positive contribution to percussion."

⁹¹ "In Memoriam: John Wyre," *Percussive News* (2007): 26.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, PA, Wyre played in the All-Philadelphia Senior High School Orchestra, studied with Fred D. Hinger (timpanist with the Philadelphia Orchestra at that time) and became involved in Alan Abel's Settlement Music School Percussion Ensemble (where fellow Nexus members Bill Cahn and Russell Hartenberger would also play). John then went to Rochester, NY to study with William Street at the Eastman School of Music (which would also be the alma mater of another future Nexus colleague, Bob Becker, as well as Cahn).

After leaving Eastman, Wyre played with the Oklahoma City and Milwaukee Symphony Orchestras before becoming the timpanist in the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, a position he held for 11 seasons between 1966 and 1981. In 1968, he joined Becker and Cahn, along with Robin Engelman (with whom John played in both the Milwaukee and Toronto orchestras), and Hartenberger at the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont, and three years later these five musicians gave their first performance as Nexus. (The late Michael Craden [1941–1981] was also one of the founding members of the ensemble.) Wyre also served as the ensemble's first press agent, manager and government liaison.

“John's musical sensibilities underlay the entire project of Nexus, particularly during our first ten years,” remembered Bob Becker. “His artistic ideas—which were continuously put into practice in his lifestyle—his people skills, his abilities as a salesman and networker, as well as his sense of humor, were all critical to organizing us into some kind of viable entity. John's voice in the percussion world was unique. Only a few timpanists have created a style and sound that is as distinctive and immediately recognizable as his. I learned a great deal from him and I miss playing next to him.”

And play next to him he did. For three decades, Wyre performed with Nexus all around the world, playing music that ranged from traditional xylophone rags to Ghanaian drumming, from concertos composed for the group to free-form improvisations. “My very favorite thing we do is a piece called ‘Tongues’,” he said in an unpublished interview. “Bob plays mbira. It’s very simple, which is a sweet thing. I could play that all night and never get tired of it.”

“Nexus is...making music, exploring the world together, sharing the stage from individual spontaneity to exquisite precision,” he wrote for PN in an article celebrating the ensemble’s 25th anniversary in 1996. Six years later, in another interview, Wyre explained why he chose to leave the ensemble. “It’s been 31 extraordinary years, but I want to spend less time traveling all over the world. I want to spend more time writing, and I want to work with some other musicians as well. There are a lot of things that I’ll miss but I’m looking forward to some new horizons.”

Although Nexus was an important part of his musical life, he also organized and directed World Drum Festivals, played in numerous chamber ensembles, collected instruments and music of other cultures, and wrote a book, *Touched by Sound: A Drummer’s Journey*. “My spiritual life is inexorably linked to music,” he wrote in the book’s Preface.

“Sound has always been at the very core of my being.” “John Wyre brought the percussion community a unique voice,” commented Ray Dillard, current business manager for Nexus and a close friend of Wyre’s. “His work with Nexus and World Drums utilized his gifts as a player, a leader, an accompanist, a composer, and— maybe most importantly—an organizer. John could bring things together in an almost magical way. Numerous symphony orchestras and chamber ensembles were given ‘the touch’ from John. That ‘touch’ was multi-dimensional and

potent! Personally, he taught me the importance of every single sound one plays or hears, and every single moment one is alive!”

“John Wyre was my lifelong ‘older brother,’” remembered Bill Cahn. “We were teenagers in the same Philadelphia neighborhoods, we studied with the same teachers, and we both went to Eastman. We toured with the Toronto Symphony together in 1966, and, of course, shared many years of performances worldwide with Nexus. His inspiration and positive outlook will be sorely missed, but his love for making beautiful music will always be a part of anyone who knew him.”

“John transformed time by being in its center,” Robin Engelman recalled. “He was also the greatest orchestral timpanist I had ever played with or heard. But John’s center is the memory I will always cherish.” Russell Hartenberger added, “John changed the way many of us think about music. He brought freedom of thought to interpretation and freedom of movement to performance. He was an inspiration in so many ways to young musicians and equally inspiring to his peers. John was a unique individual who made all those around him feel better about themselves and the world. We will all miss him dearly.”

“John had always been a major inspiration for me on many levels: music, sound, food, laughter and friendship,” explained Garry Kvistad, who joined Nexus in 2002 upon Wyre’s departure. “I know he will continue to inspire everything in his new journey... just as we have all been ‘touched by John’ here on earth.”

APPENDIX B. TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM CAHN. JUNE 7TH, 2013.

OP- Do you think there is a misconception or a validity issue between improvised music and written music?

WC- Yes I do think that that exist. It's unfortunate, but it does. Especially in the classical world, with some good reason, and also in the jazz world, improvisation tends to have a very limited interpretation about what the word means and what's possible with it, defined by the styles, the various kind of jazz styles. So yes, there are pre-conceptions about just the word improvisation and what that implies, and unfortunately, it's difficult to promote improvisation because of these preconceptions, so that's why I use the name creative music making, that was the one reason I decided not to call it free-form improvisation, which is exactly what it is. So in the classical, conservatory world, improvisation tends to be ephemeral and not of any significant value. That's changing, I have to say, but it's a slow change. And the fact that you are interested in it is part of the change. People are becoming interested in this. When I was in school, there was no interest in it whatsoever. In fact, until just a few years ago, there were no places you could go to experience free-form improvisation, at least in the US. But that's changing slowly but surely.

As we get in to a highly technical world, as the level of technical capabilities for players, even young players is going through the roof. I teach at the Eastman School of Music, and we're getting freshmen coming in who are playing stuff that graduate students couldn't even play when I was a student, so that's all on a technical level, but that's not

balanced in my view by the inner world, the intuitive and the spiritual aspect of music making. there doesn't seem to be a balance there, that has to be addressed. So I think that free-form improvisation addresses that balance, not that it's better or worse than the technical stuff. The technical stuff is good, it just needs balance.

OP- Should creative contemporary music making be a necessary skill for every percussionist to have?

WC- I think every musician should have some experience in free-form improvisation. I teach a course called creative music making at Eastman, and that's for mixed instruments. The beauty of that is that everybody on every instrument who is participating gets a chance to play, and the people who are participants get to learn about the other instruments, how can they connect, and what's possible, what are some new ideas in being an ensemble player and working with other players, give and take, and that's really an important part of music making, in my view. To side-track a little bit, a lot of the instruction today is on solo repertoire, on all instruments, not just percussion, and the art of playing in an ensemble, give and take, is not all about me, it's about us. That way of thinking about music making is in trouble right now and I think that creative music making in ensembles of mixed instruments is the best way to address that. Even to have creative music making with only percussion players is better than nothing, but I would advocate to having mixed instruments if possible to extend, and voice too!

One thing about live performance: the thing that free-form improvisation does is give a certain immediacy to live performance especially if you give some clues to the

audience on what you're doing. I've found that (universally) audiences find that to be interesting and in fact, it's not uncommon for audience members to say that the free-form improvised piece was the best thing on the program. I hear that all the time.

OP- As a teacher, how much do you/did you work on creative contemporary music improvisation with your students? What was their reaction to the concept?

WC- When class begins, normally I would ask how many students have improvised, and about half have done some improvisation, and most of it is jazz, people have had a jazz background, and they've learned a little bit about jazz improvisation. So a lot of them have had no experience, and they're rather hesitant, so the first week of improvisations everybody has to play, and usually they're short, 1-3 minutes in length, and over the weeks of the course (one two-hour class each week) the improvisations get longer, the improvisations become more complex, more interesting to listen to, more interesting for the players, involving more kinds of vocabulary, so universally, in the course that I've been teaching, people at the end of the course are totally confident to do a free-from improvised piece on their recitals, and that is starting to happen a lot. Even though there is a reluctance to start, if you've never done it, you don't know what the expectations are, but it is a real challenge for the facilitator or teacher (in this case, me) because you have to assess the students and you have to allow a lot of space, and not be critical, but allow the participants to be self-evaluating what's going on, rather than dictating it from the teacher. I think the self-learning aspect of it is where there is real

good value, and it's not so much top down learning, it's more lateral learning, they learn from each other.

I require everyone to speak. Everyone has to say something about what they've heard. If there are other rules, that's the one (unwritten rule) but I try to have everybody participate, so that puts a little more pressure on participants to really have to listen to think about what's going on, and that works really well. The other thing about facilitating, as the weeks go by, I do less and less directing. By the final week, almost everything happens without me having to say or do anything. They simply start, I'll point to someone and that person will make a comment about what they've heard, and they'll just continue going around the room, I don't have to direct that. And they don't participate necessarily in the discussion, I just allow people to say what they thought, and go to the next one. They are sort of teaching each other about what they've experienced.

OP- Did you have any experience/exposure to improvised music while growing up? Did you have any experience/exposure to improvised music while attending school?

WC- Not in college, except for a little bit of jazz improvisation. I played drum set. Most percussionist have some drum set experience and of course a lot of that is improvised, but improvised within certain limitations of the styles. However, when NEXUS was forming, and I address this at the beginning of the book, we had a collection, we started to become interested in non-Western percussion instruments, so we had this huge collection of instruments that we had no idea about how they were used in their native settings, so we just began improvising with them, and it culminated in a

concert (first NEXUS concert) where we filled the stage and just improvised. NEXUS has been improvising frequently in concerts, as part of a concert, sometimes for an entire concert, since then. So yes, a lot of experience after NEXUS was formed, and prior to that, minimal.

OP- Can you talk about that first NEXUS performance in March of 1971?

WC- At that point there were four members of NEXUS, myself and Bob Becker, and from Toronto John Wyre and Robin Engelman, and we had done a number of improvisations on our own, just in our own living rooms and our homes, with instruments that we had available, and we did once for a friend of ours who was a great composer, Warren Benson, and he was the one who said “why don’t we do a concert of this kind of stuff in Kilbourn Hall at Eastman School? And we did. He set it up. John and Robin came down from Toronto with a truck load of stuff, we filled the stage and improvised the concert. But Warren Benson was the catalyst that made it all come together. It would have happen any way at some point, but he was the one at that particular time that got it started.

OP- How did the audience receive the performance? Was the audience made aware that the program was composed on the spot?

WC- The audience was absolutely aware that it was totally improvised. We had a music reviewer there from the local newspaper, and he gave us a fantastic review (I still got it). He thought it was very unusual and engaging for the audience to be witnessing

music that was being created right there, on the spot, and also using instruments that nobody at that time had any knowledge about, except maybe ethnomusicologists but even at Eastman there were no ethnomusicologist at that time. So this was a completely new experience for the audience, and it was actually a new experience for us too, to do that in public.

OP- Where all of the members of NEXUS on board with the improvisation, or was there any hesitation?

WC- No. It just happened naturally. The first one to collect instruments was John Wyre. I think percussionists are naturally interested in the sound. Just a particular sound is enough to cause the percussionist to have a musical experience given a particular sound, and we started to hear this kind of sounds in instruments that were not part of the studies that we had taken, so we started to hear bells from Asia, gongs from Asia, drums from Africa, various kinds of metallic and wooden instruments that we were finding in antique shops. There were no catalogues at that point. In fact, there wasn't even a word for World music. We were just discovering these things that were brought back by tourists that ended up in estates and worked their way into antique shops. We spent weekends going to antique shops looking for things that were good sounding from other cultures, and we were finding them and they were relatively inexpensive at that time, because nobody wanted them. Now, you can get that stuff in a catalogue or online. It is amazing the access you have to instruments. The trade off is you have access but you have to pay more.

OP- Do you think that the decade in which NEXUS became a group had an impact on how you presented your concerts? Was the improvisation/experimentation a product of the social environment?

WC- Absolutely! In the late 1960s to the mid 1970s, this is the formation period of NEXUS. There were 3 things happenings in that period. First of all, there was jet travel. It was now possible to have breakfast in London and lunch in New York, or to have breakfast in Rochester NY and have dinner in Tokyo. That meant that people could travel much more easily to exotic places, and through that travel, experience other music. The flip side to this is that it made it possible for ensembles to travel to other places. I remember the fist time I heard a Cambodian ensemble in Rochester, and they had a gong ensemble with them, and that was all possible because of jet travel.

Associated with ease of travel, is international trade. The ease (now) of moving products from country to country, including musical instruments. The next thing was the HI-FI record revolution. It was possible to get good field recordings of musics from other places in the world. So, when you combine all these things, the ease of travel, the access to recordings, the access to instruments, that was all the beginning of Globalization in those years, and we were the beneficiaries of that. We were exploring what kind of possibilities that new environment provided for us.

OP- How does the amount of improvised music on your concerts vary? Do you always try to improvise at each concert?

WC- It varies. Some concert will have no improvisation, some concerts occasionally will be entirely improvised, and more frequently, a concert will have one or two improvised pieces on it, but normally just one. And if we have a guest artist, we'll always do an improvised piece. We did a free-form improvisation as part of a program with Kronos string quartet. This was in Toronto, for a CBC nationwide broadcast. We had no planning whatsoever, we just walked out on stage and did an improvisation. I have a recording of it and it's fantastic! The string quartet was very open, they had great ears and great imagination, so they were able to really be deeply involved in the free-form improvisation, which was 15-20 min long, so it was a significant work, and it was phenomenal. So yes, we try to include free-form improvisation in our program whenever we can.

OP- How do you choose the instruments you are going to improvise with? Do you use the instruments that are already on stage?

WC- Yes. It depends. When we started we filled the stage with whatever we wanted to have, and we would wonder from set up to set up. Sometimes we'd be playing on our instruments, and sometimes we'd be playing on instruments belonging to one of the other members. That has changed a little bit over the years. Now, we each bring our own improvised set-up and we pretty much stick to our own instruments. I think there is a video online of a concert that we did last year (in June) at a place in NY city called Le Poison Rouge, and there's a video of that improvisation there, which was part of a

program (just a single piece) and we each brought our own instruments for that. Only for the improvisation, not for any of the other pieces.

OP Is there a specific moment (or concert) of improvised music that holds a special place in your memory?

WC- There are a few. This improvisation with Kronos for the CBC nationwide broadcasting is one, we did an all-night improvisation in Copenhagen, Denmark, at the request of the presenter. We set up and played a piece all night long! That was interesting. We had a small audience, but they enjoyed it. We have a CD called “Garden of sounds” with clarinetist Richard Stoltzman. When that was done, we just filled the recording studio with instruments, just as we had done for our very first concert, and Richard Stoltzman had a music stand, and we just (all day long) improvised. At the end of the day, after it was all done, we all took the recordings home, and we picked out those sections that we liked, and put those on a CD. Interestingly, we got a review from a music critic in England (I think), where he refused to believe we were improvising. This is kind of a compliment actually. He thought that we had worked everything out. He couldn’t believe it was free-improvisation. I actually sent him an email telling him: “You’re wrong, It was entirely improvised, we had no plan whatsoever, we just set up and played. Good musicians can do that”. I never heard back from him. But it was a compliment that he thought the pieces were so structured and so organic (in a way) that he couldn’t believe that it was all improvised. In his way, to go back to your first question, was his pre-conception about what improvisation is. He was entirely wrong.

OP- What do you bring to the table as far as improvisational skills or techniques?

WC- We bring our own taste. Actually the five members of NEXUS (now is four, and it was six at one point) are very strong individuals who have their own tastes, likes, and dislikes. It's about accepting. And we were able to live with that. Some ensembles can't live with that, but we've all had the ability to treasure those differences and to learn from each other. What each person brings is their own sensibilities and a willingness to share them and a willingness to learn from what the others have to offer. You don't see that openness in a lot of ensembles, especially to hark back to an earlier questions, when all the instruction in the school of music is about solo playing, which is about having other people follow you, instead of you making compromises and trying to play with other people. It is a really different paradigm. I see it in students on all instruments, that the people who are trained and want to be soloists tend to have difficulty in ensembles where they have to give and take, because they expect (more or less) that the ensemble is going to follow them, and that leads to problems. I've seen it many number of times, it's not an universal rule, but that's an issue that is really interesting to see, and I think improvisation is a way of dealing with that, of sharing responsibilities for the music making, instead of thinking you are the center of the universe.

OP- When picking out instruments for improvisations, do you tend to gravitate to a specific area of the world, or instrument types, such as hand drums, or mallets?

WC- No, my first love was and still is orchestral, symphonic music. That was what I was trained in, that was the path way that let me into other fields, but I since have been exposed to jazz, world, Indonesian, African, Japanese music. I teach in Japan (every year for two weeks) so I've had some exposure to that. I've had exposure to Chinese music, to all the various Latin types of music, steel drums, so I've been exposed to all of those and I appreciate and enjoy all of them, but my first commitment was to symphonic music. I've been an extra player with the Chicago Symphony. With NEXUS we've played with orchestras all over the world, and I'm on the board of directors of the local orchestra here, and have been for years so, that's my first love, that's not to say that I don't like the other stuff, I do.

But as far as what instruments to take, it varies. I have a house full of stuff, so I just walk through it and see what fits in a suitcase, or what I have room to take, and it is different every time, and I improvise what I want to bring. For instance, if I see a cymbal I haven't played in a while I'll take that, or these two gongs might go together, I haven't done anything with them for a while, so I might just bring those along, or this drum I think might be really nice with this particular gong so I'll just bring it along. So, it is really intuitive and on the spot, there's no real plan for it. Also, sometimes I just build instruments! I just built a pedal-operated water gong. It is rare that I have a concert where I don't have to invent or devise some way of suspending or placing the instrument, not only for the improv, but the composed pieces as well. The advantage of a pedal water gong is that you can have your hands free to play on it and on other instruments while you're dipping the gong in the water to bend the pitch. I've built instruments for as long

as I've been playing. I started making castanets when I was in high school, because we needed castanets and we couldn't find them in the stores. This comes naturally for percussionists, basically we are problem solvers, and everything is a problem, and every thing has to be solved. That's what we do. And it frequently involves having to create something that doesn't exist. Like a support for a particular instrument, or even an instrument itself.

OP- How does the group discuss the idea of improvisation?

WC- No. We just show up, put our instruments out, and play! When the group was starting (I might have mentioned this in the book) we did one improvisation at a residency where we said "here's an idea, let's play this kind of theme, then let's do this, come back to that theme, and in the middle we can do whatever we want to do", and we all agreed on this too, and what happened was that in the performance, it was less than satisfying because what we were doing was thinking about the theme, instead of listening to each other, so we found that having a plan for an improvisation, which is how a lot of improvisation is taught today, unfortunately in my way, it gets in the way of freedom, of listening, and intuition and you end up relying on your cognitive skills instead of balancing that with your intuitive skills. We tried it, didn't like it, so all of the future improvs since then, and until now have just been without discussion.

OP- Does the instrument you have in front of you have an impact on your improvisation?

WC- Yeah, in fact, that was the advantage that we had in trying to play on world instruments without the baggage of hundreds of years of tradition. We were simply exploring the sound possibilities, and the performance capabilities, as best as we could. Of course, when you study the traditional musics you find out there are other possibilities that you have to consider. The instrument does dictate, to a certain extent, always, no matter what instrument you're playing, even if it's not a percussion instrument, the instrument itself is an extension of your musical spirit. Some gongs for example have certain sweet spots and certain combinations of overtones that are very entrancing to listen to, and that can impact the way you structure your improvisation, and how you relate it to other instrument, so yeah there is a lot of that going on.

OP- Why do you think that mixing different drums from different cultures creates such an exciting and new sound?

WC- Because it's accessible! You can do it! This idea of mixing aesthetics, mixing instruments, has been going on throughout history. I mean, the timpani that you study in college, they came into Europe from the Crusades, from central Asia, the Janissary instruments (bass drum, triangle, cymbals) came in from Turkey, from the middle East. The tam tam came in from China when there was a world exhibition in 1886 in Paris. So this process has been going on, of instruments and ideas about music traveling from place to place, but it is happening really fast now because of internet and global communications. An example, I teach in Japan, as I said earlier, one student came into one lesson, and he played a multiple percussion piece that I thought was a real

fantastic piece, and I said :Wow, what is this piece? I don't know this piece. Where did you find it? He said he went on YouTube, spent a few hours checking out a few things, came upon that piece, and really liked it. The clip was from a recital that took place in Oslo, Norway. He found the composer's name and titled, Googled it, and had the piece in about a week. Something like that, for a piece to be premiered in Norway, then to be played by a student in Japan, that could take as much as 10 years when I was a student, just for the word to get around, and that happens instantaneously now. It's a complete revolution from my point of view. Of course, for younger people, this is the world they know. Communication is instant and you have access to everything. That is why musicians in India are using electronic instruments instead of the instruments they've been using for a thousand years to create drones and that's why musicians in North America in symphony orchestras are playing instruments in the percussion section that are from other parts of the world, hundreds of years old, if not thousands.

OP- Does NEXUS borrow any improvisational skills that could also be found in jazz?

WC- The rules are you can play whatever you want at any time, and if someone wants to play a jazz riff there's nothing that could keep them from doing that. That happens from time to time. If I could characterize the improvisations we do, they tend to be open, they tend to be non-metric, although almost every improvisation has a little section that is in time, with a groove of some kind, but generally we avoid the grooves. But they still show up in every improvisation. You think that drummers are going to tend to be mostly groove oriented, but the NEXUS improvisations are basically about sounds,

and if the groove adds to the sound in some way, it's likely to show up in an improvisation.

OP- Was Michael Craden a big influence or conduit to freely improvise and make music?

WC- Michael influenced John. Michael was schooled in the visual arts, not in music per se, he was a completely intuitive player, so he interested John Wyre more in the ability to improvise in public, and he actually had a group in Toronto called I Ching, before NEXUS was formed, and John became an influence on the rest of us because John was the timpanist in the Toronto symphony, we all knew him when we were students, and he was an influence on the rest of us. Michael also wrote a book, called "the artist's advocate".

OP- What was Michael Craden's approach to drumming?

WC- For us, it was totally outside the box. He wasn't schooled, so things that we found, that we ruled in our own world unmusical, he thought were musical, and ultimately he convinced us that they were musical. He expanded our vocabulary, and opened us up to other possibilities than what we had learned in college. When we were students in the 1960s, there were what I call castles: a teacher in a particular college, his ideas got into the students, but none of the ideas from the outside world came in, they weren't allowed in. You had a school of learning that was basically self-contained and didn't admit ideas from outside of that school into its world. That's all changed now, you can't do that anymore because you have access to everything. Most of the students know

what's going on, they have a good idea of what other teachers are in to, and that gives them more freedom to decide what they want their education to be, and that is a good thing.

OP- What do you remember about John Wyre's approach to improvisation and how did it inform your playing?

WC- The first thing I remember is visiting John's house in Toronto. He put on a record of Alla Rakha. We had new access to the music of the world. I remember being blown away by hearing Alla Rakha playing tabla. I didn't know what tabla were, what that music was all about, but it was the music itself that opened the door and the access to that music. Next, two of the members of NEXUS (Bob and Russell) went to Wesleyan University in Middletown CT where there was world music program. This was a relatively new area (at that time) of study, and we met Abraham Adzenyah, our teacher of West African music, that included Michael and John, of course. Russell and Bob, after NEXUS formed, invited the rest of us (Robin, myself, and John) to Middletown, where we spent several weeks working with the teachers there: African, Japanese, Indian, Indonesian music. We had then a more formal introduction to those instruments. As far as I know that's where John and Michael both got their main exposure, other than through recordings. Michael of course was primarily jazz oriented. His improvisations prior to NEXUS were jazz or free-form in a way, and John's schooling had been in classical music.

APPENDIX C. TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH GARRY KVISTAD. JUNE 13TH, 2013.

OP- Do you think there is a misconception or a validity issue between improvised music and written music?

GK- I've grown to learn that the contemporary classical music community is relatively small, and because it is not mainstream, it varies so much in terms of what people accept and how they define things. If you're talking about a larger group, like a lay audience, they will listen to whatever we have to offer, and not really know or understand any difference. In fact, some people might not know the difference between a Stockhausen composition and a improvised piece. If you're talking about people "in the know", or intellectuals, or academic people, there is definitely a split between those who think that improvisation is valid and those who don't. We had this discussion with the Black Earth Group starting in the early 1970s when NEXUS started (around the same time). NEXUS started as an improvisation group and Black Earth was primarily focused on performing compositions and having pieces written for the group. We worked with a composer in the early 1970s at the University of Illinois by the name of Herbert Brün, and he held workshops, and he was very much opposed to the concept of improvisation, which is interesting because at one time he worked as a piano player playing standard tunes, and he must have improvised a little bit, but he called improvisation "Redundant Auto-Biographical Material". When musicians where making music on the spot, he said they were really just doing stuff they had done before, and it wasn't advancing the world of composition at all.

Whereas NEXUS, I really believe that composers didn't know much about percussion, and that by NEXUS improvising with instruments they liked and with techniques that were maybe unknown to many composers that they were helping to advance that, quite a bit. This is a huge topic that one could spend a lot of time on, and that's kind of it in a nutshell.

OP- Should creative contemporary music making be a necessary skill for every percussionist to have?

GK- I do! And I would even expand it to every musician, not just percussion. This is an area that Bill Cahn is quite familiar with, having written a book about creative music making and improvisation. His concept is totally free improvisation. The feeling amongst some people is that jazz is a pretty conservative art form. There are many rules (and within those rules there's some leeway) but if you're following chord changes and rhythmic things, structural forms and all that, it's pretty much like Baroque music perhaps. Whereas the free improvisation I think is very helpful, because in some cases it exposes students to an aspect of music that they would never ever have been exposed to. It gets them really thinking about expression, and a lot of elements of music, that when they're realizing a written composition, they will have a very different experience.

OP- As a teacher, how much do you/did you work on creative contemporary music improvisation with your students? What was their reaction to the concept?

GK- I worked at Northern Illinois University for 5 years, and then 2 years at CCM at the University of Cincinnati, all seven of those years back in the 1970s, and also as a member of Black Earth Group. There really was not a lot of emphasis on improvisation, and I did not teach improvisation at all. Some of that was covered by one of the other instructors there, and my contribution was mostly timpani, since that was my main endeavor in college with Cloyd Duff, and also contemporary music, especially the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage. But within that, because of a lot of the pieces those composers wrote have elements of “choice”, there was an element of improvisation attached to that.

OP- Did you have any experience/exposure to improvised music while growing up? Did you have any experience/exposure to improvised music while attending school?

GK- I was exposed to jazz at a very early age because I have an older brother, he's a percussionist as well, Rick Kvistad, principal percussionist with the San Francisco Opera Company, and he's 6 years older than I am, so he got into a lot of contemporary jazz, back in the late 1950s to mid 1960s, and collected a pretty good assortment of recordings of Miles Davis, Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, and I was really turned on to that music, which obviously has a lot of improvisation attached to it. Then I went to High School up at Interlochen at the Arts Academy and Jack McKenzie and Michael Ranta taught there. Michael Ranta was very much into contemporary improvisation and we did quite a bit of that in percussion ensemble.

In college it was more of a traditional education, with Cloyd Duff and Richard Wiener, both my teachers from the Cleveland Orchestra, but the students often got together and improvised, and learned that way. I never really played jazz as a performer, any improvisation I did really came from world music concepts and great instruments, and free improvisation.

OP- Can you talk about that first NEXUS performance in March of 1971?

GK- To give you a little bit of background, after I graduated from Oberlin College in 1971, I took a position in Buffalo with the “Creative Associates”, Lucas Foss’ group there, and Jan Williams was one of the directors of that group, he is both a percussionist and an expert on contemporary music. He had a percussion quartet that has just disbanded and he had a pile of music from a contest that they had done, none of which was performed. So at the end of my year as a creative associate, I got the idea to start a percussion group, and Jan was very generous and let us have all those scores, there must have been 60 scores from this contest. That was kind of the core of the beginning repertoire (for Black Earth), along with a couple other pieces of people we knew and the other two members wrote.

That was right around the time that NEXUS had started. They had done a couple of concerts prior to the beginning of Black Earth, but since I was in Buffalo, I of course knew about NEXUS starting, and you know, the percussion world is a small one, we do know what was going on, and back then it was quite a bit smaller than it is now. There would often be auditions where 4 people would show up for pretty good positions, and

now hundreds of people show up. So, We knew of each other, and I was obviously very much aware of the music of Steve Reich. And Bob Becker and Russell Hartenberger where playing with Steve Reich at the time, and Paul Winter, and then NEXUS, so I got the idea to start the percussion group and came up with the name Black Earth based on the name of a town in Wisconsin near a farm that my family owned, and I contacted a few people : Allan Otte, brother Rick Kvistad, Mike Udow, and suggested we do this together, and Mike had just accepted a Fulbright to Poland, so he said he'd love to do it but he'd have to wait for a year, so we got somebody (a young player) Chris Braun to start with us. Rick and Al came to Buffalo for an organizational meeting to start the group, and we got this idea of contacting the guys at NEXUS in Toronto, this would have been Spring of 1972. So we went up there, and met the guys who were living in Toronto at the time, who were Robin Engelman and John Wyre.

John was teaching at the University (I think they both were), and he had a wonderful studio in the conservatory area, filled with instruments, like they used for their improvisations, so we spent an entire afternoon improvising together. So there was a cross-pollination there from the start. Then, NEXUS went on in their direction, mostly improvisation, and Black Earth was (as I mentioned before) mostly interested in developing new works for percussion, but we did a little bit of improvisation, we used a film score by Ron Pellegrino that we improvised with. It was kind of abstract, pictures with an oscilloscope, polarized, which is pretty of early kind of stuff for back then. We also improvised to some Herbert Brün graphic scores he did, which is ironic since he was very much opposed to improvisation, but as far as acceptance, as soon as the word got out

that we were starting this group, the plan was to be, to reside at my family farm in Wisconsin, and utilize the old barns and all that. Luckily, Tom Siwe, got word of that and invited us to use the facilities at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I think it would have been a cold winter had we gone up to the farm so this was much better!

We spent only one semester there because it turned out to be an opening in DeKalb. Al O'Connor who was the percussion instructor at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, wanted to get into administrative stuff, and concentrate on electronic music, and he had a group called "electric stereopticon", and it was a lot of improvisation, and it was very cool. It had two artists who did a light show along with it, I mean, it was way ahead of its time. Anyway, that's when Black Earth got invited to DeKalb to be the percussion department, the four of us (Udow, Otte, and Rick and myself). As far as acceptance, the percussion world was very excited about it. We actually got a lot of bookings because we were able to play for extremely reasonable fees, and we were all in our late 20s early 30s, and we were very happy to hop in the back of a cargo van with all the equipment, and ride to California for one concert! I couldn't do that anymore, but I think that the guys in So Percussion can fulfill that role right now.

OP- How does the amount of improvised music on your concerts vary? Do you always try to improvise at each concert?

GK- I've been with NEXUS now for 11 years (four years longer than the entire span of the Black Earth group, which was 7 years), since 2002 when I joined the group. We haven't done a whole lot in the 11 years I've been in the group. We have done a few

things here and there, and it's always been very fulfilling and I think very successful to do it, when we have. The group has a really group rapport of the individuals of the group. I think we really understand where each of us are coming from musically, so we're able to respond and to improvise I think in a way that works, and what I brought to the group I think was a new approach in terms of instruments, were mostly the guys in the group brought in a wide variety of gongs of all sizes and pitches, drums, and all that, and I brought in instruments I built, or that were built by friends, and a lot of things that sounded like electronic music, but were acoustic. I think, in all modesty, that I expanded the sound palette there.

I'll tell you, the turning point for me, with NEXUS was a PASIC in Tennessee somewhere where they played in the late 1970s, when I was still with the Black Earth Group, and they did a whole concert of improvisation at the gigantic stage, and it was so incredible! Everybody there felt the magic, and it really taught me that these guys have that down! I was really quite impressed and it was a very influential moment, so I thought, wow, they not only play ragtime music like nobody else, they improvise like mad, and also can play and write a lot of very interesting music. I thought that at some point it might be fun to do something like that, and I got my chance in 2002 to do that.

OP- When picking out instruments for improvisations, do you tend to gravitate to a specific area of the world, or instrument types, such as hand drums, or mallets?

GK- Well, I've modified some sculptures that I got from Bernard and Francois Baschet, and they're really interesting instruments. We use a lot of gongs and bells from

all over the world. The thing we all have in common, probably going back to our early years as percussionists, is our interest in melodic percussion. As it turns out, all percussion is melodic, even drums and wood blocks. Everything has a frequency that can be measured, and the guys in NEXUS have always been aware of the frequency let's say of a triangle, not just the spectrum, but the note that might stick out the most and they make use of that.

When they collaborated with Toru Takemitsu on a concerto that they have been doing since 1989 called "From me flows what you call time", a lot of those instruments that Takemitsu wrote for were picked out by the individual members of the group, not only for their timbre, but also for their pitch combination, and there's a beautiful theme that runs through that piece that a lot of the percussion instruments also play. When I took over one of the parts that I play, I actually picked almglocken. He calls for 5 almglocken to play along with the melody, but he didn't specify the right pitch. So I grabbed the right pitches that went along with that and I also built a series of wooden log drum style instruments that I tuned to the exact pitches that were needed. The point is that we use a lot of those instruments whether we're playing a piece of Takemitsu's that's written out or if we are improvising, and I think we're pretty much aware of those pitches and try to utilize a wide collection and variety of sounds. I often use Hung drums, made by Swiss designers, that's a world instrument I guess since it's made in Switzerland. Bob Becker often uses a steel drum(s), and Bill has an enormous collection of bells and gongs, and Russell often goes to cymbals and a lot of drums. He's a really great hand drummer. So yes, we do use a lot of instruments from all over the place.

It used to be, back in the 1970s, if you came across a Thai gong at an antique shop, you would scarf it up no matter what it cost, no matter how much money you had, because it was a rare find. Now you can go on the internet and order an exact pitch. It's a different scene but, you know, back then we would also try to pick out the very best sounding instruments, instruments that had a strong connection for each individual which had a lot to do with the timbre and the overtone content of an instrument. We wouldn't just play any old thing, we were pretty selective, as it should be, depending on what instruments were available.

OP- How does the group discuss the idea of improvisation?

GK- The process is we show up with our favorite instruments and play. We don't talk about much at all in advance, other than maybe say "this will last 15 minutes or so" so we know when to stop. That's probably the only parameter that we discuss. I remember hearing the story before I was in the group about how Bill Cahn had this great idea to go out onstage with all these instruments and pretend to be playing but actually not hit anything to start with, so that it was kind of a mime, and maybe give the illusion that there was sound happening even though it wasn't happening, and gradually over time, start playing softly. The idea was a terrific one, and it was ironic that it was Bill's idea, because as soon as they went out there, he accidentally hit a gong immediately. They never did try that idea, but it was a good one.

OP- What do you remember about John Wyre's approach to improvisation and how did it inform your playing?

GK- I improvised once with John Wyre, and it was the transition concert. That was the last concert he did with NEXUS and also my first concert with NEXUS as a member. We actually did an improvisation at that concert which was a lot of fun. I got the idea of putting an amadinda instrument that I had built between John and me, and it was sort of a symbolic thing in that we were trading off and playing on each side of it. That was my one experience with John improvising, but I had heard him play many times. I heard him play timpani. He had a beautiful approach to music and sound. His concept of sound was very deep, it resonated so to speak with him and he was a real inspiration and a beautiful human being as well.

OP- What was Michael Craden's approach to drumming?

GK- I met Michael Craden a couple of times. He was at that improvisation concert I mentioned at PASIC, and I never ever worked with him. He passed away early on in the group. I didn't know him but he seemed to add a unique element to the group because he wasn't a professional percussionist like the other guys, he was an artist. But he had a pretty good ear and added some cool stuff to their first rag time record, he just played a bunch of percussion stuff that sounded like a trap set or something.

Also, Robin Engelman was in the group for many years when I first started, and then left the group three or four years ago, so I got to play with Robin quite a bit, and he had a strong classical percussion upbringing and had a great approach and was very

knowledgeable about music, so everybody in the group had their own unique gift that they brought to the group and it blended together so beautifully. Any group that can last this long is doing something right!

APPENDIX D. TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH RUSSELL HARTENBERGER. JUNE 13TH, 2013.

OP- Do you think there is a misconception or a validity issue between improvised music and written music?

RH- Well, in the contemporary music community, composers tend to think in one way, and performers tend to think in another. There's different situations: a composer sometimes writes pieces with improvised or partially improvised sections in their piece, and they expect the performer then to be part of the creative process by improvising and making up the music, even though the composer then is either taking credit for it or being responsible for that composition itself. And then there's another situation where the contemporary music community (as you say) is making a comparison between a fully composed piece and a fully improvised piece, and I think that's a bit of a different situation. I guess some people probably look on completely improvised music as not having the same kind of structure or forethought than a composed piece does, but then you have the jazz community who really appreciates the virtuosity and originality of the performer's approach, so they tend to give it a little bit more credence I guess.

OP- Do you think that the decade in which NEXUS became a group had an impact on how you presented your concerts? Was the improvisation/experimentation a product of the social environment?

RH- You have to look at it in the perspective of the social atmosphere of the time, back in the early 1970s. It was quite different than it is now. There was more of an

attitude of experimentation and freedom, people were trying out different kinds of things, so I think in a way there was a kind of acceptance of the kind of improvisation that NEXUS was doing just because of the social atmosphere of the times in North America. I think the time's become a little more conservative now, so I think maybe the attitude has changed a bit.

OP- Did you have any experience/exposure to improvised music while growing up? Did you have any experience/exposure to improvised music while attending school?

RH- It has been my experience with percussionists that improvisation is a very natural thing to do. When I was in High School there were 2 other percussionists, and I kind of formed an improvisation ensemble. We would get together and just jam in the band room, and eventually decided to perform parts of concerts anyway just doing improvisation. Sometimes we would structure it a little bit, but basically we were just improvising and it seemed a very natural thing to do. And when I went to music school, the other percussionists and I sometimes would just spend an hour sometimes in the practice room improvising. We might take an orchestral excerpt from a piece we were working on as the basis for it, and pick it up from there. But it just seemed kind of the natural thing to do. Other times, when I was in the United States Air Force Band, we used to do a thing we called "playing the percussion room". All the percussionist would go to the room we stored the instruments and we would just improvise playing the room itself, play on the locker doors, and the light switches, and the cases that were there, just play on stuff, rather than the instruments themselves, we would just play the room.

I had an experience soon after that playing in the Puerto Rico Symphony and the Puerto Rican musicians they loved improvising and we used to just play whatever we wanted to play on the beach! Mostly hand drum kinds of things. And then, when NEXUS first got together, not officially as a group but just getting to know each other, we were at the Marlboro music festival in Vermont, and we were there playing Stravinsky or Bartók or some great repertoire, but in the evenings we would go to the dining room where some instruments were stored and improvise into early hours of the morning. So, all my musical life it seemed like a pretty natural thing to do, almost every circumstance I've been in percussionists would kind of naturally improvise, it wasn't something that seemed unusual, or nobody said "let's try that". It was something that we always kind of did. When I got to NEXUS I think other people had have similar kinds of experiences so it seemed like a fairly natural thing to do, although in NEXUS of course one of the things that was different was that John Wyre was beginning to collect instruments from non-Western cultures, and he brought them together, and none of us really knew how to play some of them, so we would just make up techniques, that kind of added to the improvisational element because there was no instrument written for it, and we just kind of played with the technique that we concocted on instruments that we didn't really know the proper technique for.

OP- As a teacher, how much do you/did you work on creative contemporary music improvisation with your students? What was their reaction to the concept?

RH- It seems that my students have kind of fallen into that same frame of mind, I know that. It depends on the generation of students, but it seems like it is fairly common for them to improvise in practice rooms. I know that one group of my students used to have a Friday morning jam session in a practice room. One of them was kind of a jazz piano player so he would often play piano, but they would just make up things for an hour or two in the practice room. I haven't really implemented an improvisation course at school, but I do improvise with my students from time to time on an *ad hoc* basis.

OP- Can you talk about that first NEXUS performance in March of 1971? How did the audience receive the performance? Was the audience made aware that the program was composed on the spot?

RH- I actually wasn't there. When that concert was planned I had already booked a flight to Ghana. I was going to Africa to study African music for the Summer, so my flight was the same night as that first concert so I wasn't able to be there. But I played concerts after that, and it kind of depends on the venue, a lot of the times when we played improvised concerts it was in small settings, there was a contemporary music space in Toronto that we played at quite often, and I think the people then were open to what we were doing. I think they knew it was improvised music, and they appreciated the fact that we were being original and coming up with kind of a new approach to music making. As I recall, most places we played were very receptive to it and there was no sense of criticism or thinking that we should be doing something more structured.

Things that really gave us confidence or support was when we played at the Percussive Arts Society International Convention concert in Knoxville TN, I forget the year, but it was the first time we had played at a PAS convention, and people kind of went nuts hearing us play just a totally improvised concert. I don't think anybody had ever done that, or most percussionists hadn't heard that kind of thing before.

OP- How does the amount of improvised music on your concerts vary? Do you always try to improvise at each concert?

RH- You know, one of the reasons that we played only improvised music when we first started out, in addition to all the reasons we've talked about so far, was that one of the members of NEXUS, by the name of Michael Craden, one of the original six member, and he didn't read music. He didn't know how to read music, he could only improvise. So there was never any thought of playing sextets, written sextets because he couldn't really do that. And then when we started playing repertoire the first thing we played was ragtime stuff, and he improvised percussion parts. He had a table full of tambourine, woodblock, little sound makers, and again, he just improvised. And then when we started adding other pieces, especially if they were commissioned pieces, we would always tell the composer that one of the guys couldn't read music so there had to be a part that he could just play freely. So a lot of the composed pieces had a kind of improvisatory sensibility to them. And I think we gradually started adding repertoire.

I was studying African music at Wesleyan and Bob was too, and so we wanted to incorporate African pieces, and then of course I was playing with Steve Reich at the time,

and we started doing some of his pieces in the ensemble, and gradually different opportunities came and sometimes we would be on a concert series where they wanted at least one or two contemporary pieces, so we started doing John Cage and all those kinds of things, so as the repertoire built, I think, improvisation became less and less part of the concert. In recent years, if we play improvisation in a concert, its only a piece, and the length of it depends on how much time we've allotted for it, it could be half of the concert or it could be sort of a 10 to 15 minute slot for a piece, and we try to time it more or less in that amount of time. So I think its just the fact that we started adding lots of other repertoire and it just sort of evolve that way. There was no conscious decision to do less improvisation, it was more like adding other stuff and there just wasn't time to do complete concerts of improv, although, we still, from time to time we do it, but basically we just combine improvisation with other repertoire.

OP Is there a specific moment (or concert) of improvised music that holds a special place in your memory?

RH- Well, they all have special moments. One of the ones that sticks in my mind is one we did in a church in Amsterdam, Holland. They wanted us to play an all night concert so we played for many hours through the night and it was interesting what happens when you know you have that much time. Normally, before that, if we did a whole improvised concert it would be a two hour concert. We knew there would be some kind of a limit, or you would try to make it normal concert length, but when there's no limit, when they say you can play as long as you want, including all night, your whole

concept gets stretched out, and the ideas that you might consolidate into shorter spans of time frame on a normal concert, get extended, and your whole concept of development of ideas is expanded, so that was a very interesting experience in perception of time as we play. So that's one that really sticks out.

Sometimes we have guests that improvise with us, and each person that we play with brings a new element to the group, we've played several concerts with a great jazz clarinetist from Toronto by the name of Phil Nimmons, just, all kinds of different people. We've improvised with African musicians, of course one of the big ones was a drum festival that John Wyre organized, in 1986 I think it was, in Vancouver, and there were over a hundred drummers from around the world, and each of us played our own spots, but at the very end it turned into a huge improv session with all these other drummers, and that was pretty amazing.

OP- What do you bring to the table as far as improvisational skills or techniques?

RH- It's probably almost easier to ask each person what they think the other person brings to the table. For me the thing that I find most stimulating about improvisation is when I lose track of actually what I'm doing, and I feel that I'm a part of whatever the overall sound of the group is making or developing, so that I'm not actually aware of what I'm doing, but I know, I just kind of automatically know what sounds I should be making to fit in, and so, it's quite a different feeling than playing composed music where you are prescribed to do certain things at certain times. This almost

becomes an instinctual thing, and I think all the members of NEXUS have talked about that same kind of thing.

So, obviously certain people have ideas to play something and maybe dominate for a little while, but for the most part, the music really just kind of plays itself, and I as a player just seem to be taken along for the ride and know what I am supposed to be doing. I don't have to think about it too much. And I think that part of what makes that work is knowing the instrument, the kinds of sounds that instruments can produce. So you don't have to think "will this gong sound here?" or "will that woodblock be appropriate?", you just kind of know the instruments well and you know what will sound good.

And the other thing that help that concept is the fact that I think all the guys in NEXUS have (I think) the same kind of concept of sound production, because all our training is more or less with the same kind of teacher(s) that emphasized sound in a certain kind of way, and the kinds of sounds that we try go get are very similar, and the whole concept of sound is similar, so things tend to blend well. And the other thing is the fact that we've known each other for so long, that we feel things together, without having to work at it.

OP- When improvising with World instruments, what is your view on the use of, or the arrival at a groove during an improvisation?

RH- I'd say that's a good thing! The more you know about an instrument, the better, and the more you know about the style of music, even better. For me it's been two things: one is the sound, the technique of the instrument, but the other thing that is

important is a better understanding of the musical culture that the that instrument came from. I think both of those things affect the improvisation, since you have more of an understanding of it. For example, if you're feeling that the improvisation is in some kind of groove, you have a feeling for the kinds of possibilities for that groove based on experience in some non-Western music, that adds imagination to the improvisation that might had not been there without that knowledge. So, I think it's good that more than one of us has studied that music is good too. In particular Bob Becker and I have done more professional studying of non-Western music than some of the other guys, although everybody has played some, so he and I might for example be thinking that something we're playing ends up being like a rhythmic structure of Indian music, because we both have a sense for what that is like, or we might play a pattern that is similar to an African bell cycle pattern, just because we know that it exists and it is a possibility and it adds just a little bit of intrigue to it. I think it really adds a lot to the possibilities for improvisation.

OP- Does NEXUS borrow any improvisational skills that could also be found in jazz?

RH- I'm not sure. Jazz improvisation tends to be more of a solo music. When somebody is improvising in a standard jazz setting, it tends to be a series of solos, and that doesn't happen too much in NEXUS, it tends to be more of a contrapuntal group improvisation, with more polyphonic or polyrhythmic stuff going on all the time. I guess a little bit more in the sense that early ragtime music was a group improvisation. We have

played with some great jazz musicians. It's been my experience that jazz musicians tend to adapt to our style rather than us adapting to their style.

OP- Was Michael Craden a big influence or conduit to freely improvise and make music? What was Michael Craden's approach to drumming?

RH- He did influence the group to an extent. Michael worked in Los Angeles with Emil Richards, and he did study some vibes with Emil, so he could do a little bit of jazz improvising on vibes, by ear. But he really didn't understand harmony, harmonic movement, so his would be more of a modal jazz improvisation on vibes. But he also had a couple of instruments based on Harry Partch's instruments, so he brought those to the group, and that kind of opened up things, at least some different sounds.

His technique on improvising tended to be more spontaneous and he took things, he was very good at taking the improvisation into a startlingly different direction. I think because of the fact that his training as a percussionist was quite different than all the rest of us, his approach was a little bit different. And I guess more than the rest of us he had experience in jazz, although more free jazz than traditional jazz. He worked with some musicians in free jazz settings but he didn't play drum set, he just played percussion. But he would tend to have a table set up with lots of instruments, rather than the rest of us who would have racks with bells and gongs, cymbals and things. He kind of would play a small set up with a lot of very odd sounds. I think he really added a flavor to the group that we might not have had ordinarily.

He was a painter. He kind of had a different perspective of art in general. As a matter of fact, he was more of a painter than a musician. Painter by profession, and musician almost as a hobby in a sense for him. He did do some commercial work. In Toronto I used to play commercial sessions with him, back in the day when human beings made jingles, and those had to be timed specifically, and he couldn't read music so you had to put your foot on top of his foot and stomp when it was time to stop playing, so he would know the timing, when to start and when to stop, because he couldn't read the measures, but he became really good at that, interestingly.

OP- What do you remember about John Wyre's approach to improvisation and how did it inform your playing?

RH- John was probably the most influential person in NEXUS, in the style of the improvisation that we did. As I mentioned before, he was the first one to start collecting instruments and he was one of the first ones to become involved with Japanese music and culture. He made a trip to Japan early in his life, working with Takemitsu before NEXUS was working with Takemitsu, and collected instruments there. But he also got interested in Zen Buddhism. I know he used to go to a Zen place in Rochester, doing meditation and things like that, sort of more in that life style. He brought into the group this sensibility of the spaciousness of bell tones and long gong sounds, rather than a really busy typical drummer approach to playing. He made us aware of just opening things up and listening to the length of a sound, the duration of the sound, resonance, and combining those sort of things from an Eastern perspective.

Of course, the instruments he brought... He really was into Japanese temple bowls, and large low gongs. He also made a trip to Indonesia, brought back gongs... Now it seems kind of commonplace for people to have access to all those instruments, but back then it was very unusual to see any of these instruments, so you either had to go to a country to get them, or ever so often you'd find one on an import store or something that had been brought back by a traveler or someone in the military, so any new instrument was a huge discovery back then. You couldn't just go to steveweissmusic.com or someplace and just get a chromatic octave of anything. Each discovery that John brought to the group, every instrument, kind of brought a whole other level to the improvisation, other kinds of sound production we could make.

And of course, his influence was that we all wanted to start collecting instruments, so we started scouring antique stores, import stores, various places for instruments. And of course when we started traveling in all our spare time we would go looking for things to bring back, and immediately we included those in our improvisations. But that was all the inspiration of John. He even wrote a couple of early pieces, he wrote a concerto that he played with an orchestra, I think it was called "Bells", and it was just a lot of bells and gongs, basically him improvising with the orchestra. He probably determined the whole kind of sensibility of our early improvisations.

APPENDIX E. INSTRUMENT

Interview questions for members of NEXUS Percussion Ensemble

1. Do you think there is a misconception or a validity issue between improvised music and written music?
2. Should creative contemporary music making be a necessary skill for every percussionist to have?
3. As a teacher, how much do you/did you work on creative contemporary music improvisation with your students? What was their reaction to the concept?
4. Did you have any experience/exposure to improvised music while growing up?
5. Did you have any experience/exposure to improvised music while attending school?
6. Can you talk about that first NEXUS performance in March of 1971?
7. How did the audience receive the performance?
8. Was the audience made aware that the program was composed on the spot?
9. Did the decade in which NEXUS was formed have any particular influences on how you presented your concerts?
10. Was the improvisation/experimentation a product of the social environment?
11. Does the amount of improvised music on your current concerts vary? Do you include some form improvisation in each concert?
12. Is there a specific moment (or concert) of improvised music that holds a special place in your memory?

13. What specifically do you contribute to the ensemble regarding improvisational skills or techniques?
14. Does the group discuss the idea of improvisation? If so, how?
15. Does the instrument you are playing bear influence on your approach to improvisation?
16. How do “world” instruments and the musical traditions of their cultures impact the way you improvise?
17. Why do you think that mixing different drums from different cultures creates such an exciting and new sound?
18. If you had to describe the improvisational process in NEXUS, what would you say?
19. Does NEXUS borrow any improvisational techniques typically associated with jazz?
20. Was Michael Craden a big influence or conduit to freely improvise and make music?
21. Was Michael Craden well versed in drumming styles from around the world?
22. What do you remember about John Wyre’s approach to improvisation and how did it inform your playing?
23. What were John Wyre’s world percussion influences and how did he acquire them?

APPENDIX F. HSRB APPROVAL LETTER



DATE: December 17, 2012

TO: Olman Piedra, DMA

FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [378321-2] Creative musical improvisation in the development and formation of NEXUS Percussion Ensemble

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: December 11, 2012

EXPIRATION DATE: November 27, 2013

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 4 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on November 27, 2013. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.