

Improvisers' orchestras can be found all over the world, from Buffalo to Bologna, and every one of them is as uniquely individual as the musicians involved; shaped and defined by fingerprint personalities, histories and experiences. Broadly speaking, Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra can trace its inspiration and template to the example of the London Improvisers Orchestra and the collective efforts of the London Improv community. But, since its foundation in 2002, GIO has developed its own distinctive personality: warm, welcoming, inclusive and open-minded with a healthy dash of Scottish conviviality.

Saxophonist Raymond MacDonald is a co-founder of GIO and a musician with a background not too far away from the sort of Improv practices his London counterparts would recognise (and, in fact, he has previously collaborated with LIO). But his is just one of the voices that can be heard in GIO, alongside improvisers from the Noise/DIY scene, sound artists, classical, jazz and folk musicians,. "The group itself is very diverse," says MacDonald. "It's one of the exciting things about improvisation right now. Everybody in GIO has their own improvisational story to tell and our backgrounds are very different. So, we have to find different ways in which we can collaborate meaningfully. You can't just say 'this is the way in which GIO works, and this is the only way,' because then you start to exclude people. So we think it's an important part of the orchestra to explore lots of different ways of improvising."

In practice that has meant the investigation of various key modes for improvising, including the use of graphic notation, text scores, conduction and film. In particular, with membership running at around twenty musicians, GIO has developed a reputation for innovative approaches to large-group improvisation. "The idea of large ensemble improvisation is something that feels quite timely," says MacDonald. "Are we in a fertile patch for improvisation? Is improvisation affording us a process by which people can collaborate? Because improvisation is not necessarily a genre of music, it's a process by which we can explore practical, conceptual and theoretical ideas about how people can collaborate together. The conceptual work and the diversity and the discourse behind what we do is very important to the orchestra, so we spend a lot of time talking and discussing and trying to make these issues explicit and round these issues out into a process. I think we want to acknowledge a lot of the challenges we face as an improvising ensemble and discuss those challenges and conceptual issues."

There's a danger of this kind of analytical talk sounding slightly self-conscious and perhaps just a little dry. So it's interesting to note that the primary experience of GIO is not lofty conceptualising but active participation. Above all, GIO is a place where contrasting personalities come together for joyful, spontaneous, collective creation.

Fritz Welch is an American vocalist and percussionist, and a Glasgow resident since 2008, with a history in the underground music scene in Brooklyn, New York. He plays in the trans-Atlantic Noise-rock trio Peeesseye and collaborates with likeminded outsiders all over the world. "I consider myself an improviser as well as a weirdo," he says, and it's clear he values

his musical experiences as a regular member of GIO. “I really dig playing music and improvising with ten, thirteen, twenty people. This is usually some killer, convoluted and fucked-up music and that’s what I like. The parts I enjoy the most are the real mutated alien time travel excursions. “

At first glimpse, Welch’s freewheeling approach is very different to the more academic preoccupations of fellow GIO member, Aileen Campbell – an artist whose work spans performance, sound and video with a central focus on the human voice. Yet her involvement with GIO as a vocal improviser has provided a spur to creativity quite distinct from her other artistic practices. “Much of my own work is about performing, but not necessarily live,” she says. “But GIO is very much about live art. The intense focus of being in the present and continually performing through making sounds, listening, connecting, disconnecting, composing is what appeals to me. The making process, which very often as an artist you do on your own in a studio or at a computer, is revealed in the performance, as you see GIO members making something before your very eyes. And I think especially with improvising, being able to see and identify – or be confused by – what instrument is making what sound is a very visual form of music/sound making.”

Like Welch, Campbell relishes the unique sonic space that’s opened up by bringing together a large group of improvisers from various different backgrounds and disciplines. “You can’t possibly have another form where this combination of instruments could exist,” she says. “This odd combination makes a sound platform where music/noise/sound can have an equal footing, but of course sometimes these categorisations are entirely blurred. It’s also important for GIO that we are not all in some sonic disguise of our roots. I think it’s OK for the flavours of how you got to GIO to be evident sometimes. It’s just another layer of sounds, which can meet during improvisation that really wouldn’t meet anywhere else. Everything then influences each other and hopefully something of interest will occur.”

Campbell certainly isn’t alone in finding participation in GIO a liberating experience. Guitarist and GIO founder member, George Burt, started his musical career playing double bass and guitar in folk bands before turning to jazz. Today he co-leads a group with Raymond MacDonald but still describes himself wryly as “probably one of the worst jazz guitarists in history.” He goes on to explain: “Discovering improvised music and, later, being in at the start of GIO came as such a relief. At last it was a space I could make a valid contribution to. Some players in GIO have had to cut into successful careers in classical or commercial music in order to make space for improvised music. I think there might be a shared sense that these other musics have had their day as exploratory areas, and are a bit wrapped up in their own norms and values. In GIO there’s a chance to share insights with musicians from other fields as equals.”

All of this finds its natural outlet in GIO Fest – an annual opportunity to cram all of these disparate elements into a few days of live gigs, presented in an atmosphere of studious camaraderie. For many of those involved, these gigs are a natural – and crucial – extension

of the ongoing collaborations in which GIO members engage. “I think it’s important to have points where old and new forms can meet on the same stage,” says Campbell, “even if they seem like strange bedfellows.” Burt, too, sees the festival as performing some important functions: “Assertion of the identity of the group. Statement of a valid alternative vision of music and of personal and social organisation. Opportunity for members of the group to try out personal projects in front of GIO colleagues and audience. Questioning and (hopefully) affirming that this is the right road for us.”

Of course, there is one major difference between the GIO Fest performances and the orchestra’s regular meetings: the presence of an audience alters and enriches the dynamics of an improvisation, transforming it into an outward-facing, communal experience, rather than an inward-looking, personal process. Certainly, that’s a phenomenon that Raymond MacDonald is keen to encourage: “For an audience member actually being in the room, there’s a kind of drama in watching an improvisation unfolding – and that’s a huge part of improvised music. I know that some people feel that improvised music is austere and a little bit exclusive but in many ways it is actually very inclusive, not least because the audience is inextricably linked to the music that’s being performed. They are a part of the performance space and part of the performance. That’s something GIO will strive to keep exploring and we hope that future performances will look to interrogate the performance space in more detail and in different ways.

It’s worth noting that actually finding an audience for improvised music isn’t always as easy as it might be. It is, after all, a music that prides itself – even defines itself – in terms of sitting outside the mainstream. But MacDonald is undeterred. “We’re really aware that we have to reach out to an audience, particularly because we run a festival annually in our home city. Therefore I feel that we have a responsibility to try and reach out and tell people about improvised music. It’s not just a question of saying ‘if you don’t like it, fair enough.’ We want to bring people into what we’re doing. Improvisation is an accessible, social, collaborative and uniquely creative processes. Moreover improvisation affords opportunities to challenge musical and cultural hegemonies and develop new ways of collaborating and thinking in music.”

Part of that process of reaching out has been addressed simply by holding GIO Fest in the popular Centre for Contemporary Arts on Glasgow’s bustling Sauchiehall Street – an immediate way of making the festival as accessible to the public as possible. It also means extending an invitation to other musicians from outside GIO’s ranks to come and play at the festival. “There’s always been an emphasis on inviting guests to come and not only perform themselves but collaborate sometimes both in a small group context and with the orchestra. We want to reach out to the wider local improvising community because there’s a huge interest in improvised music and there are lots of people involved in improvising who aren’t necessarily in the orchestra, in Scotland or in Glasgow.” So, for GIO Fest 2010, that meant

inviting, Dundee-born, London-based drummer and vocalist Ken Hyder as well as several other stalwarts of the London Improv scene – guitarist John Russell, bassist Dominic Lash, saxophonist John Butcher and Edinburgh-born vocalist Maggie Nichols – plus French sound artist Damien Marchall.

By drawing a distinction between hosts and guests, the festival also raises the question of whether or not there is anything intrinsically Scottish about GIO. “Well, there are a lot of members of the orchestra that aren’t Scottish,” says MacDonald. In fact, current members hail from as far apart as London, Yorkshire, Cambridge, Germany, Ireland, America and Latvia. Yet, the city of Glasgow obviously plays a key role in defining the orchestra’s identity. “We’re located in Glasgow and our history is inextricably linked with the city because that’s where most of our work is,” MacDonald continues. “So, in that sense, yes, there is something Scottish about the ethos of the band. I don’t think there’s anything Scottish necessarily in the music, in the structure of the music or what we actually play. But socially and in the way the musicians interact, yes, there’ll be a Scottish character to it.”

For George Burt, GIO’s Scottishness runs deeper than that, relating to the group’s whole organisational structure. “There is a tradition running through Scottish culture of self-education and of establishing your own identity through self-assertion,” he explains. “I like to think GIO partakes of this tradition. None of us knew how to organise large-group improvisation back at the start, and I remember we worked quite hard at educating ourselves. The difference between our early efforts and now is really profound. We’re sometimes in danger of underestimating the self-education that’s gone on. I think that’s the aspect of the group I’m most proud of.”

Moreover, that sense of progress continues today. As GIO approaches its 10th anniversary, the orchestra is still constantly striving to stay fresh and incorporate new ideas. “We’re really looking to keep developing the idea of the festival,” says MacDonald, “presenting films, installation work – the CCA is not just a music venue, it’s actually better known as an art gallery. So, we’d like to branch out of that one concert space. For example, we could have a durational piece in a small gallery space – like a seven hour improvisation that an audience could drop in and out of.”

“We could do with more silence. And visual art,” says Burt. “But in the final analysis, when it comes down to it, we’re an improvising group and the time we spend not improvising is time wasted. There’s a story that Fred Frith told after Derek Bailey died. Apparently, the great man used to come to Fred’s gigs and listen happily to whatever it was – chamber music, graphic scores, rock, Improv, song-based stuff, orchestral music or solo guitar. At the end he would always say the same thing: ‘That was very enjoyable... but you should do a bit more improvising...’”

Daniel Spicer