

Short story of the Insub Meta Orchestra

(dialogue between *Cyril Bondi* and *d'incise*)

In 2009, we began to tour quite a lot with our duo diatribes. At that time we were playing with guests, we played with a different one almost every time as we wanted to meet a large number of people. While in England we got involved with the London Improvisors Orchestra (LIO), which has been quite an institution for well over 10 years and it made a big impression on us. This mix of generations, of statures and a real feeling of being in a scene with all these musicians gathering together, all knowing each other. So coming into that environment, welcomed with a smile but thinking, we're gonna get lost here, we are not going to understand the signs in the conductions but then we were swept up in the flow, just playing, the clear interplay taking place, it was amazing. A memorable experience that it must have been on the train back or the flight back we had already set ourselves a challenge to transfer this experience into our own environment.

Yes I remember it well! We knew almost no one, except Hannah Marshall, and there were 40 musicians set-up in Café OTO. People knew each other, the mood was warm and we felt comfortable immediately. I was sitting between Dominic Lash and Steve Beresford (I didn't know who he was at that time). It was beautiful to feel taken in by this mass, this ensemble, existing as individual inside the group and at the same time being lost, being integrated in the mass. I found it superb. All these people, right here and now, a kind of old fantasy of a collective, and all that with ease.

While touring with d'incise we have this annoying habit of coming up with impossible things, crazy things, sometimes unachievable. At this time, we didn't yet know we could achieve them (now we know and we are more careful!). We started to think about setting up an LIO in Geneva. Our beloved hometown, being far too small, we thought we'd cover the whole Switzerland. This crazy idea charmed the AMR (the main "jazz" club of Geneva) and they offered us to open their season on september 17th, 2010.

Regarding the name, it wasn't going to be called Geneva or Swiss Improvisors Orchestra. We agreed on the Insub Meta Orchestra, a name referring more to a network (Insubordinations) and putting forward an idea of experimentation, of immoderation, of exploring and pushing the limits.

I guess I should go back a little, in 2006, I became to be interested and then involved in the improvised music scene. I wanted to add my own little bit to this scene so I created the Insubordinations netlabel whose activity has not stopped since then. It rapidly became a means to get in touch with musicians from all over Europe, with whom we often ended-up playing together. So quite quickly Insubordinations switched from virtual to reality. We began to consider that this name was the signature for our activities. For five years dozens of musicians came to play in the basement of the house where I lived, Tivoli16. This was the ground in which this orchestra project was planted and its vision reached beyond regionalism. Switzerland is tiny, but there are a lot of musicians, sometimes stuck in their own little space, we wanted to shake it all up (even if it was probably young and naive).

So we made a list of all the musicians potentially interested in the first encounter of an Orchestra that was not real yet. So we had about one hundred musicians from all horizons (jazz, free, experimental, punk, contemporary, electroacoustic etc). Here, we did what in my opinion was the spark that still keeps the IMO going today, by immediately deciding to organize another concert in another Swiss city, Lausanne . The fact that even before the first attempt, a second one would happen turned this crazy initiative into something built on a long term potential. For these two first concerts we had 43 and then 38 participants (about 60 different musicians all included!). We didn't have enough money to pay each of them, but between fees and

entries we could reimburse expenses, food and accommodation for everyone. In the end, all these people gathered to play, for free, together, some for the gesture, some for the experience. It sounds natural, simple, the artist supposedly being “not interested” by money (in the eye of society), but in fact it was beautiful to see all these people meeting to form a unique ensemble.

Well to speak of the music, honestly, the first concert was a mess. Everyone played a thousand times too loud, something so typical for this genre, a real free-noise-ego-parade. Consequently at the second concert everyone agreed that we needed to work on the volume, to bring it down, and it worked. I think this is a key element that keeps the orchestra going, the fact that in two concerts we (the musicians) could feel we could work and that an evolution was possible.

We had established a way of functioning close to the LIO one, with sign conductions, different kinds of pieces or ideas and free improvisation in between. A rehearsal before the concert to brief everyone on the signs and the program, with a series of exercises on listening and on the volume (i.e, Do you hear the musician at the other side of the orchestra? Up to what distance?).

We operated in this mode for a while, with various experiments, “cartes blanches” (to Jacques Demierre, Kasper Toepliz amongst others), and a first three days summer residency, and then I think here we asked ourselves the first big questions...

It is true that before this first residency in August 2011 we had already done seven concerts, keeping these ideas of directions, being open to any new idea or wish to experiment, with totally improvised moments in between. We kept this way of operating (and did until summer 2012), inviting any Swiss or musician from abroad to join us, which regularly changed and on occasions completely transformed the IMO's line-up. From concert to concert we could play with a totally different orchestra. So it was the idea of doing music with a very very large ensemble (up to 60 musicians on one occasion) that was important and not the artistic content. We experienced our first critics, nothing bad but questioning the initiative on the long term. In that sense a lot of musicians participated ephemerally to the IMO, just for one or two concerts. We felt the need of a residency. To get everyone together for a few days, around different questions about the IMO. We spent three days in a theater (La Parfumerie in Geneva) with forty musicians (including twenty-three that are still members in 2015) recording a couple of conducted pieces (by Christoph Schiller, Jonas Kocher, Christophe Berthet, Brice Catherin, Thierry Simonot, d'incise....) and improvisations. Out of it came our first album Archive#1, naturally released on the Insub.netlabel. This residency and recording closed an intense first year and allowed us to face all the questions such a variable geometry raised. We decided to write a first text, putting our thoughts on paper for all the musicians involved in the project.

Listening and selecting the recordings from this residence, with the distance it allowed, we realized that things bothered us or were going in artistic directions that did not please or inspire us. The Archive# 1 cd, with its choice of tracks gives a taste, still a sketch, of where we would be heading in the years to follow; an electroacoustic approach, laying aside the individual contribution, the personality (the much discussed topic of playing a solo!) for a more collective work.

We had to explain this, our very personal choice, to an extremely diverse bunch of musicians, and it created some tensions, we have to admit that, among those with a vision rooted in the free jazz and free improvisation in which freedom and the existence of individual discourse is very strong. Now this vision seems to us to have an extremely justifiable historical sense but in our opinion it limits the potential for experimental explorations of an orchestra like ours. We needed to express firmly the fact that the IMO was not an amateur and occasional project but a real orchestra with an ambition to make serious and thoughtful work.

All these thoughts had simmered during the second year, and for the second Summer residency we took a number of radical choices that were, substantially, to restrict the participation to the orchestra to a group ready to follow it on the long term, to renounce all forms of conduction and other outside proposals, to define as clearly as possible our aesthetic and technical fields of action in the field of electroacoustic post-reductionism. At this point we wrote a second text in which we tried to answer all the questions we had from members of the orchestra (a kind of maxi-survey).

Yes what we did at that time was really questionable, but we fully took it on ourselves. We sent all the musicians who took part in the adventure of the past two years (22 concerts throughout Switzerland!) a kind of survey that had the ultimate goal in pushing people to ask themselves what was their place in the IMO, their desire to take part of the project in the long term, to invest themselves in the ensemble. Nearly all have played the game and we received nearly 150 answers. Some affirming the will to continue, others showed a moderate interest in the process and others were outraged by the turns of events. True, we did not only make friends with the IMO. Proposing a huge improvising collective throughout Switzerland was taken by some as a kind of improvisers union. I think many were disappointed that such a polymorphic ensemble, with the possibility of experimental workshops of all kinds, was focusing on a vision more precise, with a more limited vocabulary, avoiding any individual virtuosity in favor of group reflection and sound. The Meta Insub Orchestra has become a group of 45 fixed musicians from all Switzerland (Zurich, Lausanne, Bern, Geneva, Basel, ...), France (Paris, Strasbourg) and Belgium (Brussels).

This second residence was really intense, we faced the challenge of communicating our ideas, which in themselves were mostly wishes and ways of working (but our approach has been to say that there are no theories, just to try and experiment with as many things at once, and then some concepts would take shape and actually become part of a common language for the orchestra). Excluding the external information of conduction, we had to find internal communication tools, sonic ones, and to agree on strategies. We addressed sound analysis (in a somewhat Schaefferian way), what is a drone, a white noise; being able to make the difference between a click and a crack. Then learn how to generate and work with just one material over a long period, a search of texture, sound clouds, thinking of one's instrument as an abstract source, find potentially common sounds to all. One could find the results of these approaches on the Archive # 2. From there, there was clearly the claim that the IMO would play the music of the IMO, and would no longer be in service to other projects like in the past.

Communication; It was also at this time we had to accept we had a role and a responsibility towards the orchestra, that we were not just the initiators but we were in some way the "leaders" or, in any case, we had the power to decide where we wanted to go, how and why! We must say we made big mistakes with our communication, sometimes too straight, sometimes too vague, the expectation becoming bigger and bigger and we did not always manage to follow. We suffered a lot of criticism, sometimes very strong toward our (in) ability to communicate our ideas and desires. I think it was an important step and a huge lesson for for both of us.

So for the concerts that followed we kept this idea of not playing "pieces" but fully tackle the issue of improvisation in a large ensemble. How to make the sound evolve, how to (re)act collectively, how could we, without signs, without a director, make music with 30 or 40 musicians? The concerts between 2012 and 2013 enabled us clarify all this and especially to bring together 45 musicians around the same issues, the same challenges. This sense of sharing together the Insub Meta Orchestra was a new thing. We had managed to get from a polymorphic ensemble with a variable geometry, open to all, whose primary purpose was to be a very large number of musicians, to a collective of fixed musicians engaged in collective thinking and

building the IMO's identity together.

Yes it was a radical change and therefore not always well understood or accepted, moving from a social experience, a bit politically engaged, to this new mode focused on musical issues along with the desire to seek its own identity. We always oscillated between a desire of democracy and self-management, and those moments when we took it on ourselves to make choices. And in the end there is always an element of social experience, we often do meetings with ten to fifteen people to reflect on the concert programs or discuss ideas for exercises or improvisational strategies to implement. It worked well for a year or so. Group cohesion really strengthened, the difficulty of some concerts resulting more from difficult acoustic conditions than other things. Because yes, with this minimalist direction being taken, the orchestra now plays at a very low volume, very subtle, with a whole ritual of setting-up, choice of position (we played a lot in a circle with the audience surrounding us) the search for silence (yes, yes turn off the ventilation!) The music was slow, horizontal, textured. In January 2014 we had a third residence, the target being to work on the form and construction.

We took over (35 musicians!) the new Cave12 venue in Geneva for this three-day residency which ended with a concert. This time we opted to focus on the live event instead of recording. So we tried to find and invent tools for improvisation. How to create independent subgroups inside the ensemble? How to find a way to break these horizontal dronesque forms which were quasi-ambient and in which we were often trapped. How to create micro-dynamics in this music? Basically it was another step forward, always keeping with the idea of improvising without any external direction or director.

That's when we felt the need to share the heavy responsibility of managing the orchestra. It is true that we have a kind of facility working together, a very natural way to divide tasks, roles and especially the ability to meet any challenge. Having this facility is a strength but we had to accept that it was also a weakness. The IMO was somehow dependent on only our motivation and desires and not fed by the collective dynamic. Thus we asked four other people to form a sort of core group to lead the orchestra. We therefore proposed this to Coralie Lonfat and Jamasp Jhabvala (both of Lausanne), Sébastien Branche (from Paris, in order not to be restricted to a Swiss vision) and Christoph Schiller (from Basel, German speaking as a third of the orchestra). And it works! So we all decided to organize a studio session in really good conditions in August 2014 at the Swiss radio studio, the studio Ernest Ansermet.

During the residency we addressed these notions of silence, forms that were more sharp than rounded, identifying intentions (and poly-intentions), forms of internal self-conduction between the sub-groups of musicians defined by their position in the orchestra or by instrumental groups. The work was really interesting and honestly, it's a huge pleasure to feel 35 musicians racking their brains together over the same issues. But after the exercise, there is the practical, and the few concerts that followed raised a new set of questions. Naturally aspects that we had worked on appeared diluted in what or where the improvisation takes place, the acoustics, the excitement of the concert etc. In themselves, these concerts were not bad at all (we can refer to the public, for example), but in the train of thought in which we found ourselves, this desire to view the IMO as an experiment seeking to push itself further, there was a sense of stagnation, or in any case a trouble area that was hard to overcome. There is also probably a stronger expectation from our side with the results than in the past.

So thinking of this deadline of the studio recording, the need to produce an "Archive # 3" that marks the path accomplished since 2012, and adding to this the economic pressure of the thing, we said that we had to have a good strategy, and after small group discussions, the choice fell on to recording of "pieces" with a scenario and a relatively well established content. Each one revealing a particular aspect in our music,

silences, stasis, temporal organization, contrast. It is a return to a stricter structure that we had abandoned and that we returned to, and rather than seeing a contradiction, we see it as a loop. We always considered that any strategy is good if it serves a common goal.

I don't know if this is the path to follow, though we like it for sure, but it is more seeing how it will turn out in concert. It is probably where the next challenge for our orchestra lies, finding out how to combine improvisation with a concept to produce a music that is going forward.

So, we didn't want to redo an ultra theoretical text but rather an attempt to present what this orchestra means for us and what drives us to continue to work for it.

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