

THE FLORIDA LEAGUE FOR INDETERMINATE PERFORMANCE: IDEALISM AND FAILURE IN IMPROVISATORY LAPTOP ENSEMBLE PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

The four composer/performer members of the Florida League for Indeterminate Performance (FLIP) discuss the successes and failures of the ensemble from individual perspectives. Each section presents a subjective window into FLIP, informed by a member's own musical interests and ideals concerning laptop performance and improvisation. The windows presented can be encapsulated as follows: issues of spectacle and performance context, musical missteps and individual/group tension, thwarted orchestrational concerns respective to a free improvisation model, and a re-evaluation of the potential to not perform. In light of these individual perspectives, we begin to see FLIP as a discursive arena for music and music politics that surrounds a collaborative/confrontational performance practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Florida League for Indeterminate Performance (FLIP) has been active as a laptop ensemble since late 2010. Over the past year and a half, FLIP has performed several times as an improvisatory laptop ensemble in both academic and non-academic contexts. FLIP is comprised of four doctoral students in composition at the University of Florida in Gainesville, all of whom have significant experience with the tools and techniques of computer music. However, they have varying backgrounds concerning the discourse and practice of live improvisation (with or without the use of laptop). As four composers, the members of FLIP demonstrate exceedingly different compositional goals, processes, and thinking. These individualistic differences lie at the core of FLIP, in so far as the ensemble is an arena for musical and ideological juxtaposition, competition, compromise. With this in mind, the structure for this paper attempts to reflect the issues and ideals at stake within the ensemble directly by allowing each member to provide a particular understanding of FLIP, both its problems and its potential.

2. ADAM: ON SPECTACLE AND CONFRONTATION

The visual presentation of FLIP is minimal: four men behind their respective laptops, on a table facing the audience. This configuration is in no way unique within the wider context of electronic/electroacoustic performance practice, but has proven challenging to the perspectives of lay audiences who have seen us perform. With only four players, we cannot create the same sense of whimsical spectacle that laptop orchestras can evoke, and by sitting at tables facing the audience we have instead been described as confrontational.

As Kim Cascone writes, "audiences experience the laptop's use as a musical instrument as a violation of the codes of musical performance."^[4] Audiences do not see a relationship between a laptop performer's actions and the resulting sounds. By facing the audience, whether on a stage or not, we have set up expectations of visual spectacle which are left unfulfilled.^[10] In club settings, audiences are now accustomed to the non-virtuosic displays of DJs, because the DJs themselves are not the focus of the experience. FLIP has performed both in a bar and a concert hall, in each performance presented not as background for dancing, but as the sole focus of the experience. Thus, it seems even more inappropriate to use laptops in rock or classical settings than it is to use laptops in a club setting.

Our first two performances took place in a Gainesville bar, "The Laboratory," which has positioned itself as a haven for experimental musicians in the area. At The Laboratory, free improvisation and noise music reigns supreme, and as one would expect, the sounds produced by FLIP complement the general tone of the venue. However, in great contrast to the other performers, the visual aspect of a FLIP performance is quite muted. The performers that frequent The Laboratory play a variety of instruments, from trombones to circuit-bent toys to microcassette recorders. For the majority of these players, visual spectacle and rebellious posturing take precedence over musical expression, such that the guitarist who thrashes around the most receives the most applause, regardless of musical skill or intent.

According to Nick Smith, “in order for music to be dissonant with contemporary consumer culture, it must risk its very identity as music.”[9] It is ironic then, that these ‘noise artists’ who so earnestly attempt to be subversive through volume, timbre, and ‘ineptitude’ to borrow from Paul Hegarty still follow the same performance tropes as rock performance, moving with an oddly deliberate ‘abandon.’[6] Without even trying, the relatively cold and stoic persona of FLIP accomplishes the noise-musicians’ goals by appearing to be anti-performance. With both the table and the line of laptops as a protective barricade, the audience is not privy to the method of creating sound, nor the possibility of participating in the sound-creating, nor the possibility of disrupting or stopping the performance. According to Jacques Attali, “the game of music thus resembles the game of power: monopolize the right to violence; provoke anxiety and then provide a feeling of security; provoke disorder and then propose order.”[1] In our stage presentation, FLIP succeeds in monopolizing violence and provoking anxiety, but fails to provide security and order.

In our second official FLIP performance (4/30/11 at The Laboratory), I decided to add visual performance cues by playing aggressive drum samples and physically “rocking out.” Quickly regretting this decision due to its incompatibility with the visual performance aesthetics of the rest of the band, I retreated to a “normal” playing position, but still moved along with my drum samples, which constitute the bulk of my contribution to this particular improvisation. So while there is no one-to-one correlation between my mouse-clicks and keystrokes and the resulting sounds, I at least appear engaged with the same music that is perceived by the audience.

Does that make my performance any more appealing to the uninitiated audience member? The laptops are the only objects present that could be assumed to be instruments, but our interaction with these instruments is hidden. By moving to the beat, I am perhaps no more engaged with the actual production of sound than a dancer is during a Broadway show. How is anyone to know that my laptop is the one producing the drum patterns?

Since my physical movements do not carry the theatrical codes of performance, they cannot directly resolve the audience’s desire for spectacle in performance. They do serve to humanize the performance somewhat, signifying that the group is engaged with the resultant sounds and assuring the audience that the group is not intending to be confrontational. Cascone writes that “The use of spectacle as a solution to the lack of visual stimuli only works to reinforce the confusion of authenticity and aura” and for the laptop to be accepted as a musical instrument, “there needs to be a recuperation of codes that move away from the use of spectacle.”[3]

One such code might be performer placement; if we had played in-the-round, with the audience peering over our

shoulders, the performative actions carried out by each of us would be much more clearly displayed for the audience, and any extraneous movements such as mine might evoke a more communal, rather than confrontational, experience. Another code would be in the marketing; if called a “happening” or “experience” rather than a concert or performance, the focus would shift away from the people causing sounds to be generated and toward the sounds themselves. Both situations would thwart the performer-audience hierarchy, changing from a confrontation to an invitation. -Adam Scott Neal

3. BEN: THE ‘DRUNK’ OBJECT AS AN ANALOGY TO FLIP PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

The ‘drunk’ object in the audio programming language Max/MSP models the basic mathematical processes behind a drunkard’s walk, outputting random numbers depending on the variable arguments of range and step size. While assuming most readers are familiar with - or even better have performed - the walk, the following is a brief illustration of the process: a drunkard begins at one point on a Cartesian plane (see: bar), and moves toward a goal point (see: home); despite a varying amount of missteps, the drunkard eventually arrives to his/her goal - though not for better. The object is cute and small, and simplifies the mathematics behind the random walk procedure for a user. While providing great compositional potential, more often than not, the use of the object produces commonly predictable sonic results, normally in the hands of unknowing programmers. Whether taking this cynic viewpoint or choosing to ignore it, the process formalizes a trajectory that despite one’s ideal and countless number of detours, one cannot avoid the eventual goal in-sight: success with varying degrees of failure. This balance of success and failure can only be measured, however, by the protagonist and observer’s subjective metrics. It has become evident that the use of the ‘drunk’ object is merely an analogy for which I link my personal experiences with the laptop ensemble performance practice of FLIP. While undeniably guilty of sonic meandering, I propose that FLIP distinguishes itself from other laptop ensembles as they recognize the inevitable failures of an ideal laptop performance and devise an innovative performance practice of computer music improvisation and experimentation.

Let us take one random step back though. Not all missteps are immediately flawed. New sonic terrains can be discovered as the result of happenstance, and gleaned for future use. The marriage between computers and improvisation has long been established since the 1970’s. The League of Automatic Music Composers and the Hub customized electronics such that new compositions were realized as a result of varying configurations.[5] Ensemble members improvised with the rate of data-transmission and adjusted circuitry to express their personal musical tastes. Since then,

laptop ensembles have emerged which utilize a plethora of technical advancements to aid their artistic vision. Some of these include networking for computer synchronization, alternative-gestural controllers, and visuals. With the greater availability of technology, methods for enhancing real-time computer music is inevitable. Yet this is not a route the current FLIP ensemble intends to embark on.

At the inaugural FLIP meeting, the ensemble attempted to realize one of the member's composed works for multiple laptops. Briefly, the piece required performers to toggle through a series of audio presets which altered the sonic output over a period of time. However there was a near-immediate mutiny due to the prerogative that each member felt more equipped to express their own musical interests through their own custom instruments. Following this choice, FLIP became an ensemble dedicated to the use of an "autonomous improvisation" model for group laptop performance. Rather than realizing a pre-determined score or performing with a specific piece software, FLIP composers develop their own laptop performance environments and arrive at each performance with a variety of unique "instruments" available - sometimes instruments completely foreign to the other members. It is the belief of each FLIP member that as the sole designer of their individual instruments, they are the most qualified in exploring the sonic possibilities therein and may aptly entertain any modifications as needed during performance.

FLIP performances are infrequent, which adds to the unpredictability of public realizations. The excitement or dread shared by members is equal parts amazement and disappointment in each member's choices in developing their individual soft/hard-ware instruments and their decision to employ said instruments. There is no standardization in instrumentation, spectrum, amplitude, etc. The only possibility of variance between performances is up to the discretion of the performers and their current instrument research. In performance, I recall and execute a catalog of instruments written in Max/MSP and SuperCollider depending on real-time circumstances. These instruments vary in sonic potential. A brief overview of the mechanics of these self-constructed instruments follows: recursive algorithms designed in SuperCollider to read audio from a collection of audio buses which are then analyzed and used to determine output frequency, amplitude, and panning parameters; specific samples, playback repetitions, and processing initiated by keystroke commands; Max/MSP patches that utilize a Wacom tablet to select audio samples, playback speeds, and convolution. My improvisational discipline informs my attempts to navigate a "successful" performance or, reluctantly sink into a noise abyss. During a FLIP performance I am constantly reminded by John Bischoff's approach to electronic music: "If I had to put it into words I'd say I was drawn to a music that sounded as if you were hearing the heart of the electronics, of electricity as a material. That

means a huge range of tones and noise and interruptions, unpredictable events and unpredictable control." [8] While I share this personal attitude toward improvisation toward real-time laptop music, it is not always common to my fellow FLIP members.

What is challenging about performing with FLIP is that though I may have some improvisational insight into where I hope to guide a performance, these directions may be thwarted by my colleagues. The low-thumping bass drones or tried-and-true drum beats more often than not anchor musical spaces explored by FLIP - much to my chagrin. Additionally the performance output is a stereo mix of four disparate musical ideologies which often have nothing in common except for their musical platform: the computer. As a result, the sonic output does not adequately realize my performative efforts. While FLIP performances are successful in the fact that they exist as a composite of four individual musical voices in real-time, I believe the main failure of FLIP is its inability to accurately isolate and reflect these unique musical perspectives. -*Benjamin O'Brien*

4. TRAVIS: TIMBRE, FORMAT AND FRUSTRATION

In reviewing and critiquing recent FLIP performances through the lens of "idealism and failure," the issues that present themselves most strongly include spectrum (or timbral palette) and the advantages and shortcomings of the improvisational laptop quartet format relative to other performance forces. These issues are intertwined throughout my thoughts on the ways in which FLIP has consistently failed to meet my idealistic notions of what it should be, but has rather become something that none of us really intended.

My preparation for a FLIP performance includes gathering sonic materials of many different characters — harmonic, noisy, low-pitched, high-pitched, etc. — and ensuring that I have ample means for controlling the synthesis, playback, or manipulation of these materials during a real-time improvisatory setting. My strategies for deploying this material during a performance rely upon my choice to perceive a FLIP quartet improvisation as a single auditory stream. I wish for the audience to listen to a FLIP improvisation as if it were a fully-realized piece of electronic music with a unified focus rather than four independent improvisers facing off against one another. One reason for this strategy stems from the practical manner in which FLIP has been confronting the issue of amplification. Rather than utilizing individual amplifiers/speakers to keep our sonic output streams segregated, all four of our laptops are fed into a single stereo mixer and output to a single stereo pair of speakers. As the sound of the quartet is originating in a single spatial location (and the audience has very little in the way of visual cues from the performers), the question of "who is playing what?" becomes almost irrelevant.

The choices that I make during a FLIP improvisation almost always stem from this way of perceiving the performance. As an electroacoustic composer whose output has recently taken a turn towards composing primarily acoustic music, I am perhaps a bit hyper-sensitive toward the issue of FLIP's timbral palette. To be honest, many of the sonic materials used by the other FLIP members do not hold much interest for me as a performer/composer. Such materials are not attractive to me either due to their timbral characteristics or the manner in which they are being performed. These sounds are oftentimes monophonic or simply too narrow-band in spectrum for my tastes. When confronted with a stream of uninspiring sounds (or to be more kind, sounds that I would not personally choose for "my" music), my goal is usually to construct some sort of counterpart that will re-frame these sounds in a different context. If other FLIP members are utilizing percussive sounds or monophonic sounds in a quasi-melodic setting, I might bring in a broad-band harmonic or noisy sound to provide some sort of constant background. If presented with only midrange or high-register sounds, I might begin to add low tones in the 50Hz-120Hz range. Another strategy that I have found myself employing while trying to steer a FLIP improvisation in a direction that I find interesting is to try to be as annoying as possible. Often times a loud disruptive outburst on my part will serve to cleanse the palette and inspire the other performers to move off in new directions.

These issues have been present in all FLIP performances thus far, and will continue for as long as the ensemble remains in its current incarnation. One reason for this is simply the format and ideology of the ensemble. In contrast to many other laptop ensembles, FLIP does not perform pre-existing compositions or even attempt to adhere to any particular formal scheme during an improvisation. As such, FLIP has more in common with the experimental "free improvisation" scene than it does with other laptop ensembles. The second reason is that we are all composers of acoustic and electroacoustic music who are accustomed to holding total control over our own musical output. It can be very easy to become selfish while performing in a group improvisation, and I have demonstrated my tendencies to assert some particular musical idea at the expense of others on numerous occasions.

If a FLIP performance is thus a failure relative to my own idealism of what a "good" electronic music performance should be, should it then be termed an outright artistic failure? My answer after stepping back and removing myself from the equation is no. While there are always elements in our group improvisations that I do not personally care for, I feel as if these conflicts of interest are what drive our meaningful musical interplay. What makes FLIP engaging in performance is its conflation of the laptop ensemble format with the free improvisation model. Due to the aforementioned single source of sound amplification and relative

lack of visual agency for the resulting sonic events, the audience is forced to reckon with the group improvisation as if it were one entity. -Travis Garrison

5. SEAN: THE SILENT (FOURTH) PARTNER

As a laptop improviser with FLIP, I am simultaneously a performer and my own audience; I try to listen attentively to not only myself, but also to the other members of FLIP, as I gauge my sonic contribution moment by moment. From the composer perspective, laptop performance is relatively straightforward: I use the instrument in realtime similar to how I compose with it; I take advantage of the laptop's inherent separation between control and sound synthesis to precompose "out of time" sonic structures directly into the fabric of the instrument through software design. As I improvise during a FLIP performance, I am of course restricted to the aspects of music which exist "in time" (as Cage would say, issues of form and material).

From the audience perspective however, laptop performance is more problematic. I know I am performing; but how does the audience know? This suspicion is obviously the basis for the trite joke about laptop musicians checking their email, or playing sound without "playing." Joking aside though, this is the heart of the matter. My ability to identify with the audience perspective (in part, because I am myself an audience to the other members of FLIP) forces me to become aware of one's inability to validate laptop performance according to the traditions established by acoustic instruments. Ultimately, as I shift my perspective from improviser/performer to audience member there is a movement away from musical concerns (i.e. what sounds should I make now?) towards theatrical ones (i.e. what should I do right now to show that I'm making a sound?).

If such a shift in perspective places greater emphasis on how we engage with the instrument of sound production rather than the crafting of musical experience, then any attempt to appease audience unease toward the perceived inauthenticity of laptop performance must acknowledge the instrument as fundamentally different. To reiterate Cascone's assessment, "audiences experience the the laptop's use as a musical instrument as a violation of the codes of musical performance." [4] Fundamentally, it is something about the laptop: how we engage with it as performers and how it is received by audiences, which needs to be (re)addressed in conjunction with the context of its activation as an instrument.

Our performative actions upon the laptop as an instrument are couched in the history of instrumental concert performance. As Timothy Jaeger describes, "the bodily restraint, seriousness of purpose, and lack of ornamentation in the performance of this type of music [laptop music] is related to the European classical tradition of the eighteenth century." [7] While this "seriousness of purpose" has served

instrumental concert music well, or at least its conventions have “created a polarized axis of performer and audience... [creating] a distance or aura which empowered the performer with an authenticity, that helped create value in their craft,”[3] such a distance paradoxically *devalues* the craft involved in laptop performance. The devaluing occurs because we (FLIP) know, like we know our audience knows, that computer-generated or reproduced sound is displaced sound. Its source is not a physical body that is here, or present in performance; it is therefore necessarily virtual in origin, or (to borrow some Lacanian terminology) not Real. Such displaced sound is immediately understood as an engagement with the Symbolic and Imaginary realms of perception and representation, and it by-passes the need for an embodied mode of presentation or performance. If a laptop performance is heard through loudspeakers, in the same way our favorite pop music is listened to through headphones plugged into an iPod, why objectify through conventional performance an otherwise displaced sound source? From the audience perspective, the only thing being demonstrated is that sound can come from loudspeakers ostensibly generated by a laptop. That, “there is no visible causal link apparent between the performer’s gestures and the resulting audio,”[12] belies the fact that we know there could very well not be a link at all. Therefore, our suspicion of an instrument that doesn’t appear to physically do anything (i.e. change its position, interact with other physical bodies) cannot be reduced to an unfulfilled desire for visual stimuli in a performance setting. Rather, our suspicion points to an intuitive awareness of the metaphysical distinction between embodied sound and virtual sound as being presented as insignificant.

Tad Turner, discussing a laptop performance at an art gallery opening (ostensibly supporting the purchase of the artwork), provides an anecdote which highlights this intuitive awareness clearly:

Michael Farley, for example, was invited to perform at a New York gallery opening for computer-generated visual art. Amidst the wine and cheese, the gallery goers were “the worst. They don’t ask, ‘Where’s the band?’ They ask, ‘So what program are you running?’ while you’re in the middle [of] performing.”[11]

Any attempt that Michael Farley is made to put on a good show or demonstrate virtuosic skill on his instrument was completely devalued through the conjunction of laptop as instrument and performative convention. The question, “what program are you running?,” is a double bind. Either Farley responds that it is some commercial music application, which then in turn functions as a stand-in for the music itself (in effect, directly commodifying the performance), or he responds that he’s checking his email and Farley’s bluff has been called — and here’s the kicker — because we all know that it is possible. This is what Žižek would describe

as an *unknown known*: “[something] we don’t know that we know.”[13] But despite the fact that both performers and audience implicitly realize the possibility of non-performance, we proceed with conventional performance anyway. In effect, laptop performance discounts the significance of our awareness to the fact that a not-fully-engaged performance practice can easily be presented as “authentic.”

The devalued “aura” associated with laptop performance can be overcome via two approaches: changing the instrument or confronting the art of performance. Through the first approach, we attempt to modify the instrument (laptop) to conform more rigorously to the stipulations of convention and virtuosic display (read: spectacle). However, while the use of a hardware controller for interfacing with the laptop provides a heightened sense of performer agency, it does nothing for the laptop itself. Even an unbound degree of control, gesturality and precision fails to overcome our experience-based understanding of the distinction between hardware and software. Perhaps twenty or thirty years ago that distinction would be lost on some people, but not now, especially among younger generations who have grown up in a computer literate society. By using a controller, the no-longer-laptop performer reinforces the bifurcation of objectified performer and consumerist audience, as established through concert hall convention. This reinforcement masks but does not change our underlying awareness of a devalued laptop “aura.”

The second (and in my estimation, more fruitful) approach to overcome the devalued “aura” of laptop performance is to confront the convention of performance directly, highlighting the absurdity of our expectation for authenticity considering an instrument that is, by its very design, operative only in virtual spaces. The possibility of a laptop performer not being fully engaged is an opportunity (afforded by the laptop itself) to choose, or in fact vary, one’s level of performative engagement on a moment by moment basis as an improviser. To do so allows for a continuum of engagement to be explored as a means of recasting 18th century performance conventions. The codes of performance are re-evaluated by disclosing a shared understanding of what the instrument does (in a general sense). We know the instrument can make sound without constant interaction; so let it (a little). This is a way to *play* the laptop, and then *not play*. To demonstrate through performance that not playing is not a worry accentuates the agency of the improviser to operate through the laptop in a musical capacity. The serious acknowledgement of the possibility for “inauthentic” performance, as such, productively undermines the very notion that the laptop, and by extension laptop performance, can be validated in accordance with the authenticity demanded by the codes of conventional music performance.

While we may not know what program someone is running, to know to ask the question underscores an intuitive understanding of what a laptop does. Therefore, by per-

forming in a way that acknowledges that one doesn't always have to be physically doing something to the laptop to get sound out of it (or vice versa), allows for the performer to establish new codes of performance, based on the removal of authenticity as a valid rubric for criticism.

This is of course not a new idea. I am reminded of Gregory Bateson's illustration of such an instance of tempered behavior functioning on a meta-communicative level in describing animal play, stating that, "the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite"[2] (i.e. combat). Following Bateson, demonstration of the momentary choice to not perform one's laptop operates in similar fashion. In fact, if we understand "performing on a laptop" to be commensurate with the word "play," Bateson goes on to say, "the actions of 'play' are related to, or denote, other actions of 'not play.'"[2] The audience for a laptop performance is worried about "not play," or the potential for an utter lack of performance (combativeness). Implicitly, we recognize and hold as a real possibility this lack of performance, as denoted by our understanding of what laptops are capable of (email checking) and our expectation of conventional performance. By showing a tempered version of "not play" (a nip), laptop improvisers/performers can establish a new understanding of performance on a meta-communicative level.

FLIP is in fact a perfect playground for experimenting with these ideas. While I am never quite sure which one of my compatriots is currently responsible for the abysmal state of things at any given moment, making sound does little to change the aggregate music. My composerly desire to direct FLIP's music is ostensibly a self-aggrandizing delusion, but my ability to affect the audience's experience of it is not; I can demonstrate my choice to abstain. I can turn my volume down, have a drink of my beer, make a momentary contribution, and then be silent and inactive to highlight the immediacy of not only the politics, but the music. In the context of FLIP, these are not drastic actions of "not play," because they are tempered by the apparent continuity of engagement demonstrated by the rest of the ensemble at any given moment.

Ultimately, each member in FLIP can take advantage of the fact that we are a league, not a team. A team is cooperative; we are competitive. We are a league wherein four different members are constantly vying for their own musical prerogatives. In order to show the true interaction that is taking place behind the computer screens we merely have to demonstrate that the full potential to not perform is not operative. We may "not perform" a little, but the effect of doing so dispels notions that we should all be worried that someone just might be (gasp) checking their email. Because we know if they do, it is for a reason; it is purposeful within a new set of codes for performance, which don't stipulate that performers act and audiences listen "as if" the laptop were a cello. In laptop ensemble music, the

insistent accretion of sound does nothing to acknowledge the difference between the laptop and acoustic instruments. But the removal of sound, and the disengagement of oneself from making sound can go a far way in establishing a meta-communicative basis for genuinely engaging (from the audience perspective) sonic play. -Sean Peuquet

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