

HARMOLODICS: thoughts this way and that

Andrew Poppy

Revised introduction for the School of Harmolodics as part of Ornette Coleman's Meltdown Festival, South Bank Centre London 14-20 June 2009

It's a privilege to be invited by Meltdown Festival 2009 to help run The School of Harmolodics week of workshops.

I am some kind of contemporary composer rather than an improviser. And what improvising I do, does not instantly connect to the bop, post bop tradition that is the starting point of Ornette Coleman's music. But probably that's why I've been invited to be here; to be the wild card in a team of artistic leaders with Chris Batchelor and Julian Seigel who are such wonderful improvisers and whose music has more of a family connection to Ornette's work. And the team also includes Alice Tatge's making a dance and movement response to the Harmolodic idea.

What I want to contribute here is a sense of context. To see Harmolodics as connected to ideas in other areas of music and performance, both historically and personally.

Harmolodics: how does it work? Looking at various explanations by Ornette Coleman himself and members of his various bands it would seem to be a spirit or attitude as much as it a method.

There are some innovative technical inventions for sure, such as the Harmolodic clef. This is an interesting strategy. It's a way of instantly building chromatically inflected harmonic fields within a predominately *melodically* articulated style.

Perhaps Harmolodics is an example of an approach to creativity which organises one parameter while trying to be un-mindful of another to which it is intimately connected. The relationship of harmony to melody and

harmony to melody is particular in Ornette Colemans style. The later is articulated whilst the former is implied. As Wilfred Mellers says in his still resonant book 'Music In A New Found Land'(1964)

"... the first musician who has carried further some of the implication of Parker's line and rhythm.... Ornette Coleman achieved this stylistic development by paring harmonic texture to a minimum: by discarding the piano as a harmony instrument and exploring, more radically than Sonny Rollins, melodic variation on line, not on chord sequence"

Melody and melodic form are what dominate. And melodies have always been the more rigorous agents of control in any musical context. They survive almost infinite fragmentation and transformation. A harmony or a texture is much more fragile by comparison and more specifically located in a particular moment.

We can all sing The Beatles 'Hard Days Night' and, if we have the skill, we can riff and play on the intervals and shapes of the tune. But the opening chord on the electric guitar is a unique identity even if we own that particular Rickenbacker guitar and can voice it correctly. It's a unique identity made up of interval structure, chord voicing, articulation, amplification and recording technology. Transpose it up a few intervals on the sampler and its identity is lost.

We can find that fragility in other places. 'Durations' by Morton Feldman where each 'harmony colour' is a stated thing in itself. Melodies are, where you find them, implied.

Harmolodics could be seen as a poetic strategy. Because trying to explore technical questions further sometimes dissolves into the mystification and magic of 'a chord which cannot be inverted'! But perhaps that's how it should be. Strong ideas are often simple and stand alone. They don't always need some vast tome to explain them

like Wagner's 'Gesamkuntswerk' .E=MC2 is a good example of a big idea expressed with economy. Harmolodics in some ways is more useful to think of as an attitude. Ornette is ambitious for his idea to be more than just a musical technique. He says:

"Harmolodics can be used in almost any kind of expression. You can think harmolodically. You can write fiction and poetry in harmolodic. Harmolodic allows a person to use a multiplicity of elements to express more than one direction at a time."

This is a way in for me as a composer whose own work is formed and influenced by American experimental and minimal contemporary classical music of the 1950-60s.

Who was he thinking of when he said "You can write fiction and poetry in harmolodic". Certainly listening to 'Little Symphony', 'Peace Warrior', 'Enfant', 'Feet Music', all sort of connections present themselves.

The novels of Jack Kerouac, where the words rush like 'Big Sur' in endless sentences where the full stop gets pushed further and further into the future. Or the poetry of Allan Ginsberg on 'Howl', the shaman, where the mesmeric flow of images tumble over each other suspending the readers desire to understand what he's talking about. An invitation to trance dance in the metaphorical.

And could Harmolodics be in the painting of Jackson Pollack with its beguiling suggestion of freedom within an exquisitely choreographed painting action. He dances while he paints. The painting the memory of that dance.

All these guys put the sense, the image, the experience of *spontaneity* as the most importance thing to be communicated to the audience.

Perhap it's worth noting at this point that, for the listener, high modernism, the most rigorously organised total serial music of Boulez and Stockhausen, also projects an image

of spontaneity if not arbitrariness for the listener, I'll come back to this later

No doubt Kerouac, Ginsberg and Pollack all listened to Ornette Coleman back then. And given the 6 degrees of separation rule and the 'small world' cliché of any artistic scene in any city, you can bet he knew a few of those guys.

Even before I heard the story that Ornette and Yoko Ono had been an item I sensed an aesthetic connection in their approach to performance. Ideas that were new, sometimes confrontational, but definitely floating free in the air of 1960s New York.

Fluxus was a movement that originated at that time. A loose association of artists which embraced many different modes and players from the proto minimalism of La Mont Young to the confrontational performance strategies of Dick Higgins and Yoko Ono. They developed the instruction score. Often a single paragraph, sometimes only a sentence, the score set the frame of a performance idea.

Danger Music May 1962 by Dick Higgins

Scream! Scream! Scream!
Scream! Scream! Scream!

That's it. The score doesn't say how many performers, how they should be co-ordinated, how it starts, how it stops. What kind of duration there is between each 'Scream' event. All these things are decided either by negotiation OR NOT and if not these things are decided by WHAT HAPPENS by the particular quality of the moment and the thought of the people in the room.

Yoko Ono's Laundry Piece 1963

In entertaining your guests bring out your laundry of the day and explain to them about each item. How and when it became dirty and why etc'

But getting back to Harmolodics. Harmolodics is a new word, and as a coinage it says almost all we need to know. It brings together the word 'harmony' and 'melody', the vertical and the horizontal, your space and myspace. The individual and the group are incoded in the idea.

Perhap it's what composer John Cage and choreographer Merc Cunningham explored as their *co-existence of forms*. 'Music' and 'dance' or 'sound' and movement brought together, outside of any kind of deterministic framework.

So I think all we need to know is the word, to contemplate the word and things will fall into place.

Lets talk about school. Perhaps an unfortunate word in this context. Perhap Harmolodics Lab would be more useful! This School of Harmolodics could be a number of things. We may start from Ornette's tunes but we wont strive to ape the style in some of a kind of hall of mirrors. We should aim to be true to the spirit and ourselves and make something that will be about this particular moment in 2009. We should continue the spirit and translate the ideas. As the man said 'it not about style its an idea'

There is a song lyric by Nick Cave which is interesting to mention here. It's called 'We call upon the author to explain.'

'What we once thought we had, we didn't,
and what we have now,
will never be that way again
So we call upon the author to explain'

'Rosary clutched in his hand,
 he died with tubes up his nose
 And a cabal of angels with finger cymbals
 chanted his name in code
 We shook our fists at the punishing rain
 And we call upon the author to explain'

'He said everything is messed up around here,
 everything is banal and jejune
 There is a planetary conspiracy
 against the likes of you and me
 in this idiot constituency of the moon
 Well, he knew exactly who to blame
 And we call upon the author to explain'

Nick Cave sends up of the idea of God in a meaningless world. But more than this, what Cave satirizes is the desire for 'knowledge', to know; the desire for there to be a complete method and plan. As we know these things are always provisional if they exist at all.

We encounter meaninglessness and mystery everyday and we wonder why we are here and what we are doing and somehow we get on and do stuff. And in moments of insecurity and doubt that continually surface we 'call upon the author to explain'.

The author has been much theorised since the 1960s. And the author idea is, in part, a naming game. The word is great promoter of identity. A herald of something. Or a wall for the academy to breach.

George Russel has the Lydian Chromatic concept.
 Gunter Shuller has Third Stream
 Schoenberg had the Method of Composing with 12 tones.
 Steve Reich had Music as a Gradual Process.
 Cage had Silence. The musical work and title of a book which made him even more in-famous and was anything but silent.
 Arvo Part has Tintinnabulation.

Lars Von Tria the Scandinavian film maker has Dogma a set of rules for the liberation of film making from postproduction.

Although some authors don't need any encouragement to explain, it's useful to remember that Debussy was against the idea of being labelled an impressionism. But try going to a concert of his music or reading a book or record sleeve without encountering that word

One last stab at the theory.

The idea is that Ornette's 'harmony is not something pre-determined, but emerges from the interaction of the improvised lines in the ensemble'. And in this situation the intervallic structure of a line, a melody, is the essential element.

It's an idea that echo's Schoenberg's serialism. The 12 tone method starts with the organisation of intervals. It has been trailed in the press as the heroic 'liberation of dissonance'. This tells us more about the ideology of the style. Because most important to Schoenberg's is his 'prohibition' of intervals which suggest triads. Intervals which have harmonic gravity. Ornette doesn't have this agenda but perhaps does feel that melody needs to be less restricted by a fixed and stated harmonic frame.

John Cage - who with Alan Kaprow invented 'Happenings' in the early 1950s influencing the Fluxus movement in the 60s - studied with Schoenberg in his youth. Cage seems to have understood some of the irony implicit in the serial method.

The rigorous and mechanical control of one element, the melodic, tended to have implications for other parameters. The unforeseen or unintended consequences were fascinating, more fascinating that what was *worked* by the composer. In Schoenberg's music the rigorous control of intervallic structure and the resulting lack of

tonal centre left the rhythmic character in a time warp. An empty shell without any harmonic motivation.

In Ornette's approach the idea is that harmony is not something pre-determined, but arrived at through the soloist's exploration of possibilities in the moment. So the specifics of the harmony are self-determined by the free playing associations in the band.

Harmony emerges from the interaction of the improvised lines in the ensemble, but the specifics of the harmonic results are indeterminate. The melodic is articulated but the harmony is implied and always moving towards ambiguity. This is the idea.

Ornette's harmelodic clef or the strategy of transposing instrument all reading from the same clef goes quite a long way to making some kind of consistent harmonic world. It can quickly establish a harmonic identity.

Some composers in the middle of the 20th Century were quick to take Schoenberg's melodic ideas further by applying rigorous control to all parameters. Rhythm, Dynamics and Timbre. However the more the parameters of composition were rigorously ordered the more the surface of the work projected some kind of free play. This seems particularly true of Stockhausen's music.

Cage on the other hand wanted to play what was controlled off against what wasn't. He asked: why not devote composition and performance energy (control) to making an experience in which all the sonic events are unforeseen (uncontrolled) by the composer .

The final stage of this approach, in which both composers and performer *seem* redundant, Cage asks: why not just listen to the sonic events that naturally occur in the world. To consider for aesthetic experience those things which are not controlled by us and the specifics of which are unforeseen. The continuing irony is that to do this Cage still has to have a score and, in the classic version of

4'33, a pianist. Even if it's a one word instruction score: 'Tacet', to 'not play'.

Perhaps this relationship of the controlled element to the uncontrolled elements is the theme of what I've been talking about.

At the centre of Ornette Coleman's practise and thought is the idea that everything is connected to everything else. C major might be connected to Db somehow. And a musical interval may be connected to love or the smell of the earth. Ornette plays with Moroccan musicians at one moment and that European invention the symphony orchestra the next.

Both LaMont Young and Terry Riley played some kind of bop before they became the founding fathers of Minimalism. The heterophonic textures of Riley's 'In C' look both ways towards the textural micro polyphony of Ligeti's 'Chamber Concerto' and back to Parker. And a more recent work like Andressen 'Hout' has the memory of those bop lines imprinted in its DNA.

The British version of Fluxus was The Scratch Orchestra led by Cornelius Cardew who's 'The Great Learning' is a series of instruction score. John White's 'Newspaper Read Machine' is a fascinating example of how instruction score show's creative process. In America the experimental approach continued in work by Daniel Goode and his one page scores. Sorry this has turned into a stream of possible connections. Hopefully it's useful in provoking a visit to the record shop or library or a few hours googling.

"Harmolodic allows a person to use a multiplicity of elements to express more than one direction at a time."

I hope that the thoughts and connections I've put together here could possibly be Harmolodic. When Ornette talks about Harmolodics I think he's talking about the creative process. It's the continuity of action and

experience that can pull disparate things together, be they musical pitches or different people from different places and traditions; to be together and to make music. This is what for me is at the centre of Ornette Coleman's life, music and idea.

Sources

Ornette Coleman his life and Music
by Peter Niklas Wilson
(Berkeley Hills Books 2002)

Music in a New Found Land
by Wilfrid Mellers (Barrie and Rockliff 1964)

Fluxus Source Book
ed Ken Friedman Owen Smith Lauren Sawchyn
(Performance Reseach Publications 2002)

Thanks to Neil Quintin, Cameron Reynolds (Learning & Participation (Music) at the South Bank Centre) and Dominic Murcott (Head of Compostion) at Trinity Laban for making it all possible.

© andrewpoppy June 2009