

The Quest for 'Newness' in Jazz: Implications of Cage's Relationship with Jazz

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Abstract

Scott Simon (2008) describes jazz improvisation as an act of 'reproduction of music', 'reinterpretation of compositions', and 'quotations of melodies', while Paul Berliner (1994) puts it as 'reworking precomposed material'. In contrast, Lee Brown highlights the spirit of 'non conformism' embedded in jazz playing, so that the musical outcome of jazz is 'unanticipated', and 'nondeterministic' (Brown, 2000). In 2012, I proposed 'heteronomy' as one of the defining features of jazz. How would these characters of jazz appear in the light of John Cage's thoughts? If jazz is an art of quoting rather than creating, then that it was a genre of 'distaste' to Cage becomes understandable. Cage's relationship to jazz and/or improvisation is more than a mild rejection. Sabine Feisst (2009) refers to it as an 'unresolved relationship', while for Rebecca Kim (2012) there is a 'separate togetherness' between Cage and jazz. In coaching Malaysian students to embrace jazz, needs arise for a clear understanding of what is the nature of jazz. In this paper, I discuss the meaning of 'newness' in jazz, by tracing several issues that crisscross over Cage's thoughts about jazz. Do musicians seek 'newness' in jazz? I argue that 'newness' is more relevant in the process of a jazz performance compared to its outcome. Nevertheless, Cage's thoughts could inspire further pondering of what jazz is (not), and what jazz can (not) become.

Keywords *newness, jazz, improvisation, John Cage, performance process*

Are jazz musicians responsible for novelty in the way Cage desires in his composition? I have found that Cage and jazz have been in alliance in seeking indeterminate character and decentralized social settings in music. Their bitterness in relations comes from the 'modernist spirit' of newness, one that radically thirsts for a 'new' musical 'product', while jazz on the contrary prioritises real time discoveries in the course of music interaction.

The mentioning of 'newness' in jazz is scattered around philosophical papers that depict the inner perspective of jazz playing. These include the accounts of Brown (2000), who focused on the inner perception of jazz players; of Day (2000) who relates jazz to Daoism; and, of Groves (2006), Prouty (2006), Komara (2008) and Zack (2000) who relate jazz to organisation study. On the education side, research literature found mainly focuses on the pedagogy of improvisation in general but research on jazz improvisation learning is rare. The scarce local literature on jazz study include Jähnichen (2010) who has described several jazz musicians in Malaysia and has also

reported the issues of self-confidence of jazz students in Malaysia (Jähnichen, 2009). Chan reported the issues of students' self esteem through his teaching reflections (Chan, 2012) and gave some conceptual ideas on the nature of jazz improvisation in relation to its audience (Chan, 2013).

As with the local scene of jazz education in Malaysia, despite an increase of students, majoring in jazz¹ over the past 10 years, the outcome has been unfruitful². This poor output of jazz education has its root in the yet to be established teaching methods, and the lack of established social environment for jazz music in Malaysia. Students' prior knowledge and readiness to jazz vary, despite their high level of piano proficiency. Students' achievements vary too: Some have become active players in the field while others are barely acquainted with a stable style of playing. An immediate problem faced by many has been the lack of exposure to, and the lack of understanding of jazz itself.

Students' readiness has improved lately, with the emergence of jazz culture in the country. There is an increase in regular jazz performance venues in Kuala Lumpur; and a blossoming of jazz festivals like those held in Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Miri and Kota Kinabalu. Following this, my teaching of jazz piano has come to another stage of development, that is, from the problem of students' readiness to the question of direction: A question that deals with the definition of jazz and the emphasis in teaching; a question derived from the polarised views in the real jazz scenes at present.

Problem Statement

Awareness to produce something 'new' or 'different' is inherent in jazz performance, but the conception of what is 'new' and 'different' differs between individuals. Every performed improvisation is a statement (or restatement) of view, preference, and taste in music, the nature of which is not unlike a political statement. Today, these statements of jazz include both the sense of honouring the past and the spirit of non-conformism. Two contrasting views prevail in today's trends of jazz development. Firstly, one honours the history of jazz developed in the United States of America. Termed as mainstream (jazz), it combines the earlier swing (as in Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington) and the later bop (exemplified by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie) into one 'musical domain'. Wynton Marsalis's movement of neo-classicism typifies the stance of the mainstream. The second view features the explorer's spirit that was inherent in jazz development, and continues to find new boundaries for improvised music, experimenting with different materials and ideas. The boundary-challenging movements in jazz history have been the bop (which began in the 1940s and was

¹ Jazz improvisation is a common component for major studies in tertiary music program offered by local universities in Malaysia such as Sedaya University International (UCSI), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) as well as in programmes of the same nature offered by other institutions.

² The annual Roland Piano Festival sees continual drops in number of participants in Pop and Jazz categories; local universities scarcely send performing groups for the annual Penang Jazz Festival; and, the ABRSM examination board has only a handful of Malaysian candidates registered for the examination for Jazz in Kuala Lumpur for the past four years.

later included into the main body of jazz in the 1960s); free jazz, which in the 1960s experimented with materials and ideas from Avant-Garde composition; and fusion (popular in 1970s-80s and incorporates rock elements and electronic instruments). Experimentation with the music traditions of the East also began in the 1970s, with an early example being the Mahavisnu Orchestra. Living alongside world music and alternative rock, jazz experimentations took place on the centre stage of jazz festivals in Europe and Asia.

One could differentiate between the two views of jazz by examining whether swing and bop elements are present in a performance, and if there is a coherent musical style between performing groups in a jazz event. Many jazz festivals today reduce its genre coherency to the improvisation aspect alone; swing and bop elements have become mere options.

Different views of what jazz is and is not, inevitably affects the coaching scenes. A view standpoint shapes the coaching styles, and further determines the educational outcome. In considering which viewpoint applies, the socio-geographical location of Malaysia imparts auxiliary perspectives. Under the tradition-based view (the first view mentioned above), learning jazz (for Malaysians) means to acquire unfamiliar music vocabularies and performance techniques. Put under the light of the experimental view, on the contrary, jazz learning is a process of seeking self-expression without being confined to 'standards' and 'norms'. The vast and converging (meaning, flexible) music traditions in the Malay Archipelago, in addition, provide opportunities for experimentation and for students to localise jazz to their local conditions.

A discourse on pedagogy is imperative to facilitate the search for direction in jazz coaching. It may include issues like artistry and skill excellence, social identities and modes of identification, perception and reception of local audience, and many more. The topic of 'newness' is apt for such discourse for several reasons. Firstly, to do something different (therefore 'new') centres jazz improvisers' awareness in performance. Secondly, discussion about 'newness' can help clarify the contribution made by jazz improvisers to the performing arts scene at large, which will in turn contribute towards a clearer definition of jazz. Thirdly, the established idea of 'newness' by the modernists is conducive and ready for cross genre comparison, hence a viable topic to examine.

Approaches

This paper intends to deepen thoughts concerning 'newness' in jazz by comparing the views on 'newness' held by the modernists and by the 'insiders' of jazz. In order to carry out the comparison, John Cage's view on jazz represents the modernist's view, which will be contrasted with the philosophical writings on jazz published in the last decades.

Accounts on John Cage's relationship with jazz written by Sabine Feisst (2009) and Rebecca Kim (2012) are by themselves a documentation of dialogue between the modernist and jazz, but approached more from the modernist's viewpoint. These writings trace the change of Cage's relationship with jazz over different periods of his life. John Cage, in his early years of career (1940s), would seem to have been 'on the

same side' with jazz in searching for unprecedented musical possibilities; but at a later time (after 1950), viewed jazz as an antithetical end to 'newness'. He finally arrived at his own approach (1970s) for improvisation which was largely different from jazz, with his series of works entitled *Improvisation*. Besides Feisst's and Kim's articles, other works also supported the modernist's view of newness, including the writing by Charles Hamm (1997) and Beate Kutschke (1999).

By way of comparison, literature about the nature of jazz was referred to in order to put up counter-arguments. These include works by recent researchers like Bruce Benson (2006), Randall Groves (2006), Phillip Johnson Lard (2002), William Day (2000), Lee Brown (2000), Michael Zack (2000), and Chan Cheong Jan (2012, 2013). The comparing of thoughts between the modernist and jazz will be presented below, upon which a further discussion seeks to answer what 'newness' means to jazz and its implications on jazz education.

What Brought Cage and Jazz Together?: The Indeterminate Quality of Music

Cage and jazz were 'together' in wanting to do music that is not predetermined. Indeterminate and unforeseeable were the qualities of (new) music that Cage desired throughout his career. Jazz, as an improvisation-based genre, had at one time met Cage's criteria of 'newness'. Cage saw jazz, particularly the hot jazz, as a source for new possibilities in music, especially in its rhythmic aspects. Cage raised hot jazz as an example, together with 'Oriental music', in mentioning methods for group improvisation in his written text *The Future of Music: Credo* (circa 1940). His interest in jazz has been mentioned by Kostelanetz (1993), Feisst (2009), and Kim (2012). Cage was influenced through his contacts with William Russell, a composer who had favoured jazz. Jazz idioms were used in Cage's compositions such as the *Third Construction* (1941), *Credo in Us* (1942), and his *Jazz Study* (circa 1942).

In contrast to the extensive but rigid notation system of the classical tradition, the simultaneous solos played by the jazz players present a mosaic that is 'new' in a sense that the outcome is not within an individual's control and prediction. In this decentralised sound of the jazz ensemble lies the defining character of jazz, as Sargeant put it:

When ... players ... are not quite sure what is going to happen next the music takes on the aspect of a tussle in which individual players may actually try to unhorse each other, as well as the audience, by means of conflicting rhythmic impacts. When players, dancers and audience alike are hanging desperately to their sense of rhythmic orientation on one hand and are violently disturbing it (or listening to it being violently disturbed) on the other hand, the result is jazz in its purist form. (Sargeant 1975, p.241-242)

The Awareness of Newness by Jazz Musicians

The inherent attitude of jazz musicians towards 'newness' is explained in Scott Simon's (2008, p.42) statement: 'The production of new ideas is fundamental to improvisation,

since it is not enough for improvisers to produce music that has already been composed. They must produce something that, at least to them, introduces novelty.’ Although jazz improvisation is established on prescribed chord progressions and is based on ‘structured swing genres’, it is vital for a jazz musician to play ‘outside’, meaning to play beyond the preset structures. (Zack, 2000, pp.228-229). The success of a jazz soloist is in how one creatively works through the constraints of the ‘rules’, and the spirit of an improviser is one that is ‘non-conforming’, as elucidated in Brown’s article (2000). If, for example, a certain way of coiling the tune has become common, a jazz improviser would strive to improvise away from it.

The Decentralised Setting of Jazz

Another aspect that brings Cage and jazz together is his intention to break away from the authoritative social connotations associated with Western classical music and to approach a more collective-based democratic imagination of music of the future. Hamm (1997, p.280) argues that Cage was clearly postmodern in his will to reduce the domineering status of the composer in the composer-performer-audience linear relationship. Jazz would have been the alternative model for a decentralised social setting. Although soloists are featured in jazz performance in their ‘ad libs’, I have argued (Chan, 2012) that the sense of hierarchy between the performance members in a jazz ensemble is rather weak. Although the roles between instruments are defined, there is no clear dominating by one over the others.

The Split between Cage and Jazz: The Modernist’s Spirit of Newness

The differing point between Cage and jazz concerning ‘newness’ derives from the way ‘new’ is understood and the way the past is handled in their musical realms. The modernist’s understanding of ‘new’ could be far apart from what jazz musicians comprehend. The words of Schoenberg below typify the conception of what is new in the realm of classical composition. In answering ‘what is New Music?’, he says:

Evidently it must be music which, though it is still music, differs in all essentials from previously composed music. Evidently it must express something which has not yet been expressed in music. Evidently, in higher art, only that is worth being presented which has never before been presented. There is no great work of art which does not convey a new message to humanity; there is no great artist who fails in this respect. This is the code of honor of all the great in art, and consequently in all great works of the great we will find that newness which never perishes, whether it be of Josquin des Pres, of Bach or Haydn, or of any other great master (1984, p.114. Originally written in 1946).

One differing point is that novelty is articulated and given high values in the quest for New Music. It is unclear to which extent jazz musicians might have been influenced by this ‘modernist’ view, but ‘newness’ in jazz was expressed more in terms of ‘making

a difference' or building character of one's style of improvising. It is daunting for jazz musicians to comply with the first two statements by Schoenberg above.

Contrary to Hamm's view that Cage was postmodern, Cage's disgust of jazz derived from a modernist viewpoint of what is new. He expressed his distaste of jazz through the matters of taste, preference, memory, self-expression, and those features that he wanted to expel from music. His vision of newness in music, expressed via terms like indeterminate and unforeseeable, was an artistic outcome that had not existed before. In order to achieve this newness, not only taste, preference, memory were rejected, even 'rationality' was rejected because it limits the possibilities within what 'logic can imagine'. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss if Cage has after all depended on his own rationality in pursuing novelty (since chance operation could also be regarded as a form of rationality). It was however clear that, as he began to break away from the many 'old' socio-cultural and aesthetic elements in music, soon jazz became another 'past' which he must reject.

The Quoting Nature of Jazz

Jazz improvisation, on the other hand, has been explained as 'reworking of precomposed materials'. Even Avant Garde Jazz or Free Jazz did not deal away with prior materials, where motivic tone patterns have been used extensively. The truth of jazz improvisation would be that it reflects whatever pre-exists (often music vocabularies developed in classical music and other genres) in a different and unique way. Jazz's contribution to the arts is not so much in providing new music materials but in the ways materials were recombined. It could be surprising to many that jazz improvisation is likened to an art of making constant musical quotations in spontaneous ways. My earlier writing (Chan, 2011) examined this quality of jazz by referring to Benson's (2006) account:

Improvisation is perhaps the most unique feature in jazz. Taking ad lib as an act of commentaries (to the existing musical ideas), Benson applies Henry Louis Gates's idea of "signifyin(g)" to decode improvisation. By "signifyin(g)", Benson refers to the act of repeating a musical idea but with difference. Ralph Ellison claims that "jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials." If this is true, then jazz ad lib is a moment where quotations take up the centre stage without the presence of the original music materials. It is as if the lord of the house is absent, but his soul remains. And this soul is greater than the lord himself. As Benson puts it, "the transformation becomes greater than the original". One can easily identify with this by seeing the many incidents where chord progressions were juxtaposed; sections were enlarged; and hence sometimes even the vamp (a repetition of a short chord patterns serving as an intro or outro) may take on the centre role in the performance.

In contrast to those who hold jazz musicians as heroes, the identity of jazz musicians as improvisers is a heteronomous one, due to the nature of the way jazz is played. By comparing to the classical theory of improvisation, Benson regards a jazz player as neither a whole imitator (*imitatio*) nor inventor (*inventio*), and is

perhaps best to be described as a “bricoleur”, using Derrida’s term (Benson, 2006, pp.463-464), meaning someone who makes it with whatever available. Benson said, “For, if Gates (and Derrida, to whom much of my own analysis is indebted) are right, then as an improviser I am always going to be quoting someone else... It is also that it is impossible to improvise as a wholly ‘autonomous’ improviser. For autonomous improvisation is simply a contradiction in terms” (Benson, 2006, p. 462).

It is enthralling that the word ‘improvisation’ could imply contradictions in newness when used in different contexts. Its etymological meaning of ‘being unforeseeable’ connotes something that is non-existent (at least until now) and unexpected. In contrast, the ordinary usage of ‘improvisation’ has two meanings, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*: 1) to create or perform (drama, music, or verse) spontaneously or without preparation; and 2) to produce or make (something) from whatever is available. The second meaning here which captivates the existence of something refutes the etymological one that implies indeterminacy, for the existing something can be seen and foreseen. Jazz improvisation is essentially a ‘make do’ with whatever is available in the improviser’s memory and imagination at the time. The outcome of improvisation is then a rearrangement, restructuring, retelling, having high resemblance of the source, and is hardly completely new.

The Way of Quoting

Cage’s rejection of jazz and improvisation, strictly speaking, was not on the matter of existing materials alone, but also on how these materials were operationalised. Cage himself had done something similar to ‘quotation’ in his work for the dancer, where he applied 42 jazz records in *Imaginary Landscape No. 5* in 1952; and even when he dealt away with jazz and existing materials he was still using other ‘existing’ sources such as the radio. The performance in 1952 is, however, regarded as a key event to display Cage’s distaste of jazz, as illustrated by Kim (2009, p.63). Cage would regard intuitive musical judgments (such as those that occur in jazz) to produce a musical outcome that is predictable and ‘old’, hence his shift towards chance operation, random methods, and self-devised schemes inspired by extra-musical theories such as I Ching. In *Imaginary Landscape No. 5*, magnetic tape recordings were used to ‘overcome’ the taste for music preferences, that the ‘unmusical’ and ‘distasteful’ sound quality (called ‘timbre’ by Cage) of jazz is in a way tolerated (by means of ‘ignoring’ or ‘giving up’) in exchange for randomised possibilities. In his own words, as cited in Kim (2009, p.63):

With tape and music synthesizers, action with the overtone structure of sounds can be less a matter of taste and more thoroughly an action in a field of possibilities’ (Cage, 1958b, p.77; 1958a, p. 31). Thus, one expectant outcome of *Landscape No. 5* was an acceptance of jazz on its own terms through a willing suspension of distaste: ‘The mind may be used either to ignore . . . timbres which are unmusical or distasteful ... Or the mind may give up its desire to improve on creation and function as a faithful receiver of experience (Cage, 1958a, p.32).

The Matter of Self Expression

Moving beyond a simple match-and-split comparison, deeper dimensions of jazz need to be scrutinised, and here the matter of self-expression, stemming from the account of ‘self reliance’ in jazz by William Day (2000), is raised. Strong presence of self-expression has been the landmark of jazz, and at the same time one of the main reasons for Cage’s rejection. In contrast with the notion of ‘quotation making’ of which jazz musicians would usually not be aware, the notion of ‘self reliance’ written by Day, by applying Ralph Waldo Emerson’s thoughts, are something close to the hearts of many jazz musicians. Jazzmen are held as self-sufficient geniuses. By analysing what Thelonious Monk says in advising Steve, Day probed into the inner world of the jazz improviser as how he/she would maintain self reliance amid other players. The primary focus of a jazz player is in his “thinking in action”, in responding to the environment that is changing (meaning the other players’ musical message and statements), while maintaining the ‘self’ and trusting the ‘genius’ within an outpouring of musical ideas spontaneously. The will to maintain ‘self reliance’ is a moral act, a decision that determines a musician’s intra and inter-personal relation in ensemble playing. In my own words, I stressed the inner viewpoint of jazz musicians:

In virtue, they may not agree with heteronomy, as what is improvised is truly the voice of their souls, irrespective of what materials they had borrowed, captivated and leaned on in the process of music making. To many jazz players, form, structure, and materials are secondary and to be consumed and subordinated to the musician’s self and will of wanted expression (Chan, 2013).

The primary focus of jazz is aptly described by the word ‘instancing’ by Day. Each performance is an instance, a happening. The thrill of jazz is in sharing the real time, coupled with a sense of togetherness, in witnessing musicians’ attempts to survive through the constraints of the musical structure set and the unforeseen musical interactions that happen at that time. Imperfection in the musical outcome is compensated by the ‘searching quality’ in the performance process, so it is not unlike games. The appreciation of newness is held more in the way a solution is brought forth in every instance, here and now, rather than (intellectual) contribution to a body of knowledge (arts). In this sense, jazz is played without systematic consciousness of the past, hence the exploitation of existing (and past) materials is not a question. Perhaps, it has no awareness of the future either. This is vastly different from Cage, who has been critically aware of the past (which he negates away from it consciously) and wanting to look into a future that is ‘new’.

Cage showed favour again in improvisation in his later years by composing a series of works entitled *Improvisation*, in which he uses his own schemes of tone selections that are largely different from jazz. Notwithstanding, the root difference between Cage and jazz remains unchanged. Cage’s criticism on jazz nevertheless crystallised the nature of jazz, helping us to understand better what jazz is. It is however also apt to again pose Cage’s questions to jazz, not as misunderstanding or differences, but as proper questions for jazz bearers to consider as to which direction jazz shall develop into the future.

The Process-Product Argument

The split between Cage and jazz can be understood through a proposed dialectical argument of process-product views about music. While his formula of indeterminacy is commonly regarded as a process of composition, his modernist view of music as work, as product, is in sharp contrast when viewed from the perspective of jazz. Although his preferences in composition warrant him a postmodern outlook (such as his quest for impersonality; his favour of nature; his stress on the unforeseeable; and his rejection of the authoritarian and romantic structure of classical music), he did not really step beyond the long existing idea of art composition, one that deals primarily with the final acoustic outcome. The idea of music as a picture is still vivid. A good contrast to Cage in his relationship with jazz is William Russell, who, on the contrary, was so absorbed by the musicality of jazz that he at times became less of a composer and more of a jazz researcher (Kim, 2009, p.70). Once jazz is listened to with a modernist's mindset, the true rationale for jazz would be missed. This was already mentioned by Brown (2000, p.113) who states that to a formalist's ear, jazz is full of defeat and mannerism.

Viewing jazz from the outside would give a picture that is far different from that of the angle of jazz players. Looking at the acoustic outcome of jazz, one would see heteronomy as a consistent character of jazz. From the musical source to the performance outcome, phrases in jazz are hardly an invention, nor an add-on to the existing musical vocabularies. However, in the ways in which these phrases are played lies the true uniqueness of jazz. To be able to appreciate this uniqueness, one needs to be in the 'inside' of jazz. Viewed from the inside, or a view that looks more on the interaction that happens along the process of playing, jazz is in fact autonomous, though not authoritative. As improvisation is to 'make do with what is available', the process of making do (a music) in an unforeseen situation is of paramount importance.

In recalling his performance with the jazz musicians on the same stage at Hyde Park in 1965, Cage commented that jazz is a form where musicians are frequently "talking but without responding" (Kim, 2009, p.81).

The Hyde Park concert had been Cage's first face-to-face performance with jazz musicians, and he now articulated his criticisms in more concrete terms: 'The form of jazz suggests too frequently that people are talking—that is, in succession—like in a panel discussion or a group of individuals simply imposing their remarks without responding to one another'.

But precisely jazz is about 'keep on talking', and the joy is in sharing the intention and the process of continuous outpour of phrases. When listening to jazz, the audience is active in journeying with the players, standing on the same side, feeling together the urge to express of the player. Under this autonomous character of self-expression, the final sound product is a part of the process: they are important, but not the dominant (Kim, 2009, p.81).

The paradoxical nature of autonomy observed in the process and product of jazz could be grasped as an auto-hetero model: The process of jazz making is autonomous

but its product heteronomous. This is in direct opposition to the case of a classical music 'work'; where the value of a performance process depends solely on the quality of the outcome (product). Therefore, a missed note in jazz could bring profound implications but in classical music, it is nothing more than an error. Cage first found the heteronomous sound product of jazz was close to what he envisioned as indeterminacy. Soon, he became uncomfortable with the autonomous nature of the jazz process, particularly, the autonomous nature of the individual performer. In the 1950s he rejected this role of the improviser altogether. In later years, when the theory of Self Reliance and social equality movement took to a new height, he returned to improvisation but this time he made the improviser more heteronomous, by replacing the musicians' authority to choose, with his own schemes of sound generation.

Implications on Jazz and Jazz Education

Is jazz responsible for 'newness'? My answer is yes. This newness is however not the one defined in a modernist way. The quest for newness in jazz is derived from the spirit of non-conformism: The outcome of it is not a new material that has been non-existent (at least in the music field), but perhaps a new way through which existing materials are (re-) expressed. Now that the difference between the modernist and jazz view about 'newness' is made clear, several implications can be drawn to facilitate further discussion about the direction of jazz in the future.

The first implication is, is exploring new possibilities of sound outcome an apt agenda for jazz at this point of time? Do we need to have new sounds in jazz anymore than what the traditions can already provide us? It is understood from jazz history that musicians had not neglected their role to explore new possibilities. Among the jazz giants, there have been those who were primarily passionate communicators (like Louis Armstrong, Oscar Peterson, and Joe Henderson) and those who were extraordinarily sensitive towards the sound outcomes of their performances (like Duke Ellington, Stan Getz, and Miles Davis). What would it be, if jazz musicians now focus more on its final sound picture than that it is 'new' in a sense that it was not heard before (at least in the jazz history)? Could a sound picture of jazz become something as refined and sensitive as those of the neo-classicists but yet different from them?

Another implication regards the radical self-examination of the core nature and values of jazz. In Cage's lifelong career as a composer, he had been querying the role of composer (his own role), and experimented with ways to attain new possibilities of sound outcome by modifying or changing the role of the composer. Would jazz musicians be tempted to conduct radical self-examination as Cage? A new direction for jazz can be considered by re-examining the autonomous core of the performance process, which deals directly with the nature and value of improvisation. Is there any benefit to doubt, for example, the superiority of solo improvisation and together with it, the skills of spontaneity that display good sense of taste, preference, and memory?

The third implication is the modernists' strong opposition against familiarity and mannerism rings a bell to jazz musicians whose music at times is over-commercialised and easy listening. Very often, we have heard about students of jazz study engaged in 'composition', where the outcome was somewhat similar to a music arrangement.

Some jazz musicians, at least in Malaysia, also take pride in ‘rearranging’ popular tunes into ‘jazz modes’, something that would draw popularity from the public. Many were proud of the ‘familiarity’ that jazz poses, and have perhaps forgotten about the non-conformist spirit in jazz. The history of jazz has been one that repeats trial and error. The early bop received harsh criticism; free jazz remains at the fringe of the genre today. Even with fusion jazz - that has now become synonymous with popular music - Miles Davis attempted it with the intension of seeking new sound possibilities. Fusion jazz in the early 70s, by the likes of Miles Davis and Chick Corea, took on a much heavier component of experimentation. It is alarming to the identity of jazz itself when musicians, lecturers and students alike strive to produce (or reproduce) jazz music that is of ‘top quality’ and ‘can never fail’.

Closing Remarks

By examining Cage’s relationship with jazz and by producing responsive arguments from the jazz literature, this paper has made clear the differences of views about ‘newness’ between the modernists and jazz bearers. The emphasis of jazz on the process of music making over the sound outcome, a mechanism which is opposite to that of art composition, is also clarified. Implications of the comparisons made suggest self-examination of jazz can be conducted over the inclination to neglect sound outcomes, the over dominance of individual improvisers, and the trading of non-conformist spirit for popularity and commercialisation. Although this paper derives from the Malaysian situation, the proposed framework of process-product argument for jazz is applicable in different ways to other situations of jazz coaching.

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Biography

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