

Phil Trelor *Feeling to Thought*

Collective Autonomy

AN INTRODUCTION

Collective Autonomy has been my life-long dream. In a sense, though, I'd describe it as a natural predilection. It seems to have been with me forever. It has drawn the focus of my attention and energy for almost as long as I can remember. From a certain perspective I'd describe it as an attempt on my part to decolonize: to liberate creative inclinations from the expressive hegemony of both Europe and America and, more broadly, imported models, whatever their description. Emphatically, it is *not* for the open slather of rampant creative liberalism per se but rather a move towards clearing the field of, what largely amounts to, imported imperatives. This predilection has not always had a name nor, to begin with, a specific direction, at least not one of my own conscious making. But as my efforts proceeded and clarity slowly increased, as I delved into its depths I came to understand that my intentions seemed always to have embraced one essential thing, to wit, that people engage with, and express freely, their own, *considered* perspective. As a child I saw this as a naturally positive thing. I continue to see it thus.

Critic/writer, John Shand, in defining the 'what-ness' of *Collective Autonomy*, recently suggested that it is "an idea that seeks to liberate the individual through the power of creative collaboration and the embracing of interdependence." (Shand, 2009, *Jazz – The Australian Accent*, p. 76). Yes indeed. It is this. But, and as I think Shand is well aware, more than being 'an idea', or a concept lending itself to neat definition, *Collective Autonomy* lies on a field of process; process that more or less defies definition and instead, finds, and looks for, ways to dislocate altogether, fixed positions. If, in its light, positions themselves refuse change then *Collective Autonomy* will change the context in which these abide. In this respect *Collective Autonomy* has much in common with the 'deconstruction' of Jacques Derrida and is, I would suggest, as difficult to talk about. Just as 'deconstruction' functions at a great remove from being a prescriptive system, so too does *Collective Autonomy*. But, as too with 'deconstruction', it is equally far from being a case of 'anything goes'. It is more a matter of having a deep, active, mindful, accountable, and responsible engagement with 'how' and 'why' it goes, *as* it goes, leaving the door wide open for it to go some other way next time. It does not so much concern itself with product but rather with process. It embraces integrity. It embraces meaningful, communicative relationships. It embraces traditions without seeking to nail them down. Indeed, it enables the possibility to view traditions in various contexts without reducing them to the status of mere instrumentality. Difference is an active constituent and not something to be nominalized, normalized, or reified. But at the same time, and crucially, the most intricate, finely nuanced structures might be employed in any one of its processes of emergence. These are never fixed however. Indeed, structure is significant. But also variously circumstantial. Functional engagement with its processes is fundamental to its understanding.

I coined the term, *Collective Autonomy*, in 1987. This terminology, significantly, made a public appearance September 14, 1988, as a program note for a concert presenting my work in the Australian Bicentennial concert series, 'New Directions - A Preview of the Nineties'. Particular emphasis was there placed on the aspect of 'process' as a central concern, and of the communicative problems brought into

play by the imposition of categorical boundaries. These were matters I'd problematized and seen as intrinsic to creative music-making. Questions pertaining to 'process' as evolving form, and 'categorical boundaries' as imposed restriction to creative effluence; these, I'd come to realize as interrelated. And while I saw traditions as positive bearers of communicative essence, I confronted their appropriation as hegemonic entities. In a published interview – Sounds Australian: Australian Music Center Journal, Autumn 1988, pp. 8 ~ 10 – Brian Brown, as guest editor for this special issue, pursued this with me focussing the discussion on his concern expressed as follows: "I've always felt that Australia is, *and should know that it is*, capable of realizing its own improvised music cum composition." (Emphasis mine) I'd suggest the entire issue to be well worth a read, especially nowadays, more than twenty years after publication. And just by the bye, Brian Brown, in my view, has made a contribution to creative life in Australia beyond measure.

Between then and the time of this writing I've carried out extensive research concerning these aspects and specifically, their meeting at the intersection of improvised and composed/notated musics. Just recently this intersection broadened further to include textual materials. Shand's defining terminology above makes a mindful incision into understanding with his use of the word, 'interdependence', suggesting that no constituent is entirely isolated from others; that they touch or interpenetrate each other to some degree. His use of the word, 'collaboration' accords well with this. And this is significant, though I stress that notions of interaction are able to operate, subtly, at many levels and not only at the overt, as might be signaled by a term like, for example, 'call and response'. I recently discovered the creative potential and intrinsic value in interaction dislocated from real-time; spontaneity left on hold as it were; suspended, yet with no loss of energy and focus due to its suspension while, during the period of suspension, tremendous gain deriving from the clarity of shifting perspectives obtains. This, however, takes us beyond the scope of the present Introduction but does clearly indicate the extent to which *Collective Autonomy* can be, and has been, cast.

As the unusual collocation suggests, *Collective Autonomy* is a complex field of enquiry. Among other tasks it investigates the intersection where music composition/notation, and improvisation meet. And as will be crystal clear to all who consider in depth the material presented with Volume 1 of the documentary CD-project, *Of Other Narratives*, (see extensive program notes on the Feeling to Thought page) the complexity applies no less to questions concerning improvisation than to those concerning composition. I should clarify one point up front. When I speak of composition I refer to (a.), what I've termed 'thorough composition', meaning, a range of (potentially musical) elements as these find themselves construed in some particular way as a result of having been thoroughly worked over/through. And in turn this means compositional processes that address, inter alia, relationships as these obtain between levels – 'background', 'middle ground', 'local or foreground' – of structure. This doesn't foreclose on spontaneity. It embraces it. I think of composition as inspired but certainly not as whimsical. I think of composition as a mode of music-making that enables expressive processes not accessible otherwise. But this is certainly not to deny a compositional ethos as may be made manifest through improvisational processes and for which I've coined the term, (b.), 'intuitive composition'. These two modes of compositional coming-into-being, whilst variously different, are not incompatible. Nor are they necessarily incommensurable.

Indeed, it is precisely the potential these 'non-incompatible differences' bear that establishes the ground on which the discourse of *Collective Autonomy* plays out its discoveries. The research projected by *Collective Autonomy* is to delve as deeply as possible into this intersection so as to discover multiple possibilities by which these modes of music-making are able to interact &/or share the same creative space.

Equally crucial too is the sociological. The impact made upon an entire generation by, for example, the 1950s Australian cultural milieu, cannot be

overestimated. Fundamental to my endeavor has been a concerted attempt to turn the tide of an almost overwhelming malaise – one I identify as the hegemony of imperialism and British/Euro-centric indoctrination – we children of the immediately post-WW II period were saddled with. And if not turn the tide, at least draw attention to its magnitude. Obviously, all in this is not to be negated. But sadly, many have accepted it as the unquestioned status quo. Like the proverbial ripples on the mill pond, the effects of this particular tide flowed on long after the stone had sunk to the pond's bottom. For me, the notion of 'liberation' meant emancipation from British imperialism and all implied by it. Significant here is the substantial contribution I firmly believe possible through music-making. And rather than this being music-making, *toto caelo*, as 'art', and particularly as Art for Art's sake, I have seen music-making as, perhaps primarily, a means of expressing the need to question status-quo thinking; music-making as an expression of a people's voice and as a means of critique. Though certainly, not as a mode of supersession. This is, of course, not to exclude art and questions of aesthetics. Nor is it to exclude thoughtful rigor. Rather, it is to put all this – the intricate, subtle relationships as well as those more obvious – into the service of a call to responsibility. For an in-depth discussion regarding this see my recently published *of Paradox Once Found* – a "Work" of written text and solo improvisations for marimba (Feeling to Thought, FT-005 ~ FT-007).

It is not my intention to fully expound herein the intricacies of *Collective Autonomy* – relationships between its dimensions of philosophy and creative music-making. That task is better left to a book-length exegesis. However, there will be occasion to delve a little into technical areas. Although deeply penetrating theoretical knowledge may not be necessary for a performance of the music itself, it has been absolutely essential to my reaching the kind of understanding that has allowed this particular creative environment to come into being with, notably, a reasonable clarity of purpose. So called 'intuitive' inspirations, insights, and motivations are one thing. Providing these with fertile ground in which they might flourish is a matter for years of disciplined research and practical application, experimentation and documentation, making mistakes then figuring out how or why these occurred. There are no short cuts nor 'quick fixes'. Research is a slow, time consuming aspect of the process. In my view, thought processes are every bit the equal of hands-on music-making. The two are inextricably linked. They help illuminate and clarify each other. Growth, clarity, and understanding results from their cooperation. As a historical document of creative endeavor, *Of Other Narratives* spells out a few of the visible, more substantial landmarks in this long process of cooperation.

It is apposite to point out that *Collective Autonomy's* processes of emergence have never been dependent on 'style' – neither compositional nor performance – in order that realization be achieved. Nevertheless, the observation is a fair one that, in consideration of the performances contextualized by *Of Other Narratives*, style, in various ways and degrees, is present. This is not the point however. What is significant is that style is not a binding element; something that glues the music – its composition and performance – together, and without which it might fall apart. Style, as generally interpreted, tends to draw people towards modes of behavior consonant with some predetermined model. And in this I don't deny possible relevancies. But with *Collective Autonomy*, creative engagement has been paramount since the beginning, not a focus on one's established ability to produce certain musical goods on demand and, particularly, as these may accord with some kind of imported model. Thus, the people represented in *Of Other Narratives* have been, by and large, the kind of creative individuals who have searched for their own voice, irrespective of the various genres they may have chosen as a means towards their voice-finding. And indeed, these have tended to be people who forge a new, or at least a different, path in the process. In effect, this indicates their having sought ways to discover some kind of ground in which to plant and nurture a relationship between themselves and the music they've chosen to play, thus manifesting creative

potential through a form of dialogue that embraces, to some degree at least, original, personal, input. This should not be read superficially. One of the major difficulties in providing compositional material in *Collective Autonomy* has been to do with facilitating forms and structures without these becoming stultifying to creative predilections; without getting in the way of individual expression whilst nonetheless facilitating a ground for unity. Thus, the journey through *Of Other Narratives* provides a bird's-eye view of various attempts to address this profoundly difficult problem, one that *Collective Autonomy* has grappled with in a way that enables people's abiding abilities as naturally creative beings to be foundational to creative exchange as made manifest. An observation passed recently bears out the beneficial significance of this beyond the ken of those directly engaged:

“[And] as I said, people like you and Mark [Simmonds] gave me (and others) a kind of ‘permission’ to be ourselves, to see that our music is somehow related to jazz without having to play some sort of ‘proper’ jazz.” (Will Guthrie, personal communication, May 21, 2009)

This observation makes very clear the necessity to address the question of ‘style’, if for no reason other than it defusing the imperative to perform institutionalized, mechanically oriented forms of ‘role playing’. In so far as it achieves this, it opens up space for creative exchange based on innate predilection. This certainly does not imply a lack of discipline but does, and powerfully so, bring into question where, how, and for what purpose, disciplines might be applied. It lays wide open the possibility to remove altogether the prevalent hegemony of music as metaphor; as a symbol that bears little, if any, personal reality other than one's ability to imitate. It lays wide open the potential for people to share Otherness in a way that is mutually beneficial. The extent to which this sharing is realized will be largely dependent upon the people involved on any given occasion and their willingness to fully engaged with the process. Though not precluded altogether, stylized role-playing bears very little to offer this fecund environment.

In 2007 I attempted, for the *n*th. time, a definition of *Collective Autonomy*:

Collective Autonomy identifies a dynamic field in which agents, exploring concepts of universality and multiplicity, seek harmonious co-habitation through processes of creative interaction, *discovering* both common sense and individual perception as the play of potential-bearing perspectives, and where integration is an option rather than an *a priori* imperative.

It may well be the case that no further definition will be forthcoming because, as pointed out above, the process ensures ever-changing parameters and terms of relationship; the ground itself remains in constant flux. On the field of *Collective Autonomy* definition, it seems, amounts to little more than a futile pursuit that terminates in reification where, in actual fact, what counts as contributive is engagement with the creative process; where, rather than the reiteration of established terminology thus generating product, engagement with process as a coming-into-being is definition enough.