

## Book Review

### Minute Particulars: Meanings in Music-Making in the Wake of Hierarchical Realignments and Other Essays

Edwin Prévost  
Essex, UK: Copula, an imprint of Matchless Recordings, 2004.  
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177 pages

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In consideration of Edwin Prévost's second book, *Minute Particulars*, I am drawn to a quotation from the dust jacket of David Borgo's new book, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age*. The great British saxophonist and Prévost collaborator, Evan Parker, offers his endorsement for Borgo's work, lauding him for his inquiry "in an area where it is almost impossible to make any single uncontested statement!" As one of the most articulate and experienced performer/theorists in the field of creative improvisation, Prévost, I would guess, would have little difficulty agreeing with Parker's sentiment. Through the complex history of the pioneering British improvisation collective, AMM, that is documented in his first book, *No Sound is Innocent*, one senses Prévost's trenchant role in a decades-old set of debates that have informed the group's very committed aesthetico-political approach but, at crucial points, have temporarily torn the group asunder. In the same spirit, *Minute Particulars* is a book that is very much about contestation, a sustained taking-to-task of musicians (close colleagues, notably) and listeners allied with scenes of experimental and creative improvised music who Prévost feels have missed the point of it all, or who are willfully ignoring it. The point, an evaluative standard which Prévost "nail[s] to the mast" in his introduction, is that musical practice can help to foster communitarianism (4).

Such an overt—one may say polemical—correlation of music and revolutionary politics crosses the grain of contemporary discourses of creative improvised music that tend to be more relativistic in spirit, but clearly Prévost is unconcerned with adhering to critical fashions. He stakes a claim for his intellectual, theoretical positions precisely through his sense of their veracity within his own music-making experiences. As such, despite his efforts to work through the arguments in a systematically analytical way, they are informed at their inception by an act of translation—from musical to critical practice—which demands a suitable leap of faith of readers, or else they may well be typecast as the protestations of an ideologue. Skeptical readers, particularly those who seek a more conventionally academic critical approach, may be unwilling to make this leap, and will uncover aspects of Prévost's methodology that run counter to the dictates of formal scholarship—despite its rather stiff title and essay structure, it would be a stretch to call *Minute Particulars* an academic book. Though the sites of these limitations demand scrutiny (and I will make a few provisional observations to this end below), a condemnation of *Minute Particulars* on these grounds alone, in my mind, ignores the centrality of 'insider' perspectives like Prévost's in the emerging discipline of critical studies in improvisation. In a field where debates from tendentious and divergent points of view are the norm, a multitude of perspectives is completely welcome, particularly from those, like Prévost, who have devoted their lives to improvisatory modes of music making.

For Prévost, in a sense that is comparable to the ideas in Christopher Small's work, music at its root is comprised of the social relationships between those involved in its creation. By championing communitarian social relations in particular, Prévost identifies operational aspects of improvisation as the means by which to enact such relations at the site of music-making. Much of *No Sound is Innocent* is devoted to exploring these aspects, which he characterizes as "the mobile logic of dialogical heurism" (3), in which musicians actively search for appropriate musical responses in dialogue with those around them. While improvisation provides the context in which dialogical heurism can take place, Prévost quickly points out that not all improvised music reflects these vital traits. One of the main tasks of *Minute Particulars*, which Prévost characterizes as the "reactive" nature of the essays, is to point out the failings of other established improvisers toward these particular, communitarian ends. Though he remains in fighting form throughout, rhetorically speaking, Prévost's criticisms bear an overall tone of disappointment and loss—a lament that the aspects of the music-making that he prizes have been ignored or forgotten by its most visible contemporary practitioners. Notably, he criticizes the approach of Derek Bailey (another articulate performer/theorist and Prévost collaborator), citing his "preference for musical co-existence rather than conscious processive interactivity" (15), and blasts Radu Malfatti and the Berlin 'reductionist' school for their "rather facile doomy religiosity" (38).

Most tellingly, however, he saves his sharpest attacks for long-time AMM colleague, Keith Rowe. Here, the perspective provided by the historical accounts in *No Sound is Innocent* helps to sort out what may be at stake in Prévost's critique. Ideological debates during the 1970s split the group into two discrete, acrimonious factions (with Prévost and Rowe on opposite sides), and Rowe eventually left the group for several years partly in response. In light of such a history, it is likely that the kinds of debates that emerge between the lines of *Minute Particulars* have been rehearsed in private for decades. Within the text, Prévost is explicitly critical of Rowe on multiple points, many of them to do with his more recent work: his affiliation with the growing field of laptop improvisers and their "technocratic" priorities; his appeal to listeners' "virtual masochism" with his Grob recording, *Harsh* (62); and his disavowal of the importance of listening to fellow musicians during performance in which he characterizes musical dialogue as "visceral chic" (92). As the evidence piles up against Rowe, it is increasingly clear that Prévost's lament for the lost or suppressed virtues of improvisation and their communitarian rewards find their primary motivation immediately across the stage, within AMM.

The emergence of such a highly personal critical dynamic increasingly confounds Prévost's explicit goal to make "a more deliberate attempt to be analytical" here than in previous work (1). Instead of a measured, distanced approach based primarily on research, readers confront essays that appear to 'out' what have been private debates between colleagues in which their emotional stakes are left intact, but which are thinly veiled behind the claim of "deliberate analysis." As I stated above, Prévost's deep (emotional) sense of the social and political nature of music-making, based on performance experience, justifies his contribution to current debates about improvisation, against the tides of detached, quasi-objective academic discourse. However, by couching what ultimately read like very personal, subjective criticisms of Keith Rowe within an "analytic" discourse, Prévost leaves himself open to methodological criticisms of his own work. Likewise, though with a hint of paradox, Prévost's writing on the work of another AMM colleague, John Tilbury, often presented in positive contradistinction to Rowe, continually betrays his profound emotional commitment toward him in a way that distills the strength of analysis that a more neutral comparison may sustain. Their near-explicit opposition in the case study of Tilbury's concerto with the Rowe-led MIMEO electronic orchestra, in which Tilbury's performance was violently suppressed by his aggressively noisy collaborators (reported by Prévost second-hand) is the clearest example of the undeniably thorny, highly personal critical field in which Prévost attempts to work.

Instead of theoretical perspectives on music-making in general, the reader is left with a strong sense of a complicated interpersonal history that is refracted through and obscured by the book's legitimizing discursive strategies. As a result, the work I now seek from Prévost is a more straightforward, updated history of AMM, one that fleshes out these debates in a way that makes a virtue not of the individual politics or ethics of players involved, but of the deeply felt subjective positions and the dynamics of collective inquiry that have sustained debates of this nature (not to mention the band's musical achievements) almost continuously for decades. Though I can only speculate as to the nature of the dialogue that has actually taken place within AMM over the years, I have little doubt that, in keeping with Prévost's thematic concerns, it is a model of social interaction (musical and otherwise) that would contribute usefully to the critical study of improvised music in general.

### Works Cited

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