

Notes and Opinions

Roundtable Discussion: The Association of Improvising Musicians Toronto

**Ken Aldcroft
Rob Clutton
Nick Fraser
Rob Piilonen
Joe Sorbara
Scott Thomson
Ellen Waterman**

The [Association of Improvising Musicians Toronto](#) (AIMToronto) was founded in late 2004 by Ken Aldcroft, Rob Clutton, Nick Fraser, and Joe Sorbara as a result of meetings with Vancouver guitarist and former [New Orchestra Workshop](#) (NOW) Artistic Director, [Ron Samworth](#). In January 2005, Scott Thomson was added to form the first Board of Directors of the newly incorporated organization.

AIMToronto's goal is to support and promote creative improvised music and musicians in the Toronto area. Recognizing that the diversity of creative practice in the city had fostered many discrete 'scenes' with little continuity or coherence between them, the founders conceived of AIMToronto as an umbrella organization under which local improvising musicians could affiliate to collectively generate a greater visibility and audibility locally, nationally, and internationally.

The primary method by which this goal is achieved is the [Interface Series](#), in which visiting, world-class improvising musicians collaborate with a variety of local improvisers during a three-day concert program. Prior to the formation and incorporation of AIMToronto, successful events of this nature had been organized by Aldcroft and Sorbara. The first of these events featured Vancouver drummer [Dylan Van der Schyff](#) (August 2003), the second featured New York bassist [Reuben Radding](#) (January 2004), and the third featured Ron Samworth (April 2004).

Once the Association was formed, a fundraising Interface was held in January 2005, featuring local musicians who donated their music in support of the new organization. Carl Wilson of *The Globe and Mail* wrote a detailed preview of the event entitled "Mavericks Unite" that contextualized AIMToronto within the history of creative improvisation in the city, and compared the fledgling organization to various musicians' collectives from other urban locales.¹

Revenue from the 2005 fundraising Interface helped to finance an Interface event in May of that year with Montreal saxophonist and composer, [Jean Derome](#). This was followed in July by another event with the electro-acoustic trio, [LaConnor](#). The trio, which visited Toronto while on a Canada Council sponsored tour, is comprised of [François Houle](#) on clarinet and electronics and [Jesse Zubot](#) on violin and electronics (both from Vancouver), and [Jean Martin](#) on drums and turntables (from Toronto).

In September 2005, with support from the Toronto Arts Council and the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Ottawa, AIMToronto hosted an Interface Series featuring the [KaMoSc Trio](#) -- [Achim Kaufmann](#), piano, [Michael Moore](#), woodwinds (from Amsterdam), and Dylan Van der Schyff -- as well as the spectacular Amsterdam trombonist, [Wolter Wierbos](#). The 2005 season was rounded off with a final event in December featuring two top British musicians: drummer [Paul Hession](#) (Leeds) and saxophonist/bassoonist [Mick Beck](#) (Sheffield).

Late in 2005, Rob Clutton resigned from the Board of Directors which, in collaboration with the membership (having grown to 75 members by year's end), appointed Rob Piilonen as a new Board member in January 2006.

In addition to concert and series promotion (which includes the weekly [Leftover Daylight Series](#), Fridays at the [Arraymusic Studio](#), and the NOW Series, Sundays at the [NOW Lounge](#)), AIMToronto is committed to developing creative improvisation in Toronto through educational initiatives. This endeavour includes:

- a partnership with AIMToronto member [Victor Bateman's](#) long-standing, periodic six-week improvisation workshops;
- workshops with visiting artists in conjunction with Interface Series;
- an improvisation workshop with [Humber College](#) students at their request;
- bi-weekly workshops led by various local musicians in association with the NOW Series.

Also, in an attempt to increase the degree of communication and exchange between the Board of Directors and the ever-growing membership-at-large, the Volunteer Work Group was inaugurated in early 2006 under the leadership of newly appointed volunteer co-ordinator, Scott Thomson. The goal of the Volunteer Work Group is to increase the organizational and executive involvement of its diverse membership as AIMToronto continues to grow.

The 2006 Interface season continued in early February with another fundraising Interface, again featuring all local players. Shortly afterwards, AIMToronto hosted a highly successful Interface event featuring Montreal-based clarinetist [Lori Freedman](#) in March, 2006. This event brought the total number of Interface guest artists to 14 and the number of local Interface participants to 92.

Future AIMToronto events in the works at the time of the roundtable include Interface Series with Amsterdam bassist [Wilbert de Joode](#) (June 2006), Sheffield UK pianist [Stephen Grew](#) (August 2006), and Poughkeepsie NY multi-instrumentalist [Joe McPhee](#) (September 2006). Future collaborations with the [Red Guitar Club](#) (June 2006), a number of Queen Street West art galleries (July 2006) and the [Music Gallery](#) for the city-wide "Nuit Blanche" arts celebration (September 2006) are also currently being organized.

Roundtable

The current Board of Directors of AIMToronto ([Ken Aldcroft](#), [Nick Fraser](#), [Rob Piilonen](#), [Joe Sorbara](#), and [Scott Thomson](#)), and founding Board member [Rob Clutton](#) met at the Arraymusic Studio, a regular venue for AIMToronto activities in Liberty Village on Friday, May 26, 2006 for the following roundtable discussion. The meeting provided an opportunity for everyone present to reflect on the organization's achievements and growth since its formation, and to reconsider the Association's goals in light of the challenges the Board has faced as a promoter of local improvising musicians.²

Ken Aldcroft: When Ron Samworth came for the third Interface, he hyped us to the idea of starting a non-profit organization. It was the four of us who met with Ron -- Joe, Nick, Rob Clutton, and myself -- after that interface, in this very building.

Joe Sorbara: We were talking about how they started in Vancouver, the New Orchestra Workshop, and why and realized that, in Toronto, we were almost already there. Up to that point I had (and to a degree I still have) an imposter complex, but it was that moment when we realized that we were actually already in the midst of a 'real' improvising scene. Ron was saying, "This is great. You guys are doing great stuff. Do a little bit more and make it official." It was a kind of permission to proceed. I left that meeting thinking that the project was possible, that we should do it.

Ken Aldcroft: It was almost a year after the first Interface before we began forming the association.

Nick Fraser: You guys [Ken and Joe] conceived of the Interface Series before you conceived of making it the centrepiece of a non-profit organization. Right?

Ken Aldcroft: Joe and I met [Vancouver drummer] Dylan Van der Schyff at the Banff Centre for the Arts and knew that he was coming to the Guelph Jazz Festival with Peggy Lee. He wasn't playing and was just here to see their family so we decided to put on a weekend of concerts. We got local musicians to play with him, and also programmed local bands for two sets, each of three nights. On the third night we played [John Zorn's](#) "Cobra" with a large ensemble with Dylan prompting it -- he had played it with Zorn in [Victoriaville](#) the previous spring and had taught it to us at [Banff](#). The goal was to get as many people involved as possible.

Joe Sorbara: I've talked with a lot of musicians about the fact that music fans in general don't know what's going on in Toronto. AIMToronto was explicitly formed to solve this problem. When most people think about creative music in Canada, they think of Montreal and Vancouver. From the people with whom I've spoken, it

was clear that there were a few things that were creating this impression. One was that, when visiting artists played in Toronto it was never with local musicians, so people never knew that any sort of scene existed. As opposed to, say, Vancouver where you either play with locals or there's a local band opening. The second problem was that some local music fans were traveling the world, meeting musicians from abroad, and telling them that nothing was going on in Toronto. That was incredibly damaging. With the Interface, we wanted to correct such a false impression. Players can play with us and decide for themselves. Whether they like it or not is up to them, obviously, but at least then they can make their own decision. These musicians would be touring all around and talking with other musicians and promoters about what we do. This way, whether they like the music here or not, we're letting the music speak instead of having some people who don't really know what they're talking about do so. And it's working. Michael Moore, Achim Kaufmann and Wolter Wierbos came because Dylan had done an Interface and had told them about it. A lot of the other people who have contacted us have heard about it in this way and have said, "Hey, I'd like to do this too."

Ken Aldcroft: It's an artist-run organization, which I think is important. In Vancouver, they have a few orchestras like the NOW Orchestra, the [Hard Rubber Orchestra](#), but a lot of stuff is done by [Coastal Jazz and Blues](#) [who run the Vancouver Jazz Festival] which isn't artist-run.

Nick Fraser: Our organization is artist-run out of necessity because nobody in Toronto is going to step up to the plate. Nobody who runs a festival will do it. There's no significant press. These are problems we're trying to solve by saying that this music is happening all the time and it's of a high quality. Since there's no-one else saying this, the job falls to us.

Rob Clutton: There was a time when [Ron Gaskin](#) did program a series during the Toronto Jazz Festival called "What Next" that was amazing. It was at the Rivoli and every day during the festival you could hear visiting creative musicians, often with a local band opening. That was maybe 1993 to 1996. Eventually, the festival started giving him less money and he got increasingly frustrated before, ultimately, the series was cancelled.

Joe Sorbara: I came here in 1996 and I was living up at York University. I was desperate to find creative music. It was very difficult even to find out what was going on. [Bass clarinetist] [Ronda Rindone](#) would have been running her series at the Ilder Pub during those years and I had no idea that it existed until it was finished. I was trying to find stuff but it was really hard to figure out where the music was taking place.

Ellen Waterman: Did the [Music Gallery](#) play any role in supporting improvised music?

Nick Fraser: I've been living in Toronto for ten years now and I've had two paying gigs at the Music Gallery. I've had a few other gigs where I, in essence, rented the space. I quickly gave up on that because I couldn't afford it and I found that it didn't do much for me. If I could have made my money back then I would have done it because I liked the previous (Richmond Street) venue. Their new venue, the [St. George-the-Martyr] church, is not very conducive to improvising musicians, especially drummers.

Rob Clutton: The one thing that the Music Gallery hosted, since its inception, was the Tuesday night series by [CCMC](#) [long-standing improvising ensemble comprised, currently, of [John Oswald](#), [Paul Dutton](#), and [Michael Snow](#)]. They would welcome people sitting in so you could hear, say, [multi-instrumentalist] [Ryan Driver](#) playing with [pianist, synthesist, and visual artist] Michael Snow.

Nick Fraser: That's true. I played with them a few times and I went to hear them. They didn't know me from Adam but I heard that if you gave Paul a call, you could play with them so I did. Those were probably my first improvising gigs in Toronto.

Scott Thomson: But the association between CCMC and the Music Gallery is mostly historical these days.

Nick Fraser: When we were discussing the formation of AIMToronto, I remember Ron Samworth said that when he was growing up in Vancouver during the eighties, the NOW organization presented an alternative path for him. That way, his musical education included the world of artist-run organizations for creative music. It wasn't simply the option of going to school to become a jazz guitar player, work on cruise ships, teach guitar and play part-time gigs in bars. There was this infrastructure there that allowed for creative music in an organized setting which has been absent here, I think. Young musicians need to know that this

exists. One of the things that I was hoping would happen, and it hasn't happened yet, is that local improvised music gigs would become viable gigs rather than, "Well, I'm playing at the Tranzac on Tuesday and I hope to make \$12 or I'm playing at Array on Friday and I hope to make \$6." This can be achieved either through funding or through increased awareness and increased attendance. Making this music a viable part of the Toronto music scene in general is a priority.

Scott Thomson: Those little gigs seem to have always existed. There's been a proliferation of this kind of activity in the last little while, reflecting different kinds of improvised music practices and, if AIMToronto has a purpose, it's to provide a certain cohesion for all of those gigs. We don't want an iron grip of control on a curatorial, organizational, or infrastructural level, but there should be a pervasive sense that, though what I'm doing sounds a lot different than what Jim Bailey [electronics] or [Justin Haynes](#) [guitar] is doing, these activities are connected insofar as all of this music is marginal, and it's important -- and it would be good to discuss why it's important, though I certainly think that it is. It should all be part of the cultural fabric of the city.

Ken Aldcroft: For me it was not necessarily about the financial aspects -- though it would be great to make more money, of course -- and more about encouraging people to get involved, to play. By running the Leftover Daylight Series every other week, I feel like I empowered people, particularly composers, to spend those hours writing new music, to put a band together, to rehearse, and then to present it. Everyone in this room does that anyway but it really provides an opportunity for younger players. We're getting Humber College students, University of Toronto students, and people from other scenes involved in the creation of new music. Hopefully, this will increase the awareness of the music and the audience, but that has to start with the other musicians. They come out and then bring a few friends and one of them actually likes it! When Joe and I were running Leftover Daylight in the beginning, I was keeping records of attendance to give to Array for their grant applications. Early on it was three people. . . no people. . . four people. At the beginning of 2006, when the series started going weekly, we were getting at least fifteen people pretty consistently, every Friday. It's the same with the NOW Series at the NOW Lounge where we get twelve to fifteen people every Sunday, plus the musicians. It's still not much money but it's closer to what we're trying to do. It's happening, but it takes...

Joe Sorbara: Time and consistency. The problem with the pockets of activity, all of the little \$6 gigs, is that they tend to last for two months and then the bar owner gets sick of it and says, "Nobody comes. You're done." This was the case with the As Is series that [Gordon Allen](#) [trumpet] and I were running at the Oasis. The owner said, "Oh I'll give you the back room on a Thursday because we have so many people in the front that the small turnout for your event will be a good thing since we won't be breaking fire code." (*laughter*) That gave us complete freedom to do whatever we wanted. We could put on a concert for three people and the bar owner was happy. Then, what happened was just surreal. Everyone was just dying for a centre for this scene, and it seemed for a moment like the Oasis was it because they were being supportive. So [Glen Hall](#) [saxophone] put on the three-night CIA Festival and the place was packed to the gills every night, which caused problems because there were too many people there! "You can't have this many people here! We're going to break fire code! You were supposed to have only three people!" (*laughter*) After we started getting more people out, they shifted us to a less popular night -- Sunday, I think -- and then all of a sudden they expected us to have the same size audience as we were getting on Thursdays. When that didn't happen we got shut down. I literally showed up having booked three bands one week and found out that there was a play going on in the back room where we were supposed to perform. That's a good example of the consistency being broken. The Oasis was no longer the centre and the scene lost a bit of its hard-won cohesion. Ken had a series, where? At the Horseshoe?

Ken Aldcroft: I had series at the 360 Club, Clinton's Tavern, and Graffiti's.

Joe Sorbara: And the same thing happened. Something gets set up but it doesn't happen for long enough in the same space for people to say, "Oh it's Friday. Let's go hear some music at the series."

Ken Aldcroft: It's like Tuesdays and CCMC. You guys knew that those gigs were happening consistently.

Joe Sorbara: This is the thing about the Arraymusic Studio. It's a bit out of the way, but the series can be here every Friday and we determine that. So the consistency over almost three years has meant that people know that it's here, that the series is ongoing, and that has been paying off.

Ken Aldcroft: That work is also paying off for the NOW Series. That's what's good about the organization. We can put these activities under one umbrella so people can recognize AIMToronto as a focal point for improvised music in the city. Hopefully, if young musicians are looking for improvised music, then they can find it.

Rob Clutton: Another reason why Ron Samworth was excited by the prospect of AIMToronto was that there would be another place to play for touring musicians and local people to play with them. That's certainly worked out well for Leftover Daylight and NOW as well as the Interface Series.

Joe Sorbara: I get an e-mail every week from someone who wants to come to Toronto to play.

Ken Aldcroft: I've heard from musicians as we were starting this who said that there's nowhere to play. I mean, there's Ron Gaskin's [Rough Idea](#) [a local creative improvised music promoter] but, other than that, some of the jazz clubs may book them but what people are doing doesn't really work in that sort of venue. Now, word about AIMToronto is spreading.

Nick Fraser: We still can't give them any gas money.

Ken Aldcroft: But it has to start somewhere and they understand that.

Joe Sorbara: That's the other thing that's surprised me. People have been really cool about playing for the door. They say, "Sure. That's what we make at home and I'd rather have a place to play." It would be great to pay them properly and it's our goal to do so but, for now, I think a lot of people in a lot of different cities are fighting the same battles. It's been cool to learn that this is not a freak situation.

Scott Thomson: It would be shortsighted to say that the Interface is, first and foremost, about getting paid. Of course, it would be nice to be paid for the work that we do. It would be nice to be able to pay visiting artists what they are actually worth. But the Interface does much more than that. It seems that all of the activity in the city which we've been discussing, and the establishment of the consistency that Joe pointed out, does something very important in terms of the development of people's musical practice. By having a chance to play their own compositions, or to play with new people in lots of new contexts, people are developing all the time and interacting with lots of new people. The Interface Series, in particular, puts players in a situation where they can test their skills in collaboration with an improviser with an international reputation. We've had some fabulous players come through and the interaction has been at a pretty equal level. I've been surprised, actually, by how well local musicians have played with the guest musicians. In terms of people learning how to improvise, the Interfaces have been serving that function really well.

Joe Sorbara: Absolutely! Local players are drastically better than they were. It's phenomenal how much better people are playing, even since this time last year.

Rob Piilonen: I think people have been improving for a number of reasons. One is that people are playing more often, and another is they are playing with new people. A really big reason for the improvement, though, is a sense of validation of having the organization and regular series, which makes it feel like it is a cohesive scene compared to before AIMToronto existed. At that point, I was cut off from a lot of improvisers on the scene whom I had yet to meet. Taking part in the [John Zorn game piece] "Cobra" sessions which followed the Interface with Dylan was instrumental to learning about many of the players. There, you got to play with a lot of very good musicians all at once and, for a lot of them, it was new context in which you couldn't hang onto your own improvising clichés. There was a lot of learning going on in those sessions.

Nick Fraser: I think the "Cobra" experience was influential as well because it's a piece that helps people to develop language and to codify certain ways of playing. It makes you think about improvising in a very specific way. That also goes for the Interfaces with Ron Samworth and Jean Derome where we played their original music. I think those large ensemble activities were invaluable for players who were developing their improvising vocabularies.

Ken Aldcroft: Ron still remembers that performance fondly. He said that he'd done the same thing elsewhere and it didn't go nearly as well. He was blown away by the ability of all of the Toronto musicians. That speaks volumes about the work that local players have done, and there were a lot of musicians who came through that band [Joe Sorbara's [Pickle Juice Orchestra](#)]. Another reason why local players have gotten better is an increased awareness of all of the other little improvising scenes in the city, and of different approaches to playing. We're all playing something called creative music, but the [Rat-Drifting](#) musicians -- I hate summing it up like that -- like [guitarist] [Eric Chenaux](#) and them, or [guitarist] [Michael Keith](#), who has a more 'hard-core' improvising approach, represent two different approaches that listeners can often hear on the same bill these days.

Joe Sorbara: There's the scene around [turntablist] [Mike Hansen](#), [percussionist] [Tomasz Krakowiak](#), [guitarist] [Arnd Jurgensen](#) and them.

Ken Aldcroft: Or Jim Bailey and those players.

Joe Sorbara: That's what I mean. Those are the pockets with specific "sounds" and all of those pockets are playing their \$6 gigs or whatever. If you mix those people together then it's productive.

Nick Fraser: The players that I'm most interested in play in many musical contexts and have many musical languages that they can access at any given time. Some of them are focused in a particular direction and some of them are very eclectic. It would be great to have improvised music recognized by a broader public as simply another of those approaches. When I say "viable," I don't mean "financially viable" solely. I also mean in an artistic sense, one that affirms that "this is something that adults do." (*much laughter*). It's an important practice because you're dealing with the raw materials of music, in real time.

Rob Clutton: That's not the only thing you're dealing with.

Ken Aldcroft: Personalities.

Rob Clutton: Communication. Relationships.

Nick Fraser: Those are the primary things that you deal with in improvised music, but you deal with them in all music. Really, it teaches you not just how to play music but how to live your life, how to negotiate relationships with other people.

Joe Sorbara: I've only just realized how to articulate this now, but I think our culture supports things that "work" and has tossed a lot of other stuff out. In the face of this process, improvisation allows us to re-examine possibilities. Let's not toss anything out. Let's go back to the widest palette possible. It enters into debates about what is or isn't music. If we talk about our culture specifically, the bulk of the population listens to music that is in four-four time, with a steady pulse, catchy hooks, simple structures that are easily remembered, and so on. Obviously, we can discard some of these general assumptions but, then, why is a scratch not music? Why is coughing not music? Through improvisation, we can reconsider whether these things are valid, and, ultimately, we all make new decisions based on our own criteria.

Rob Piilonen: The relationships between people and the communication are really close to the surface in the music that we play. It's something that can be picked up not only by listeners who happen to be musicians in other genres, but also by people who aren't musicians at all. I've learned this from having brought people to various gigs. They often make very incisive points about when particular musicians were communicating with each other, and when they felt things weren't working. If I've been playing in the group, their sentiments often match what I was feeling at the time. I think that aspect often gets lost on recordings, but, in live performance, people can pick it up quite clearly. Maybe in other genres you don't hear that as much from listeners. There's just as much interaction taking place in those contexts, but it's not as raw and obvious.

Nick Fraser: In genre-based music, you can notice, for example, a vibe between a bass player and a drummer, but it can be separate from what's going on musically. When you're improvising, it's almost always central to what's going on musically.

Joe Sorbara: With genre-based music, the musicians tend to have conventional ways of interacting that already work. We do too, but we also have a fascinating situation where the music is still valid when it's not working. Everyone in the room is invested in the process of working it out but, in that situation, the miscommunication between players, the reasons why it's not working, become things to listen to actively. With the majority of music, all of that stuff already works because they've practiced it *ad infinitum*, or one guy sat with a computer and worked out all of the material, and then had someone sing and then took all of the faults out of his or her voice. All of the things that don't work are taken out in advance.

Scott Thomson: The idealist in me imagines how creative improvised music, against the grain of most commercial music, can offer people a different kind of listening experience that invites a greater degree of participation. The social nature of the music, the sense that the interaction is "close to the surface," as Rob Piilonen eloquently put it, extends into the audience, or at least that's what lured me into the music as a young listener. When I first heard improvised music, I was sold on it because it demanded a lot of me, and I was up for the challenge. I was finding the same challenges in lots of different kinds of music -- I've always been a curious, eclectic listener -- but, in terms of live performance, I'd never experienced the degree of interaction that characterizes improvised music before. I'm speaking very generally here. So I imagine how this music might affect a young listener, or any listener for that matter. Somebody coming to the Arraymusic Studio, the Tranzac, or any AIMToronto event may have a similarly profound experience. That's a primary motivation for my continued work with the organization.

That's sort of a theoretical, idealistic sense of what improvisation is or can do, but I have a secondary and much more practical perspective on the usefulness of improvisation. Given a certain shared sensibility, a certain openness, I can play with anybody. I don't need a rehearsal or lots of coordinated planning. Somebody can call me from Vancouver, or New York, or wherever and say, "I want to come to Toronto. Let's do some playing." And I can say, "Yes. Let's do it. Meet me here." Then we make some music. Maybe there will be an audience, maybe not, but meeting people this way is wonderful, especially if they are incredibly creative people who have worked through their whole lives to develop specific or wide-ranging vocabularies on their instruments. It's always exciting to meet people with new skills and who share a sensibility that allows us to work together in this way.

Ken Aldcroft: Then there's the challenge of meeting people with slightly different sensibilities.

Scott Thomson: Yes. The challenge of reconciling those differences, absolutely. That speaks to what Joe was talking about before, about improvised music being more of a process than a product. Popular culture, as a general rule, gives us musical products and our participation, our choice as listeners, is often reduced to "Yes. I want to buy that" or "No. I don't want to buy that." It's binary. That's a bit cynical of me...

Joe Sorbara: But it's true. Things that aren't worked out and complete are not valid. This logic suggests that we should just eliminate anything that's not working. God forbid we should have to work through something and figure out how these two languages will come together and make some sense. There's a tendency to remove that kind of process from popular music, and then the world sounds even more like Brittany Spears which, suffice it to say, all of us are trying to work against.

Rob Piilonen: I think all of us do listen to product-type music and enjoy it. I don't just listen to creative improvised music. I listen to all kinds of music and it touches me in different ways. I don't discard those kinds of music. I just appreciate the music we're discussing for those differences that Joe was mentioning.

Scott Thomson: That's an important clarification. The kinds of social interaction that are close to the surface in improvising situations exist in virtually any musical practice. However, I fear that it's being purged out of a lot of music, although I see these virtues enacted on the stand in any number of genre-specific situations.

Ken Aldcroft: It's being purged out in the music that is channeled through the mass media but, I'm sure, if you go to a singer-songwriter night or to the Silver Dollar for bluegrass, you'll hear these processes at work. There are lots of people with similar interests who are working in their own genre of music.

Scott Thomson: I'm curious to know what you think the limitations of AIMToronto have been. I don't want to call them "failings" because it's still a new project and can still do a lot of things it's not doing yet.

Ken Aldcroft: Due to financial limitations, we can't choose who our Interface guests will be. I'm looking forward to a time when we can afford to choose four Interface guests each year, and then continue to book all of the stuff that happens to come up in between.

Rob Clutton: We haven't had many American musicians yet. There's just been Reuben Radding.

Joe Sorbara: That's also a political issue. The Dutch guys had government funding so that they could be here for three nights. Not only did they get government funding, but we also got Dutch Embassy funding to advertise their concerts. We get money here to a degree. I haven't seen any of it yet, but some Canadian musicians are funded by the government. I pray that they continue to be. However, in the States, it's quite different. They can come here for one night and, for example, a lot of players from Chicago have been through lately to do one-night things. Due to these circumstances, they need to make money from the gig.

Nick Fraser: I think another challenge has been that, even though there are many artists whose activities fall under the umbrella of AIMToronto, it's still a very small community. There are also some political, thorny issues around what we are trying to do and how it's being perceived. It gets painted as "those guys are doing that thing" when, if you talk about it with any of us, I hope it's immediately clear that we want it to be much more than that. We want to provide a sense of cohesion for all of our members' activities. Whether it's successful or not remains to be seen, but I think there's still a feeling in some parts of the community that what we're doing doesn't relate to them. They don't realize that what they're already doing is already a part of it, as far as we're concerned.

Scott Thomson: By introducing the Volunteer Work Group, which started in January 2006, I was trying to imagine a way to include people who may feel excluded otherwise. We were in the midst of the transition from having Rob Clutton to having Rob Piilonen on the Board, and there were all of these people who expressed interest in Board membership, and it seemed like a shame to include only one of them. We decided before Rob Clutton's resignation that we didn't want to expand the Board beyond five due to the logistics of negotiating busy schedules for meetings or otherwise, but we had all of these people with energy to invest into the organization, good ideas, and skills, and I thought what a shame it is to appoint only one of them. I started this Volunteer Work Group not only for these Board candidates, but also any of the now-120-plus members. It should be pointed out, though, that they are members nominally; their membership doesn't carry with it any particular privileges or obligations; they aren't paying to be members so their membership is basically just an expression of solidarity. But I thought that if this solidarity extends beyond simply putting their name on the website and being called for a couple of gigs now and then, that they would respond to the call to come out to a meeting that says, explicitly, "We want to know what you think about AIMToronto. We want you to give us your input about how to improve things. We also want you to take on tasks to make it a better organization." I've been resisting feeling crestfallen that the attendance at these meetings has been so poor. Two or three people have been coming out, and it's been productive, though nowhere near as productive as I'd originally hoped. To me, what that says is that there are people who are willing to be critical, however they position themselves, but when they don't respond to a direct invitation -- and I hope it's been direct enough and that I haven't been putting up any barriers without knowing it -- then I'm not exactly sure how else to address their criticism. I still feel very strongly about what we're trying to do and, even if it does strike some people as being a somewhat closed scene, we ultimately have to make certain decisions in order to be sustainable.

Ken Aldcroft: In the history of this Board, there's always been an open debate about how to include as many people as we can and, in my mind, we've tried to set up a situation where anyone who wants to get involved can do so. As a Board, we can't spend too much energy worrying about that kind of attitude. When we book special events, it's always someone different on the Board who does the programming. That way, each Board member's slightly different perspective is reflected in what we organize. If any of us are confronting someone for whom it's only about getting a gig, then each of us has the option to include that person if we want. If people think that we're not being inclusive, then they should pick up the phone, or e-mail me, or come out to some concerts and they'll find out that that's not the case.

Joe Sorbara: The main thing is to come out to the concerts. Come, listen to some music, and introduce yourself. I realize that I don't go to a ton of gigs, and that other people have lives that get in the way. However, for me -- and I think when people use the word "community" they don't always think about what it

actually means -- it's really about a community of people. Why else would we be here? We're not making any money. We all enjoy making this music so we may as well make it with people who are invested in what we're doing. I'm interested in making music with new people for the purpose of including those people in the community. So, for them to come out and make music once and then disappear, that's fine, but it's difficult to justify including such people in a special event when there are only so many slots to fill. There are so many people who come out almost every week who deserve the gig more.

Scott Thomson: I've been disappointed by the attendance at the Interface Series, particularly the Achim Kaufmann, Michael Moore, Wolter Wierbos, Dylan Van der Schyff event. We had tons of advertising: fancy handbills, radio advertising, print advertising. We couldn't get any more people out to that event than to any other event. What was it? Ten or twelve people a night? And those were really heavy players! As we tend to think after events are not well-attended, I thought, "Where's our membership? I thought the membership is interested in this music." We've tried to eliminate as many barriers as we can. We've introduced a pay-what-you-can night one out of the three nights of the Interface in case cost is the issue. However, I always wonder what barriers we're throwing up without even knowing it. Is it the cost? Is it the venue? Is it the programming? Is it the fact that we're an all-male Board? It could be any number of things. I feel that it's crucial to think these and other possibilities through. And yet, if we keep thinking and thinking and thinking, then nothing gets done. No concerts get booked. At a certain point, we have to say, "Okay, what we're doing is valid. We've just got to plow on through and get things done."

Nick Fraser: Yes: "This is who we are and this is what we are doing."

Joe Sorbara: I worry about how much we include ourselves in our events. I've come to what feels like a fair resolution that I'm here every Friday night and I'm not playing anywhere else so I'll give myself a gig every couple of times. We're putting in lots of volunteer work and none of us would be doing this if such an organization existed already. We're all musicians, first and foremost, so we need to help ourselves in that regard. But that's the one thing among the things that Scott listed that concerns me most. If there's a perception that AIMToronto is "the thing that those guys are doing," then is that the reason why? Even if that is the case, I don't see how it could be otherwise. I'm not interested in putting on a weekly concert series and never playing. You also have to look at our exemplars. If you look at what's happening in Vancouver, those guys are playing at the things that they are organizing.

Rob Clutton: Our inspiration for starting AIMToronto was NOW in Vancouver. That's a very specific organization. There are a few non-profit organizations in Vancouver that are for specific groups that are more-or-less closed. They do workshops and things in the community but they don't try to serve everybody. What we're doing is actually quite different.

Scott Thomson: Still, there's an ethic of improvisation that at least invites the idea of openness. As I said before, it creates the potential to play with anyone. There remains this two-sided view where, on the one hand, the music itself motivates me to be as inclusive as possible while, on the other hand, at a certain point, the organization becomes a closed thing simply by virtue of it existing and functioning.

Nick Fraser: This is part of the problem of being inclusive in the programming of the Interface Series. There's a danger that, by trying to be inclusive, you encourage mediocrity. By being somewhat exclusive, you're getting the best players. I don't want to put on mediocre concerts. I don't want people to come from elsewhere with the explicit purpose to show them how great the Toronto scene is and for that not to happen. I want the music to be great.

Rob Clutton: I have reservations about the notion of "mediocrity," as well as the suggestion that local players have all gotten better, because I have questions about what "better" is in improvised music. I think the scene has gotten better, for sure. I don't even know if I've gotten any better over the last ten years! In terms of being an improviser in the pure sense of existing and relating to other people, I'm not sure that it's about getting "better."

Joe Sorbara: I think you can learn how to relate to other people better.

Ken Aldcroft: It has to do with experience, but those issues point to the importance of the work in between the Interfaces. Simply having four events a year and having twenty people play at them doesn't really benefit the scene in terms of helping the development of young and inexperienced players. The work in between,

the Leftover Daylight Series, the NOW Series, the Tranzac, doing outreach so that every three months there are maybe new players peaking and we can justify including them in the Interface so there's less a risk that those concerts will be mediocre.

Scott Thomson: If somebody with thirty years' experience as an international improviser were to come to Toronto, someone like, say, [Evan Parker](#), then I'm curious to know how that would influence our booking. Would we try to book "the cream of the crop," so to speak, or would we try to achieve a balance with the inclusion of less experienced players? I think this is something that we experience on a case-by-case basis. I don't think it's something that we can necessarily answer right now because we'd be dealing with a whole bunch of issues including how to promote such an event, how to pay for this great player from abroad, and how to give him, as Nick said, the best musical experience based on our own aesthetic choices.

Ken Aldcroft: The great thing is that we're actively discussing it, that it's open to debate. Who are we booking and why? Who are we responsible to? As long as we keep having these discussions then, given our varied experiences with different segments of the local scene, we'll be getting the feedback by which to answer these questions.

Notes

¹ Wilson's article may be found as "Great Hoser Music, Ancient to Future" in *Zoilus.com*.

² AIMToronto member, CSI-ÉCI editor, and University of Guelph ethnomusicologist Ellen Waterman was also present as an observer for her research on experimental music performance in Canada (www.experimentalperformance.ca)

Works Cited

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