

## A glimpse of the Incus Archive

Derek Bailey was a player, rather than a writer. He could write beautifully, in a punchy and often ironic style, as his book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* demonstrates. Nevertheless, as he wrote in September 1991, in the preface to the second edition of that book, '[t]urning once again from improvising to writing about improvisation was done reluctantly; they are very different activities, it seems to me, and not always compatible.' (p. xiii) Less still, in most people's eyes, was Bailey a composer. He stands for many as the supreme example of the free improviser; to use his own terminology, the 'non-idiomatic improviser'. He clearly states his philosophy in his book:

Paradoxically, perhaps, I have found that the best base from which to approach group playing is that of being a solo improviser. Having no group loyalties to offend and having solo playing as an ultimate resource, it is possible to play with other musicians, of whatever persuasion, as often as one wishes without having to enter into a permanent commitment to any stylistic or aesthetic position. (p. 112)

The desire to avoid 'permanent commitment' to a given style or aesthetic in a group context does not, however, imply a lack of interest in such questions, particularly with regard to Bailey's own musical resources. In fact, he spent over forty years exploring his instrument with the goal of developing techniques appropriate to the kind of improvisational musical practice that interested him. He told Henry Kaiser in an interview in 1975 that when playing with Gavin Bryars and Tony Oxley in the band Joseph Holbrooke (in the mid-sixties) he

... found as regards the instrument – naturally – that whatever traditional equipment I had on the instrument was no use in these situations. It was no good coming on like Charlie Christian while somebody was playing a gong and somebody else was sawing off the end of the bass. ... So as regards to changing the way I played to suit the musical situation, that was how it started.

(interview available at <http://www.m-etropolis.com/wordpress/p/derek-bailey-the-interview-london-1975/en/>)

One of the ways that Bailey went about this was through composition, initially with a great interest in serialism (specifically Webern). We are lucky enough to be able to hear some of the results of this process on the Tzadik CD *Pieces for Guitar*, which contains solo pieces recorded in 1966 and '67. The CD begins with largely written pieces but ends with improvisations on written material deliberately designed as a stimulus. Bailey wrote in his 2002 liner notes to the CD that

“Composition” quickly fragmented into short items – phrases/Bits/notes/all sorts of things – collected in notebooks, a practice I've maintained ever since. It seems useful and, anyway, I enjoy it.

Hints like this have long teased the Bailey aficionado. In Ben Watson's 2004 biography of Bailey we read that

[h]e has a drawer bursting with jottings, and has made tantalising mention of collecting these together as a technical manual on guitar harmonics and fingering. Although he could easily establish some kind of pre-eminence in this field, one senses a certain reluctance to 'prove' the worth of Free Improvisation by such means. (p. 352)

The caveat is worth noting, but particularly since Bailey's death it seems appropriate that, if Bailey's

notes can illuminate his musical thinking and the scope of his practical analysis of the resources of the guitar, they should become more widely known. I would not want to argue that their existence means that Bailey was a composer, in anything like the conventional sense, but what they help to prove instead, I think, is that free improvisation and the writing down of notes on paper are not mutually exclusive activities.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> July and 1<sup>st</sup> October 2008, I visited Incus headquarters in London where Karen Brookman very graciously gave me access to Bailey's handwritten material for the purposes of my PhD research. The large collection of notebooks and loose leaf pages are contained, not in a drawer, but in a small brown suitcase. There is a vast quantity of intriguing material within – from arrangements of jazz tunes, to a guitar realisation of Stockhausen's 1963 composition *Plus-Minus*, to fragments of what seems to be a quartet composition based on Samuel Beckett's short 1967 prose piece *Ping*. A significant proportion of the material, however, consists of notes towards a projected book on the guitar, containing the kind of fragments mentioned in the notes to *Pieces for Guitar*. One notebook in particular, a pad of blank sheets with a brown and yellow cover reading 'Daler Sketch Pad', and containing over sixty pages (most written on only on one side), plus some loose sheets inside the front cover, is particularly rich and stimulating. I shall in this piece limit myself merely to giving some – far from comprehensive – indications of what the 'Daler notebook' contains.

On one of the early pages, Bailey indicates the philosophy behind the book, noting that pitches on the guitar can be played in three distinct ways, each with its own distinct timbre – as stopped notes, as natural harmonics, or as open strings. He goes on to write a note to himself to include

something about significance of being able to play 5 different middle Cs (This is not for anyone who thinks the middle C on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string is the same as the middle C on the 6<sup>th</sup>)

Thus the fact that the 'same' pitch can often be played in many different ways on the guitar, but each with timbral or microtonal differences, was a central feature of Bailey's explorations, and helped him develop a way of incorporating pitch but not playing tonally (what he called 'non-tonal', rather than atonal playing, which referred to the way timbre and pitch were inextricable in his improvisations – much as in Delta blues or classical Chinese string music; see pp. 126-129 of the first edition of *Improvisation*, and my own 2006 essay *Syntactics*, which is available at <http://www.dispatx.com/show/item.php?item=1023>).

Sometimes Bailey clearly set himself challenges such as playing straightforward scales, but with the obligation to change timbre as often as possible. An example of such is the G major exercise reproduced below as **Ex. One**, where to counter the self-imposed restriction Bailey omits the requirement that the scale follow a consistent pitch contour, but simply that the correct pitch class sequence is maintained. That is, as long as the sequence is G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, any octave transpositions are permissible. The notes Bailey wrote himself at the bottom of the page to include an example of each major scale indicates his thoroughness; while the injunction to 'alternate timbres every time scale is played' gives a valuable clue to the purpose of this and other exercises. The point was not to master a range of licks that could then be deployed in an improvisation, but rather to master a set of knowledge about the guitar (such as all the various ways a given pitch could be played), such knowledge then becoming an improvisational resource. In setting artificial limits such as playing within a conventional scale, but varying timbre in different ways, practise could be seen in a sense as half-way between mere technical exercise (in that such exercises did develop Bailey's knowledge of the fingerboard) and improvisation itself (in that the attempt to change timbres in continually changing ways required on-the-spot decision making). In its way, such an exercise echoes Bailey's comment on *The Art of Improvisation*, a 1934 manual about organ improvisation by T. Carl Whitmer, where he observes that the technique 'of practising improvisation on a single limited idea, is often very effective'. (*Improvisation*, p. 32)

Ex. One

Scales - major in mixed timbres.  
Different notes up & down e.g.

MAJOR

The image shows a grand staff with five staves. The notation is handwritten and includes various symbols: circles, squares, diamonds, and accidentals (sharps and naturals). The notes are arranged in a way that suggests ascending and descending scales. A large, semi-transparent watermark 'Copyright' is overlaid on the page.

Write out a number of scales.

OR write out one version of each

side (12) & suggest which notes

alter - then practice first new  
alternate timbres every time scale  
is played.

Bailey also extended the harmonic vocabulary of the guitar. There are many examples in the Daler notebook of exercises involving chromatic clusters with no octave transposition, which have a very particular character on the guitar because they are so difficult and specific: unlike the piano where they are extremely easily obtained, they require very particular combinations of open strings, harmonics and fretted notes. I suspect Bailey explored every possible way that such clusters can be played. He also extended them by suggesting bending one of the notes by pressing behind the bridge of the guitar, so that one of the notes is lifted through the rest of the cluster, creating acoustical beating effects as it approaches and departs from each of the other pitches. The way these examples are notated also indicates Bailey's philosophy for the projected guitar book, in that he only indicates the type of articulation of each note (fretted, harmonic or open) and not the specific fingering, so that the reader of the book has to explore the instrument for themselves to work out how the notated chords are possible. A few of these chords can be seen in **Ex. Two**. (Fretted notes are indicated by circles, harmonics by diamonds, and open strings by squares, and all pitches are notated at concert pitch, rather than with the octave transposition customary for guitar music.)

Elsewhere in the notebook are prose notes. These also demonstrate both Bailey's imagination and the thoroughness of his explorations. A list of 'timbral devices' runs as follows:


- Behind bridge
- Nut end sounds
- Pick – point and side (scratches)
- Finger-style – nail + finger – also whistles (slide along string)
- Whistles against sustained notes
- Other string sounds – scratches, whistles and bangs (nail against string)
- Left hand string whistles and right hand string whistles (combine)
- Prepared string sounds without preparing string
- Unisons
- Pick over frets
- Left hand string sounds: e.g. glisses
- Tap left hand fingers (on fingerboard) with right hand fingers
- Hammer pick guard holding chord
- Guitar body noises
  - rub, knock, scrape, tap
  - (+ in combination with feedback)
- 2 way glisses using pick + nail
- Voice and whistling – in + out of guitar – combined with feedback
- Blow out the sound
- Rub body of guitar while playing (with chin, cheek, thumb?)

Elsewhere, a list of different types of 'time experiences' is as follows:

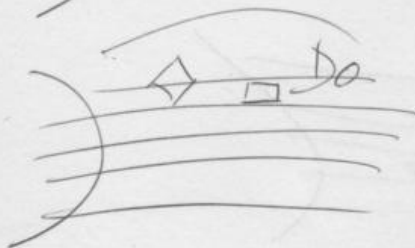
- Anticipation – silence
- Present – short (less than 4 seconds)
  - but complete with movement
  - but no development or progression
- Simultaneity – at least two unrelated
  - continuous events
- Succession – non developmental activity
- Duration – sustain with some development

These clearly refer to Bailey's aspirations, the kinds of musical time experiences that he was aiming to create, and that would match the openness of his pitch and timbral language ('A language based on malleable, not pre-fabricated, material', as he puts it in *Improvisation*, where he could 'utilise

Ex. Two




Lift open string.



Lift open string.



Lift harmonic



Lift harmonic

those elements which stem from the concepts of unpredictability and discontinuity, of perpetual variation and renewal first introduced into European composition at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century'. [p. 107])

Finally, I should note that there are also within the Daler notebook occasional texts relating to writers that inspired Bailey. One note translates the title of Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities* into musical terms, and runs as follows:

A music without qualities

'A journey to the farthest limits of the poss[ible], skirting the dangers of the imposs[ible] + unnatural, even of the repulsive and perhaps not always avoiding them.' Musil

Many of Derek Bailey's manuscript notes, such as those contained in the Daler notebook, could perhaps be seen as fragments from his diary of that journey.