

BLUE BAMBOO

jazz and other improvisations

Melinda Maxwell

(oboe and cor anglais)

Mark Pringle (piano)

Sebastian Dessanay (bass)

Liam Halloran (vibes, drums)

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Recorded at the Birmingham Conservatoire of Music,
July 2014 (tracks 1-4, 6, 7 and 10) and July 2015 (tracks 5, 8, 9 and 11-14)

Produced by Melinda Maxwell and Simon Hall

Engineered and Mastering by Simon Hall

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Photo of Melinda Maxwell by George Archer Photography

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Some **Composer** web links: www.hanskoller.co.uk, www.joecutler.com,
www.oup.co.uk/music/repprom/skempton

Publishers: Edition Durand (Messiaen), Kurt Weill Foundation,
Harms Incorporated New York (Green), Thelonious Monk Corporation,
Universal Music Publishing (Varèse). The other pieces are unpublished.

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1	Free Group Improvisation I - quartet	4:12
2	Messiaen Sketches (Melinda Maxwell) - quartet	7:30
3	Speak Low (Kurt Weill) - cor anglais, bass, piano	6:25
4	12 tone oboe improvisation	5:25
5	Pompidou Rats (Mark Pringle) - quartet	4:49
6	Varèse Blues (Melinda Maxwell) - quartet	7:33
7	Body and Soul (Johnny Green) - quartet	6:40
8	Hard Cheese (David Purser) - quartet	5:13
9	Offshoot Waltz (Joe Cutler) - quartet	5:55
10	Bye-Ya (Thelonius Monk) - oboe, bass, drums/vibes	5:28
11	Tres (Hans Koller) - oboe, bass, piano	6:24
12	Free Group Improvisation II - quartet	5:13
13	Bamboo (Howard Skempton) - quartet	4:19
14	L'Amour de Piroutcha (Olivier Messiaen) - oboe and piano <i>World première</i>	3:51

Total time: 79 minutes

Programme Notes by Melinda Maxwell

Improvisation has always held a fascination for me. I had my first taste of it as a student in the 1970s at York University and it was brief, terrifying, but inspiring in ways I couldn't then judge. Later in the 1980s I took part in London Sinfonietta education programmes, followed by creative projects with the National Youth Orchestra - both involving extensive use of memorisation and improvisation. I realised these musical processes offered me new ways of perceiving - of feeling and thinking about - music.

I also realised I enjoyed the danger of improvising and felt comfortable designing sounds by ear, as it were. Later in life I decided with encouragement from various colleagues that yes, a classically trained oboist could offer a new approach to improvisation through jazz and other contemporary music, hence the Masters degree in Jazz that I gained a couple of years ago.

This CD is the start of a long journey and offers a beginning to it by bringing together the sensibilities that I feel close to; improvisation and composition, with allusions to my experience of listening and performing an extensive history of classical and modern music. Improvisation is deceptively delicate and difficult in its supposed freedom and it requires extensive study and degrees of preparation to allow the instinct to truly be able to express itself within specified limitations. The freedom to express music in the moment exists within clear rules of harmonic process and form. You design as you go and memory helps keep the structure and harmonic detail in mindful perspective. Composition takes longer in its decision-making and by its nature is more considered, but thinking an idea through is key to both. They are interlinked, but require different skills.



When I first began to improvise with my jazz colleagues I heard their extraordinary aural skills, their consummate sense of form, and ability to never let an idea go until it's exhausted. No score was rejected or deemed uninteresting until it had been thoroughly explored. It was dangerous, frightening, and in some cases humiliating, but the learning curve was and remains exhilarating.

This CD includes a few famous standards from the mid 20th century, collaborations with Birmingham Conservatoire composers and performers, and some compositions of my own. My experience performing core 20th century modern classical music has influenced my ear in many subtle ways. I had to tip my hat to two greats, Olivier Messiaen and Edgar Varèse. Messiaen used improvisation as a way into composition and Varese, living in New York, had contact with some of the greatest jazz musicians, including Charlie Parker.

In these pieces the improvisation takes place within various forms, with the exception of two group improvisations that are free in design and harmony, and a solo improvisation by me in which I introduce a twelve tone row.

The one exception to all the above is the first ever hearing and recording of L'Amour de Piroutchka by Messiaen for oboe and piano. Its beautiful melody forms the basis for my own Messiaen Sketches. I wanted to include Messiaen; his modes of limited transposition are well known to all jazz musicians, and it seemed doubly appropriate not only to record an unknown piece but to compose an offshoot from it.

The oboe is an unusual voice in this context (and occasionally there are times when the sound can go no further in terms of volume). Its restraint is quite touching and a long way from the all out razzmatazz of fully flung play-outs. The journey has begun.....

Track notes

Tracks 1 and 12, Free Group Improvisations

As a group we often play free improvisations together; in rehearsals as a way of warming up, generating ideas and exploring the acoustic and mood of the day, and in concert. I added these two improvisations to show the group dynamic and character, and the wealth of invention that can materialise from the four of us at any one time. We recorded a few and chose these particular ones.

Track 2, Melinda Maxwell: *Messiaen Sketches*

Messiaen improvised frequently (on the organ at the church of La Sainte Trinite in Paris) and it feels natural to initiate another improvisation from the opening melody of *L'Amour de Piroutchka*. The melody travels into another harmonic dimension staying within diminished modes; a middle section at 3:50 breaks the spell initiating a more anxious character before subsiding and returning briefly to the opening.

Track 3, Kurt Weill's *Speak Low*; Hard Cheese by David Purser (track 8) and Thelonious Monk's *Bye-Ya* (track 10)

are all standard jazz forms over which we take it in turns to improvise. For Johnny Green's Body & Soul (track 7) we decided to take a

somewhat different approach by loosening the form completely and allowing it to speak freely in unpredictable phrase lengths.

Track 4, Melinda Maxwell: 12 tone solo improvisation

I learnt the row in varying permutations and explored different structures. I decided in this performance to introduce each note in turn, sample it and move on. I recorded several versions and chose this one.

Track 5, Mark Pringle: *Pompidou Rats*

Mark spent part of his undergraduate studies in Paris that naturally included a late night excursion to the Pompidou Centre. Sitting outside in the piazza after most people had left, Mark was amused to see rats tentatively poking their noses up through the street grills, silhouetted by the lamplight. As with all jazz forms, this piece evolved as the group worked together on it and we made this particular version with his direction. The melody plays against twos and threes and allows for "scurrying" and "anarchic" improvisations.

Track 6, Melinda Maxwell: *Varèse Blues*

The opening oboe melody pays tribute to Varèse's piece *Octandre* for wind septet and

double bass. Varese listened to jazz in the clubs of New York in the late 1950s and early 60s and around this time he experimented with graphic scores played by the jazz musicians he met. The notes of this beautiful melody have always suggested a dark blues feeling to me so I slowed it right down and gave it some additional harmony. Half way in the percussion initiates a more urgent tone with a faster alien pulse. This stalls things, but only for a while.

Track 9, Joe Cutler: *Offshoot Waltz*

Joe, an insightful and supportive mentor to me, composed a harmonic blueprint and gave me free reign with it. I decided to compose a melody by I improvising over the harmony until I found one I liked. The result has an almost Satiesque quality. The form follows the original with extensive repeats to open up improvisations.

Track 11, Hans Koller: *Tres*

Hans, an inspiring teacher and musician on my Masters course, composed this trio for me. It has a wonderfully elusive feeling of pulse with shapes of four and three rocking against one another. It is very precise in its intention yet exudes a feeling of ease and grace.

Track 13, Howard Skempton: *Bamboo*

I have played many pieces by Howard, whose music I find beautifully beguiling and thought provoking, and I have also improvised with him in concert. So it seemed extremely fitting that

he compose a piece for my group. He gave me a one-page piano score and from this we designed a format. The music in itself is full of wit and we discovered a character that gave us licence to indulge in a sense of experimentation. This particular take uses silence as a tool to surprise and provoke, and made us smile with its hide-and-seek sense of fun.

Track 14, Messiaen: *L'Amour de Piroutchka*

In 1945 the oboe faculty at the Paris Conservatoire asked Messiaen to write a test piece for the oboe concours. According to Yvonne Loriod this became the fifth song in (the song cycle) *Harawi, L'Amour de Piroutchka*. The main cyclic theme of love from *Harawi* came from the improvisation Messiaen recorded as incidental music for a staged performance of the play *Tristan et Yseult* by Lucien Farbre, produced in Paris in February 1945. Hence *Harawi* is the first composition in what Messiaen called the *Tristan* trilogy (the other two works being *Turangalila* and the *Cinq Rechants*). The music is marked '*Lent, tender et berceur*'. The text of the song is:

La Jeune Fille: "Toungou, ahi, toungou, berce, toi, ma cendre des lumieres, berce ta petite en tes bras verts. Piroutcha, ta petite cendre, pour toi"

Le Jeune Homme: "ton oeil tous les cils, doundou tchil. Coupe-moi la tete, doundou tchil. Nos souffles, nos souffles, bleu et or. Ahi! Ahi! Chaines rouges, noires, mauves, amour, la mort."



Biographies:

Melinda Maxwell read music at York University, and studied in Germany with Ingo Goritzki and Helmut Winschermann. She has performed worldwide as soloist in Europe (at the Holland and Aarhus festivals) Japan, Africa, the USA (New York and Washington) and nationally in the UK (Edinburgh, Aldeburgh and Cheltenham festivals). She is also a recitalist, chamber musician, composer, improviser and teacher. In addition she is principal oboe of the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and performs as guest principal with the London Sinfonietta, Britten Sinfonia and Garsington Opera.

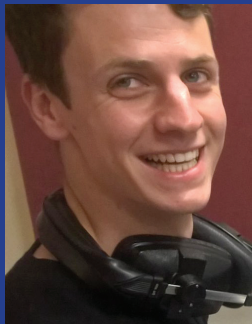


Several works have been written for her, including *Pulse Sampler* (1981) by Sir Harrison Birtwistle; *Banshee* (1994, revised 1996), *Sphinx* (2000) and *Disparate* (2005)/ *Disparate Dos* (2009) by Simon Holt; and pieces by Simon Bainbridge, Nicholas Maw, Howard Skempton, Robert Saxton, Jo Kondo, Philip Cashian and Wilfred Mellers. A composer herself, her works include *Pibroch* (1981) and *Song for Sidney* (2001) for solo oboe; *Crane Dance* (2004) for double-reed ensemble; several pieces for string ensemble; and *Singla Rock* (2009) for mixed quintet. Her septet *Fractures* (2015) received its première performance by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group conducted by Oliver Knussen.

She has recorded frequently for the BBC and her own recordings have been critically acclaimed and voted CD of the month in the BBC Music magazine and the Guardian.

She has taught at the Royal Academy of Music and Trinity College, London, and is Consultant in Woodwind Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester. She is a visiting tutor at the Birmingham Conservatoire, oboe tutor for the National Youth Orchestra, and regularly coaches at the Britten-Pears School for Advanced Musical Studies in Snape, Suffolk.

In June 2013 she was awarded an MMus in Jazz Studies from the Birmingham Conservatoire.



Mark Pringle is a pianist and composer working in the fields of jazz and improvised music, hailing from the UK and currently based in Berlin. He is a Yamaha Jazz Scholar and Peter Whittingham Award winner, as well as leader and participant in diverse artistic projects Europe-wide, performing his own music at the BBC Proms, Manchester Jazz Festival, The Vortex, Southbank Centre, and for BBC Radio 3. He has lived, worked and studied in Berlin, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Paris, and Birmingham UK.

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Sebastiano Dessanay moved to the UK from Italy in 2007; in 2009 he completed a Master in Music Composition at the Birmingham Conservatoire, and a PhD in 2014. Sebastiano regularly collaborates with musicians in classical and contemporary music, jazz, pop-rock and folk music - and also with the opera, theatre, dance, film and visual arts worlds. He has performed extensively throughout Europe and has recorded many different projects as a leader and as a session musician.

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Liam Halloran has had a huge range of influences which has led to exploring a variety of sound worlds. Despite his first instrument being the drums, he now makes most of his living as a pianist, and the instrument that he specialised in at the Birmingham Conservatoire was the vibraphone! Liam is a resident pianist at the Alexandra Theatre Birmingham, drummer for the Bonfire Radicals, and a busy freelancer, playing for shows, weddings, orchestras and anything else he can fit in!

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