

MALCOLM GOLDSTEIN (b. 1936)

because a circle is not enough: music for bowed string instruments

80835-2 (2 CDs)

DISC 1 [TT: 50:28]

- 1 *for the left hand alone* (3) 3:38
- 2 *statements and responses* (2, 4) 9:40
- 3 *extraordinarily variable, this source* (1) 7:03
- 4 *haiku sounding* (1, 3) 9:15
- 5 *reflections on a cavatina/adagio* (4) 5:04
- 6 *on and on and always slowly nowhere* (3) 15:48

DISC 2 [TT: 47:53]

- 1 *because a circle is not enough* (1) 7:05
- 2 *songs and interludes* (2) 12:05
- 3 *décollage/collage* (4) 5:39
- 4 *storytelling* (2) 7:59
- 5 *boundless the source, overflowing in song* (string quartet) 15:04

Malcolm Goldstein, violin (1)

Jean René, viola (2)

Émilie Girard-Charest, cello (3)

Nicolas Caloia, contrabass (4)

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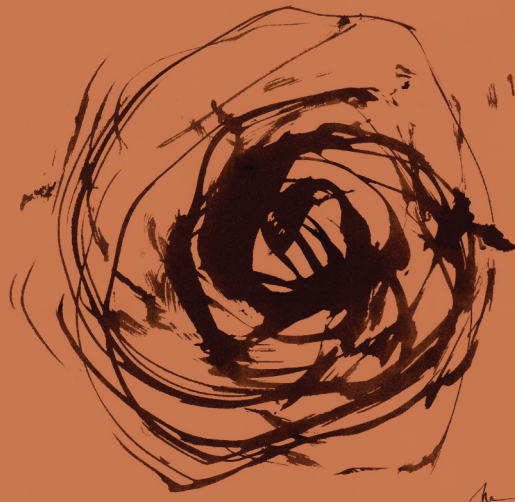
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Malcolm Goldstein

with Nicolas Caloia, Émilie Girard-Charest, Jean René



because a circle is not enough
music for bowed string instruments

“Anything Can Happen Starting from Nothing”

THERE ARE TWO BROOK CROSSINGS ALONG THE ROAD that leads to Malcolm Goldstein’s cabin in Sheffield, Vermont. When I first visited him in 2012, I came into town from New Hampshire accompanied by the composer Larry Polansky. We took a left off interstate 91 and plunged into the maple forests behind a farmhouse. For about a mile we slowly bumped our way along the rutted-out path, grateful for the four-wheel drive of Polansky’s Subaru. The first brook gave us no trouble, and Polansky barely slowed the car as we crossed it. The second crossing took two attempts to pass. Polansky had to balance speed and traction to get enough momentum to get up the steep slope and over the exposed roots. Shortly after fording this second brook, the trees suddenly opened to a small field with a handsome wooden cabin bathed in sunlight and a sizeable fenced-in vegetable garden. We stepped out of the car into the balmy August morning to the sound of music—J.S. Bach, to be precise. Goldstein was playing Sonata No. 1 in G minor from the Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin (BWV 1001).

As we approached the cabin, the music ceased, and Goldstein opened the door to welcome us in. I had come to Vermont to interview Goldstein as part of my graduate research and to help send his materials to archives to be preserved.¹ Before doing any of that Goldstein took me outside again for a walk around his property. We started down that dirt road towards town and stopped by the banks of the brook, the one that gave Polansky a hard time. We sat down and listened to the water babbling on its way to lower elevations. The sound is complex; constant, yet ever changing. Or, as Goldstein once wrote: “each weight and turn of pressure producing rhythms and pitch

¹ See Malcolm Goldstein Papers; MSS 350; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

variants singing subtle twists and turns, ever fresh.”² This composer has a special love for brooks, and especially for this brook so close to his home. He writes about the brook as a process, a physical mechanism dependent on the environment, and as a metaphor for his practice of improvisation. His composition *The Seasons: Vermont* (1979–1983), for improvising ensemble and magnetic tape, uses a map of the brooks that flow from Sheffield southeast to join the Passumpsic River as a score for the final movement, *Spring*. Moreover, the magnetic tape features sound recordings of those same brooks.³ This morning we must have sat for nearly twenty minutes listening to the flowing water before Goldstein broke our silence: “Whenever I have a student, this is how I always begin my composition lessons.”

Composer-violinist Malcolm Goldstein (b. 1936) built his cabin in the early 1970s with his wife, dancer Carol Marcy, and spent the better part of four decades living there. The town of Sheffield is small and rural with only around 700 residents, most of them maple farmers. Goldstein’s Brooklyn accent betrays his roots, but after so many years “living on the land,” as he once put it to me, he’s right at home in Sheffield.⁴ Though his career began in New York City in the 1960s—where he took part in the Judson Dance Theater, organized the Tone Roads concert series of American experimental music with Philip Corner and James Tenney, and developed his distinctive style of solo violin improvisations called *Soundings*—Goldstein’s subsequent work is greatly shaped by his experience living in the Northeast Kingdom. His attention to small sounds, gradually transforming textures, subtleties of articulation, and the unique ways individual musicians approach improvisation stem from these experiences.

² Malcolm Goldstein, “Listening to the Sound of a Brook,” in *Sounding the Full Circle: Concerning Music Improvisation and Other Related Matters* (Sheffield, VT: Malcolm Goldstein, 1988): 6.

³ Malcolm Goldstein, *The Seasons: Vermont*, (Lebanon, NH: Frog Peak Music Gol03, 1983): 34.

⁴ Malcolm Goldstein, interview with the author, April 23, 2012.

music for bowed string instruments consists mostly of music composed by Goldstein between 2018 and 2019 while living in Montréal, Québec.⁵ The series was commissioned by the Canada Council for the Arts in 2018 and performed on this recording by Goldstein alongside some of his closest collaborators in Montréal. The impulse to compose this series came from Goldstein's experience as a teacher and performer of Béla Bartók's *44 Duos for Two Violins* (1931). Whereas Bartók's series features a clear progression to the pieces, gradually increasing in technical and musical complexity from beginning to end, *music for bowed string instruments* has no such sequence. The compositions do not build toward a particular way of playing or specific kind of technical virtuosity. Even so, Goldstein envisions these pieces to be used as both teaching material for improvisation as well as concert pieces. Each of the fifteen pieces defines a narrow set of parameters—musical, physical, conceptual, etc.—to explore the sounding possibilities of stringed instruments. Goldstein uses the term *structured improvisation composition* to describe this kind of piece. He explains that concept as “improvisation as a process of discovery enacted within the structures of the particular performance activities specified for each piece.”⁶ In other words, the musicians are not free to play *anything* at all, but they are free to explore everything within the constraints laid out in the score. Goldstein's aim is not for the musicians to produce the same music each time, nor to try and play a piece the way he would do it. Rather the philosophy is centered on the process of “each individual unfolding, the breath expanding in gestures of becoming sound.”⁷ Goldstein relishes the possibilities inherent to improvisation: “Anything can happen starting from

⁵ *because a circle is not enough* (1990) and *on and on and always slowly, nowhere* (2011) were previously composed but revised in 2019 for this collection.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the quotations in these notes reference: Malcolm Goldstein, *music for bowed string instruments* (Lebanon, NH: Frog Peak Music, 2019).

⁷ Malcolm Goldstein, “Improvisation, People Making Music,” in *Sounding the Full Circle*, 1.

nothing ... so that music is a process of discovery filled with surprises.”⁸ All of the musicians on this recording are part of the Montréal improvisation scene and there is a deep mutual trust between composer and performers developed over many years.⁹ A keen ear will recognize both the unique constraints of each piece's structure and the subtle, individualized ways the different musicians improvise the material.

The first piece on this album provides a vivid case study of the concept of *structured improvisation compositions*. Its title is descriptive of its structural constraints: *for the left hand alone* (2018). This piece emerged after a period of intense concertizing during which Goldstein strained his right arm and was unable to draw the bow across his violin. Still wanting to play, he experimented with improvisation using only his left hand. Using only the left hand fundamentally changes the scope of sounds possible on bowed string instruments. Yet, as with any creative limitation the extent of the possibilities that remain seems to belie the structure as a limitation at all. Indeed, the richness of sound cellist Émilie Girard-Charest produces here may hide the fact that she is only using one hand to the listener. Goldstein suggests six possible activities using left hand pizzicato to the performer, including swift running passages, focused activity in a single area, repetitive patterns, short bursts of sounds, using the palm/hand to thump the string or body of the instrument, and occasional vibrato of plucked notes and sliding tones. *for the left hand alone* employs a physical constraint on the performer who must develop a new vocabulary for improvisation. This is one method Goldstein uses to elicit creative improvisation from musicians in this series.

extraordinarily variable, this source (2018), played here by Goldstein himself, presents a different kind of constraint. The music consists of “a flow of very fast staccato/spiccato

⁸ Goldstein, personal communication with the author, November 3, 2021.

⁹ See Malcolm Goldstein and the Ratchet Orchestra, *Soweto Stomp*, Mode 291, 2016, CD.

articulations” within a narrow pitch range of about a perfect fifth. The musician must explore this pitch area without repeating any kind of tonal or rhythmic patterns or shaping the music into a dramatic narrative. The goal is to create a texture that is generally consistent, but, like the brook in Sheffield, constantly changing.

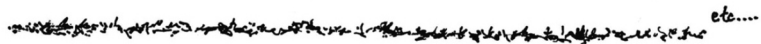


Figure 1. Textural representation from *extraordinarily variable, this source*.

After the basic texture is established and thoroughly explored, Goldstein suggests some additional activities the performer may incorporate sparingly, such as using the wood of the bow, a left hand pizzicato, change of bow placement, *jété* (bouncing the bow on the string), harmonics, and others that will add depth and nuance to the constantly flowing texture. The musical constraint of this piece challenges the listener’s focus on pitch as a central musical element and asks them to focus instead on parameters such as texture and articulation.

A third kind of structure relies on a conceptual framework. In *haiku sounding* (2018) the musicians are free in terms of what they play, but they must do it within a formal structure analogous to the 5–7–5 syllable structure of Japanese haiku poetry.¹⁰ The improvisation occurs in successions of three grouped phrases, short-long-short (exposition, development, conclusion), with brief, three- to five-second pauses in between phrases. Successive “haiku soundings” (three-phrase groups) must connect to the previous in some way, such as “a tone, timbre, mode of articulation, gesture/shape of the line, texture, register, quality, etc.” On this recording, *haiku sounding* is played

as a duet between Goldstein and Girard-Charest, who alternate phrases throughout. This piece asks the performer to focus on larger aspects of sound, the phrase, the form, and the connection to what has already occurred and what may happen next.

Goldstein’s use of structures is not intended to restrict performers to certain modes of playing, but rather his aim is to focus the improvisation in some way. *storytelling* (2019) asks the musician to “focus on some particular memory experience, that will be the source for the music improvisation.” The musician, in this case violist Jean René, is to express aspects of the memory as short “statements” of about five to twenty seconds in duration with pauses in between for reflection. The statements need not be arranged in a narrative sequence but should come forth naturally in the process of improvising. This open structure is a reminder that for Goldstein, improvisation is a highly personal matter: “I start from where I am (which is not the same as starting from nothing); there is a lot in all/around us all the time. ... it is just a matter of letting what is necessary come forth to be heard.”¹¹ *storytelling* asks the performer to share something intimate through their improvisation; the music comes from within them, not from Goldstein’s specifications.

The final piece on this recording brings together the four musicians in a string quartet and a selection of the improvisation structures from the previous compositions. *boundless the source, overflowing in song* (2019) evokes the babbling brook in both name and sound. It is dedicated to composer-improviser Nicolas Caloia, who plays bass on this recording and organized the performances and the recording of the series. Whereas most of the pieces in *music for bowed string instruments* use only prose instructions to communicate their structures, here Goldstein employs a form of graphic notation.¹²

¹¹ Goldstein, “Improvisation: People Making Music,” 1.

¹² Goldstein is well-known for his extensive use of graphic notation in most of his compositions. This series is a mild departure from his convention, but he’s always used some amount of prose instruction alongside his graphic scores.

¹⁰ Prior to formalizing this composition, Goldstein used this concept as teaching material in private lessons and improvisation workshops, including one I attended in 2014.

The “Cue page” for this piece sets six graphics representing different performance activities that stem from the prior pieces. Some of these activities are given verbal names, such as “pizz/left hand” for the left-hand techniques of *for the left hand alone*, or *pizz/spiccato*, of *extraordinarily variable, this source*. Others are left unnamed and represented by graphics alone. The cue page for performance situates the six performance activities in a circle.

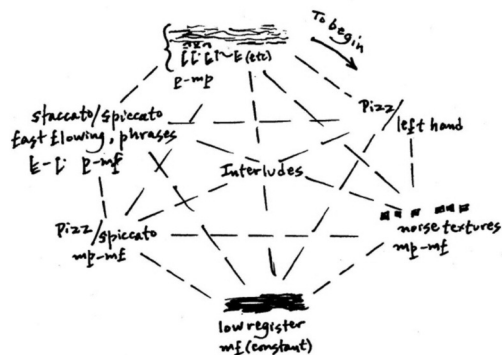


Figure 2. Performance activities for *boundless the source, overflowing in song*

Performers start together at the top of the circle with the designated performance activity and proceed clockwise around the circle, spending between 15–45 seconds on each activity. The “unison” beginning will soon break down as the performers go through the material at different paces and the activities begin to overlap. This is an ensemble technique Goldstein has frequently used in the past, such as in his four-part madrigal

Illuminations from Fantastic Gardens (1964), notably his first extended use of graphic notation in a composition. As each performer reaches the top of the circle (about five minutes into this recording), the performers proceed around the circle once again, but this time adding occasional interludes in between performance activities to break up the sequence. These interludes stand out as they are constituted by single tones or harmonics, quietly sustained with nuances of timbre modifications and dynamics. After the second cycle of the performance activities, the musicians may then freely mix up the order of the activities independently of the other performers, but always “listening/aware of the ensemble texture/density of activities.” This cycle adds another option for interludes in the form of a *jété* followed by a brief silence before proceeding to the next activity. During this section, each musician may play a solo improvisation that extends from one of the performance activities. While the solos unfold, the end of the piece approaches and the performers are instructed to begin gradually omitting performance activities and the *jété* interlude until only the “very fast staccato/spiccato” activity at the upper left of the circle remains. The players ultimately converge on this activity, and the piece finally concludes with a cued brief, tapering diminuendo into silence.

Listening to these recordings I can’t help but remember the sounds of that brook by Goldstein’s cabin. The endless nuances of sound emerging from a constant flow of water, trickling over rocks, swelling from rainfall the day before, moving silt and rocks, animal, and plant life, all contributing to the sounds that emerge in each moment. Each composition in this collection starts from a deceptively simple structural constraint to the performer’s improvisation, be it physical, musical, conceptual, or something else. The musicians must then respond to that structure, work creatively within it to extend the sound and create something. The beauty of these works, as with much of Goldstein’s oeuvre, is not in their fixity, but in their flexibility. No two performers will play these pieces in the same way, and no two performances will be alike even by the same musi-

cian. From even a simple structure these musicians are able to bring forth that endless variety of sound inspired in part by that brook in Sheffield.

—Jay M. Arms

Jay M. Arms is a visiting lecturer of ethnomusicology at the University of Pittsburgh, improviser, and classical guitarist. His research focuses on the American experimental tradition, especially issues of improvisation and the American gamelan movement.

Malcolm Goldstein (b. 1936) is the preeminent member of Montreal's creative music community, actively involved in the city as a composer, performer, educator, and presenter since 1992. Goldstein first rose to prominence in the 1960s in New York City, where he was a co-founder of the Tone Roads Ensemble and a participant in the Judson Dance Theater, the New York Festival of the Avant-Garde, and the Experimental Intermedia Foundation. Since then, he has toured extensively throughout North America and Europe with solo concerts as well as with new music and dance ensembles. Numerous ensembles such as Essential Music, Relâche, Musical Elements, The New Performance Group of the Cornish Institute, L'Art pour l'Art, Quatuor Bozzini, and Klangforum Wien have performed his music. His music has also been performed at important festivals including New Music America, Brooklyn Philharmonic's Meet the Moderns, Pro Musica Nova Bremen, Invention '89 Berlin, Wittener Tage für Neue Kammermusik, De Ijsbreker Amsterdam, MaerzMusik Berlin, Cologne Triennale, Sound Culture Tokyo, Neue Horizonte, Ton Art Bern, and Musique Action Nancy. The Quatuor d'occasion was formed in 2011 on the initiative of Malcolm Goldstein. Since then, they have performed in most of Montreal's experimental and improvised music venues. Meeting regularly for several years, the quartet's musicians have developed a common discourse and created their own group sound.

<https://www.musiquerayonnante.org/quatuordoccasion.html>

Nicolas Caloia is a Montreal-based bassist, composer, and bandleader. He works at creating a living music by using rigorously composed material to channel collective improvisation. He can be heard in ongoing collaborations with Tristan Honsinger, Joe McPhee, Matana Roberts, Malcolm Goldstein, Kim Zombik, Lori Freedman, Rainer Wiens, and Yves Charuest, or in past projects with Roscoe Mitchell, Marshall Allen, Steve Lacy, Hassan Hakmoun, William Parker, and Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia. Caloia has composed for and led many ensembles, including the twenty-piece Juno- and GAMIQ-nominated Ratchet Orchestra. He has fulfilled composition commissions from the Quatuor Bozzini, Tour de Bras, Productions Super Musique, FIMAV, Radio Canada, and CKUT 90.3 FM.

Émilie Girard-Charest is a cellist, composer, and improviser dedicated to new music. As a chamber musician, both as soloist and member of various ensembles, she has taken part in the premiere of more than sixty new works and has worked closely with many composers, most notably Malcolm Goldstein, Maxime McKinley, Cecilia Arditto, Graciela Paraskevaïdis, Enno Poppe, and Jorge Diego Vazquez. Her own compositions have been performed by several ensembles, such as Qhirqhiña, Quasar, Continuum, Zukan, and by the members of NO HAY BANDA. She maintains an active international touring schedule and has appeared in performances at numerous festivals in Canada, Europe, and South America.

After studying viola at the Montreal Conservatory, **Jean René** worked for five years in various orchestras in Italy. Upon his return, he studied composition and conducting before returning to the viola. He is dedicated to the practice of improvisation and its exploration in various musical contexts but he also works as a freelancer in many different ensembles, principally with the Orchestre Métropolitain.

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Music scores available from Frog Peak: www.frogpeak.org

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(string quartet)

~ by Malcolm Goldstein (2019)

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