The work of the Russian improvisational group, The Ganelin Trio, is evidence of a development in Free Jazz behind the iron curtain of censorship. The trio had performed for almost thirteen years before their music became known in the West, as a result of which they were able to perform at a concert in England in 1984. This was due to the efforts of Leo Fagin of Leo Records who distributed tapes of the group. With the curtain drawn, availability of the Ganelin Trio’s recordings is less sporadic and their exposure in the West can be seen as an important historical event. It showed that there was musical freedom behind the Iron Curtain. This freedom is at the very heart of jazz.

The Ganelin Trio’s music was an advance of the Free Jazz experiments of the sixties, but they were unique. There is an interesting use of the theatrical. Their collective improvisation recalls the work of the earliest masters of New Orleans jazz. There are also elements of Classical music, in its formality and structural sense. They can be cool and swinging in the way that has been associated with West Coast jazz in the fifties, but they can also be as “free” as late Coltrane or Albert Ayler, yet not without a sense of humor. The entire history of jazz is compressed in their music. Importantly, their freedoms are circumscribed within a form. There is a sense in which the music is “composed.” But here we are dealing with a form that does not restrict or inhibit but is elastic enough to liberate.
A work by the Ganelin Trio can be seen as a large-scale dramatic performance. Each “act” or section reveals another key into their world. It is playful but serious; the actors are not too formal in their delivery. The work exhilarates as it teases the intellect. Below is a series of my impressions of the Ganelin Trio while listening to their recording, Ancora Da Capo, released in 1997 on Leo Records. The members of the group are Vyacheslav Ganelin on piano, basset, percussion, electric guitar; Vladimir Tarasov on drums, percussion, bells, talking drum; and Vladimir Chekasin on alto and tenor sax, wooden flute, clarinet, basset-horn, violin, percussion, voice.

First, repeated knocks. Then the sound of bells, of blocks, and an assortment of other percussive sounds, all of which sketches a beat. Tarasov is very effective here. We are in a formal, highly stylized space. Now Ganelin urges a melody from the piano. Sketches it, develops it, punctuates the silence. Chekasin on sax in the background, accenting, developing his own lines. Next a space opens for dialogue between piano and horn. Anxious, frenetic, searching. Chekasin switches to bird calls. The intensity builds. Chekasin wilder. Ganelin inside the piano, scratching, scraping the strings. A sound strangely appealing. Then a dark stream of heavy bass sounds. This is the basset, a small keyboard instrument. A tragic, ominous sound. Theatrical.

Chekasin on sax: a primitive force. The animal banging at the bars, unleashing energies that lie buried under the dome of civilization. It is a sound that is violent, relentless, insistent. A listener can feel the sound welling up from the lower regions, the Underworld. In his book, The Body of Myth, J. Nigro Sansonese, writes:

Stereognosis (body knowledge or visceral feeling). The first word: The source of visceral proprioception (roughly internal touch or feeling) the body below the nostrils associated with taste (gustation) and touch (feeling). In myth the first world is described variously as Hell, Hades, The Infernal regions, The Pit, and so on. Also as The Sea: the sea of feeling.
This is before cognition or perception, the rudiments of civilization. It is below the foundations, gestating in the lower consciousness. Sound hits the listener like a revelation. It over-whelms. It is the domain of the nerve. The energy of the muscle. It is internal, pre-language, infantile, unabashed: the wonder of creation.

In this context, the title Ancora Da Capo (Again from the Head) takes on an ironic sense. That highly formal space is criticized in the piece. Or better yet, it is a mental space into which feelings enter. Heart and Mind. The overarching structure is not abandoned. That would lead to chaos. Cognition, for Sansonese, is the “third world,” that of thought, intellect, the head above the brow: “In myth the third world is also described as a mystic Sea — the sea of thought — bounding the island of the second world (perception) from above.” Thought mirrors feeling.

The piece as a whole is strangely formal, structural, almost “composed” in the broadest sense of the term. It is, in the words of the poet Clark Coolidge, “sound as thought.” An ocean wave not a steel beam. A wave tearing at the rocks. The visceral energy impinges upon the form, destabilizes it, and gives it dimension, depth. Humanizes, as it disrupts. Liberates as it questions the very foundations. It does not reject form utterly. It seeks, ultimately, new forms. The unsayable seeks language, however insufficient it is for its purposes. It seeks to materialize. The word as flesh. Note that at the end of Ancora Da Capo, part 2, the trio breaks into a folk anthem. This is the ironic joy of liberation. Also, the humor.

Finally, The Ganelin Trio plays out the drama of this story.

Recordings and Works Cited
