

# Improvisation as an Analytic Category

This article takes a critical look at the dichotomy between composition and improvisation, arguing that from an analytic or hermeneutic standpoint the distinction is incoherent. In support of this conclusion, various musical practices such as Jazz, Western Classical, *Qawwali*, and Indian Classical musics are considered, as well as the role of fixed media such as notation, recording, and transcription. It is argued that the question of improvisation in analysis provides an opportunity to question the assumptions and methodologies of traditional analytic practices, even with respect to the repertoires they are designed for. Instead, an analytic practice that is itself improvisational is advocated.

## I. On the Composition-Improvisation Dichotomy

The dichotomy between improvisation and composition comes in various forms and makes varying degrees of sense. It seems reasonably coherent where we distinguish between the sorts of responsibilities required of performers. In this light, the distinction comes from different levels or degrees in which a performer assumes creative ‘command’ of the variables of a musical situation, or that those variables shift in terms of their respective weight. Yet however sensible the distinction between improvisation and composition might seem in performance, the resulting categories become less coherent with respect to analysis or hermeneutics. There is never any sense in which improvised music is completely ‘free’; that is, where it is not pre-figured or conditioned by the instruments at hand, the performer’s ability and background, or other factors. Nor is the most rigorously notated or well rehearsed music without its fluid dimensions or ever fully identical in successive generations. But even more problematic is the suggested determinate nature of the creative process involved in either case. Does the dichotomy imply that there are fundamentally different processes involved in composition versus improvisation? If so, what are they? And what’s to prevent them from ‘bleeding over’ from one side to the other? Even if we find ourselves certain of a plausible distinction between creative processes, it isn’t at all clear a distinct dichotomy has any real meaning in our *perception* of music as listeners. As Bruno Nettl asks, ‘can we tell from the outcome which is which?’<sup>1</sup>

Paul Berliner writes that in his attempt to frame a coherent division between composition and improvisation ‘their characteristics seemed to overlap hopelessly at the margins.’<sup>2</sup> The trouble is not simply that their characteristics overlap: the margins themselves seem artificially drawn. Berliner finds himself beset by tautologies. He asks, ‘was a particular musical practice improvisation or not? If one defines improvisation in such a way as to include the practice, then, presumably it is.’<sup>3</sup> Berliner’s search for an essential distinction encounters a profound problem lurking beneath the two terms: the tacit assumption that the one stands in opposition to the other.

The question here is whether or how improvisation could be a coherent category for musical analysis. What sort of meaningful distinction might we make between music that is improvised and music that is not? And if we make such a distinction, what hermeneutic

1 Bruno Nettl, ‘An Art Neglected in Scholarship’, in: *In the Course of Performance*, Chicago etc.: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 9.

2 Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, Chicago etc.: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 4.

3 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, p. 4.

end is achieved? The reader has likely guessed that I am suspicious of the notion of improvisation as an *analytic* category. But my reasons have less to do with improvisation than with the presupposed order from which it is implicitly or explicitly distinguished: the 'composition.'

My suspicion reflects a growing sentiment among scholars. Bruce Ellis Benson argues that the dichotomy is a bad one. He contends that 'improvisation is not something that precedes composition (...) or stands outside and opposed to composition.'<sup>4</sup> Benson points out that like improvisers, composers do not create 'out of nothing', but rather 'fabricate out of what is conveniently at hand', which is a standard definition of improvisation.<sup>5</sup> Another critic of the dichotomy is Michael Jarrett, who states that 'improvisation is one of the names that writing (or composition) assigns to its other'.<sup>6</sup> Jarrett clearly feels that a predominant sense in which the word improvisation is used comes more out of what is traditionally thought of as composition – produced negatively in relation to some determined belief about the nature of composition – rather than out of what positively accounts for improvisation. Jarrett, like Benson, is not convinced that composition consists in some wholly other form of musical creation. And if this is the case there is no basis for understanding one term in opposition to the other.

Let's consider what is minimally involved in the creation of a musical event. Rather than thinking of an event as a spatial object, consider it as a temporal action within an ongoing process. For each musical event there are conditions which precede and prepare it. Henri Bergson called this 'milieu' the *virtual*: a process whereby consciousness 'marks out upon matter the design of its eventual actions even before they are actual.'<sup>7</sup> '[C]onsciousness (...) lights up the zone of potentialities that surrounds (an) act. It fills the interval between what is done and what might be done.'<sup>8</sup> For creative processes it is this field of emergent ideas – in some ever shifting blend of impulse, pre-sonic formation, sound image, muscle memory, intuition, and possibly concepts; whatever is prior to the production of a sound, or the writing of a note, that is a necessary aspect of its creation.

I believe what Bergson calls the virtual is synonymous with what the word improvisation means in its deepest sense: creative action engaged with a field of nascent potential. This field is specific and immanent, rather than general and abstract. In music, it is a kaleidoscopic particularity of prospective musical action; inherently fluid and unstable, but no less palpable, no less important, than the material passage of sound itself. Indeed, a dynamic virtual process of this sort would characterize the process of *listening* to music as well. After all, we bring a tremendous amount to the table when we hear music. It can only be our creative supplement as listeners that experiences metric 'levels', that develops expectations, and responds with complex sensations. Of *anticipation* Christopher Hasty remarks that it is 'not the projection of a definite outcome but a readiness to interpret emerging novelty in the light of what has gone before.'<sup>9</sup> Indeed, we do interpret as we hear music: a kind of *inner* improvisation. As Marion Guck says, 'we hear with our whole bodies, not just our ears'.<sup>10</sup> Projection, virtuality, 'listening with our whole bodies'; these are creative listening

4 Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 2.

5 Bruce Ellis Benson, 'The Improvisation of Hermeneutics', in: *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, p. 195.

6 Michael Jarrett, 'Cutting Sides: Jazz Record Producers and Improvisation', in: *The Other Side of Nowhere*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004, p. 319.

7 Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005, p. 10.

8 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p. 147.

9 Christopher F. Hasty, *Meter as Rhythm*, New York etc.: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 69.

10 Marion Guck, 'Analysis as Interpretation: Interaction, Intentionality, Invention', in: *Music Theory Spectrum* 28/2 (Fall 2006), p. 202.

acts, which in the moment of enactment are arguably the very essence of improvisation. It is no overstatement that improvisation of one sort or another occurs wherever we engage musical experience or musical time as a composer, a performer, or a listener.

## II. Improvisation and its 'Possibility Conditions'

As has been widely argued, improvisation is never without pre-established conditions, if not actual musical parameters or ideas. If I bang my fist on the piano the results might not exactly be heard in advance. But the piano certainly existed before, as did the shape and weight of my hand, and the expectation of a significant sonic gesture to occur at a particular moment. These parameters form part of what Benson calls 'possibility conditions'.<sup>11</sup> The physical and acoustic factors, the tangible or objective component of the possibility conditions might be thought of negatively as a limit, but they are really a necessary condition for any creative act. A second component of these conditions encompasses the first but adds to it the full active memory, experience, habits, skill, and imagination of the composer or improviser 'working' his or her materials. These conditions would appear to be common ground for composition and improvisation as creative processes, even under the strictest interpretation of the dichotomy. But from this common ground many more issues arise which further undermine it.

We can show as much that improvisation involves 'composition-like' conditions as the reverse. Berliner writes: 'the popular conception of improvisation as "performance without previous preparation" is fundamentally misleading.'<sup>12</sup> Berliner stresses the importance of fluency in the received tradition of jazz improvisational practices.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, whatever balance might be struck in blending various processes, there is no universal formula. Berliner points out that jazz groups strike different balances between what is composed in rehearsals and what is improvised in performance:<sup>14</sup> 'At one moment, soloists may play radical, pre-composed variations on a composition's melody as rehearsed and memorized before the event. The very next moment, they may spontaneously be embellishing the melody's shape, or inventing a new melodic phrase.'<sup>15</sup> Berliner calls this the 'eternal cycle of improvisation and pre-composition.'<sup>16</sup> Ingrid Monson makes a related point: 'there is (...) great interplay between conscious and unconscious modes of awareness in jazz improvisation and several layers whose degrees of fixity and freedom are constantly shifting.'<sup>17</sup>

Similar fluctuations may be seen in Indian classical music. The *alap*, or initial presentation of the raga, is, for all intents and purposes, an improvisation. Yet immense technique and preparation is required in order to negotiate the notes, proportions and durations, registers, and melodic ornaments appropriate to a given raga. Throughout typical performances of Indian classical music a rich combination of traditional devices and gestures, elements of the *bandis* or *gat* ('pre-composed' section), and the underlying fixity of the *tal* (rhythmic mode) make for a mixture of great ongoing complexity in terms of sorting out what is created on the spot and what has been formed in advance. Martin Clayton describes the tradition as a whole as 'rather heterogeneous'. In practice 'techniques and processes are not always clearly distinguished. Techniques are often not clearly defined,

11 Benson remarks: 'one can hardly complain about these limitations, since they are precisely what make jazz possible.' (Benson, *Improvisation of Hermeneutics*, p. 198).

12 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, p. 17.

13 Berliner asks: 'If the object of improvising is for performers to create music anew...then what did it mean that their phrases "had history behind them"?' (Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, p. 6-7).

14 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, p. 64.

15 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, p. 222.

16 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, p. 242.

17 Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, Chicago etc: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 214.

nor are they always separated in performance (...). Moreover, each (...) individual style has distinct development techniques'.<sup>18</sup> As with jazz in general, the idea of isolating 'kinds' of creative processes temporally (composition OR improvisation) exposes a defect in the presupposition of the question: whoever said that music is anything short of a vast mixture of intertwined movements, influences, and techniques? How is it that, if we interrogate the creative history of a single note, we should not expect a complex answer?

Another interesting case is the tradition of *Qawwali* – the Sufi music of India and Pakistan. In it blends of materials are forged in performance, directly in the process of eliciting and sustaining emotional and physical responses in its listeners. Proportionally speaking, much of the material of *Qawwali* music might qualify as 'pre-composed'. But the deployment of verses, melodies, their embellishments and repetitions, re-combinations and impromptu excursions can follow any number of paths in performance.<sup>19</sup> What results might be described as a musical 'mobile'. My point is, whatever is considered to be 'composed' in these musics cannot simply be segregated from what is improvised. Everything sounds, or ought to sound, as seamlessly blended.

### III. Composition as Creative Process

It is widely known that many composers of Western classical music were improvisers. Mozart improvisations were a staple feature of his considerable concertizing throughout his life. He improvised songs, sonatas, fugues, variations – he writes to his father on one occasion that in a concert he had just improvised a fugue when 'all of a sudden a magnificent sonata in C Major, out of my head, and a Rondo to finish up with'.<sup>20</sup> With such felicitous skills at his disposal in front of an audience, what was composition like for the private, reflective composer? For me the question is not how Mozart might have incorporated improvisation in his composition process, but how he could have possibly refrained from doing so. Whether or not a composer makes a practice of publicly improvising music, we should consider that the ability to hear an idea, to then follow that idea with another, and finally to judge whether things are working, whether this or that note is 'right' or whether a particular duration is the proper length means to have an ongoing, intuitive understanding and imagination of what *ought* to be happening at any moment. And generally, naively perhaps, we overestimate the aesthetic competence of conceptual schemes in this process.

In the widely projected image of composer-as-architect there is little, if any, free or 'rhapsodic' element to the organization of the work. We so often hear 'serious' composition portrayed as this abstract, objective process. Composers are said to 'assemble' and 'make choices' regarding the musical work as if it were a freestanding building or a fresco of some kind. Perhaps composers themselves are partly to blame for this image. Undoubtedly, the conceptual nature of language skews our discourse about musical creation. As Elliott Carter remarks: 'That a composer can write music that is thought to be of some interest is, of course, no guarantee that he can talk illuminatingly about it'.<sup>21</sup> In my own experience I have observed that composers tend to mistake the conceptual aspects of their creative processes for something more concrete and aesthetically significant than they really are

18 Martin Clayton, *Time in Indian Music*, New York etc.: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 106.

19 See Regula Burckhardt Quereshi's *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan*, Chicago etc.: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

20 Kaitalin Komlos, 'Mozart the Performer', in: *Cambridge Companion to Mozart*, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 220.

21 Elliot Carter, 'Shop Talk by an American Composer', in: Schwartz/Childs (ed.), *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1998, p. 262.

– at least composers working under the pretenses and ideologies of academia.<sup>22</sup> These constructions convenience theorists to be sure. Excavations devoted to unearthing conceptual apparatuses in the name of analysis become self-validating. The musical and artistic quality of an expression is always presupposed. And the tacit belief is that this quality exists in direct relation to the conceptual constructions revealed by the analysis.

The very idea of conceptually-created composition is paradoxical. Sounds are not concepts, and thus if one 'hears' a musical idea any concept of it will necessarily be derived or imposed afterwards. But if a musical event is determined through an abstract process before it is heard in the ear, it would seem to qualify more as an experiment or chance than as a result of an original, essentially *aural* creative moment. John Cage defines an experimental action as 'one the outcome of which is not foreseen'.<sup>23</sup> There is something basically experimental about the installation of a concept in advance of the sounding result. This because musical concepts and sonic effects are neither synonymous with each other nor do they exist in any stable relationship. The longstanding presumption that the ratios and numeric values of theoretic systems correspond to the qualitative palette of musical combinations is a bad one. Bergson mentions the accidental or happenstance effect of abstract relations, the effects of associating abstract patterns with structural identities 'mysterious attractions of which it is not even possible to say beforehand (...) by what effects they will manifest themselves'.<sup>24</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the two forms of modernist idealism which dominated composition in the 20th century, absolute determinism and absolute indeterminacy, should deliver qualitatively similar bodies of music. Notable exceptions bear the marks of imaginative intuitive – or virtual – processes above and beyond whatever well-wrought conceptual order might be in place.

Take, for instance, Schoenberg's Piano Concerto. There are several extant sketches of the opening. Each version takes the same basic rhythm and melodic contour and applies to it different row forms.<sup>25</sup> Theorists seem baffled by Schoenberg's indecision, particularly the fact that Schoenberg rejected a combinatorial row for one that was not. But what I believe this row 'auditioning' process shows is not only that the qualitative result of successive pitch class intervals is a kind of experimental 'leap', but also that there must have been a 'semi-sonic' sound idea, a virtual idea, that Schoenberg was trying to match with a row. At the very least it shows that something of the virtual was entailed in Schoenberg's process. Just because the Concerto is a 'structured' work does not mean that its artistry is reducible to that structure.

There is undoubtedly a role for accidents in the course of improvising music as well. But the accident or chance, in the Cagian ideal sense, is not in itself a 'form' of improvisation. At best, we might say it is an ever shifting and indeterminable dimension in any creative process. Berliner talks about accidents and musical saves. He quotes Art Farmer: 'Whether the chances you take come off or not (...) you have to preserve the continuity of the ideas you're playing. If an idea comes to you and you don't make it, you have to experience making something else out of it (...) if a wrong note comes out, you have to make something out of that note.'<sup>26</sup> Kenny Barron advises 'if you play

22 Another interpretation is that the significance of conceptual schemes is falsely attributed to the aesthetic content, when their real importance has more to do with their role in the composing process; that is, as means of staking out conceptual – virtual – terrain into which real music will be composed. The falsity comes in presuming that a meaningful relation obtains directly between the actual music and the virtual markers used to compose it.

23 John Cage, *Silence*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961, p. 39.

24 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, New York: Zone Books, 1991, p. 214.

25 See David Bishop, 'A Reexamination of the Evolution of the Series in the Sketches', in: *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute* 14/1 (1991), pp. 135-147.

26 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, p. 211.

something you didn't mean to play, play it again."<sup>27</sup> Both statements imply that in the course of improvising these artists *as a rule* hear what they mean to play in advance. The accident is the exception, which simply means the performer did not imagine or anticipate something that happened. And the skill comes in adjusting to, even incorporating the accident into the creative process. If, as Hasty tells us, we listen to music 'in the light of what has gone before', then surely composing and improvising must take place in this light as well.<sup>28</sup> The continuous interpenetration of the musical past with the musical present is a responsibility shared by all music; a unified, fundamental condition far more significant in its common rule of engagement than any supposedly ontological distinctions imposed by categories.

And this is just it: neither side of the composition/improvisation dichotomy is reducible to itself. Composers' methods are likely eclectic and multifaceted; different from piece to piece and even from one idea to another. The score acts as a screen behind which the amalgamated history of its creative processes is irrevocably hidden – even from the composer. This is just as true for the recording or transcription of an improvisation. Much of what is meant in the distinction between composition and improvisation comes down to a question of when and where a fixed medium such as notation is involved. It seems to me that in scholarly endeavors a fixed medium *necessarily* stands between an analysis and a musical performance of any kind. An argument could be made that the necessity for a fixed medium in analysis makes the whole matter of improvisation versus composition a moot point. But then should improvisation be subjected to the same anachronistic assumptions governing composition? Or does the consideration of improvisation create an opportunity to question these assumptions? I am inclined towards the latter conclusion.

#### IV. Restoring Composition to its (Improvised-Improvising) Self

Improvisation is a fluid, temporal process. As such it is not a particularly obliging subject for musical theories rooted in structuralist presences, arboreal hierarchies, absent Platonic forms in pre-existing spaces, and architectonic wholes. But if we understand 'composition' to refer also to a fluid temporal process (whether as the act of composing itself or as the resulting musical process we hear) it would seem these traditional modes come up short with respect to the very repertoires they were designed to illuminate.<sup>29</sup>

One of the basic problems with traditional paradigms lies in the predetermination of a separate structural system in relation to which individual musical events supposedly stand. The concept of structural harmony presupposes the presence of a complete progression from the beginning of the work as well as at every point along the way. A twelve-tone row presupposes the identity of the twelve embedded within the first of the series. Even

27 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, p. 212. I would add that in repeating what was first an accident a kind of equilibrium is restored to the virtual: the repetition is heard and prepared in advance.

28 As a composer myself, when I stumble upon an intriguing chord or gesture, the first thing I do is repeat it. In repetition, what is difference in itself becomes difference for itself. It becomes an improvisation.

29 One common strategy is the notion of comparing musical passages with absent models or prototypes. Kevin Korsyn suggests this approach to western common-practice music. (see Kevin Korsyn, *Decentering Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research*, New York etc: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 93-96) The technique of 'measuring' digressions from an absent musical entity would appear to provide a coherent basis for the analysis of improvised music. In my view the result can only diagram a false dynamic; a simulated movement from one idea directly to another, outside the scope of, but somehow mysteriously effecting, the perception of the listener. Where is the terrain of this movement? To what musical experience does the calculation of such relationships correspond? What I would like to see are modes of analysis which approach ongoing events as positive, self-sufficient processes apprehended in time by a listener; modes which abandon recourse to negative forms, predetermined structures, statistical probabilities, cultural referents, or abstract distances.



the concept of the interval presupposes the arrival to say the path. Such totalizing views of musical works, where the composition in some sense exists as a whole, its beginning simultaneous with its end, contradict the reality of music created in the moment, its beginning past, its end beyond the horizon. I suggest that if we position ourselves as if *all* music is improvised we have the opportunity to clear ourselves from these troubling and, as Lawrence Dreyfus characterizes them, 'extremely dated' metaphysics.<sup>30</sup> If the analytic lens sticks with the moment as an absolute opening of creative expression many of these difficulties no longer obtain. The distinction between the ubiquitous composition and the ephemeral improvisation disappears. I agree with Marion Guck's call for an analytic practice which 'involves the inventive use of analytical concepts and rules and it involves invention of concepts'.<sup>31</sup> Far from raising a false or moot question, thinking in terms of improvisation creates an opportunity for invention, for the improvisation of *analytic* concepts. To me, it opens into a deconstructive process, as well as a potential for the discovery of more responsive, more *engaged* analytic techniques. Rather than maintaining the dichotomy or subsuming improvisation under the regime of composition, I advocate taking up an analytics of improvisation: advancing it into the sacrosanct jurisdiction of composition and challenging those concepts which warp and suppress the creative content they claim.

30 Lawrence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*, Cambridge (MA) etc.: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 170.

31 Guck, *Analysis as Interpretation*, p. 203.