

Improvisation: Between the Musical and the Social

In the current practice, studying musical improvisation usually amounts to music-theoretical analyses of solos by individuals. What tends to be forgotten is that improvisation always takes place in an interactive, collaborative context. To tackle this oversight, and thus creating a more comprehensive understanding of improvisation, this essay investigates improvisation from a socio-musical perspective, setting course by three concepts: interaction, listening, and freedom. Questions addressed are: How does a simultaneous interaction of musical sounds, people, and their musical and cultural histories establish a moment of community? What is the role of attentive listening in these interactions? Considering that improvisation is always (in)formed by its immediate context and the performer's musical background, how 'free' is the musician in making artistic choices?

I. Introduction

According to British guitarist Derek Bailey, improvisation is perhaps the most widely practiced of all musical activities;¹ it is an inextricable part of a variety of musics – from Baroque, rock, flamenco, and jazz, to gamelan, Indian and Iranian music, etc.

But what is improvisation? How can it be defined, marked off from other musical concepts such as composition, interpretation, and variation? This essay will *not* be a renewed effort to come up with a clear, comprehensive, and final definition of improvisation (although I hope it will affect and infect any attempt to define it). Instead, this text will focus on three aspects that are inextricably bound up with improvisation, yet often not included in its description: interaction, listening, and freedom.

As such, this essay might be considered a kind of supplement to the many improvisation studies, conducted by music theorists, which concentrate mainly on examining individual expressions and technical skills. What I would like to emphasize here is the fact that improvisation is always already an interactive, collaborative, and social event (even in the case of solo performances). In other words, I am not content with identifying structural and formal shapes alone; I am also interested in and intrigued by the interactive processes through which they emerge. The specific direction an improvisation takes obviously depends upon a whole range of intermusical as well as interactive inputs, (in)formed by attentive listening and what Herbie Hancock paradoxically defines as 'controlled freedom'. I would like to elaborate upon this particular statement in the next few pages.

II. Interaction

Sunday, 16:00h. Lantaren/Venster – a venue for contemporary performing arts in downtown Rotterdam. A fairly large and diverse audience applauds when Ned Rothenberg (clarinets, alto sax, shakuhachi), Stomu Takeishi (bass guitar), and Tony Buck (drums) enter stage. After the first number – a slowly built up soundscape of repetitive bass clarinet patterns, modified bass sounds, and drum figures whose function is to add specific colors rather than to indicate a clear beat – Rothenberg wants to exchange his bass clarinet for alto sax. Having taken a seat in order to better handle the huge clarinet, he moves the stool and reaches out to grab the

¹ Bailey 1993, ix.

sax. However, the stool almost slides into the bass drum, and its removal is accompanied by some squeaks and thumps. Buck, though startled and disturbed at first, reacts with a number of rim shots and strokes on the (floor) toms, somehow imitating the noise of the gliding stool. While some of the audience begin to chuckle, Rothenberg, instead of picking up his sax, goes to the stool once more and gives it another push. Buck takes up the solicitation and responds with another drum break. The second number has started ...

Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something* tenders that improvising jazz musicians (also those accompanying a soloist) are 'compositional participants who may "say" unexpected things or elicit responses from other musicians.'² But it is the reaction of the others that is crucial as to whether a particular musical idea is picked up on, developed, or ignored.

Perhaps Rothenberg is initially not even aware of what he is doing. Perhaps he does not have any intention to create a musical event. Perhaps it is just a slight accident. In any case, the moving stool turns into an extraordinarily positive, spontaneous musical event. Buck's high-speed reaction and Rothenberg's gleeful response to the new situation show that certain musical and cultural knowledges play an important part in being able to work together appropriately in an improvisation. The particular course of events during the performance clearly depends upon a whole range of intermusical conditions. The (inter)play between Buck and Rothenberg is only able to take place because they in some way share a certain (musical) background, whereby a disturbing extra-musical noise can suddenly turn into a subtle musical intro. Rothenberg and Buck share an openness towards sounds in general, and both are able to immediately insert non-intended sounds into their performance and spontaneously created composition. The realm of musical sounds and instruments is suddenly enormously expanded.

Although Rothenberg and Buck can rely on their mutual artistic experience – their knowledge and their openness – they make themselves vulnerable at the same time. Of course they take a risk: where will this interplay lead? What about Stomu Takeishi who has his bass ready for the next number? And how will the audience react?

In the same interactive moment, the musical and the social are thus fused. During the course of the performance, there is a simultaneous construction of a musical text as well as the development of emotional bonds among the musicians through musical risk, vulnerability, and trust. Musical interaction does not only refer to instruments, instrumental techniques, or pitches and rhythms; it also means the interaction of human personalities. A 'possible world of a performance's community'³ is established through the simultaneous cont(r)act of musical sounds, people, and their musical and cultural antecedents and networks.⁴

What is happening here between Rothenberg and Buck can be called an *intermusical relationship*, i.e. a communication process that occurs primarily through musical sounds, rather than words.⁵ To put it differently, music 'itself' contributes to the creation and maintenance of social interactions among players.

Although improvisation certainly bears some similarities to conversation – it is interpersonal and open-ended rather than pre-determined – what is interesting in this case is the *non-verbal communication* and interaction that takes place among the improvising musicians. In other words, improvisation in music cannot be thought solely in linguistic

2 Monson 1996, p. 81.

3 Tarasti 1987, p. 167.

4 Therefore, it comes as no surprise that players often reflect upon improvisation using interpersonal rather than musical terms. For example, *feel(ing)* is often used as a synonym for *groove*. (Monson 1996, p. 68)

5 Monson 1996, p. 127.

terms. Rothenberg and Buck's musical act, primarily consisting of sound imitation and/or a call-response game, is triggered and supported by visual cues (movements of head and eyes, facial expressions) and something that might be called 'intuition', a feeling also developed and fed by experience, knowledge, and having played together for long time.⁶

Chris Smith calls it the 'creation and manipulation of a ritual space, in which gestures could be endowed with symbolic power sufficient to form a functionally communicative, and hence musical, vocabulary.'⁷ Improvisation arises out of a heightened sensitivity to the interaction of many signifying elements: players, numbers, performance parameters, cues, etc. What I would like to stress here is the interplay of musical procedures and the communicative moment; perhaps even more important than technical skills is the ability to listen and respond (and to encourage the others to do the same) in order to feel, literally, in tune with the others, to feel both a musical and social unity.⁸

III. Listening

... When Rothenberg and Buck commence their small (musical) game, bass player Stomu Takeishi still has his instrument ready to strike up the second composition. However, once he realizes that this second number has taken on a different introduction, he swings the bass on his back, grabs a flightcase (coincidentally) put next to the amplifier and throws it on the floor in order to contribute to the random noise suddenly turning into music. After a while, he takes his sandals off and uses them as drum sticks while the case transforms into a tom. While Takeishi is thus entering the 'conversation', Rothenberg quits twisting the stool and returns to the stillage on which his instruments are displayed. However, instead of taking the alto in order to continue (or finally start) the second number, he hesitates, obviously listening to the sounds produced by Takeishi and Buck. Finally he chooses the shakuhachi, thereby producing a tenuous but very bright sound, in contrast with the (un-pitched) rasping and hammering of drums and case. Gradually, Takeishi inserts scanty bass notes and patterns into the soundscape, while Buck slowly starts playing a new, repetitive drum pattern ...

In *The Other Side of Language*, Italian philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara attacks Western *logocentrism* – its rationality, logic, and knowledge, its capacity for ordering, systematization, and explaining. All these achievements, she argues, are based on a culture in which the power of discourse is deployed and the strength of listening ignored; we know how to speak, but not how to listen. In other words, this one-sided logocentrism is deafened by its own speech.

Her book hinges on the possibility of 'freeing our thinking from its constitutive compulsion to submit to analyze, scrutinize, delve into, explore, exhaust, probe the famous object of knowledge of our research tradition.'⁹ How? By giving back to Western thought 'the other half of language', that is, the rich openness of listening. What Fiumara (implicitly) tries to do is to rethink the concepts of communication and interaction. Instead of restricting them to the power of expression – a one-way communication can easily end up in violence as 'the other', the non-speaking partner in a conversation, is

6 According to Monson, musicians often describe such moments as 'ESP', something that 'just happens', or a reflection on their musical and personal compatibility with another musician. (Monson 1996, p. 142)

7 Smith 1998, p. 285.

8 The Dutch word that beautifully expresses what I want to bring forward here is 'saamhorigheid', meaning 'belonging together' but literally containing derivatives of the words 'listening together'. Of course, moments of interaction can also be regarded as negotiations or struggles for a certain control of musical space. A player's interjection might be experienced as an interruption or a challenge. Because sociability also includes the possibility for discord, the bandstand is an arena in which jealousies and competition – as well as harmony and brotherhood – can emerge. (Monson 1996, p. 94)

9 Fiumara 1990, p. 16.

usurped and thereby annulled – Fiumara emphasizes the silent (but not mute) readiness of the listener. Attentive silence is a way of being with the (musical) interlocutor; it indicates a proposed interaction, an invitation to a development of a time-space opening in which to meet. Listening is what allows any verbal or musical expression to take place in the first place.¹⁰

Fiumara quotes German hermeneutic Hans-Georg Gadamer, who writes in his most famous book *Truth and Method*: 'Anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without this kind of openness to one another there is no genuine human relationship. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another.'¹¹ The listening attitude advocated by both Gadamer and Fiumara is different from the cognitive endeavors which result in a further production of the very knowledge that warrants them; Fiumara refers to this attitude as 'the de-stitution of the defining'. Listening opens up the world instead of closing it down.¹² In doing so, it moves us towards creativity. If we cannot listen properly, we can no longer share in creativity, and we confine ourselves more and more to circulating within a given repertoire of standard articulations, which can be summoned up each time in mnemonic fashion.

True listening – a strenuous process of conception, growth, and devoted attention – means establishing a relationship between our familiar world and a different world, between our usual attitude and a different attitude. True listening means being receptive to the advent of an unanticipatable alterity, an encounter with the accidental, the unmanageable. True listening means being susceptible to the other, passive in a dedication to what presents itself, active in an alertness to and preparedness for a diversity of (acoustic and social) events. I like to call this the hospitality of listening or the ethics of listening.

Musicians often refer to listening in an active sense, that is, as being able to respond to and participate in musical opportunities that might change or surprise them at any moment; it is the aptitude to react (immediately) to changing musical events. In other words, the constant process of decision making that takes place in an ensemble during an improvisation is for a large part based on the listening attitude of its individual members.¹³ 'Participating listening' thus refers to an openness, to some kind of welcoming receptiveness to the unknown, the uncanny, increasing in importance as the number of agreements or pre-established musical passages decrease.

Is Fiumara's ideal, as described above, effectuated in music, in improvised music like the concert I am describing here? Although Takeishi is most likely as surprised as the audience is with regard to the changed course of the second number, his response reveals

10 Fiumara's suggestions are at odds with the idea that a monological communication model should be replaced by a polyvocal system in which one is taken into account only if one is able to raise one's voice. Furthermore, her approach to listening can be regarded as an implicit criticism of Adorno's ideas concerning structural listening.

11 Gadamer 1979, p. 324.

12 'At the very moment in which we "arm" ourselves with a cognitive model we are, paradoxically, justified in losing interest in the object. We no longer consider it as enigmatic since it is our turn to speak to it – the object no longer has very much to say to us.' (Fiumara 1990, p. 106) Here, Fiumara relies heavily on Martin Heidegger who does not fail to stress that conventional knowledge and metaphysical philosophy 'assault' objects, using conceptual accounts in order to impose them on things. Instead it should be a matter of abiding-by in order to listen, and to do so genuinely. Adhering to this 'method which is not a method', one is intent upon 'gathering himself' in order to welcome with respect a thought before it lapses into imitative conformity with standard rationality. 'Especially we moderns can learn only if we always unlearn at the same time,' Heidegger writes in *What is Called Thinking?* (Heidegger 1968, p. 8)

13 Monson 1996, p. 43.

more of a warm welcome than an annoyed rejection of that noisy stranger suddenly entering the inner space of the musical domain. The reaction flowing from his listening attests to this: he hears the dialogue between Rothenberg and Buck and doesn't want to impose on them the musical discourse he had in mind (or that was planned by the whole trio in advance). Instead, he allows his fellow musicians to start the conversation and to explore the musical possibilities before he decides that the best way to enter the event is not by playing his bass but by playing something with the 'same vocabulary': grating and throbbing pitchless sounds. Takeishi's ability to respond to the musical events generated by the other members of the ensemble is a product of his experience in watchful listening as well as his sensitivity toward the other musicians who inform this sensibility.¹⁴

In reacting to the continuous changes in this improvised music, Rothenberg, Takeishi, and Buck display their hearings of the musical events and their understandings of appropriate musical responses.¹⁵ These responses also indicate what musical events they take to be most significant. If Takeishi had missed the opportunity to respond to the sudden change in the musical development, he could be accused of 'not listening' to what is going on in the rest of the ensemble.¹⁶ The ability to listen carefully is pivotal as to whether a specific musical (or extra-musical) event is picked up on and developed (or disregarded). Rothenberg, Takeishi, and Buck put into practice Fiumara's plea to listen to the rich multiplicity of 'reality' and let the other speak without reducing this open attitude to a model, a series of rules, or a method which can be followed. The response-ability becomes a singular responsibility – the aesthetic and/or social choices they are able to make are no guarantee for success (in the conventional sense of the word). Listening (in improvised music) thus becomes an important locus of resistance to orthodoxies of the imagination (conventional systems of thought), challenging indifference.¹⁷

IV. Freedom

... After a couple of numbers, Rothenberg invites guitarist Marc Ribot on stage. Ribot plugs in his guitar and turns on his old Fender Twin Reverb. An enormous cracking fills the hall. The amplifier is obviously broken. Fortunately, there are three more Twins on stage, already installed for the next group. However, Ribot, strangely enough, decides to hold onto his broken amp. Instead of using a working Twin, he starts switching the broken one on each time he wants to play his guitar; conversely, he turns the amp off when he doesn't want to produce sounds. He thus operates the on/off switch some 20 times per minute before the whole number has reached a level of intensity that can permit the drone of the amp as an integral part of it.

Halfway through one guitar solo in the same composition, the b-string snaps. Imperturbable, Ribot continues soloing, modifying his playing and the thematic material according to the circumstances. As if he considers these mishaps to be an opportunity instead of an excuse ...

14 Takeishi's (re)action is a result of what composer Pauline Oliveros calls 'deep listening', an intense form of commitment and responsibility to – as well as interaction with – all that surrounds us.

15 Although an exchange will frequently begin with the repetition of a particular musical passage or a response with a complimentary musical interjection (Monson 1996, p. 89), I do not want to suggest that an 'appropriate musical response' is always an obedient submission to the musical vocabulary already sounding. Perhaps, in contrast to a verbal conversation, musicians can make a very adequate and responsible (even ethical) contribution to the musical event by brutally interrupting the situation at hand in order to take the music into a completely different direction or atmosphere: coherence through contradiction. Referring to the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, one could call this the ethics of ingratitude at work in improvisation.

16 Monson 1996, p. 83.

17 Fischlin 2004, p. 11.

In 1936, German philosopher Theodor Adorno writes an illustrious but devastating essay on jazz's putative freedom. Throughout the past decennia, this indictment has often been criticized, and perhaps correctly: Adorno creates a caricature and confuses jazz with entertainment music in general. Nevertheless, certain issues from his essay deserve attention; Adorno's concerns with individual freedom are still (or again) very relevant and even necessary to our times.

What are his difficulties with jazz? Why does he call the jazz musician/soloist a 'pseudo-liberated subject' and reproach jazz music for sacrificing individuality? In short, it comes down to the accusation that jazz *seems* to offer substantial freedom to its players but, *in reality*, the musicians are tied hand and foot to predetermined structures. The improvisations are merely ornamental in their significance and are never part of the overall construction or determinant of the form. Their placement, right down to the number of beats, is stereotypical, their duration and harmonic structure completely preordained. Their melodic form hardly exceeds the paraphrasing of the cadence, and the wild agitation of the jazz solo gives only the illusion of a dynamic.¹⁸

The soloist's musical freedom – a freedom that should take shape in his/her improvisations – is from the outset curtailed; not only by predetermined harmonies and musical form, but also by his/her fellow musicians, the 'collective'. The soloing subject 'falls out of the collective just as syncopation does from the regular beat';¹⁹ it does not want to be engulfed in the prescribed majority, which existed before the subject and is independent of it, whether out of protest or ineptitude or both at once – until it finally is received into, or, better, subordinated to the collective as it was predestined to be.²⁰ To be different, yet to obey the law; that's how the activity of the soloist might be summarized.

These ideological objections are directed mainly towards the restrictions the soloist encounters; s/he is subordinated to the collective, the accompanists. In other words, Adorno situates a potential and desired freedom of the individual as a counterpart to a lack of freedom inherent within the group. On the one hand, his analysis might still be adequate when considering many kinds of jazz music: form, harmonies, rhythm, and beat – often generated by the rhythm section – determine (and thereby restrict) the soloist's possibilities. Improvisation in this sense is never much more than variation. On the other hand, it is especially improvised (jazz) music that can trigger a rethinking of Adorno's slightly absolutistic conceptualization of freedom.

To be sure, the aesthetic of improvised (jazz) music in general, and the music of this nameless trio featuring guitarist Marc Ribot in particular, is founded on the inventiveness and uniqueness of each individual contribution. However, the various climactic moments require the cohesiveness and participation of the entire ensemble. The shifting between relatively free and relatively stable musical ideas thus permeates the entire ensemble, and does so constantly.²¹ In other words, the binary and hierarchically organized opposites that saturate Adorno's thinking on jazz do not do justice to the complexity of the situation

18 Adorno 1936, p. 477.

19 For Adorno, syncopation remains tied and subordinated to the fundamental beat. In other words, it does not lead to new rhythmic developments, but finally complies with the prescribed metric law. Contrary to alternative rhythms in Beethoven's music, which have the power to resist the main rhythm in order to become superior themselves, syncopation's opposition to the compelling beat is temporary and weak.

The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for the jazz vibrato. With it, the subject seems to express his/her emotions, but the vibrato remains attached to the fixed, objective 'keynote'. The objective sound is subjectively sauced, but the latter will never dominate the former.

20 Adorno 1936, p. 489.

21 Monson 1996, pp. 151-2.

within which the improvisers are operating. The relation between the individual and the collective as presented by Adorno needs to be reconsidered, not because there is currently an abundance of jazz that does not fit into Adorno's depiction of it, but because his ideas concerning (musical) freedom seem to be too rigid. Exploring the interaction among the group provides an opening for reconsidering this relation. Of course, there is still an inherent tension between the individual and the group in jazz. However, this tension is far more subtle than what Adorno has tried to make us believe: improvised music thus calls into question the myths of individual self-expression upon which many Western understandings of improvised music are founded.

The construct of improvisation as a free zone of music where one is responsible only to oneself and to the dictates of one's own taste is simply an illusion. Improvisation is not primarily about unblocking the obstacles that impede access to forms of individual self-expression. It has always been about interaction, about fostering new ways of thinking about, and participating in, human relationships. Improvisation is, first and foremost, 'an expression of the tension between spontaneous musical events borne of a particular context predicated on multiple factors and clearly demarcated organizational patterns that produce the structures in which improvisation is enabled.'²²

The interaction of Rothenberg and co offers freedom and a lack of freedom at the same time. Each player is free to choose what he wants to play, but in accepting responsibility for the other(s), he is simultaneously constrained: what is demanded by the other(s) is a radical generosity, a constant interrogation of oneself, an unremitting orientation towards the uncanny. However, there is a freedom in this want of freedom as well. The musicians are encountering new possibilities that they could not have chosen without the other(s); the other's restrictions make them freer. Their music becomes the (collectively and individually owned and shared) 'sounding' of this responsibility, this generosity, this interrogation, this relationship.

V. Conclusion

What I presented here in a more confined way – writing around a specific performance of the Rothenberg/Takeishi/Buck trio – can (and should), in my opinion, be extrapolated to most improvised music, be it jazz, Baroque, flamenco, Indian, or Western folk music: a meaningful theorizing about improvisation must take the interactive, collaborative context of musical invention as a point of departure. In the attempt to achieve a satisfying musical journey, an improviser is always making musical choices in relationship to what the others are doing. Improvisation is always and inherently interactive. First, a successful improvisation in multi-musician ensembles requires group cohesiveness as well as the participation and contribution of all performing members (for example, groove is one sort of interactional 'text' within an ensemble). Secondly, every improvisation relates to and interacts with the musician's background, meaning other, previously experienced music, either pre-composed, fixed pieces, or rehearsed patterns. Thirdly, most live performances generate productive interactions with the audience.

Improvisation, to the extent that it is founded on interactive performance, emerges as an important medium for exhibiting as well as a means of conceiving and (re)enacting interpersonal relationships. It derives its particularity 'from the force of context, one that challenges players, listeners and all those caught up in its social field, to reevaluate the "space" in which the conjoined activities of making music and community happen.'²³

22 Fischlin 2004, p. 32.

23 Fischlin 2004, p. 18.

Attentive listening and an alternative interpretation of freedom are inextricably bound up with the interplay among musicians, their music, and their musical and cultural backgrounds.

This essay sought to initiate a more comprehensive understanding of the context in which improvisation is practiced. One of the results of the kind of research it advocates might be better insight into the relationship between the actual improvisation (aesthetic choices, technical abilities, formalistic features, intermusical knowledge) and the social (artistic, ethical) behavior of the musicians. To be placed within a broader context of social, cultural, and ethical conduct, improvisation needs a systematic and interdisciplinary examination, not confined to any one field, whether that of music theory, (ethno)musicology, or music sociology.

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