From As If to What If?
Intimacy and Interaction in Free Improvisation

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Notre partition, c'est l'individu en face de nous.
(Joëlle Léandre 2007, 68)

I. HOW AND WHY

I wrote this essay to clarify ideas for my participation in a roundtable discussion on "improvisation and thought" at *Máquina productora de silencio*, a six-day colloquium on the critical analysis of improvisation in the Spanish-speaking world, organized in Mexico City by *17, Instituto de estudios críticos* between 24 and 29 June, 2024. This project was intended to mark the founding of a concentration on improvisation studies at that institute and a collaboration with the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation at Guelph University, some of whose members were present for the greater part of that colloquium.

Like all of the roundtable discussions at this colloquium, this one had a title chosen by co-organizer Benjamín Mayer Foulkes (along with Ricardo Lomnitz) "to be as open as possible," with no real clarification as to whether it was to focus on how Spanish-speaking improvisers think when improvising, on how Spanish-speaking philosophers have thought about improvisation, or directly as a showcase for thoughts about the nature of improvisation in the Spanish-speaking world. Implicit in this and most of the other roundtables was an interest in querying possible similarities and differences between how improvisation is analyzed, theorized, viewed and practiced in the Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish-speaking worlds.

Since I am not a historian of thought, but rather an active free improviser who also thinks and writes about various aspects of its practice, I decided not to undertake a study of how Spanish-speaking philosophers have dealt with the subject of improvisation. Moreover, the fact that my native language is French and my mother tongue is English makes me reluctant to simply assume that I can speak for native Spanish speakers about how they think when they are improvising. I have, however, spent well over half my life in Spain and have been thinking, writing and publishing books and essays in Spanish about free improvisation for most of that time, not to mention making music with Spanish-speaking improvisers for well over thirty years. So I *do* consider myself qualified to think in Spanish about improvisation.

That is why I have decided to share my thoughts on what I consider a fundamental question with regard to this music, as well as one that I believe is egregiously underrepresented in Spanish-language literature on this subject: improvisatory interaction in the broad sense. That is, improvisation as an interactive process involving both human and non-human agents. As we shall see, in the context of free improvisation, this interaction involves a considerable amount of human intimacy and vulnerability, elements consubstantial with the very process of shared creation that characterizes this kind of music making. Specifically, I wish to address, first, interaction among practicing free improvisers and those theorists involved in the critical analysis of this practice (musicologists, sociologists, philosophers, and improvisers themselves); second, interaction among improvisers; third, interaction with the acoustic context; fourth, interaction with the audience; fifth,

interaction with memory; and sixth, interaction with one's instrument. Some of the ideas presented here are actually reactions to what others have written about similar phenomena, often from other perspectives (notably jazz). Most of the ideas are my own, and several have been dealt with at greater length in my earlier writings. What I have not done until now is dedicate an entire text exclusively to the question of interaction, and that is what encourages me to evoke them, however briefly, here.

II. A FEW QUESTIONS (AND EVEN FEWER ANSWERS) ABOUT THEORY, PRACTICE AND ANALYSIS

It is a truism that theory follows practice. And it is just as clear that practice cannot be developed *exclusively* on the basis of theory. In the context of art making this involves the question of how one approaches creative practice. If it involves channeling the unconscious as part of a poietic process that brings it into the domain of practice, including but certainly not limited to conscious craft, then perhaps we could consider theory as a means of delimiting that channel without necessarily thereby limiting, much less determining, what actually flows through it.

Of course, theorizing is already a creative process,[1] as Timothy Hampton has pointed out in his text on Michel de Montaigne, aptly titled "Philosophy as Improvisation,"(Hampton in Lewis 2016, n.p.) but a theory text is, itself, a *product*. One may well intuit something and then attempt to construct, or sometimes assemble, a theory that explains it, but the result will consist of ideation expressible in words (or sometimes mathematics). As such, it may shed considerable light on practices that involve some element of verbal conceptualization. But what happens when conscious theory is brought to bear on unconscious practice? Some might say this is impossible, that we have no such capacity to intervene in our own unconscious. I disagree. I believe conscious processes can become unconscious and I am willing to believe that the opposite is true as well. As an example of the former, I offer the arduous and occasionally terrifying process of learning to drive a car. When we begin, *everything* is conscious. Somehow, we are supposed to be aware of the brake, the clutch, the accelerator, steering, how fast we are going, how to stay on the road, whether there are cars directly in front of us, beside us or behind us, stop signs, traffic lights, signs indicating maximum speed, road work, crosswalks, pedestrians, not to mention what our possibly terrified driving instructor is shouting at us. It's a nightmare, and all the more so as failure can have consequences that range from expensive to lethal.

And yet, just a few years later we may suddenly realize one day that, in our daily commute home from work, we have driven three blocks entirely lost in thought, and that we have no conscious memory *whatsoever* of what we were doing. The entire process of driving has become momentarily unconscious. It isn't always so, thankfully, but it sometimes is. In that same sense, albeit in the opposite direction, a new idea or even a group of ideas we could qualify as a theory, may provide an insight that makes us aware of a process in which we have, until then, allowed our unconscious to take the helm. In the realm of psychoanalysis, this may be the case with processes that are entirely unconscious. Not only are they being handled by our unconscious; we may actually be unconscious of the fact that we are doing them at all. So part of our psychotherapy may involve attaining insights that make us conscious of these processes—dragging them, so to speak, into the conscious long enough for us to alter them.

I rather doubt that the sort of insights attained through psychotherapy come from a patient's direct contact with theory (ideally, the therapist will be handling the theoretical approach). I am certain,

[1] Let us not, however, conflate "creative" with "original." I cannot help recalling how one literary critic appraised a young novelist's first work: "his writing is interesting and original. Unfortunately, the interesting parts are not original and the original parts are not interesting."

however, that other sorts of insights (perhaps more relevant to art making) can be attained from such direct contact, and that these insights will very possibly be part and parcel of how, consciously or not, our individual artistic practice evolves over time. In her narration of how she developed her personal approach to improvising, inside-piano player and founding member of the Berlin Echtzeitmusik scene perfectly describes her own efforts to develop a conscious awareness of certain aspects of previously unconscious improvisatory criteria and habits in order to alter them before letting them return to their unconscious level.

> When we started to play in the nineties a lot of music in Berlin was free-jazz, and free-jazz was so much about pushing certain limits, like energy and dynamics, and I felt it was about losing control and letting things go. I think what happened then in the kind of scene where I'm belonging to, was about distancing the music from that approach and doing something really opposite to that. It was about being very suspicious to what you play and questioning every impulse in order to let out only the most essential thing. And that's very much where my being a musician started. This aesthetic, or approach, was very much present at that time. I don't think I do that anymore, but maybe when you do that really intensely for a period, it stays a part of you (Neumann in Nordeson 2018, 86/98).

Let us return, for a moment, to our initial proposal that theory follows practice. One question immediately comes to mind. Given that relationship, to what degree is practice determinant in the validation of theory? Or more specifically, how much say do those who actually *practice* have in the development of theories about what they do, or why they do it?[2] Obviously, theorists are better equipped to theorize than practitioners. And by this I do mean better *equipped*, not necessarily better suited in other ways. Their equipment will probably include familiarity with previous theories about the same subject, or with theories about other subjects whose contents, structure or both can be fruitfully mapped onto whatever they are analyzing or, at the very least, reflecting upon. On the other hand, while theorists are undoubtedly more skilled at making theories, it would be, at the very least, optimistic to assume that they are more familiar with the processes they are analyzing than those who actually practice them. Sometimes, the theorist's broader perspective and consubstantial capacity to draw relations not easily grasped from the trenches (so to speak), will be exactly what furnish the insights that may make their work so valuable to the foot soldiers. At others, however, that very skill may distance them from aspects of pure practice that have been fully internalized by those who actually carry them out.[3] Theorists may be able to analyze what is being done, but unable to grasp (or even realize that they are *not grasping*) the unconscious criteria practitioners are applying when actually *doing.*

Of course, the other side of the same coin will ideally be equally obvious to us: practitioners may not have that broader perspective, they may be unaware of certain processes even as they carry them out, or they may be aware of only certain aspects of those processes. They may also be unequipped to analyze and/or theorize about them, or they may be outspokenly unwilling to analyze them at all, let alone to help non-practitioners do so. For many, the well-known Gadsen flag of a rattlesnake with the motto "do not tread on me" flies proudly over terrains they perhaps rightly

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[2] Here, I am reminded of a certain criticism of 18th and 19th-century "natural sciences." The author, whose name I have long forgotten, said something to the effect that, the first thing "natural" scientists from that era did when they discovered a new species was kill it and cut it open to see what was inside, rather than trying to observe it in its natural habitat to see how it lived, what it ate, how it reproduced, and so on.

[3] Readers seeking to compare and contrast may be amused by the following two approaches to understanding improvising together: Free improvising contrabassist Joëlle Léandre once observed that "...music is flesh, it is organic, it is pleasure, it is error… Moreover, it takes a lot of love to play with others," while ethnomusicologist (Ph.D. 1999, UCLA), jazz saxophonist, and Professor in the Department of Music at University of California, San Diego, David Borgo, thinks of it in terms of "collective properties that may 'spontaneously' develop in a collection of interacting components without being implicit in any way in the individual pieces"

believe belong to intuition, creative flow, inspiration and other mysterious and necessary processes whose functioning might seem to depend on not being importuned by excessive light, thought or conscious awareness.

All of the above suggests the possible fecundity of two different approaches. One is for theorists and practitioners to work together with a shared willingness to start from a necessary humility in which each is willing to ask questions, and neither attempts simply to make what they observe fit into some sort of predetermined framework (a beguiling temptation for many scholars). This approach will certainly remind us of similar, if earlier, debates and decisions about ethnocentricity in the field of anthropology, and sadly, it will require just as much effort and vigilance if all parties wish to ensure results based on something other than intelligent (sometimes even brilliant) misunderstanding or misconstruel.[4]

The other possible approach is for the work to be done by theorists who are also practitioners or vice versa. Here, the term *vice versa* is important. One can be a scholar and an artist at the same time, but one can obviously be more of one than the other. Indeed, in the United States, universities are filled with figures of unquestionable artistic stature—composers, novelists and poets, among others, whose academic contributions are not necessarily weaker, and there are undoubtedly just as many whose academic work outshines their artistic contributions[5]. In the case of free improvisation, this combination has generally been less common, quite simply because it has not really been a central field of interest, let alone inquiry, in academic circles and is even more rarely taught in universities, at least in the United States. Still, one does not necessarily have to be equally skilled at making art and making theories, the mere fact that each activity casts light on the other can lead to both theories *and* practice unattainable by any other means.

Analysis in the context of practice and vice versa

So far, we have argued that practice cannot be forged exclusively on the anvil of theory. Analysis, however, can often have, and some would say "require", a reciprocal relationship with theory, as each guides and, sometimes, confirms the other. Even this relationship, however, can be fraught with traps, as Thomas S. Kuhn has so clearly illustrated in his analysis of scientific paradigms, where he shows how some of the results of specific experiments were ignored for years as the paradigm guiding evaluation of data generated by the experiment assigned no importance to them.[6] To clearly understand how analysis and practice interact, we could propose the following four vectors: 1) the practice of analysis, 2) the analysis of practice, 3) the analysis of analysis, and 4) the practice of practice. The present essay does not require an extended exegesis of all four, but the fact that it does involve both analysis and theory suggests the usefulness of at least a succinct definition of each.

The practice of analysis

Gilles Deleuxe famously observed that "a theory is exactly like a box of tools" (Foucault and Bouchard, 1972, 208), and we might well expand this simile by adding that analytical tools almost

[4] In the field of jazz, I believe Ingrid Monson's, *Sayin Something* is outstanding in that very sense. Her interviews with extraordinary jazz musicians and her manner of relating and interrelating their statements to cast light on a plethora of that music's most interesting aspects is simply brilliant. So, too, is her grasp of the difficulty of reaching every sector of her intended audience. Towards the end of her book, she writes: "In writing *Saying Somethin*, I have been very aware of the conflicting needs of the three audiences I have most wanted to reach: musicians, listeners, and academics. I am quite convinced that what is of most interest to musicians and listeners is of least interest to academics, and vice versa. I only hope that what emerges is the complex way in which the daily lives of musicians and the sounds they produce are connected to issues that extend well beyond the musical community." (Monson 1996, 217)

[5] Particularly if they are among those scholars whose academic work is truly creative.

[6] See, especially, his narration of Roentgen's discovery of X-rays (Kuhn 1962, 56-60).

always come in a box. Most form part of a group associated with a particular kind of analysis (the metaphorical tool box in question). Moreover, this “kind” of analysis is not delimited exclusively by what it is designed to analyze, but also, and often more so, by how it is to do so. In other words, by how those analytical tools are to be employed and combined. As a budding musicologist or composer, one learns how to operate the tools from a specific box, be it Shenkerian, neo-Riemannian or any of innumerable other versions of structural, harmonic, rhythmic, serial or other analytical systems based on a chosen primary focus and how it is guided by different theoretical underpinnings. For a student, it is often unclear whether the purpose of such an undertaking is to discover things about a piece of music or, instead, to learn how to handle the analytical system itself. These two clearly overlap, but often less so than one might imagine, especially since academia has long since identified pieces particularly suited to one type of analysis or another—that is, particularly useful for demonstrating the use and usefulness of each.

The analysis of practice

This is one of the two most widespread of the four vectors and possibly the most useful from an academic perspective, although here we need to emphasize the importance of both applied and theoretical research, not to mention how much more they overlap than might seem to be the case when viewed individually.[7] Science has long recognized the equal value of both, even when those in charge of funding tend to favor applied research. The advent of critical analysis, with its application of analytical tools and references from a broader spectrum of social, political and philosophical disciplines has had an enormous influence on how we analyze and situate phenomena (such as musical improvisation) in a context more coherent with its actual practice by human beings in society.

The analysis of analysis

This process has at least two valuable uses. First of all, a clear analysis of how an analytical system functions, including a close examination of its theoretical underpinnings, is often the first step in generating new analytical tools derived from that system. To the degree that these “theoretical underpinnings” constitute a paradigm in Kuhn’s sense of the word, this process might be said to encompass (though it is certainly not limited to) “an actualization achieved by extending the knowledge of those facts that the paradigm displays as particularly revealing, by increasing the extent of the match between those facts and the paradigm’s prediction, and by further articulation of the paradigm itself” (Kuhn 1962, 24).

Second, this examination, especially in the form of critical analysis, can often reveal social and/or cultural biases that have all-too-often distorted analytical findings.

The practice of practice

Practice is the foundation of all the rest. Were it not for practice, there would be nothing to analyze, but the idea that practice is *practiced* might be understood to suggest that carrying it out could encompass a broader spectrum of activities in a larger socioeconomic context than may immediately seem relevant. This could be an argument in favor of a critical analysis of practice, but here it needs to be understood in the very context of practice. The old adage that a jazz musician is someone who puts a five-thousand-dollar instrument into a five-hundred-dollar car and drives fifty miles to play a five-dollar concert needs only slight adjustment to ring true for free improvisers.

[7] An excellent example of this combination may be found in how applied research and pure research participated equally in the discovery of cosmic microwave background radiation—the event that essentially confirmed “Big Bang” theory. The story is succinctly narrated here: <<https://www.bell-labs.com/about/history/innovation-stories/confirming-big-bang/#gref>> (consulted on June 7, 2024).

They could be described as persons who take a five-thousand-dollar instrument with them on a fifty-mile bus ride to play a free concert for five people. Jocular as this may sound, the use of monetary references to describe the precarious status of this practice cannot help but reflect the importance of not letting the sometimes crushing criteria of our surrounding market economy affect our self esteem as artists. It goes without saying that these criteria are sometimes directly economic and sometimes indirectly so, and that they span a considerable part of a free improviser's everyday life, from how "success" is defined to how to make enough money to cover the monthly rent without having to dedicate one's entire waking hours to a job that may have nothing at all to do with the practice of one's chosen art form. So practice must indeed be *practiced*, and the personal clarity needed not only to do so, but also to *continue* to do so, are part of that constellation.

Musical object vs. musical process

Ethnomusicology has studied improvisation in numerous cultures,[8] but free improvisation as practiced by musicians in Europe and the Americas has received less (which is not to say "none") attention from ethnomusicologists. Moreover, for various (and often admirable) reasons, European and American scholars (philosophers, sociologists, musicologists, critics) reflecting on musical improvisation in Western cultures have very often drawn on jazz for their models. This is perfectly reasonable—it is, after all, the most widespread and well-known form of musical improvisation in the Western world— providing that the results are not automatically conflated with those aspects of European or American[9] free improvisation which are not, or no longer, rooted in jazz.[10]

If the focus on jazz has often been a factor that distorts a possible understanding of certain aspects of free improvisation, Western arts' secular focus on product rather than process[11] has also distorted understandings of both jazz *and* free improvisation from the viewpoint of aesthetics and philosophy as a whole. As Philip Alperson put it,

> Generally speaking, Anglophone philosophy of music has by and large focused on music as a certain kind of object-oriented practice. More specifically, it has seen music as an aesthetic practice centered on the creation of objects—musical works of art.[12]

Alperson's observation is particularly cogent with respect to Western forms of musical improvisation because *there is no lasting art object.* One can stand (as I have), rapt, before a canvas by Mark Rothko, until the museum closes, but in the case of improvised music, there is no object, t*here is only process and memory.* Jazz musician, Steve Lacy, famously observed that "in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in 15 seconds. In improvisation you have 15 seconds." He could have added that, in painting, you have all the time you want to contemplate the art work while, in music, you have exactly as long as it takes to occur. And in improvisation, you have just one chance to experience it. You can't go back the next day to hear the piece again, and a recording is just that, and nothing more. Look at a photo (that is, a visual recording) of a canvas by Rothko and you will immediately realize that it is a very poor substitute indeed for standing in front of the real thing. The same holds for a recording of an improvisation.

[8]A fine example is *L'improvisation dans les musiques de tradition orale*, a magnificent collection of texts directed by Bernard Lortat-Jacob for SELAF's *Collection Ethnomusicologie* 4, in Paris, and there are many others.

[9] In this text, unless otherwise stated, "American" means "of the Americas", that is, from anywhere between the northernmost tip of Alaska and the southernmost tip of South America.

[10]This is by no means a denial of jazz's fundamental role in the origins of Euro-American free improvisation. It is, quite simply a recognition of both the latter's varied and significant origins and its posterior development. Metaphorically we could state two things of equal import: first, we are *not* our fathers, nor are we our mothers. And second, most of us have learned to be ourselves without the need to deny our progenitors or to depend on them.

[11]At least until the mid 20th century.

[12]Alperson, Philip (2016), "Disappearance, Disparagement, Dismissal" in Lewis 216, n.p.

In other words, an art object is the *result* of creative practice, and that is all we usually witness. We do not see the actual process, only the object it has produced.[13] It is that result, the painting, video, sculpture, installation or whatever, that has been and often still is the object of study for those concerned with analyzing, criticizing or theorizing about art. If, however, we are watching and listening to free improvisation, we are witnessing the creative process itself, and the only product will be that process. *There is no lasting art object,* all that remains after the improvisation has ended is memory—of the process and of the experience of that process—and the effect it has had on anyone who was a part of it, including both the audience and the improvisers themselves.

Moreover, most free improvisations are *collective,* not individual. This raises yet another obstacle to analyses based on the contemplation of an art object or theories about how individual artists undertake the process of making their art. As I hope to show in the following pages, whether individual or collective, free improvisation is *always* a matter of interaction and must be understood as such if it is to be analyzed or modeled in any fruitful manner. Any consideration of individual creative process as improvisation, or of individual improvisation as creative process, must necessarily be understood as part of a dynamic involving innumerable actors, some human, some not. This, then, will be our point of departure in the following pages.

III. INTERACTION AMONG IMPROVISERS

Musical intensity

The other day, my friend and colleague, Gonzalo Biffarella, mentioned that, while listening to a recording of a trio concert in which we had both participated, he had made a surprising discovery. Since it was a multitrack recording, it was possible to listen to each instrument alone, and he had done just that to discover what each of us was doing at the most intense moments of our collective improvisation. To his surprise, while those moments of trio playing were clearly exceptional, none of us alone was doing anything particularly remarkable—it was only the combination of our three contributions that made them so powerful. Of course, Gonzalo Biffarella's comment reminded me of what David Borgo calls *emergent qualities.* Drawing on chaos and complexity theory, Borgo defines these as "collective properties that may 'spontaneously' develop in a collection of interacting components without being implicit in any way in the individual pieces" (Borgo 1996, 249).

This idea of a synergistic event or sequence of events that constitute a special moment is part of a significant exploration of group improvisation as a process of collective art-making in a context (Western civilization) where almost all art is created by single individuals, including most of what is actually presented on stage by a group. As such, it reflects a focus on both collectivity and process. However, it responds to only one part of a practice—collective improvisation—that raises considerably more questions than current theorizing can convincingly answer. Or perhaps we should say that numerous specialists are addressing numerous questions with numerous possible answers that do not appear to have been combined to form an all-embracing theory of collective improvisation as art making. Perhaps that is too ambitious (or even irrelevant) a goal, redolent as it is of 19th-century efforts to explain almost everything with less-than-wieldy theories based essentially on closed systems. At the very least, current efforts in this field are now almost fully

[13]Anyone wishing to more fully understand this distinction may want to watch Henri-Georges Clouzot's 1956 documentary film, *Le mystère Picasso,* in which we can actually observe that painter's creative process as he paints (and *repaints)* a series of pieces before the camera. How different this is than simply looking at one of his finished works in a museum, let alone as photos in a catalog.

aware of the difference between processes designed to generate an art object, and those in which the only object is the process itself, as is the case with most forms of improvisation.

Let us abandon this excursus for now and return to that idea of an emergent phenomenon “that is not implicit in any way in the individual pieces,” for example what Biffarella describes as an extraordinary moment of trio playing in which none of the three improvisers is doing anything extraordinary. While Borgo’s idea may convincingly explain this event by likening it to similar phenomena addressed by complexity theory, it may be less successful at clarifying other equally extraordinary moments in the same musical context. For example, what are we to make of moments in which one of the three improvisers *clearly is* doing something extraordinary? Is this simply an example of personal inspiration, or are that musician’s two colleagues playing something unexceptional when taken alone, but exceptionally appropriate as a supportive background, or even, metaphorically speaking, as a *frame* intended to bring out the content being generated at that moment by their inspired coworker?

Dynamic intensity

If we are properly to address, or at least formulate, questions about interaction among musicians here, we must draw a distinction between two coexistent but distinct aspects of the overall process: music and improvisation. This distinction becomes significant when drawn in the context of perception. Part of the craft that must be acquired to carry out any kind of skilled behavior includes a considerable amount of perceptual capacity *and* criteria needed to guide it. Moreover, part of this perceptual expertise is clearly an ability to see and evaluate both the process and the results of that craft. I would even suggest that such expertise involves not only seeing but actually being unable *not* to see such things. We sit in chairs, and the physical experience of doing so tells us whether the chair is comfortable. We may also cast a more aesthetic gaze at a chair—take, for example, Vassily Kandinsky’s *Barcelona chair,* which is both elegant and remarkably uncomfortable to sit in—but most of us are not particularly familiar with the skills needed to actually *make* a chair. I believe that, in the presence of a chair, a skilled furniture maker cannot help noticing, and probably judging, *how it is made.* So, too, at a concert in which s/he is not actually playing, an improvising musician will not only hear and possibly enjoy the music; they will also be perfectly, and sometimes uncomfortably, aware of *how it is being improvised.* That is, of the improvisation itself. And just as the *Barcelona chair* is formally elegant but functionally uncomfortable, improvisation can sometimes be fascinating as dynamic process without producing music of equal interest.

This distinction has been made abundantly clear to me on three occasions. The first was at a night of duo performances in London, where I had been invited to improvise with the organizer. Saxophonist and improviser John Butcher generously drove me to the gig, despite the fact that he was not actually playing. It turned out that the person I was to play with was then working exclusively with toys. This is of little or no import, as I was improvising with him as a fellow musician, not as an instrumentalist of one sort or another. Things became more complicated when we began playing and I discovered that his improvisatory approach could be expressed in a single sentence: “whatever sound you make with the bass clarinet, I’m going to show you that I have a toy capable of making the same sound.” So I found myself involuntarily trapped in a game of sonic and mimetic pingpong. I struggled to shape a response that could turn this situation into something at least minimally musical but, understandably, the experience left me uncertain as to how it might have sounded to others. I queried John about it on the way home, and his reply was enlightening: “it was certainly not the most interesting music of the evening, but it was by far the best improvisation.”

The second was a concert in Valparaiso, Chile, where I arrived expecting to play solo. Instead, I was asked to perform in duo with a local percussionist. When we began playing I immediately

realized he was not listening to me *at all.* None of my efforts to engage him, including those intended to foreground his work, were even noticed, let alone acknowledged by even the slightest adjustment of his determinedly autarchical sonic discourse. More striking was the fact that his personal sound world was in no way conflictive with mine. In other words, we were in substantial agreement about what sorts of sounds we could work with, but not at all about how we could go about doing so in a collective manner. Afterwards, an improvising flautist from Amsterdam who had been sitting in the audience said nothing about the musical results. Her only comment was about the improvisation: “wow, that was difficult. He doesn’t listen at all.”

The third, and perhaps the most interesting example, was a duo concert at a festival in northern France. One of the musicians was a founding member of the Berlin reductionist movement, the other, an almost purely intuitive musician from Australia. When they started to play, it became clear that both were excellent musicians, excellent instrumentalists and excellent improvisers. However, as the British would put it, they were as different as chalk and cheese. As the Australian began playing, the Berliner listened with intensely focused attention and then responded with a sonic vocabulary totally grounded in his reductionist approach. Those sounds were perfectly chosen and clearly reflected the German’s awareness of what his colleague was playing, but they constituted an entirely different sound world. The Australian struggled valiantly to find some sort of common ground but his collocutor was thoroughly unwilling to budge. So here were two intelligent, creative musicians who simply couldn’t find a shared language in which to converse. As music, it was truly disappointing; as improvisatory process, it was fascinating in its dynamics, especially as both were such extraordinary musicians and improvisers and both were listening so intensely.

While these three anecdotes illustrate the at times unequal coexistence of improvisatory process and musical discourse, they may not make it entirely clear how, or why, non-improvisers can sometimes be totally focused on the music but unaware of the underlying dynamics of the improvisation. Returning to our earlier example of the chair and how it is perceived by a furniture maker, we might add that, while a chair is a finished object whose process of construction is rarely if ever observed by those who sit in it, free improvisation is a process of creation that leaves no object. It does, however, produce music as it unfolds (hopefully, at least). It is therefore understandable that, despite the presence of the improvisatory process in the concert, non-improvising audience members will be more focused on the music and may well not even capture significant aspects of the improvisation itself. Specifically, non-improvising audience members—as well as non-improvisers who seek to theorize about how improvised music comes into being—may well think that the direction taken by the music is more determinate in the improvisational decisions being made than vice versa. And even when they are aware of the underlying dynamics of the improvisation, they may well misunderstand the degree to which—necessarily or by choice—the improvisers are at least as focused on the improvisation, that is, the process, as on the music it is producing.

The fecundity of conflict

For some free improvisers—I would be tempted to say many of the best—the fundamental focus is indeed on the practice of improvisation itself, the group dynamics involved in that process, rather than on specific aesthetic aspects of the music. And this motivation is sometimes misunderstood, misconstrued or simply overlooked by theorists—especially, but not only, when they are not themselves improvisers. Gary L. Hagberg, a philosopher and academic, as well as a competent jazz guitarist, has written cogently on the significance of collective intention in ensemble improvisation, drawing largely on the groundbreaking work of John Searle and Michael Bratman, but his understanding of this question, while undoubtedly useful for grasping certain types of shared improvisational dynamics, misses the considerable value that many improvisers place on deliberate

difficulty or, more specifically, their estimation of the possible fecundity of conflict. Hagberg quotes Bratman to the effect that

> the specific content of my shared intention, as it unfolds, will in part be determined by my linked intention that your intention also "be realized in the right way," as it contributes within a shared dialogue and exchange along the process of realizing our larger shared intention (Hagberg in Lewis 1916, n.p. Chapt. 27)

As we will see below, this idea that each participant shares a linked intention that his collocutors' intentions will also be realized "in the *right* way"[14] underestimates the importance of discovering *new* ways in contexts where "right" could too-easily be dictated by convention, memory of previous improvisations, or expectations based on either or both of these. According to Hagberg

> players often anticipate, with considerable sophistication, what another player will do, and this allows them to play in an "as-if" mode: they play as if the momentary passage were rehearsed, as if they had known in advance what they were going to do together. And in a special sense (a sense that further defines what the term happening means), they do know: the extent to which they know the idiom intimately, and more importantly the extent to which they know each other as players intimately, comes out in this kind of "as-if" performance; and one important measure of the success of the performance is taken in just these terms"..."We know these things of each other as a function of shared attention and all the interweaving of semantic and intentional content that such sharing makes possible. And we feel alone when just such shared improvisational interaction is frustrated (Hagberg in Lewis 1916, n.p. Ch. 27).

Before unpacking some of the implications of this quote, let us add another that may be of use here. Lydia Goehr, a British philosopher with a significant background in music but, to my knowledge, not an active improviser, draws a useful distinction between what she calls *impromptu* improvisation and *extempore* improvisation.

> When musicians make up music in performance, from this moment forward, their act falls under the familiar umbrella concept of what I'm calling improvisation *extempore*. The second, less familiar concept, I'm calling improvisation *impromptu*. The latter refers to what we do at singular moments—in the moment—when we're put on the spot, particularly when we're confronted with an unexpected difficulty or obstacle (Goehr in Lewis 1916, n.p. Chapt. 26).

It will not be necessary here to detail Goehr's entire understanding of this second form of improvisation, which for her includes levels of competitiveness that are institutionalized in jazz in the form of what she calls "cutting contests."[15] A sort of competition we find almost entirely absent in free improvisation. Nor do we need to go as far as she does in distinguishing *extempore*

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[14]My italics.

[15] Goehr's distinction between *extempore* improvisation and *impromptu* improvisation is certainly interesting and, as we will see, useful for our exegesis of certain practices in both individual and collective free improvisation. In the case of jazz, however, she seems to encounter *impromptu* improvisation only in the most competitive aspects of that music: the "cutting contest." And yet her own definition of it as "what we do at singular moments—in the moment —when we're put on the spot, particularly when we're confronted with an unexpected difficulty or obstacle," might more reasonably be associated with how jazz musicians go about straightening out mistakes of the sort described by jazz scholar Ingrid Monson in her analysis of accidental formal displacements in a performance of "Bass-ment Blues". This detailed analysis of both the "mistakes" and the manner in which band members adjusted matters to straighten them out and get everyone back "on the same page" reveals an enormously supportive and skillful employment of *impromptu* improvisation by those jazz musicians. Monson concludes that: "to the extent that performers take risks and push one another, they also risk making mistakes. The repair of these moments-— having the poise to take problems and make aesthetic virtues of them—is one of the most highly prized skills of an improviser" (Monson 1996, 176)

improvisation from *impromptu* improvisation in terms of “the differences between acting with humility or with hubris, with divine exhibition or with egoistic exhibitionism” (Goehr in Lewis 1916, n.p. Chapt. 26). In the context of our understanding of collective free improvisation, we hope to offer a different reading of where *impromptu* improvisation finds its place as a fundamental element in improvisatory dynamics.

“As if” versus “what if?”

As we saw above, Hagberg’s description of collective improvisation in a jazz context posits the idea of “playing in an ‘as if’ mode” which involves predicting what the other improvisers will do next on the basis of one’s intimate knowledge “of the idiom” and an equally intimate knowledge of “each other as players.” Not only does he consider this capacity to predict events and to base one’s playing on them; he even goes so far as to assert that “we feel alone when just such shared improvisational interaction is frustrated.”

For free improvisers, predictable playing, playing *as if* one knows what is going to happen next, is the most frustrating of all. Further on, we will consider how free improvisation approaches the two aspects Hagberg considers fundamental to such playing, asking whether free improvisation has the sort of “idiom” he associates with jazz, as well as the possible interest for free improvisers of having an intimate knowledge of “each other as players” rather than playing *ad hoc*. But first let us consider how *impromptu* improvisation can function there.

In the case of collective free improvisation, *impromptu* improvisation is clearly present on both individual and collective levels, but its use is less related to competitiveness than to an attitude shared with almost all experimental art that seeks to shuck off at least part of the weight of convention. Free improvisers are, of course, not entirely incapable of foreseeing where the music may be going, so they, too, can be considered from the standpoint of “as-if” dynamics, but how they respond to their possible predictions is another story. Some fifteen years ago, I saw a quintet of musicians performing in Madrid’s Cruce art space. Four of them were among the most interesting free improvisers from Mexico City, but the fifth was the outstanding Norwegian improvising percussionist, Ingar Zach. At a moment in the piece when his participation consisted of silent listening, Zach lifted a group of bells and other small objects and placed them on a towel stretched across the head of his floor tom. About 10 seconds later, however, he took them off, silently placing them back on the floor. At no time in that moment did he actually *play* them. Clearly, he had foreseen that the music was going to go in one direction, only to discover that it was headed somewhere else.

Wouldn’t that be an example of the predictive skills that Hagberg considers a lead-in to playing “as if?” The answer is “yes and no.” The difference lies not so much in being able to foresee what comes next, but rather in what one does about it. Any experienced free improviser has a large and ever-expanding compendium of sonic material and approaches to using them linked to a memory of previous occasions in which those resources proved ideal for the situation. That is precisely where we discover how they employ Goehr’s *extempore* and *impromptu* approaches to improvisation. As we shall see, this is actually a matter of improvisational *ethics.* If a free improviser senses that a particular musical situation is about to take place, s/he may draw on that personal repertoire of possible responses to generate results that will work both because they are musically compatible and because they are foreseeable. This “as-if” approach makes things easier for the other improvisers—and often more easy to follow for the audience—but it also makes the music more conventional, thus weakening the degree of surprise and the improvisation’s level of dynamism. Obviously, this is an example of rather tame *extempore* improvisation. Moreover, its smooth, conflict-free musical flow may also be read by some theorists as a clear, if less-than-brilliant, example of collective intention.

If, on the other hand, the improviser chooses *to challenge him or herself* by playing something they do not automatically consider compatible with what they think is going to happen next in the music, they will be truly in the moment, rather than working from memory. It is important here to point out that what they choose to play may perfectly well be a part of their familiar compendium of musical and sonic resources, but it will *not* be what they know from previous experience to be appropriate for the given situation. They may still be basing their decisions on an "as-if" approach but only as a point of departure. Their motivation could be better described by the question "what if?" What if I enter the situation with something whose consequences I cannot predict *at all?* Here we find the most interesting elements of Goehr's *impromptu* improvisation. Like the best of experimental artists in any field, the improviser is deliberately eschewing his or her own conventions to produce something almost guaranteed to intensify the improvisatory dynamics. And, as advertisements often put it, "results may vary." In fact, they will almost always vary.

Improvising in such a manner is often more difficult for everyone involved as they cannot simply act on the basis of their expectations, but it is also much more immediate. It is truly *here and now,* producing the kind of unforeseen events that require an *impromptu* approach and thus increase the dynamic immediacy of the interaction, that is, the sense of (re)acting *on the spot* that gives this kind of improvisation (and the music it often produces) a special sense of immediacy. It goes without saying that the capacity to predict and thus project an imagined "as-if" scenario will be considerably weakened if all, or even most, of the improvisers are challenging themselves and each other with a "what-if" agenda. Of course, there is no guarantee at all that the music it generates will be more coherent or understandable, much less, pleasant for the audience, but the improvisers "collective intention" may not be primarily to generate music with those characteristics. Perhaps they seek to engage in a stimulating and challenging improvisation whose dynamics demand and allow them to play with each other at the top of their abilities.

Still, surprising contributions that eschew ever-lurking conventions are not *invariably* difficult to handle. Let us consider the case of French saxophonist and improviser Michel Doneda. One of the most striking aspects of his playing is his ability to generate unexpected responses that are somehow perfectly apposite yet equally unexpected. Particularly telling, in that sense, is how he applies those skills when playing with younger and less experienced improvisers. Rather than struggling to keep up, they find themselves in a context—largely crafted by Doneda—in which they have never sounded better. The ability to achieve this without resort to common-denominator conventions is a sign of mastery. The *choice* to do so in support of younger musicians is reflective of the ethics one hopes to find in a master.

Familiarity and trust

As we have seen, Hagberg emphasizes "the extent to which they [improvisers] know each other as players intimately" as a determinant factor in the capacity to predict what will happen next, which he considers fundamental to the likelihood of a collective improvisation reaching the level of engagement he calls "happening." If, in the case of free improvisation, we posit a "what-if" approach to the predictive experience, what role will improvisers' intimate knowledge of their colleagues play in the improvisatory dynamics? One answer emerges when we compare the dynamics of an established group to those of an ad hoc encounter with improvisers whom we do not know to the same degree, or possibly at all. Indeed, we may never even have met the improvisers before we take the stage to improvise with them before an audience.

Such ad hoc encounters are a staple at many improvisation festivals and a way of taking advantage of the presence of musicians who are already at the festival to play with their respective groups. Unexpected combinations determined on the spot, usually by the festival organizer(s) can

sometimes lead to truly surprising music, truly surprising improvisation, or both. Whether "surprising" equals "outstanding" is part of the challenge. As I wrote above, "results may vary." These encounters are often viewed by the audience as somehow epitomic of the "risk" involved in free improvisation—an approach that would liken its practitioners to trapeze artists. The idea that they are somehow going to brilliantly overcome the obstacles supposedly associated with improvising with someone they do not even know in the presence of an interested and often quite knowledgeable audience would seem to fit perfectly with Lydia Goehr's description of *impromptu* improvisation.

All too often, the opposite is true. In such a situation, musicians who barely know each other can be tempted to find a middle ground based on the shared conventions of free improvisation, a sort of lowest common denominator in which neither brings to the table their most individual and personal manner of improvising. It may have been his desire to avoid resorting to such a practically anonymous middle ground that led French improvising percussionist Lê Quan Ninh to declare: "I don't want to play improvised music, *I want to improvise."* Of course there are occasions when each of the musicians does indeed play in their most personal way, and on some of those a truly fecund middle ground may well emerge.

Nonetheless, in collective free improvisation, the true sense of risk lies elsewhere. It is usually found in groups whose members improvise together on a relatively regular basis. Where, you might ask, is the risk in playing with people you know very well, at least on a musical/improvisatory basis? If you share with them the intimate knowledge that would allow you to predict the next musical moment and play "as-if", what risk can there really be? The answer, in free improvisation, lies neither in predictable musical content nor in a foreseeable improvisatory dynamic, but instead, in trust. If the improvisers are at the top of their game, if they share a "what-if" ethos, a commitment to *not* operating on the basis of routine, their colleagues may well have neither the capacity *nor the need* to predict their next move. That familiarity will, however, provide them with something deeper: the confident belief that, whatever they do next will turn out to be appropriate. In other words, playing with musicians who are truly partners allows them to assume far greater risks, opting not for what they know will work, but instead for combinations they have never tried before, simply because they are confident that their colleagues will respond with something not only new and unforeseen but surprisingly *right* for the situation.[16]

Of course that *rightness* should not be conflated with stability or resolution, it may well be the opposite. Rather than viewing the unfolding sonic discourse from a purely musical perspective—especially in well-worn but hardly obsolete terms of tension and resolution—it might better be approached from the perspective of improvisatory dynamics, in which a particular gesture may not be received with reactions that stabilize that discourse, but rather with those that *tip it in another direction,* thus pushing things forward in a manner that insures, not resolution, but rather a sort of ongoing non-resolution not unlike the rhythmic push we associate with the Baroque, or Wagner's famed delayed resolution of dominant to tonic in *Tristan.* This emphasis on improvisatory dynamics might also be viewed in the context of the frequent recourse to the idea of conversation as a useful metaphor for interaction in collective improvisation. While the dynamics of verbal conversation conversation are far too complex to be discussed here, we might fruitfully observe that some of

[16] I am often asked what exactly free improvisers do at their rehearsals. If they have no score, no fixed form, melody or harmonic framework, what are they working on? The answer is: "they are building trust." Here, again, the similarities between jazz improvisation and free improvisation may meaningfully outweigh their considerable differences. While it is true that most jazz relies on structures and instrumental/musical roles largely absent in free improvisation, trust is equally present and necessary in both of these forms of improvisation. As Ingrid Monson put it, "While much literature about jazz has emphasized the competitive or cutting quality of the relationships between jazz musicians, it is also important to remember that solidarity and emotional bonds with other musicians are emphasized when players talk about what they love best about performing, what they love most about being a part of a musical community" (Monson, 1996, 177).

them include the expectation of what might vaguely be defined as “politeness,” a body of social rules that varies considerably from one culture to another. In this context, there might be some interest in contrasting sociologist Georg Simmel’s ideas about using language to create sociability with free improvisers’ conception of improvisatory dynamics. Here, however, a brief excerpt from Kjell Gunnar Nordeson’s interview of German free improviser Andrea Neumann will suffice.

> Nordeson: Can you describe how you experience the social interaction in music, with fellow musicians or with the audience in terms of politeness, tone of voice, cutting someone off, listening, speaking up, being emotional etc.
>
> Neumann: I really like combinations with musicians where you can be impolite. There can be agreements so that cutting someone off, or somebody's getting louder than you, is done with a feeling that this person does it with the awareness that he or she will get quieter again. And that it's just an idea for a moment which makes me not having to play louder too. Instead I can stay quiet because I know this person will stop at one point. I feel that with certain musicians that you have known for a long time, and with whom you have a common base, you can be very impolite, but it's very interesting for the music (Nordeson 2018, 128/140).

Lastly, we should add two qualifying observations. First, this description of “what-if” improvisation is intended as a hopefully useful exegesis of successful and challenging free improvisation, not as the verbal equivalent of Chinese socialist realism paintings in which rosy-cheeked and heroic farmers mounted on enormous heroic tractors plow their heroic fields as the sun rises on the heroic horizon. There is some truly outstanding free improvisation and at least some of it may be understood in terms of what I have described here, but a great deal more will be much less ideal; there is most certainly plenty of routine and not especially daring free improvisation, and that is what it shares with almost all other forms of art making.

Second, this description of “what-if” playing should not be understood as a matter of criteria for decision-making. As improvising pianist and composer Fredric Rzewski put it, “we must trust the unconscious. When we act, we momentarily free ourselves from reflection. We simply act” (Rzewski 2006 in Schroeder et al, 2019, 441). Music moves very quickly—certainly much faster than almost all of what we could call “though-out decision making.” What we are referring to is less a matter of decisions than of attitudes and feelings. Trusting one’s self and the musicians with which one has embarked upon an improvisation will help generate the confidence that allows one, not to choose risk but rather, and more directly, to risk—to flow in and through the music with the sense of freedom that allows each to be themself and to challenge themself. In other words, not only is being oneself the only true originality; selfhood itself is in a state of constant change that perfectly reflects its performative nature. As Oscar Wilde put it: “be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”

Personal style and musical idiom

As we know, most forms of artistic creation in Western society are individual. At the very least, they are viewed as individual, although Howard S. Becker has very correctly observed that “Art works can be conceived as the product of the cooperative activity of many people” (Becker 1974, 767) According to Becker, “some of these people are customarily defined as artists, others as support personnel.” The latter may include the highly skilled craftspeople who prepare and “pull” engravings, the welders who assemble pieces such as Alexander Calder’s *stabiles,* or foundry workers who cast bronze or aluminum sculptures from wax or plaster models provided by sculptors. Becker adds that “the artist’s dependence on support personnel constrains the range of artistic possibilities available to him.” And this is equally true in the case of a second category of personnel

that, while equally determinant in certain aspects of an artist's work, do not play a role that could easily be defined as "support," except in an economic sense. From the Middle Ages onward, cathedral chapters or councils, or even wealthy patrons seeking to commission a painter to depict this or that saint, Bible story or miracle often specified numerous aspects of both the materials and the images with which they expected the artist to work, not to mention questions of decorum possibly unspecified in the chapter's contract but clearly imposed by reigning conventions).[17]

In the case of an art object such as a painting, the possible involvement of "support personnel" and/or one or more patrons/clients in its genesis may well render erroneous any consideration of the finished work as exclusively representative of the artist's personal style, or at the very least, of his or her preferences. Still, the concept of a single creator has engendered a lasting and not entirely misguided idea that their work will be characterized by a certain consistency that makes consecutive pieces identifiably *theirs*, notwithstanding Jean Cocteau's insistence that "one must have style, but not *a* style" (Philippe 2013, 202)

The interaction of this narrative of personal style and its constraints with Derek Bailey's concept of "idiom" in the context of musical improvisation requires at least some reflection if we are to avoid the possibly fruitless if well-rehearsed debate about whether free improvisation is idiomatic or not. From the perspective of 2024, rather than 1975/6, when Derek Bailey wrote *Improvisation: its nature and practice in music,*[18] we might skirt this minefield by observing that Free Improvisation (with capitals) is now old enough to have had several different idioms. Without even leaving Berlin, we can easily identify and distinguish the sort of rowdy and energetic playing associated with Free Music Productions from the posterior Berlin Reductionism, and neither of these could be mistaken for the playing championed, in its day, by the British trio of Phil Durrant, John Butcher and the late John Russell, which the French used to call "feu de bois" because if its sonic resemblance to a crackling wood fire. The list goes on, but what matters here is that these are not simply personal styles, they are *ways of playing together.*

The Improvising Polyglot

Professional free improvisers share the ineluctable need to travel. Statistically, if one plays music that interests, at the very most, about half of one percent of the population, one will need a very large population base to make it economically viable. This can only be achieved by summing the populations of innumerable cities, that is, by traveling from one to another and performing in each. Unless one lives in one of the very few countries that actively supports its improvising musicians, traveling with an established trio or quartet can often be economically impossible in terms of lodgings, fees, transportation costs and food. It is much easier to travel alone, playing solo, or in ad hoc duos, trios or quartets with local musicians. Staying put often involves just as many ad hoc encounters, as free improvisers from other places will be passing through on their own tours and eager to play. It is conceivable, though highly unlikely, that an individual free improviser might eschew the opportunity to play with another on the basis of their respective musical idioms, so competent professional free improvisers tend to develop (and they continue to do so over time) a repertoire of resources—both sonic and dynamic[19]—that allow them to engage in meaningful and interesting improvisation with musicians whose personal idiom may be quite different for theirs. Improvising saxophonist John Butcher describes how he had to adjust his language to respond meaningfully in two consecutive concerts.

[17] A fine example is Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* (ca. 1601-1606), which was rejected by the fathers of *Santa Maria della Scala* in Rome because of the artist's temerity at depicting the Virgin Mary with dirty feet.
[18] First published in 1980.
[19] Here, by dynamic resources, we mean the variety of ways in which improvisers can approach interacting with their collocutors.

> The last time my soprano saxophone was overhauled, the new pads had been given a special coating intended to keep moisture out of the leather. The instrument has been awkward to play ever since. Half way through a sweaty concert the pads start sticking to the tone holes, and I'm forever having to clean them. It will soon be taken back to the workshop. But last February I played a concert in a quartet that included no-input mixing desk expert Toshimaru Nakamura. The music was extremely quiet, and after a while I stopped blowing into the instrument and worked instead with the sound of the pads as they audibly unstuck and then leapt open under the spring action. This sonic material seemed to interact satisfyingly with the other musicians' input, and had a surprising vitality. The previous week I'd played in the same venue, Cafe Oto in Dalston [London], with Matthew Shipp, the American jazz (in the broadest sense) pianist. Sticky pad sounds would have been a ridiculous contribution. Equally, most of what I found myself playing in this duo would have sounded nonsensical in the Nakamura quartet (Butcher 2011, 2)

About his choice of materials, Butcher observes in the same text that "I decided upon what, at first glance, might seem to be quite different approaches," and yet, "I think anyone who follows this scene would have recognised that I was the saxophonist in both concerts." Clearly, this implies a definition of identifiable personal style that is considerably broader than one may find in other artistic practices but is shared by "anyone who follows this scene." Finally, he refers to the need for "continually addressing the question of how to keep your own musical personality without bringing too fixed an agenda to each performance. How to get the right balance between playing what you know and what you don't yet know."

One way to understand this idea is to accept that, in the context of free improvisation, personal style may depend less on one's choice of sonic material than on how one interacts with the other musician(s).[20] In other words, a competent (and John Butcher is far more than competent) free improviser will be choosing his sonic material *in order* to facilitate a personal sense of dynamic interaction that may well have varied much less than the sounds employed on each occasion to articulate it. So, to someone "who follows the scene", personal style will be identified in terms, not of what a musician plays, but rather of *how* they play, especially with others, even when the sounds are almost diametrically opposed on consecutive occasions. We might add that, if we consider Butcher's reference to "playing what you know and what you don't yet know" from the perspective of this proposed relation between sound material and improvisational dynamics, we may conclude that a "what-if" approach based on "what you don't yet know" suggests developing new sonic material as a vehicle for an already familiar sense of improvisational dynamics. And, of course, it includes the idea that one subsequently brings the new material into one's repertoire of sonic resources. We might hazard to suggest that a similar process can involve learning new dynamic approaches. Clearly, Butcher's reaction to his concert with Toshimaru Nakamura, his on-the-spot recourse to building an entire discourse on the basis of sounds he had never used that way before (the sticky pads) is an excellent example of *impromptu* improvisation, though totally free of the competitive content that Goehr associates with "cutting contests" in jazz.

And, of course, if we are to combine Butcher's idea of playing "what you don't yet know" with Judith Butler's idea of performativity, we may conclude that, while he is probably correct in

[20] When we posit that "this implies a definition of identifiable personal style that is considerably broader than one may find in other artistic practices" we would invite those knowledgeable of jazz to ask themselves whether they can imagine someone as immediately identifiable as, say, Clifford Brown, being able to play a solo in which he entirely avoids *all* of his customary sounds. And if they consider him capable of somehow doing so, whether they would be able to recognize him as Clifford Brown? The closest I have ever heard to this is a solo on Charlie Mingus's album, *Pre-Bird*, in which Eric Dolphy plays an alto saxophone solo that sounds exactly like Johnny Hodges. In this case, Dolphy is perfectly capable of eschewing his own musical language and convincingly taking on another. It is far from clear, however, that almost any listener would be able to identify him as the musician responsible for that solo.

assuming that he will be recognizable to informed listeners on both occasions, it is not as simple as concluding that this is because he is exactly the same person. His contact with what he didn't yet know will clearly change him in ways that may well be significant in subsequent improvisatory situations. Although Butler initially focuses performativity largely on gender, it is certainly applicable to other aspects of personal identity. As she puts it in chapter 1 of *Gender Trouble:* "Gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (Butler 1990, 25). In other words, Butcher is not an improviser with a fixed and pre-existing identity; he is constituting his musical identity performatively each time he plays.

IV. INTERACTION WITH THE ACOUSTIC CONTEXT

How sound sounds

If we had to identify the single phrase most often employed in efforts to explain free improvisation it would unquestionably be "here and now," a convenient way of identifying two aspects of what is, at least for Albert Einstein, a single reality. For less gifted humans, space and time may seem less united, but even for us, they overlap in ways that merit attention in the context of free improvisation.

All musicians are aware of how sound behaves in each performance space, but to a degree, most will distinguish between how *their* sounds behave, and how all other sounds interact with what they are playing.[21] In the case of the former, a combination of resonance and coloration, musicians performing compositions will have to adjust their tempi and articulation according to a venue's resonance. If it is quite short, they will probably slightly shorten their silences and elongate their articulation, and even some note values, in order to link consecutive sounds. In the case of what they would consider "a favorable acoustic," this blending will be carried out by the resonance itself. And where the resonance is overly long, they may actually slow the tempi so that details are more easily grasped, as Toscanini famously did when directing the *Presto* of Beethoven's Third Symphony at Carnegie Hall.[22]

Free improvisers, however, can actually adjust their entire musical discourse. Not having to perform a predetermined, pre-rehearsed and pre-announced repertoire, they can effectively play whatever they consider appropriate for the acoustic situation. In the case of extreme acoustics, they may choose to go beyond mere adaptation and actually *play the room*, generating sounds that bring out those specific qualities in one way or another.[23] Argentinian improviser and composer Gonzalo Biffarella recently mentioned how often free improvisers in Latin America find their options

[21] For a more complete consideration of how extraneous sounds can interfere in performances of composed music, see: Matthews, Wade (1999), "Intimidad y límite: reflexiones sobre el perro de stockhausen" in *La Balsa de la Medusa* nº 49. Available in English at: https://www.wadematthews.info/_files/ugd/801a0d_50b41159ca40479fafda7c2faba178f9.pdf and in Spanish at: https://www.wadematthews.info/_files/ugd/801a0d_84ef950925e6480f9900ec8814b1ab31.pdf

[22] A New York Times critic accused the famous conductor of taking that *Presto* too fast, which led to a fit of laughter on his part when mentioned to him in a subsequent interview. His response: "Of all the conductors I know, I am the one who presents it at the *slowest* tempo at Carnegie. That hall is so resonant that, if you conduct it too fast, it becomes a blur. When you take it a little slower, all the details become audible and it sounds very fast indeed."

[23] Years ago, I organized a solo concert for John Butcher at a venue in Madrid whose acoustics were relatively dry, except for a passageway to the left that led back about 15 meters to a resonant stairwell. Some weeks after the concert, Butcher wrote me to request the recording of one piece from that concert for a new CD of solo improvisation. When he took the stage at Cruce (an artists' collective which has since moved to a different venue) he immediately noticed that distant resonance and its contrast with the comparatively dry stage and audience space, and improvised a sort of dialog with his own sound which, as he put it, was different than anything else he had played on that solo tour. This is far more than simply adjusting one's tempo or articulation.

reduced to spaces almost entirely bereft of even the minimum amenities one would hope to associate with a serious performance of complex and challenging art music. One might therefore hazard a question about whether constant performance in adverse acoustical conditions might actually lead to the development of a particular approach to playing[24]—alongside Berlin Reductionism and British *Feu de Bois*, should we now add *Aguante Argentino* to our list of improvisatory idioms?

Site-specific improvisation

Continuing with our brief deconstruction of “here and now”, we can posit a preliminary definition of the term *site-specific improvisation* as awareness of, and interaction with, the sonic content and characteristics of our surroundings beyond what is being proposed by our fellow improvisers. As a first step, let us return for a moment to Hagberg’s *as-if* hypothesis. Specifically, we must here question the role of legible intentionality in the sort of prediction he associates with playing “as if the momentary passage were rehearsed, as if they [the improvisers] had known in advance what they were going to do together.” While it is probably fair and perhaps even necessary to state that, given the complexity of interacting spontaneously to make music, no improviser can always do what they *intend* to do, it would not be totally unwarranted to state that predicting what they have not yet done, and then acting on that prediction *as they actually do it* (or don’t…), might better be understood as a reading and or prediction of what they *intend* to do, rather than of what they will almost certainly do.

Here, let us clarify the importance of this carefully drawn distinction: if our capacity to predict a future sonic event depends on our ability to intuit, read, interpret or attribute specific intentions to makers of certain as-yet inexistent sounds, we will have no way *at all* to predict musically unintentional sounds. The sound of a beeping car horn that enters a venue from the street outside, shouting children, birdsong or, as occurs in Cruce, (where I have been organizing concerts in Madrid for 29 years), the amazing conglomeration of rhythmic and often pitched noises produced by people throwing bottles into the glass-recycling bin just outside, are all intentional, but not *musically* intentional—none of them reflect an intention to interact in any way with the musicians improvising inside the venue. In other words, none of them is predictable on the basis of musical or improvisational intentionality let alone through an intimate familiarity with the person producing them—who knows if or when a driver is going to sound their horn or a child is going to shout? Do we even know who is throwing away the bottles, driving the car, shouting? Are we intimately involved with specific birds or a visiting tourist whose carry-on trolly clicks and clacks with wonderful rhythms as it rolls down the sidewalk in front of the venue?

How, then, are we to interact with such sounds? The answer is not a matter of prediction, but rather of opportunity. Instead of predictive listening, site-specific interaction requires *opportunistic* listening. How do those falling and sometimes breaking bottles sound? How do they change the music? What *opportunity* do they offer the improviser if s/he wishes to incorporate them into the ongoing sonic discourse? In that sense, musical or improvisatory intentionality is displaced from the source of the sound to the improviser who chooses to include those sounds in the music. Moreover, they choose to do so *once the sounds are actually occurring*, not before.

Environment and placement

This displacement of intentionality with regard to environmental sounds brought into the music is, in fact, only half of the improvisatory dynamic involved with site specific improvisation. Succinctly put, displacement also involves placement. How do improvisers understand the environment itself, and how, or where, do they place themselves in it? An ethical response to this question must begin

[24] In fact, that has actually been suggested with regard to the Japanese *Onkyo* school of improvising.

with recognition of a possibly unspoken misunderstanding of our very concept of Nature. The word "environment" comes from the French verb *environner,* which means to surround. It does not, however, imply any necessary sense of belonging. So perhaps our opening question must be: do we belong in our surroundings? In other words, is Nature simply what happens *around* us, or are we actually part of it? If we are able to grasp that we are ineluctably linked to our natural surroundings, where do we place ourselves with regard to them when making music? Can we presume to be a part of Nature, all the while playing music in a manner that entirely fails to take it into account? If we do, what message are we sending?[25]

This question of placement and its possible ramifications may most easily be explained with a personal anecdote. At the very beginning of the 21st century, I took part in three consecutive editions of the annual *Rencontres de Musique et quotidien sonore* (Meetings of Music and Everyday Sound) organized by the *Group de Musique Éléctroacoustic d'Albi-Tarn,* the electroacoustic music studio in Albi, France. On one of those occasions, when I was still playing bass clarinet and alto flute, I was asked to give a solo concert of freely improvised music in the cloisters of the Church of St. Salvi, an outdoor space whose surrounding arches provided the resonance often lacking in such settings. As I was unfamiliar with its characteristics, I decided to go there two hours before the beginning of the concert and sit silently on one of the stone benches under the arches. I was acutely aware that I would not be playing in a deliberately neutral space of the sort associated with concert halls that have been soundproofed to protect them from external "noise." This cloister had its own sonic ecosystem in which I would have to somehow enter if I was to avoid simply playing *over* it. Its sounds were abundant but all quite soft by musical standards; there were almost no urban sounds (vehicles, sirens, construction, etc.), but there were bees who had built a hive in a part of the church wall, birds of several species and the occasional distant human voice. The situation was actually quite similar, though on a much more intimate scale, to one described by saxophonist Henry Threadgill in an interview with Alexandre Pierrepont.

> Before the concert in the amphitheatre [outdoors], during the sound check, I understood that the wind was at home here, that we would have to play with it, make it a partner, the sixth member of the group—and not an adversary of the music. … This night, the wind sat in with us on the stage and when it made itself known, we made a place for it in the orchestra. (Threadgill quoted by Pierrepont in Lewis 1916, n.p. Chapt. 10).

The possible difference between Threadgill's experience and mine was its inverse approach. I was seeking to place myself and my sounds into a preexisting sonic ecosystem, while Threadgill, having noticed a particular sonic aspect of such an ecosystem (the wind) was seeking to make a place for *it* in the context of his music. An approach closer to my own may well be that stated by George Lewis in a 2005 interview: "I made this task of interpreting the world around me, trying to be minimally invasive. I want to harmonize with the world as I find it in music" (Lewis quoted by Pierrepont in Lewis 1916, n.p. Chapt. 10)

At the cloister of St. Salvi I decided to place myself in a relationship with the preexisting sonic ecosystem that would allow me to adopt different roles, that is, to establish different sonic planes. At times, I assumed a clear presence in the foreground, moving around the open space and enjoying how my sound bounced off the church wall and resonated differently under the arches that lined the other three sides of the cloister. At others, I deliberately adopted a background role, accompanying and foregrounding the sounds that were already there before I arrived and would continue to be there long after I left. In one such case, with the bass clarinet held at a distance from my mouth, I

[25] Interviewed in 1967 by Bruce Glaser, painter Lee Krasner mentions having taken her partner, Jackson Pollock, to meet her teacher, Hans Hofmann. According to Krasner, after seeing his paintings, Hofmann warned Pollock that his inspiration would eventually dry up if he did not "paint from nature." Pollock's reply was eloquent: "I don't paint from nature; I *am* nature." (Krasner in Varnedoe 1999, 28)

began blowing gently over the tip of the reed, generating very soft whistling sounds. And finally, I also explored playing sounds that could not possibly be heard from a distance, becoming audible to some audience members and then others as I wandered around the grassy space on which they sat, lay, reclined or stood.

The concert was very well received, and after it ended, several audience members came to share their emotions, all in surprisingly soft tones. One said that I had even made the clouds sing, another confessed that my playing had brought him to tears. But what a third person said led me to discover that I had also been playing another role in at least some parts of the concert: I had actually been *guiding* the audience's listening. Most of my playing during that concert had been in the range nominally associated with the bass clarinet, but when I began producing the gentle whistling tones, I entered a much higher area of frequencies: a domain already occupied, at St. Salvi, by the birds. What the third audience member said was: "when you began playing those high whistle tones, it was amazing how the birds reacted. They began to sing and sing. In fact, they had been singing throughout the concert, but in a range so much higher than where I was playing that they had gone virtually unnoticed. When *I* began playing in that register, I carried the audience with me. Thus, they suddenly became aware of the birdsong and erroneously thought it was a response to my whistles, something two different ornithologists later assured me was not the case.

When an improviser begins to develop the expanded listening needed to improvise in a manner attuned to their surroundings, they cannot automatically expect their audience to bring the same skills to their part of the event. But when the improviser begins to *foreground* some of those sounds, they can, in fact, pull the audience's listening into that awareness, generating what we might call a three-way interaction among the improviser, the sonic ecosystem and the audience. If, in other words, the improviser has been conscious and conscientious about their placement, the results should be an awareness of all three as active parts and participants in that ecosystem.

V. INTERACTION WITH THE AUDIENCE

Starting in silence, starting with silence

A free improviser's interaction with the audience does not begin with his or her first sound. The latter's expectant silence is a very real presence at the beginning of the concert and, unlike the silence at the end of an improvisation, it belongs to them, and not to the improviser. While the weight of this silence may not always make an improviser uncomfortable, it does imbue the first sound they make with an importance that encompasses not only its rhetorical status as the opening utterance of a discourse, but also its determinant position in a process whose form is almost inevitably organic.[26] The fact that free improvisers are not working with predetermined structures of the sort present in many other forms of improvised music (jazz and flamenco, among others) does not mean their improvisations are formless. Instead, it suggests the presence of organic form. In other words, rather than improvising material coherent with a fixed form (a blues, a standard, a *soleá* or *alegrías*), the musicians are engaging in a process whose form reflects their development of the content. And here, by content, we mean not only the sonic ideation but also, and more importantly, the improvisatory dynamics. That is, the content *of the process.*

This endows the improviser's first sound, or more precisely, their *first act*, with an importance that cannot possibly go unnoticed by the audience. It is there that we can locate a certain transfer of

[26] This is just one of the aspects of a concert of free improvisation that is poorly transmitted by a sound recording or video of the event. One very rarely sees a video of such a concert that includes more than a few seconds of that initial expectant silence. Normally, it has been cut off in the editing so that the musicians begin playing just seconds after the video begins. This, of course, captures the concert's initial sound, but not the forces at work therein and how they affect the improvisation.

power in the interaction between audience and performer. The dynamics of this transfer are perfectly exemplified by how Mexican improvising pianist Ana Ruiz began performances with her group, Atrás del Cosmos, in the 1970s. Rather than starting with a sound, the group would begin with a silence. Of course it was *their* silence, the first thing they were actually *playing* after the expectant silence directed at them by the audience. From then on, *they* were in charge. Not only did the silence no longer belong to the audience; the first *sound* played by the musicians was no longer the first event but rather something occurring in an improvisatory process that had already begun with their initial silence.

Another approach to this situation involves blurring the beginning of a concert, that is, making it impossible to determine what the first sound or act might have been. The *Domus Artis* performance space in Buenos Aires consists of a round stage surrounded on all sides by concentric and rising rings of seats. About 20 years ago, in a concert there with several local musicians, I was invited to open with a solo. That same day, percussionist Diego Chamy and I had been discussing the first-note phenomenon, so just before the concert, I asked my host at the venue to tell me before she opened the doors for the audience. When she so informed me, I began walking slowly around the circular stage, playing extremely quiet sounds on the bass clarinet. As I was doing so, the audience filed in, chatting, shedding jackets and sweaters, placing backpacks on adjoining seats and generally preparing themselves for a concert that they only gradually realized was already underway. Since some were more distracted than others, my "first sound" was whatever each individual listener first noticed. There was no expectant silence, only a brief period that spanned the moments when different audience members actually began to listen.

A circle of chairs, a loop of energy

Of course this view of the audience's expectant silence, its effect on the improvisers and how they chose to explore it as part of the improvisation, stems from a reading of improviser-audience interaction as essentially binary, an "us and them" approach that is sometimes the case but neither exclusively nor ideally so. A different reading can be drawn from looking at how musicians organize themselves on stage, how and where audience members choose to sit, and what sort of venues improvisers prefer. First, however, we should probably point out that this music is about intimacy. There is almost certainly something intimate in the very act of creating, just as there is in sharing, so shared creation is almost unavoidably intimate, and few improvisers indeed would ever seek to avoid it.

As a general rule, they sit in a circle at rehearsals or "closed" sessions (that is, with no audience). That way, they can all see and hear each other with precision. When they go out on stage, this becomes a half-circle, open to the audience who is invited to complete it. And of course, they are not just completing the circle in the physical placement of their chairs; they are being drawn into the space of intimacy established by both the musicians and by how the audience listens, hears and responds to them. Consider how, in a conversation, after one verbally expresses an emotion, their interlocutor may respond "I hear you." Clearly, "hear" signifies much more than just the physical reception of their sounds. In the context of shared musical improvisation, Ingrid Monson has quite appropriately proposed "the notion that music is a powerful activity that can produce a 'community of sentiment' binding performers and audiences into something larger than the individual" (Monson 1996, 178). Once again, a binary reading of this statement might erroneously lead us to the idea that the musicians are somehow transmitting emotions that are then received by audience members. In fact, we might instead argue that what she calls "sentiment" is not the result of the musicians somehow transmitting emotions to the audience which then receives them *as is*. At the very least, we need the capacity to distinguish between feeling sadness when we listen to what a musician is playing, and concluding that that musician is him or herself sad, whether or not we feel sadness ourselves. Let us abandon that binary model of direct emotional transmission and propose instead

that Monson's "community of sentiment" is, in fact, a "sentiment of community," that performers and audiences are bound "into something larger than the individual" by a sharing that produces such a sentiment largely due *to its intimacy.*

This is where a knowledgeable audience becomes truly important. Knowing you are being listened to with interest is a fundamental catalyst for an improviser, and knowing that you are not *only* being listened to, but also *heard* in the sense mentioned above, is the beginning of true magic. An audience capable of following, not only the music, but the nuances of the improvisation as a process—the dialog among the improvisers, the moments of doubt, of pushing or feeling pulled, of sharing a soaring, unfettered discourse where it seems impossible that anyone could play anything less than perfect—none of this can happen without the intimacy of trust. None of this can happen without trusting the intimacy.

What underlies this experience is acceptance, and this very capacity by all involved parties—both improvisers and audience—to suspend judgement establishes a loop of energy whose circulation among them is practically mirrored the circular arrangement of their chairs. Just how much the audience *chooses* this level of intimacy became clear to me one night when I was setting up the chairs for a concert at the Cruce art space in Madrid. I had walked there from my house, and as I crossed the park, my mind was filled with thoughts about what the word "free" might signify in the context of "free improvisation." So, as I set out the chairs, it suddenly seemed strange to me that the musicians could play with such free and untrammeled abandon while the audience sat in front of them in uniform rows of chairs. Shouldn't they have the freedom to sit wherever and however they wanted? As the idea entered my head, I decided to toss the chairs out into the space, letting them land wherever they fell, some open, others halfway folded and facing in all directions. As the audience began arriving, they each chose a chair and went about placing them in orderly rows to complement the half circle of musician's chairs in front of them. The final result was almost exactly how I would have set them up had I not decided to carry out the experiment. If anything, the arrangement was slightly better ordered!

How are we to interpret this decision? Clearly, the audience members want to see and hear the concert, but that is already implicit in their decision to come to the venue. Arranging the chairs in a totally conventional manner suggests that they also want to *engage in the social ritual* of attending a concert. Just as they expect the musicians to fulfill their expectations, and not only the sonic ones, so too, they *want* to comply with the norms that facilitate that ritual for all involved parties. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this behavior is that it is not limited to concerts of freely improvised music. The fact that there is no substantial difference between the seating arrangement freely chosen by that audience for a concert of free improvisation and one permanently installed in a conventional hall for a concert of anything from a string quartet to a singer-songwriter, invites us to view improvised music not as exceptional, but rather as part and parcel of its sociocultural context, at least from the standpoint of how its audience chooses to structure their interaction with what is occurring "on stage."

The almighty stage

Of course, we should not overlook the fact that this narrative begins with the idea of setting up chairs. One does not set up chairs in a theater, where they are almost always fixed and oriented towards a stage. And here we must return to the question of shared intimacy. As a practice, free improvisation has never been for large audiences. Based, as it is, on *access*, on the capacity of everyone involved to capture small and sometimes tiny nuances of both sound and human behavior, it fares poorly in venues whose spatial organization emphasizes hierarchy through its use of distances or barriers. For the same reasons, it is considerably distorted when mediated. Rows of fixed seating with a raised, Italian-style stage at the front may make the musicians more visible to

audience members, but it also distances them, generating a physical separation, often reinforced by lighting, that emphasizes a much more frontal relation in which the musicians are supposed to radiate their music out towards a passive audience that observes them from their position in the darkness below. Often, the musicians can barely see them from their blindingly lit position on stage. Much the same occurs in black-box theaters, where the musicians are arranged on the floor and the audience sits on bleachers that rise from floor level almost to the ceiling, with only the control booth (for lighting and sound amplification) behind them. This produces the same difference in level as an Italian-style theater, but in reverse. While very interesting for dance, as it permits audience members to clearly see both movement *and* displacement, it is less successful when proximity is a determining factor. Finally, in larger spaces, it may seem necessary to amplify the musicians—this is the "mediation" I referred to above. The results may be more or less musical, depending on innumerable factors such as the quality of the equipment, the skill and sensitivity of the person controlling the mixing board, the placement of the speakers with regard to the audience, etc., but even in the best of cases, this mediation transforms almost all aspects of the concert experience, and thus of the relations established (or not) between audience and improvisers. Some amplified concerts will be magnificent, others, less so, but they will *all* be different than a purely acoustic one.[27]

Often, this is a moot point, as the size of both audiences and budgets for improvised music events frequently leads to performances in more informal settings, including galleries and other visual art spaces, community centers, the back rooms of pubs, and even living rooms in private homes. All of these spaces where comparatively small size and a flat performance area in front of folding chairs that place the audience on the same level and in close proximity to the improvisers, are conducive to the sort of intimacy that can make this music, and the improvising process itself, a truly intimate and fulfilling experience. And almost all of them will be preferable to a space where patrons sit at a bar, drinking, chatting and often paying scant heed to the strange collection of people scraping things, banging, screeching and whispering at the back of the room.

If we accept shared intimacy as an axial element in the interaction among all of the involved parties we might reasonably ask about the content. Something is being shared in an intimate way, but what does it consist of? In fact, there may be considerable difference between what each audience member experiences at a concert of free improvisation. To put it more clearly: what audience members share may quite simply be the experience of sharing, rather than the sharing of a more-or-less uniform perception of the music. At this point in the 21st century it seems rather naïve to assume that all members of the audience are actually seeing and hearing the same thing. Garry L. Hagberg draws on William James (1842-1910), the "father of American psychology" to clarify this point by describing the process involved.

> For James, we make our world into what it is by selectively attending, and the composite result of any such act of selective foregrounding against massive backgrounding is our perceptual world at that moment. This is an illuminating description of one half of sensibility: we select from the much larger set of what is given in experience to make our world (in a way distinctive to our patterned histories of selection) what it is. (The second

[27] The growing use of electric, electronic and digital instruments by free improvisers obviously imposes the presence of amplification without which those instruments would not be complete. It has long been accepted that an electric guitar, for example, is only part of a compound instrument that includes an amplifier and often an array of effects pedals. This does not automatically imply, however, a need to amplify those instruments that are essentially acoustic. The question of how to organize things so that sounds coming out of loudspeakers and those coming from acoustic instruments can coexist on stage without seeming to occupy entirely different acoustic planes has been a consideration for musicians and composers ever since the advent of so-called "mixed music" in the early nineteen sixties. In improvised-music settings it generally depends more on the sonic sensitivity of each musician than on any particular acoustic determinants of the venue.

half is then the presently-activated recollection of our distinctive history of related experiences that inflect our perception of whatever it is to which we presently attend.)"

In this first "half of sensibility", we, as individual audience members, will be selectively attending to what we foreground as a way of building our "perceptual world at that moment. Moreover, we will be doing so against a background of "what is given in experience." The implication is clear here: no one has had the same experiences in their life, and no one is experiencing the present moment in the same way, so none of us will "make our world" in a way that faithfully mirrors anyone else's world. As Hagberg puts it, what we are building is based on immediate percepts that remind us of "our distinctive history of related experiences". This process, then, "inflects" our perception of whatever is happening at that moment. So, what we are sharing as audience members at a concert of free improvisation is not the content, but rather the intimacy of sharing itself, of being together—musicians and audience alike—as part of a process which may be different for each of us, yet is nonetheless shared by all.

VI. INTERACTION WITH ONE'S MEMORY

Garry Hagberg's reference to "a presently activated recollection of our distinctive history" is no more and no less than an evocation of the role of personal memory in perception, and perception is the bedrock of improvisation. This is certainly what *most* distinguishes improvisation from composition. Above, we recalled Steve Lacy's observation that "in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in 15 seconds. In improvisation you have 15 seconds." Having all the time you want is, obviously, an advantage when composing. Being able to think things through, to leave them overnight, to come back and alter them, move them around in the piece or even eliminate them, allows a composer to approach musical creation in a very different way than improvisers do. On the other hand, generating music in a time frame disconnected from when it will actually be heard by an audience means not being able to foresee the exact circumstances in which that will happen. Many years ago, I was contacted by a colleague who wished to celebrate her composer husband's birthday in Madrid's Cruce art space with a closed session at which several of his compositions would be performed. She also invited me to perform an improvisation as part of the celebration and I asked flutist Jane Rigler to participate. The performances went smoothly, as both the musicians and the compositions were more than competent, so when it came time for Jane and I to improvise, the atmosphere was both positive and expectant. Just as we began to play, an enormous garbage truck pulled up, stopped directly in front of the venue's large front window and began emitting a surprising variety of noises, from the low throb of its diesel engine through the hissing of its hydraulic system, the banging of the garbage cans being lifted and emptied, and the shouts of the men coordinating their actions with the driver. It was marvelous! Instruments in hand, Jane and I wove a thick and richly textured tapestry of notes and noises into and around that powerful presence, generating a piece that led one of the guests (a composer) to exclaim afterwards: "I never heard a garbage truck sound so good!" Of course, we were very fortunate. This huge, noisy vehicle had arrived at the only moment in the entire evening when the musicians could take full advantage of it. Had it arrived during *any* of the compositions, it would have destroyed the possibility of listening, as neither the compositions themselves nor any of their performers would have had sufficient leeway to adjust their pieces to the situation, let alone fully incorporate the unexpected noises into the piece.

What Jane and I were doing in our improvisation was building a piece on, around and with what we were perceiving in the moment. There was, of course, no lack of conception in our piece, but it largely depended on our perception of the moment. For a composer, working alone, in a time frame earlier (sometimes several hundred years earlier) than that of the performance, this is simply impossible. And even if one somehow possessed the magic ability to perfectly foresee what was

going to happen in a performance and adjust the composition accordingly, to which performance would one adjust it? After all, most composers aspire to create pieces that will be performed more than once. Improvisers, on the other hand, neither can nor want to play the same piece over and over again.

Memory’s role in conception is not entirely clear, and almost certainly different depending on what kind of memory is involved. Clearly, procedural memory of the sort developed and employed when playing a musical instrument will have a different role than the sort of episodic memory evoked when recalling a specific lived situation in which another musician played in a particular way or with particular sounds. Nonetheless, no music is created ex nihilo, and the vastness of musical craft suggests it is inextricably intertwined with both kinds of memory. When Kjell Gunnar Nordeson asked Andrea Neumann (a leading figure in the development of Berlin reductionist improvisation whose musical instrument is a custom-built piano harp[28]) why she plays the way she does, she answered,

> I think I was mostly influenced by the musicians I played with. For example, as a piano player, when I started to improvise on keys I played with people who would do circular breathing on their instruments, but I couldn't do that on the keys. I was looking for sounds that would match that, so I went into the strings, because when playing inside the piano I could find techniques to have a long-standing or never-ending sound. Or, when at the end of the 90s people started to play much more with computers. Electronic music had quite an impact on my playing. For example, machine like sounds that would start and stop abruptly, not like a person who would warm up and get louder and get quieter again. This is all things that happened at that time. I wasn't very aware of the traditions twenty, thirty, or fifty years ago. It was more like what is actually happening now, and I was curious about some things and I wanted to respond to something that I heard. So, I developed my instrument in this direction (Neumann quoted in Nordeson 2018, 73/85).

So for Neumann, building a personal language with which to interact with other musicians involved playing with and listening to them, then seeking on her own instrument techniques that would work with those she remembered from their playing. At the same time, she basically denies being influenced on that same level by earlier musical traditions (“twenty, thirty, or fifty years ago”), which Nordeson characterizes, in his question, as “not so much relating to what had happened before, musically, but looking at where you were at that moment?” Neumann agrees, but not without qualifying it: “Yes. It might have been naive because things are never new, and you always have traces of things that happened before that might be similar.” And finally, she underlines her own “what-if” approach: “at the same time, I was very much about doing something that I didn’t know of from before, and had never heard [chuckles]” (ibid, 74/86)

Trumpeter and free improviser Axel Dörner is another of the fundamental figures and founders of the Echtzeitmusik or Berlin reductionist movement. He is also an accomplished jazz trumpeter, which may account for his awareness of tradition as part of his development.

> My memory of what I played until now is influencing my music of today. I look at myself as a musician who enjoys discovering new ways of playing and composing and doesn't want to repeat his own clichés over and over. On the other hand I also enjoy music which is based on a longtime tradition which can't be invented by one musician so easily. For that reason from my point of view every music I'm doing in the present is in a relation to the music I already realized until now. So it’s always both, continuing and breaking with my own personal “tradition” (Dörner quoted in Nordeson 2018, 81/93).

[28] Neumann identifies herself as a player of “inside piano.”

It would seem, then, that we could propose a sort of sandwich with perception on one side of memory and conception on the other. Perception would play overlapping but different roles in the development of those two types of memory, and they, in turn, would affect our posterior conception in different ways, as well. For example, one may learn to play a particular chord on the guitar by sitting across from another guitarist and watching what he or she does. If one recalls that situation, it will be a matter of episodic memory, in which one remembers the occasion itself. However, actually learning to play that chord and retaining it as part of one's instrumental technique involves procedural memory, in which perception of that initial episode where one saw someone else playing leads to the proprioception needed to actually control one's hand and to retain that ability for playing. In that sense, the exact relationship between the function of motor neurons when perceiving actions by other people, and that of the procedural memory developed in order to reproduce those same actions oneself calls for greater examination.

Clearly, procedural memory does not involve conscious recall, it is more a matter of learning "an action system that is expressed through behavior"[29] Neither is procedural memory directly involved with the development of perceptual criteria, of experiences that determine how we perceive things and which ones we choose to "foreground," as Hagberg puts it. We are generally unaware of the experiences that have formed those criteria when they are actually at work in the determination of our perception. Indeed, the fact than many of them (probably the vast majority) are not even susceptible to conscious recall, encourages us to think of them in terms of learning, rather than memory. In that sense, the current debate as to whether episodic memories are actually *stored* by the brain, or whether they are *constructed* in a manner some specialists consider "inherently creative" might lead us to question the degree to which we creatively construct what we think we have learned, as well.

VII. INTERACTION WITH ONE'S INSTRUMENT

Rethinking one's acoustic instrument

In the early years of what is now known, at least in Europe, as free improvisation, the vast majority of the participating musicians played acoustic instruments. Many of them had backgrounds in jazz or pop, often both, although, at that time, a growing disenchantment with serial composition also led some contemporary classical performers and composers to explore improvisation as well, especially in France. Then, as now, only a tiny minority actually *began* their musical career as free improvisers. In other words, almost everyone who somehow finds their way into this music has already acquired a relatively solid grasp of instrumental technique and a grounded personal, physical and musical relationship with their instrument of choice, albeit in some other genre of music.

With the exception of a considerable part of contemporary composition, most of those other musics are solidly based on various ways of approaching melody, harmony and metered rhythms. The fascination with music as sound in a broader sense was over half-a-century old by the time free improvisation began to take form as a recognized practice, but the willingness to build musical discourse that included what was still generally considered "extra-musical sound" was still far from widespread. To understand the independence with which free improvisers began to explore sound per se, and the effect it has had on the relations they establish with their instruments, it might be helpful to liken them to the scholars and thinkers associated some decades earlier with the Eranos conferences in Switzerland. Those annual events, centered each year around a different subject, brought together figures of the stature of Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade or Richard Wilhelm. Henry Corbin's description of Eranos and of his colleagues there could almost equally well apply to the

[29] <<http://www.scholarpedia.org/article/Episodic_memory>> Consulted on June 7, 2024.

first generation of free improvisers: “we are perhaps not ‘of our time,’ but are something better and greater: we are our time.”

As I understand it, Corbin’s idea is that seminal figures, or even the less-stellar members of a seminal movement, do not simply reflect their time, they actually make it what it is. In the case of free improvisers, this means not just mirroring contemporaneous practices, but actually building a new approach from available material—in this case, an approach clearly related to the development of electroacoustic music, where sounds are no longer treated as largely interchangeable[30] vehicles for establishing what Adorno called “structural listening” (Adorno 1976, 1-20) but rather, as Tara Rodgers put it, “[as] points of departure to realms of personal history, cultural memory and political struggle.”

Instrument and language

As we saw above, free improviser Andrea Neumann took this approach to her instrument partially in response to the musicians with which she was interacting. Perhaps we should repeat her words here: “at the end of the 90s people started to play much more with computers. Electronic music had quite an impact on my playing. For example, machine like sounds that would start and stop abruptly” (Neumann quoted in Nordeson 2018, 73/85). In that sense, she was working very much *in her time*, and she herself emphasizes this when she adds: “this is all things that happened at that time. I wasn't very aware of the traditions twenty, thirty, or fifty years ago” (ibid). At the same time, in her choice of instrumental techniques that generate sounds, rather than just notes, Neumann clearly reflects Rodgers’ reference to their employment as a “departure to realms of personal history” when she evokes: “The happiness of engaging with sounds rather than with words, the happiness of revealing yourself in sounds, the happiness of playing with this” (Neumann 2011, 203).

Of course, developing a personal musical language that allows one to interact with other improvisers who are equally engaged in developing *their* languages involves interacting with one’s instrument in more than just aesthetic ways; there are also technical questions whose resolution reflects some of the considerations mentioned above by John Butcher that illustrate the difference free improvisers must necessarily establish between personal style and personal vocabulary. Clearly, free improvisers are not obliged to play their instruments in conventional ways, but they are certainly not prohibited from doing so, either. The determining factor is not a matter of convention but of acquiring and being able to use whatever instrumental and sonic resources one needs in each situation. In that sense, we could posit a double process. First, discovering a broader gamut of instrumental resources than will have been dictated by the improviser’s engagement with other musics, and second, clearly identifying which of those resources will actually be useful in the context of free improvisation. However, other factors are involved in both parts of this process. First, new instrumental discoveries are rarely isolated; they tend to lead to the discovery of others. On one hand, one may discover a new sound world by attempting to *operate* one’s instrument in a different way, and that change in technique will often turn out to be the tip of an entire sonic iceberg that expands not only one’s technique but also one’s ear. On the other, constant contact with new improvisers, or even with known collocutors whose personal language is changing, may well lead to the realization that an instrumental technique/sound world one has discovered and discarded as unlikely to be useful is not only useful but truly fecund. In that sense, the sort of instrumental mastery associated with “virtuoso” performance in other musics, including many forms of

[30] Consider how easy it is to recognized Beethoven’s *Heroica* symphony in Liszt’s piano transcription, where *none* of the original sounds exist. Beethoven’s orchestra does not include a piano, and the piano itself is unable to produce *any* of the sounds generated by that symphony, yet we immediately recognize the his work because we are not listening to the sounds, but instead, to the relations they establish with each other, and those relations can be established with considerable independence of the nature of the sounds employed. Another fine example of this is Wendy Carlos’s rendering of works by J. S. Bach on the Moog synthesizer.

improvisation, is essentially impossible to attain. For a free improviser, there is no foreseeable end to the need for a degree of elasticity that allows one to interact with other improvisers while still remaining oneself. One never arrives at what would be considered mastery in other musics because what one needs to master is itself in constant evolution.

Among the very wide spectrum of sonic situations in which a free improviser may find themselves, some will involve extreme dynamics. For example, improvising in site-specific circumstances may produce a need to accompany a group of very soft sounds present in the sonic surroundings. A dog barking in the distance, a soft conversation among people just outside the venue or children laughing can sometimes be of particular interest as foreground material in an improvisation, but this will be impossible to establish if one's *softest* sound already overpowers them. To successfully assume an accompanying role in such circumstances calls for more than just playing very softly; one also needs to have some degree of choice as to *what* one plays. The first time an improvisation calls for such low dynamics, one realizes that it may in fact be impossible to play any of the conventional sounds associated with one's instrument that softly. Clearly, one will have to discover other ways to play the instrument and bring the results into one's musical language. This may involve previously unexplored techniques for producing new sounds, such as bowing the side of a violin body to generate very soft rubbing or hissing sounds, blowing softly through a flute or gently running one's hand over a drumhead. It may also involve sounds already present in more conventional playing but not normally understood as musically intentional. For example, the screeching sounds produced by acoustic guitar strings when one has to rapidly change the position of one's left hand. Anyone accustomed to listening to classical guitar music has heard these sounds, which are generally ignored because they are operational rather than musical. Why not use them musically when their peculiar qualities prove appropriate?

The instrumental gesture

There are also visual aspects of a musician's interaction with their instrument, and these draw the audience into the music as well. Most experienced concert goers have a clear idea of both the sounds acoustic instruments make and the sort of gesture their players use to make them. In that sense, their grasp of how musicians are playing together is informed by both sonic and visual perceptions. When an improviser begins working with sounds and techniques not conventionally associated with their instruments, it becomes less easy for audience members to identify who is making them. This can considerably weaken their understanding of the musical dialogue. There can also be an element of circus-like distraction when a musician uses an unusual technique to generate an unusual sound and the newness of both distract audience members from the role that sound plays in the ongoing musical discourse.

The improviser and the audience in the presence of interactive and electronic instruments

In the case of some electronic or digital instruments, it may be impossible for even experienced concert goers to recognize particular gestures and associate them with specific instrumental sounds. This can seriously impair their capacity to grasp musical dialog and interaction among improvisers. Both laptop computers and analog synthesizers often require only very small physical gestures to effect huge changes in sound. Moreover, many (perhaps most) listeners do not have as clear an idea of the sounds or sound qualities associated with each. In that sense, watching a saxophonist interact with a percussionist and a guitarist can have little in common with watching (and hearing) three electronic musicians interact, even when the dynamics of their interaction are as surprising, agile and musically engaging as those of the acoustic trio. In both cases, there are three musicians before the audience and in both, all three are listening and playing. But in the case of the electroacoustic trio, it may not be clear at all who is doing what. Sometimes it is possible to assign each electroacoustic musician their own speaker, placing it just behind them, alongside their chair.

Depending on the acoustic qualities of the venue, this may help both the musicians and the audience to better distinguish who is doing what, but it will probably not make their microgestures more visible.

This interaction may be even less clear when an improviser is working with an instrument that has actually been designed to interact with them. In the field of composition, stochastic methods were already highly advanced by the early 1960s, when Iannis Xenakis applied them to both his orchestral and electronic works. They have taken considerably longer to find their way into the electronic instruments designed by and for free improvisers, but they are now frequently present in digital and/or laptop based instruments as a means of articulating certain kinds of interaction, effectively distributing agency between human and non-human elements. Depending on how present these methods are and what their role is in a given instrument, there may well be entire series of sounds that require *no gesture at all* on the part of the musician "playing" them.[31]

Detecting this relationship between human gesture and electronic/digital sound can create problems that extend beyond a question of simple identification. They also extend to how listeners evaluate an improviser's degree of involvement in what s/he is playing. Succinctly put: to make a large sound on a cello or a drum requires an equally large gesture on the part of the musician, so there is a clearly visible and audible correlation between physical gesture, sonic intensity and personal involvement in what is being played. But generating similarly intense sounds or even sound worlds on a digital instrument often calls for only minimum physical involvement. This may lead audience members to question whether the person making that sound is truly engaged with what they are playing.[32] As a result, in designing their own digital instruments, free improvisers would do well to consider the gestures required for interacting with their chosen instrumental interface from the standpoint, not only of ergonomics, but also of visual legibility.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

As my friend, the Mexican philosopher and improviser Ramón del Buey, observed, if there is an underlying element in this text, it is the examination of intimacy's role in multiple aspects of free musical improvisation. The interaction among human agents when making this music is characterized by a willing exercise of intimacy and human vulnerability whose presence as part of the improvisatory dynamics can only be understood in terms of their reciprocal relation to the musical discourse itself. Moreover, those same aspects are equally present in how, when actually making their art, improvisers relate to the non-human agents that form a part of their poietic process in the broadest sense of the term. They clearly emerge in how an improviser interacts with his or her instrument, with the acoustic and sonic realities of the place where they are making their music, and even with the ideas that only become meaningful when an improviser manifests the personal openness that allows them to function as vehicles for the dynamics that make his or her music possible.

This is one of the places where freedom works its poietic magic in free improvisation. Finding the personal freedom and shared trust that allows one to be who they are at each moment in an improvisatory process is a truly significant achievement. And here, "significant" must be understood not only as "important" but also in the most directly lexical sense, because improvising freely involves transmitting that very freedom, not as a message, but rather as a direct example. It means creating with a personal freedom, an intimacy and a human vulnerability that emerge,

[31] For a much more detailed discussion of these and other considerations around digital instruments, gesture and interaction, see pages 337 – 364 of Matthews, Wade (2022). *El instrumento musical. Evolución, gestos y reflexiones.* Madrid, Turner. (in Spanish)

[32] For a more detailed discussion of this question, known as "liveness," see pages 374 – 384 of Matthews, Wade (2022). *El instrumento musical. Evolución, gestos y reflexiones.* Madrid, Turner. (in Spanish)

without needing to be named, in the experience of all of the humans involved in the process, including both the musicians and the audience members.

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Le Rousset d’Acon, July 12, 2024

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