

Improvisation

Improvisation:
Between Technique and Spontaneity

Edited by

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Improvisation: Between Technique and Spontaneity,
Edited by Marina Santi

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INTRODUCTION

IMPROVISATION BETWEEN PERFORMANCE ART AND LIFEWORLD

MARINA SANTI AND LUCA ILLETTERATI

The word “improvisation” is used to describe a host of very different things. Improvisation can be considered a collective, creative phenomenon, an individual skilled performance, an emerging act within a rooted practice, or as a set of generative techniques, yet there are a number of issues with its concept and practice. It seems that improvisation is too evanescent to be enshrined by a definition, too vast to be captured by a description, too unpredictable to be clarified by an explanation. At the same time, when speaking of improvisation, we appear to be dealing with something whose features, examples and roles are well known as they appear in the different fields of life-experience. Whether we assume the phenomenon is too broad and vague, or take it as clearly evident and recognizable, we have little need, or opportunity, to look at it more closely.

Underpinning this project is a decision to consider the notion behind improvisation; we attempted to understand what is actually meant by “improvisation”, i.e. its nature and its construct. However, dealing with this issue implies theoretical questions that also raise other, more pragmatic ones. Consequently, our initial question “*What does improvising mean?*” raised matters such as “*When, why, and how do we improvise?*” Following up this line of inquiry, the question “*Who is the improviser?*” arises. Our first answer, which we offered as a starting point for discussion, could be summarised as follows:

“We are all improvisers, continually improvising within the practices that we develop in our relationships with the world. We are improvisers every day, without realising it; most of the time we are unaware of the power of this generative process, while giving improvised and unexpected answers to events. We all are improvisers, even though we do not often acknowledge

it, even refusing it, relegating improvisation to the realm of crude spontaneism and evanescent episodes with neither stability, nor deep structural anchoring in consciousness and expertise.”

This project, however, aims to bestow on improvisation its legitimate role as a versatile, long-lasting generative process of knowledge and action, wherein new paths retrace old ones in a quest for alternative routes. In other words, we assume that whereas not all adaptation to change is improvised, all successful improvisations are good adaptive responses to change. In improvisation, shared practices, steeped in culture and history, are intertwined, yet constantly exposed to the force of innovation; respect and transgression – two apparently opposing, but intricately bound, concepts – are combined in an emergent response to a present situation. From this perspective, tradition may be considered a standard that is built on previous transgressions. Similarly we could also state that improvisation works alongside tradition by applying rules and standards, while continuously breaking with it to produce new forms. These emergent forms are governed by ongoing action, and it is exactly this governance that allows tradition to become a repertoire of ‘the strange’ and of ideas which become the norm.

The potential shapes and eclectic results of this dialectic between the sedimentation and implementation of rules emerge sharply in the field of art. The study of improvisation in artistic practices could hold the key to understanding the more unstructured, at times more unconscious, forms of improvisation that pervade different fields of knowledge and professions, as well as our everyday experiences. What stands out is the contribution art makes to highlighting the essence of life’s patterns, which mostly unfold automatically.¹

By analyzing music, as well as other visual and performing arts, we see that practices such as jazz and comedy of art have a tradition that legitimises improvisation, one that could emphasize what happens in other fields, including science and culture. What emerges is that the improviser is usually both a technical expert and an eclectic creative; the act of improvisation transcends the boundaries of mere execution, yet is not a

¹ Interesting references on the topic are: Berliner, P.F. 1994. *Thinking in Jazz. The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Monson, I. (ed.) 1997. *Saying Something. Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology). Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Benson, B.E. 2003. *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue. A Phenomenology of Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Fischlin, D., Heble, A., and Monson, I. (eds.) 2004. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*. University Press of New England.

pure expression of unshackled imagination. However, if improvisation is transcendence of the rules, those very rules are the condition that enables this transcendence to occur. Indeed, transcendence not only presupposes the rules, but in many respects creates and rises from them as it explores their most hidden potential, fully aware of the constraints they impose and the clashes it will provoke. Once again, the seemingly opposing concepts of “constraints” and “freedom” have the potential to form a strong relationship. Improvisation embodies the ability to move, starting from itself and not from an established rule; this movement, however, creates other rules which are valid only in the specific setting that generates them, though they may be extended and generalized to form a new kind of legitimate behaviour. In other words, improvisation is clearly an expression of freedom that never leaves the boundaries of its world, yet without them it could not even exist.

The dialectical nature of improvisation seems to stretch from the extremes of rigid constraint and total arbitrariness, yet improvisation is where these opposing ideas meet. Musical dialogue within improvisation ensures that the original spontaneity of a composition emerges on each performance and that the technical nature of this performance inspires a potential composition. In other words, in some ways there is an improviser in every composer and performer, and it is thus the prerogative of improvisation to free the musician from the impoverishment of mere repetition.

The features emerging from this study of improvisation in music could be used to interpret improvisation more generally as a phenomenon, process, or product of human activity. Within this extended concept, improvisation also appears to be an effect, not a mere result, of the strict application of essential techniques and an outcome of unexpected, surprising and spontaneous imagination born of a situation, which can never be planned in advance. A closer look at this feature suggests improvisation is a spontaneous performance that grasps and transforms elements into actions that, without technique, would otherwise be lost. Technique and spontaneity, far from being opposite poles, find within improvisation a place to reconcile their reciprocal and inextricable relationship. This relationship redirects the attention toward the situation from which the act of improvisation arises.

These ideas were behind the title, and above all the subtitle, of the book: “between technique and spontaneity”. Improvisation lies in-between the paradox of defining, recognizing, learning, and teaching something that repeats the past (technique) and the creation of an undisclosed present (spontaneity). When improvising, we have to follow a model and then

surpass this model as well; to copy something and someone else, but copying is not enough; to listen, but listening does not suffice; and also to perceive, but the performance exceeds the perceived, promising more, something that can be used to spawn future creations and to understand the world. We have to listen, look and perceive carefully if we are to produce a previously unheard sound, an untouched work, an unseen frame or landscape. Yet these sounds, works and landscapes evoke past rules, while – as proleptic products – propose and foresee new constraints.

Positing improvisation as an act that emerges from teaching and learning is another paradox, in that it expects the unpredictable to be crafted in advance, and personal, immediate and courageous resourcefulness to be learnt from imitation and practice. The solution to this antinomy is, in fact, put forward in experience of improvisation whereby a teacher outlines one model in order to teach another, and learners copy others in order to find their own style. In a way, the ontology of improvisation lies within the phenomenology of this overflowing teaching and learning process, thus overcoming its narrow common meaning that reduces improvisation to immediacy, ignoring the mediation used to generate and develop it.

These considerations also highlight the dialogical, collaborative and shared dimension of improvisation as a practice based on ‘working together’, in which imitation and repetition foster originality and variation by confronting and bending the rules. In the improvisation process, performers become ‘characters’ and improvisation could be effectively understood as an ‘act of character’, with the meaning suggested by the Chinese writer Acheng:

“...character is an act of writing. If you see something you like, copy it every day for six months, without skipping a day. When it seems similar to the original, write it again from memory, and when writing it from memory you deem it similar to the model, write it your own way. That is what talent is made of – breaking the rules. If you do not manage to do it, you will have to content yourself with writing characters that resemble their models.”

Following this line of thought, improvisation may be considered both an act of learning furthered by repetition and training, and an act of teaching promoted through crafting and scaffolding, but above all an act of knowing oneself and the world, effected by means of the new possibilities on offer. Such an act is performed as an answer – predictable enough to be recognized and surprising enough to be unique – to other suggestions in an authentic dialogue. The authenticity of dialogue lies in its genuine interest in a liaison that could entail recognition and loss, reinforcement and risk.

In an authentic dialogue, tolerance of discomfort and perplexity accompanies the pleasure of finding a common groove. In the openness of dialogue, errors become an incident, and also an accident, that needs to be valorised and turned into an opportunity for growth. This is why improvisation is a joint venture that continuously escapes from each solo act. It always develops over a framework of conversation by adding something new, while responding to something else. Improvising means being able to detect the elements of a possible dialogical structure by careful listening even by one's self and to tease it out, enriched and changed by one more voice even just one's own. In this way, during the improvisation process, the original structure on which the discourse has to be based, with its rules and inner grammar, is at the same time reconfirmed and stimulated.

To sum up, a good improviser needs to be brave enough to breach the confines of grammar and believing enough to use it to extend the field of discourse toward new, shared meanings. This could be an explanation as to why improvisation appears to be a unique spontaneous act of dialogue in a common technical language.

The book is, in a sense, the result of a collective performance that took place in Italy over two days in May 2008; it consisted of a conference at the University of Padova, a concert at the "C. Pollini" Conservatory and a workshop at the Porsche Italia Auditorium.² The contents page follows the main thread unravelled by the core questions raised in the project and by the possible answers of the authors during the meeting. The different lengths, styles, rhythms of these answers contribute to the development of the common theme. However, a second thread may appear in the continuous reference to jazz music as a metaphor, a practice, and a live model of improvisation.

² We would like to thank the following partners: the University of Padova (all of the colleagues, PhD students, and staff involved in supporting this project by the Department of Educational Sciences, Department of Philosophy, Department of Linguistic, Communication, and Performing Arts Disciplines; Faculty of Education and Training; SSIS Veneto); Porsche Italia and Centro Porsche Padova, the "Cesare Pollini" Conservatory, Municipality of Padova; Centro d'Arte. We are also grateful to Alberto Zotti, Loris Casadei, Leopoldo Armellini, and Fiorita Luciano who believed in this project. A special thank you to the Tord Gustavsen Trio for their beautiful concert. A personal acknowledgement also goes to musicians Marcello Tonolo (piano), Marco Tamburini (trumpet), and to actors Francesco Burrone, Federico Stefanelli, and Daniela Amato, who were involved in the successful improvisation workshop.

The first article is by Tord Gustavsen, who ponders improvisation as an erotic, dialectical experience with a homologous ontological status. His work is developed around five polarities/dilemmas and their dynamic potential in the psychology and phenomenology of improvisation. The link Gustavsen's article establishes between improvisation and jazz is elaborated by Andy Hamilton in his contribution, which compares improvisation with classical music. Hamilton argues that jazz could be considered classical music by reconsidering the traditional opposition between improvisation and composition within this art form. The core issue concerning the role and nature of the music performer and the common assumption behind the creativity of improvisation are combined in Gabriele Tomasi's paper, which considers the concepts of "spontaneous" and "spontaneity", both to analyse them as causal origins of music and as consequences of the involvement of some form of thought and reflection in music improvisation. Improvisation as a form of thought devoted to creative action is the focus of Bjorn Alterhaug's contribution, which relates improvisation to all kinds of creative processes in human action, from everyday conversations to highly skilled professional activity. The author assumes that improvisation is a multiple phenomena, and proposes an interdisciplinary approach to the communicative dimension of improvisation in communities of cultural practices.

The interdisciplinary perspective proposed by Alterhaug is developed by the last two contributions in the book by Keith Sawyer and Frank Barrett. Sawyer develops his contribution around the idea of innovation as the fundamental aim of the knowledge society, underlining the importance of teaching and learning for creativity today. Starting from the acknowledgement that innovative collaborations flow, in most cases, improvisationally, Sawyer argues that educating for innovation requires the creation of opportunities for collaborative improvisation, and he offers an insight into how to introduce this idea into educational environments. Improvisation, which Sawyer's paper mainly considers to be a shared process of knowledge construction, is valorised by Frank Barrett in terms of the simultaneous actions of world-making and self-making. Barrett lays down these two actions as the bases for the construction of identity, which is considered a joint experience of coordination, negotiation and reorientation towards a positive, but not risk-free, development of self.

Finally, this four-hands introduction is an attempt to explain why two colleagues embarked on this adventure, and to present the interpretation of the ideas that emerged in the following and enlarged polyphonic session. It serves as a provisional insight into improvisation and a dialogical movement open to discussion.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DIALECTICAL EROTICISM OF IMPROVISATION

TORD GUSTAVSEN

An Australian journalist wrote in a preview of our concert in Melbourne:

“Music is all about sex. It's about tension and release, eagerness and restraint, gratification and generosity, control and surrender, and other delicately opposed forces in a more or less graceful fumble towards ecstasy”.¹

Let us start here. Although tabloid, this sentence summarizes a lot of what the dialectical eroticism of improvisation is about. I believe there are crucial parallels between the realm of music-making and the many realms of intimacy. Challenges facing us in one field can help us understand parallel challenges in other fields. The metaphorical –sometimes almost poetical – quality of understanding one thing in the light of another can be of great importance. We can gain *inspiration* and *self-development* both as persons and as musicians.

My main argument is that a specific listing of *five basic dialectical dilemmas* or *themes* can be highly relevant to understanding the challenges of musical improvisation. This listing of dilemmas is collected from a psychological theory of development that in itself bridges the infant's early forming of a self with adult challenges in close personal relationships at later stages in life. Thus, we have three levels constantly present in my dealings with these dilemmas:

¹ Preview article for the Melbourne Jazz Festival 2008, printed in the city's major newspaper *The Age*, April 2008 – journalist unknown.

- 1) The infant forming a self through interaction with the primary caretakers
- 2) The adult engaging in intimate relationships –both as eroticism and as lasting companionship, and
- 3) The improviser relating to, making sense of, acting on, and being formed by his or her musical surroundings, that is, by the sounding music, by the physical instrument, and by the fellow musicians (if any).

Now, instead of beginning (as I did in my more lengthy thesis) with summarizing and discussing existing theoretical approaches thus laying out extended background and terminology for our project –let me move directly to the “five polarities” or dilemmas. First I must rush into acknowledging, then, my sources for the listing of the dilemmas. Primarily we have Norwegian psychologist Anne-Lise Løvlie Schibbye, who is in turn building on theory from German psychoanalyst Helm Stierlin as well as a vast body of existentialist psychology. I am deeply grateful to Løvlie Schibbye for writing the beautiful little book called *The Self–Yours, Mine, or Ours?* (Løvlie, 1982), which was where I was first exposed to this line of thinking. For empirical data I use interview quotes collected from Paul Berliner’s book *Thinking In Jazz* heavily (Berliner, 1994). This is coupled with basic insights from the so-called “scenic music theory” as delivered to me through Rolf Inge Godøy and his renderings of Pierre Schaffer’s writings. The key concepts here are those of “musical objects” and their “emergent qualities”.

The “five polarities” are descriptions of dilemmas that mankind is “doomed to” live with and encounter on a multitude of levels–dilemmas that must always be worked through in changing relations and changing situations throughout our life span. They are as follows:

- Moment vs. duration
- Difference vs. sameness
- Gratification vs. frustration
- Stability vs. stimulation
- Closeness vs. distance

Fundamentally, each polarity or dilemma comes with a set of dynamic potential, and a set of dangers. Dangers threaten when dialectics are “frozen” –that is when there is no creative movement, when the *flow* of relations (or the flow of music) is stalled in repetitive conflict. Dialectic potential, on the other hand, lies in dynamic resolution of conflict, and in fruitful integration of opposing forces. And –importantly– we are *not* aiming here for the dullness of a “middle way” –a middle way without any clear profile and striking qualities. You need to really *embrace* and *explore*

each side of every paradox, but in ways that don't bring about frozenness and repetitive conflicts.

Now –let's introduce the five dilemmas with a few remarks that bind them together. The art of improvisation is a field where you develop storytelling, narratives, form, harmony, etc. pretty much in the way a composer does. These are parameters of music frequently dealt with in existing literature. But this art form is just as much a *live act* where the musician *confronts* and *faces* the music, her fellow musicians, and the audience –in a very *real time* situation. A virtuoso improviser not only has to possess impressing analytical, creative and technical abilities, but equally important the ability to *put these forces into play* in the midst of multi-faced, often chaotic situations. The improviser has to build a musical unfolding that *works* on all levels from individual phrases up to the concert experience as a whole –without having much time to focus on each level separately. The improviser must attach musical activity to a basic “groove” and “mood”, while at the same time *challenge* and transcend these relatively stable qualities. The improviser must bring out his or her intensity and emotional presence without losing technical control, and without losing the ability to create overviews and orient herself in the musical landscape. All this, in my opinion, ties the art of improvisation closely to the basic challenges we have when developing as human beings. And, I believe that psychological and philosophical theory dealing with precisely these kinds of dialectical challenges in close personal relations, in sexuality and in child development, may shed a very fruitful light on the analogous challenges in making improvised music.

First, we have...

1. Moment vs. duration

The ability to negotiate musical *time* at different levels of resolutions is crucial for an improviser –all the way from the production of a single note via a gesture or phrase, a chorus or a bar structure, up to an entire piece. And even the concert as a whole– there are shapes unfolding in time on all these levels. And a good improviser must make her stuff *work* on every level.

The first dialectical theme explores the intense dilemma between the *here and now* and the *unfolding in time*. Creative potential in this field can be summarized as the fruitful tension between *involvement* and *intensity* in the moment on the one hand, and the *fullness* and the *reliability* in that which lasts and builds itself over time, on the other.

The dangers threatening on the dark side of this polarity, however, lie in the “blind”, restless and isolated moment vs. the empty and boring duration –a duration without intensity, without a focus and presence that can sweep you away and absorb you.

As with all five polarities: the potential awaiting in the attractive versions of the dilemma has a tendency to transform into its destructive “shadows” if we are not able to initiate a dialectical movement. One side has to be brought into dialogue with the other –and new consciousness thus created in a process of synthesis.

Moment vs. Duration			
Frozen dialectics		Dynamic Potential	
“blind”, restless, isolated moments	empty, boring duration without intensity and focus	involvement & intensity in the moment	fullness & reliability in that which lasts and builds itself over time

The infant must go through a process from an undifferentiated state of being –where everything is experienced immediately in an all-embracing now– towards a familiarity with the passing of time by the experience of rhythms and cycles, and towards a coming to terms with deferred gratification. All of this has a huge potential for creating fear and anxiety. For an intimate relationship to grow and last, you have to find ways to unite childlike involvement in the moment with reliability and a sense of rhythm and an appreciation of commitment. When it works, moments gain reliability from duration, and duration gains intensity from moments. When it doesn’t work –you get bored or empty in duration, and the moments become “blind” in their search for fulfilment without perspective.

By analogy, the improviser must also learn to unite his or her intense focus on the moment with a backward orientation and a forward orientation. Backwards in a feeling for the implications of musical events that have already taken place. Forwards as a deep feeling for the unique “loading” of any musical situations, a penetrating understanding of musical qualities that can be developed further in the course of the improvisation. He or she must learn to “hold back”, to distribute intensity, and thus shape musical substance over time. This is difficult, because the fuel of spontaneity and childlike involvement must be maintained at the same time.

1.1 Negotiating musical form

Orienting oneself in forms and chord changes underlying the improvisation also has to meet such a multi-directional imperative. You have to negotiate all the different levels at the same time, and at any given “now” relate yourself to the given location in the basic unfolding of form. Advanced improvisers often possess huge and impressing flexibility in this respect. Improvisers must develop an ability to experience and to “think” their musical now in different contexts –with a manifold, yet intensely focused fullness in perspective. Any given musical incident gains its meaning partly from its relatedness to the overall form, its relatedness to the musical processes activated in dynamics, timbre, rhythm, and to the gestural aspects of what has been going on in the music so far. You have to be completely *there*, in the heat of the moment. At the same time, you have to be in control of the unfolding, to be intuitively aware of the time line and the internal relations in the musical texture. And for great improvisation to really happen, this can not be an academic analysis, nor a troublesome shifting of focus back and forth; it must be a lived synthesis of man’s basic dilemma between the moment and the duration.

1.2 Strategies and cross-modality

The ability to unite moment and duration is fundamental for improvised *strategy making*. Short term, intermediate term and long term goals must flow in an organic decision making process. For this to happen, the improviser must orient herself through flexible and efficient cognitive representations of musical substance. The ability to create snapshot overviews is crucial. Overviews can facilitate spontaneous analysis of the musical processes going on, and spontaneous analysis of options for further development embedded in any given situation. Music can always be understood and encoded in an infinite number of ways, ranging from purely theoretical encoding based on for example harmony and rhythmic patterns, via visualizations of texture, timbre qualities etc., into more informal large-scale chunking of content –for example: “Yes, there we go again. We’re doing the soft touch approach to swinging eighths coupled with use of extreme registers in the piano and mallets on drums”. These kinds of informal labelling of musical situations are constantly developed both in individual musicians and among ensembles playing together over time. The complexity of different ways of understanding the music present in musicians’ consciousness is enormous. And this complexity can of

course potentially cause the improvisation to stall because of sheer overflow –or because of inefficiency in processing and chunking.

Crucial to achieving required efficiency in this field, then, is employing *cross-modal representations*. The tension between moment and duration is handled by the use of both

- muscular-motor memory,
- visual images of contour and texture, and
- more conventional theoretical categorization based on harmony and other parameters.

The different kinds of representation are all important in making up the totality of musical orientation. An improviser must possess a highly developed sense of *integration* in these landscapes, as well as a special kind of intense *concentration*, in order to hold these elements together and use them creatively in composing-in-the-moment. When such abilities are present, it is precisely the richness of this pluralistic universe of images – as well as the devotion in creative concentration amidst the richness– that assists the musician in producing musical meaning.

"As artists explore different approaches to improvisation –whether vocally or instrumentally, or conceptually improvising away from an instrument without vocalizing their creations– their ideas can assume different forms of representation. Improvisers sometimes emphasize aural thinking. At other times, they emphasize theoretical thinking. Additionally, their rich field of imagination can feature abstract visual displays. Curtis Fuller ‘tries to paint little pictures’ when he improvises. Fred Hersch, too, ‘sees things very graphically that way’. He visualizes what he plays as ‘a kind of big playground with things jumping around on it, usually in terms of melodic movement: things going up this way, balanced by something going down that way’. Or he will see ‘large masses of things moving along: one string of notes jumping up and down, stopping, twitching around. Music has a feeling of space around it; it exists in space, these little mobiles of things. I like to think of music visually like that’, Hersch explains".²

1.3 Direction

Handling the moment in relation to the flow of time also demands a special sense of musical *direction*. By necessity, any point in the musical unfolding is part of movement in time, but it is the improviser's task to make these directional movements “good”, “interesting”, and “organic”.

Harmony, of course, matters a lot in this respect, and a basic challenge for beginners in jazz improvisation is for example the need to “anticipate

² Berliner, 1994, 175.

the chord changes". An aesthetically satisfying jazz improvisation within styles based on chord changes, demands that you always combine an exploration of the various chords as universes in themselves with movements that foreshadow and prepare the chord to come. Bass player Rufus Reid states:

"When I'm playing walking bass lines, I try to have the line moving somewhere. ... This has a lot to do with harmonic phrasing. If I'm playing a ii-V-I progression, I'm not just playing the notes of the chord. I'm moving toward V when I'm playing ii. I'm constantly flowing, pushing toward I. If you think consciously of moving somewhere harmonically when you play, it assimilates this swinging sound, because harmonic sound is motion".³

More generally, David Sudnow says that

"[t]o go for a sound is to go for a sound within a course. ... It is in terms of securely targeted movements, implicated by preceding-forthcoming-positional-configurations, that the definition of sound is to be sought in the first place".⁴

Here, Sudnow touches upon something very crucial in the "moment vs. duration" dialectics of improvisation. The improviser's *intentional movement* –both mentally and physically– when he or she executes a "go for a sound", is the main component of improvisation as an activity. The way a sound *works* and acquires meaning in different musical and motor relations, must be a part of the improviser's internalized and embodied *knowledge*. This knowledge is fundamental to the ability to form anticipating "hypothesis" concerning potential sound events. It is also an important component in the ability to efficiently interpret events that have actually taken place –which in turn initiates further strategy making by processes of association, repetition, variation etc..

These insights can also be coupled with Alfred Pike's concepts of "intuitive cognition" and "prevision" from his essay *A Phenomenology of Jazz* (Pike, 1974). These notions capture the improviser's ability to immediately discover and "dig in to" fundamental qualities and possibilities for further development in a given musical event. Pike states:

"What is first given must be developed. The incipient jazz image has its future horizons, and the improviser successively changes his viewpoint as

³ Reid, in Berliner, 1994, 352.

⁴ Sudnow, 1993, 74.

he strives for these horizons. The immediate perceptual field contains within itself the potential structure of future fields”.⁵

Accordingly, in musical improvisation the present is always in labour with the future –labour both in the sense of “work” and as “giving birth”.

1.4 Perception “in a now” – duration conceptualized in the moment

Now, let’s turn to the crucial term of “musical object”. The paradox-ridden relationship between a constant flux of sensations and relatively stable perceptions in the form of objects in consciousness is of great interest to modern music theory and psychology. You have to “step out of time”, so to speak, to form objects in consciousness in the constant stream of sensations. An object in consciousness is a crystallized discontinuity in the continuous soundscape, and such crystallization is necessary in order to orient ourselves and make sense of what’s going on. “The continuous is only perceivable through the discontinuous, as “the intuition of a temporal interval takes place in a now”.⁶ A “subjective now” in Husserl’s terms contains both protentions and retentions –that is, both foreshadows of time to come and impressions from preceding portions of time. The improviser’s chain of moments is a sophisticated chain of “subjective nows” along these lines. A musical object can be formed in consciousness on all levels of resolution of time –from a single note via a gesture or a phrase up to a concert as a whole.

1.5 “Emergent qualities” as pragmatic synthesis

Here, we need to go into the basic notion of a musical object’s “emergent qualities”. Basically, emergent quality is anything striking about an object –a contour, a texture, a rhythmic pattern, etc.. From my experience, focusing on emergent qualities has significant potential for real-time practical *solutions* to some of the problems facing the improviser in the dilemma between moment and duration.

A moment’s experience; an appealing sound quality, a perceived contour, a subtle harmonic resolution, a tickling tension, etc., etc. –all is based on a “distributed substrate” sensed over time, but captured “in a

⁵ Pike, 1974, 89.

⁶ Godoy, 1997, 63 (with a quotation from Edmund Husserl).

now". To contemplate this fundamental paradox in our perception of sound, can be very useful to the improviser.

The wish to be existentially *present* in the details of the music can harm the ability to orient oneself in the broader soundscape. The urge to enter into deepness can harm the ability to get a grip of what one is actually delivering; that which can be perceived by listeners. I think that these dangers can be met by developing a habit of listening for the emergent qualities in phrases or musical events while they are still in the making in the improvisational process. Thereby, one strengthens the skill to perceive and control the relevant *connections* between details on a micro level and perceivable qualities on other levels of resolutions. While one is performing an improvised phrase, distinct emergent qualities usually manifests themselves –often to the surprise of the improviser, too – qualities that can be purified, developed, deepened or contrasted efficiently if taken seriously and understood in the right way. If consciousness during performance is actively searching for these qualities as *qualities to encounter*, and not only focusing on technique, theory and devices, nor exclusively on the inner creative “pressure” escaping objectivity, the improviser can come closer to a *listener's reality* without having to turn to populist, and often times alienating, ways of “communicating with the audience”.

This is really about getting the *dialogue* happening in playing; not only with the other musicians (if any) and the audience (if any), but with oneself as a creative subject and an appreciating receiver. Hereby, the improviser strengthens her ability to build musical substance that *works*, in the sense that it offers striking and intriguing emergent qualities. This dialogic imperative demands the ability to negotiate relationships between unfolding in time (production of a distributed sound substrate) and existential *moments* (crystallized musical objects with emergent qualities perceived “in a now”); at a multitude of levels, the improviser must converse different “presences” and intimately *feel* connections between separate details building the larger units and the overall qualities of these units. Although the dialectics between moment and duration will always represent a field of challenge and risk even for advanced improvisers, an important path to practical solutions and development of improvisations skills in this area lies precisely in the common human mechanisms of sound perception –in the pendulum that is always moving between “floating” substance and stable objects. Contemplating these mechanisms, and developing them to a maximum, is likely to do the improviser a lot of good.

To put it into a slogan: *Play for yourself as a listener* – by focusing creatively on emergent qualities of objects on a multitude of levels – get the dialogue going between inner urge and objective sound.

2. Difference vs. sameness

For the second dilemma, we also start by laying out the difference between a constructive and a stalling version of the polarity. Creative potential in this field lies in the fruitful tension between individuality and clarity on the one hand and of belonging in immediate at-homeness and familiarity on the other. On the “dark side” of this polarity lies the alienating *isolation* and lack of integration or understanding on the one hand, and the undifferentiated symbiosis on the other. In this symbiosis one lives in repetitive patterns without really recognizing otherness, without any tools for breaking out of patterns, without any clarity of vision to separate between breathing, evolving patterns and lifelessly repeating ones.

Difference vs. sameness			
Frozen dialectics		Dynamic Potential	
alienating isolation, lack of understanding	undifferentiated symbiosis, repetitive patterns whether they actually breathe or not	clarity of objects, individuality of ideas	belonging, “at home”-ness, familiarity and understanding

As in the dilemma discussed in the previous section, the danger of transformation from growth-through-synthesis into stalling, unfruitful conflict faces us when we are unable to encounter the one side of the polarity with the other in a dialectical movement. Humans have an acute need of *both sides* in the polarity in their closest relations and also in their creative work. But the two sides can easily get into a difficult opposition, and the dialectical movement is easily “frozen” in repetitive conflict.

Coming to terms with being separate *and* being connected; indeed, developing dialectical ways of being fulfilled in individuality through tight connections, and being relaxed in connected *belonging* through the acquisition of secure separateness; these are all basic challenges for the infant's forming of a self. And they are basic challenges for the adult living the existential themes of the human condition again and again. Emmy van

Deurzen also explores these paradoxes in her account of existentialist psychotherapy:

“The balancing act that we all have to work with is that of going out towards the world whilst maintaining a centeredness and equilibrium at the core. In terms of human relationships, this leads to the experience of the polarities of belonging and isolation, dominance and submission, power and impotence, contact and disconnection, recognition and rejection, participation and avoidance”.⁷

Relating this to musical improvisation, we get two sub-fields of tension: First, the tension between “entering into the music” on the one hand, and analyzing it as something “outside of” oneself on the other. Second, the relationship between continuity/similarity and variation/contrast in the musical substance. The latter sub-field is already well researched in music theory, although not often within an explicit dialectical framework.

2.1 Familiarity and curiosity –the unstable nature of the acting subject in making music

An attentive creative improviser is situated the fundamental dialogue between *doing* and *receiving*. The improviser is and must be *different* and *separate* from the music in so far as he or she is making up strategies, doing informal musical analysis, labelling musical units, identifying musical processes, and challenging the material in ever new ways. At the same time, the improviser is *one* with the music in an infant-mother like *symbiosis*, constantly nurturing a need for familiar groove and secure belonging. The state of combined childlike devotion and adult-like control in relating to the music is crucial.

Paul Berliner identifies this paradox in his interviews with jazz musicians; the calls for “letting go” and “let the music play you” are as frequent as the calls for taking control and being active in shaping the music. He states that

“[t]his paradoxical relationships between musical actions calling for a passive performance posture and others calling for precise artistic control contributes to the mystique that surrounds improvisation”.⁸

⁷ van Deurzen, 1988, 39.

⁸ Berliner, 1994, 219.

Surely, it is a kind of mystique. At the same time, though, it is not very different from the mystique that we all live in our coming to terms with the need for *belonging* in familiar intimacy and warmth, and *individualization* in action, divergence and self-evaluation.

This corresponds to the struggle between the “discontinuous” and the “continuous” in George Bataille's classic book *Erotism* (Bataille, 1986). We are discontinuous beings in keeping ourselves as separated individuals, but we long for the continuous in being fundamentally tied to the world and to other people. Eroticism is *the* field of most intense tensions and battles here. “Erotic activity, by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it, reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea”.⁹ We strive for unity and continuity, but these states are also threatening to us, as they violate our stable sense of individuality, thus bringing the intensity of life close to extinction and death. I believe that contemplating this analogy between the human condition and musical challenges has a creative potential for musicians.

Apart from mere contemplation, how does one develop skills for handling this “mystique” in practice? Impressive analytical, technical and creative skills must be united with the courage to let go of control, and the courage to engage in something that you can never know the outcome of on beforehand. You have to dare “losing” yourself without guaranties as to how and when you get yourself back. You have to dare the encounter with the challenging unknown within what is familiar.

Helm Stierlin talks of a *labour* necessary in human relations in order to live the dilemma between symbiosis and separateness fruitfully and dialectically:

“Through this work we transcend the narcissism that keeps us from recognizing in the other anything but what is already known and familiar – that is, ourselves. This work makes us capable of incorporating the other's difference in us. Thereby, we ourselves become more complex, and gain greater opportunities for developing the relationship and our psychological understanding. But thereby, we envisage differences on a deeper level, differences that again has to be accommodated and transcended [opphevet]”.¹⁰

I do think that this “labour” in many ways corresponds to the improviser's challenges in constantly discovering the music anew, in seeing new “ways” and new solutions, and in bringing fresh curiosity to

⁹ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰ Stierlin, 1994, 53 (my translation, from the Norwegian version).

the situation, while at the same time hanging on to familiarity and intimacy with the musical landscape. When improvisation is flowing, it is precisely these oppositions that are constantly enriching each other in a dynamic movement. When the music is *not* flowing, the challenges are experienced as burdensome and alienating. Neither oneness nor curiosity is then blooming. Still, these are moments that should be lived without too much fear, because they nonetheless represent potential for breakthroughs and radical synthesis through honest search, craftsmanship and strokes of luck as well.

Of course, no single technique or fixed method of practicing can ensure success in this dynamic field. Still, I would like to suggest the task of playing phrases or making musical events with an explicit focus on combining at-homeness and surprise; with the aim of getting a firmer grip of practical ways to unite with the music and confront it at the same time. This can be done through exploitation of intervals, harmonic contents, registral direction, different voicings, etc. –in short, every musical parameter routinely worked on by aspiring improvisers can be subject to this creative work.

Furthermore, in practicing, the improviser should open up to the powerful experiencing of analogies between “life” and “art” along the lines drawn above. Much is to be gained for skilled musicians by just letting the music happen while reaching for an existential encounter with the situation as such: reaching for the feeling of being one with the music while at the same time being an agent confronting it.

2.2 Variation and continuity

This work can involve drastic personal development and therapeutic processes. But it can also be found on a very practical level, where embracing familiarity can be experienced in elements of *repetition* and *coherence*, while differentiated manipulation lies in *variation* and musical *contrast*. Thus, our somewhat speculative psychological use of this polarity is closely connected to that which ties it to established music theory, in fields like motive analysis and rhythm; fields that are also heavily commented upon by jazz musicians in interviews. In these statements, one can often identify a basic preference for balance between repetition and variation.

The ways in which you can invent motives, repeat them and manipulate through compositional techniques, are well known to most jazz improvisers. Relating his psychodynamic theory to esthetical experience, Helm Stierlin says that “we love a picture or a melody when they combine

the beauty of the unknown with the beauty of that which is known to us”.¹¹ The basic notion is that of lust: “In our striving for lust, chasing that which is new always walks hand in hand with the need for that which is the same, the need for what is known”.¹² In these matters, Stierlin draws explicit parallels between aesthetic experience and the psychology of relations and sexology, and these are parallels that I believe are very useful for the phenomenology of improvisation. The improviser's work in developing skills for establishing continuity and variation, coherence and deviation in the musical substance –and more generally, to achieve the synthesis of secure familiarity and creative surprise –resembles the work needed to develop and deepen an intimate relationship. You have to be devoted in worshipping the familiar, the rituals and the at-homeness of belonging. At the same time you have to be devoted to looking for possibilities of development and growth, for new “themes” and meaningful contrasts in interaction patterns.

2.3 Schemata theory–prototypes and generative acts

At this stage, we should also refer to a completely different field of psychological theory –cognitive schemata theory. There is, of course, no room for any thorough introduction to such a vast and important field, but I still want to outline this linkage because it offers insights that are particularly valuable to us in exploring the difference vs. sameness dialectics. In cognitive schemata theory we deal with research on “*information packages*” and on *prescriptions* for action, by which relevant knowledge of a certain kind of situation, scene or activity is held together and integrated in a way that makes it easier for the actor to select sensory data, organize them meaningfully, interpret them quickly, and choose appropriate action on the basis of this. Humans have this kind of schematas for standardized types of action and categorized fields of objects encountering us in our perception.

The building of an improviser's cognitive apparatus for interpreting the musical landscape and finding “ways” in it can be understood in terms of schemata theory. Interaction between more or less fixed schematas and a constantly flowing *sensory input* is basic. This resembles the interaction between “top-down” and “bottom up” processing of information often referred to in cognitive psychology. We orient ourselves using stereotypes, model objects and pre-understanding. But we live dynamically from the

¹¹ Stierlin, 1974, 55 (my translation).

¹² Ibid., 53.

fuel of sensory input challenging and enriching precisely this pre-understanding. If schematas are not there, nothing makes sense. If schematas are not efficiently negotiated, selected, combined and processed, the flow of improvisation will stall and disintegrate. But if schematas are too tight and rigid, if we are not able to open up to being challenged, to form new classes of objects, to dig in to the qualities of objects with acute attention to detail, and to look for fresh links between objects, then improvisation becomes a dull and predictable procedure.

A main point in schemata theory is that scripts and scenes are often *generalized* or *inexact* representations of situations or actions (or complexes of actions). This kind of representation facilitates information processing while also opening up for new behaviour and *creative* solutions. When orienting yourself through inexact schematas, you get a quicker grip on the landscape, and you envision possibilities for action in the form of “sketches”, not always highly detailed programs. Thus, there will always emerge different *variants* of the same schemata, with differing degrees of deviation and “newness”. When a schemata is treated so freely that it runs the risk of disintegration, we have the following options: Either, the actor can withdraw toward “acceptable” variations and act in more conventional ways according to the original schemata, or he or she can establish a *new* schemata – related to, but distinct from, the old one.

Thus, schemata theory integrates and specifies familiarity and creative differentiation in one and the same model. Forming, sustaining and modifying schematas is a basic human capacity and necessity. On a very fundamental level, then, the improviser works with an innate capacity of creative innovation in secure, familiar landscapes. I would say that the dilemma between sameness and difference has a potential for practical solutions right here. Exploring and contemplating this basic human mechanism is likely to be a useful tool in the pedagogies of improvisation. We should focus on having a sufficient number of relevant schematas to interpret and handle the musical situations that arise. We should help students developing sufficiently profiled and worked-through schematas to facilitate a quick and efficient retrieval process from long term memory. At the same time we should challenge them towards getting sufficiently flexible schematas to prevent their musical actions from being automated and predictable. These are basic keys to flowing musical improvisation.

2.4 Creativity in other metaphors – language and thought

Paul Berliner uses the notion of “musical ideas” as the basic unit in the improviser's *Lebenswelt* and its creative processes, and he relates this to creativity in language and verbal thinking in general:

“[I]mprovisers constantly strive to put their thoughts together in different ways, going over old ground in search of new. The activity is much like creative thinking in language, in which the routine process is largely devoted to rethinking. By ruminating over formerly held ideas, isolating particular aspects, examining their relationships to the features of other ideas, and, perhaps, struggling to extend ideas in modest steps and refine them, thinkers typically have the sense of delving more deeply into the possibilities of their ideas. There are, of course, also the rarer moments when they experience discoveries as unexpected flashes of insight and revelation”.¹³

The main focus here is how formation of freshness and newness in musical improvisation can be seen as analogous to the production of new sentences with familiar words in common language, and analogous to the process where one develops one's chains of thought by constantly going over old material anew, searching for new constellations and interrelations.

This quotation from Berliner offers a powerful tool for approaching the problem of novelty or innovation in jazz –the endless discussion of *what* can pass as creative improvisation. Here, we often find a conflict between avant-garde attitudes on the one hand and neo-classicist ones at the other, where the first party tries to monopolize the definition of novelty –and, in fact, of creativity at large. Using Berliner's analogy, one can claim that it is totally arrogant not to recognize the freshness and newness happening within familiar stylistic boundaries every time a musician approaches the stylistic area with openness and the desire to “say something” in his or her here-and-now-situation. Basically, one does not have to invent a new language to tell a new story. Anything that is *experienced* as a creative encounter between a devoted musical consciousness and a musical substance, *is* in fact fresh newness –from the point of view of this particular musician at the very least– and must be recognized as such. The fact that other musicians or critics may not necessarily have similar experiences of this musical happening can, of course, be brought into a discussion of *what kind of* creativity one favors. But it should not be used in out-defining other people's branches of musical activity as un-creative.

¹³ Berliner, 1994, 216.

Furthermore, the quoted passage hints to the possibility of the *overwhelming* in experiencing creative processes. When encountering “sacred otherness” in innovations in flowing musical improvisation –be it the freshness inside of known stylistic borders, novelty in “playing with” these borders, or innovations in braking them successfully– familiarity and differentiation is dialectically united in growth. The improviser has entered into the music and achieved intimacy, while at the same time transcended what is known and safe in a daring act of creativity. These moments are crucial:

“It is in dramatic movements from formerly mastered phrases to unrehearsed patterns, from commonly transacted physical maneuvers to those outside the body's normal reach or hold, and from familiar frames of reference within compositional forms to uncalculated structural positions, that improvisers typically push the limits of their artistry”.¹⁴

Now, on to the third basic dilemma...

3. Gratification vs. frustration

Without gratification from one's needs being met, there can be no warm feeling of safety. But without challenging encounters with obstacles and resistance, we will not build independence and skills in problem solving. The infant first and foremost has to experience the world as trustworthy. A “warm care received by the infant in response to his needs”¹⁵ is probably also crucial to the building of trustful relations at later stages in life. But at the same time, as Anne-Lise Løvlie puts it: “[W]ithout obstacles the infant becomes unaware of himself as the centre for his own actions”.¹⁶ Thus, the self is built through experiences of limits and challenges.

Furthermore, it is suggested that the ability to conceptualize and come to terms with *deferred* gratification is grounded in the initial feeling of safety and of needs being met. Løvlie talks of an “optimal” frustration; which is a kind of resistance facing the infant in the right amount and at the right time, where the feeling of mastery is developed in an environment of *challenges in a safe terrain*, and where gratification is intensely enjoyed without getting stuck in narcissism.

¹⁴ Ibid., 217.

¹⁵ Løvlie, 1982, 93.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Importantly, “frustration” has a dual meaning here; it is relevant both in the sense of *postponing* gratification and in the sense of *disappointment* or disaster. We are now ready to specify the dialectical theme: Positively, this polarity embraces *sensuous well-being* and *security* through gratification on the one hand, and development through *challenges* and *building of lust over time* on the other. On the dark side, when the polarity is not lived dynamically and the dialectic is frozen, its negative counterpart emerges: On the one hand, a “blind” desire that recognizes neither the passing of time nor the other as a separate entity –that keeps one from achieving the deeper satisfaction based on patience and lust built over time. On the other hand, you get a constantly frustrated being-in-the-world or in the music, where you don’t really take in moments of joy or satisfaction, and where the encounters with problems and challenges fail to bring secure development, because one always moves from one disappointment/dissatisfaction directly to another.

Gratification vs. Frustration			
Frozen dialectics		Dynamic Potential	
“blind desire”, lost in short-sight, unable to build over time	constant frustration, not able to take in and really enjoy satisfaction	development through challenges, building of lust over time	sensuous well-being, security through needs being met

3.1 Disappointments and "musical saves"

Relating this to musical improvisation, we start by considering disappointments in the sense of errors or musical events that are experienced as un-satisfying. Jazz musicians often talk of the challenge in *using* such events constructively. In the art of the moment there is no “undo button” –what you have played is unquestionably there. When you disappoint yourself, it is therefore crucial to be able to transform disappointment into a kind of challenge that can enter into a dynamic dialectical movement toward satisfying totalities. Paul Berliner states that

“[i]mprovisers cannot retrieve their unintended phrases or unsuccessful ‘accidents’. Rather, they react to them immediately, endeavoring to integrate them smoothly into their performances. Mistakes, in particular, they treat as spontaneous compositional problems requiring immediate