

Overriding Actuality: Some Thoughts about Improvisations

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Leonard B. Meyer, a distinguished authority in music theory presents us, in the chapter “The End of Renaissance?” of his book *Music Art and Ideas* (1967), an impressive analysis of a period of around 500 years, where according to the author there was always, in all the inter-human latency, something new to discover. By the time Meyer claimed that we completed this global historic process and that we would face an emergent period in music with the coexistence, during the same historical moment, of a huge variety of aesthetic directions and a plurality of styles.

If we don't consider exclusively the study of the erudite western music tradition, then modernity, this huge vast field where we move, presents such a diversity of music practices and styles as well as scholarship directions, and critic approaches, thus proving the Meyer assumption concisely. The audience, this vague concept more and more difficult to define in its singular form, has suffered a tribalization phenomenon, which is parallel to the multiplication of music practices. Several life styles have also risen in relation to this fact. There are a number of different communities sharing ideologies, a phenomenon that is most clearly visible by their exterior symbols like ways of dressing, hairy styles. This also applies to the music that they consume.

In the continuation of the erudite music traditions, which in western societies is generally referred to as classical music by the whole social, the tribalization phenomenon is equally present, even if it seems less evident. In the erudite music traditions devotions to specific aesthetic orientations are maybe even more radical than in the social areas mentioned above. It is these radical devotions that have led the erudite contemporary music field to be described as a wild archipelago in which 600 tendencies fight by their primacy.

In my daily work as a creative artist (mainly as a performer of contemporary music and improviser) I intensively reflect on these sort of ideas. In order to establish some vision of the future, or at least to my future, I feel a tremendous necessity of rethinking the agents in play, all that has been my scholarship learning path, the vision of the world that was inherent to it and the *doxas*¹ that are always present and incomprehensible to me.

For some years, improvisation in its non-idiomatic form, mainly coming from free jazz and what's called free improvisation (from the late-1950s on) had a great influence on me. It was the beginning of an interest in this area that led me to embrace the subject as a way to understand and to put in practice my creative needs. Also, it

¹ The *Doxas* are basic and immutable principles contrary to experience.

was an essential medium to understand the world where I live, since I found music to be one of the most privileged places to think about reality.

So for this article, I will trace a vision that I have been constructing for some time and that presents some of the core commitments of my musical approach, focusing on a particular practice – improvisation.

In Western societies improvisation has been neglected over the years by performers, theoretic researchers, and perhaps most extremely by scholars. The excessive power of the media in our daily life makes it difficult to become conscientious of the fact that the *things-have-not-always-been-like-that*. This point is the main axis of the story I want to sketch, through an analysis of some of the facts I found preponderant to be able to grasp other possibilities amongst the absolute *actuality* for this practice.

The Focus on Process

Most of the research that I've found in the field of the art and, in the specific case of music, which is my final focus, is centered on *product creativity*: activities that result in objective, ostensible products - like painting, sculptures, musical scores, - which are created over time with unlimited opportunities for revision before their presentation and which remain after the creative act is complete and can be apprehended several times. Theoretic art researchers like psychologists, and art critics ignored improvisational performances over the years in their studies because this practice cannot be perceived as entertained and understood within the sphere of the same analysis tools of the art products discussed above. In the music field, what I found regularly is the presentation of improvisation as a marginal practice to composition or even as a feature of interpretation of composed works.

A small jazz ensemble that starts playing collectively without any script to follow nor a guiding director, or an improvisational theatre in which the actors create during the performance an emergent action/dialogue, are considered practices because of the ephemeral nature of the act and the lack of generation of a permanent product. They have been easy to neglect, or from a certain point of view, difficult to analyze, mainly because in improvisational creativity the creative process *is* the product (Sawyer 2000).

A veritable exception is the recently created discipline ethnomusicology, which's interest in the music of other cultures than the western or western-derived ones, is opening new perspectives in the study of improvisational creative products, allowing us to rethink the methodological approaches of musicology, which bases itself on *documents*. As Bruno Nettl (1998) said, every activity, which leaves little or no historical trace, becomes rather enigmatic, and most of the non-western cultures do not understand any other way of making music than improvising (and in which's society the word 'improvisation' does not even exist.)

Centuries of Notation-dependent Music

The notion of interpretation is relatively recent. It had no currency before the 19th century, largely because of its dependence on the idea of a canonical repertory that

was performed by different artists. Obviously it has acquired increasing importance because of the possibilities of comparison made available through recordings (Davies & Sadie 1980). Before this time in the erudite music tradition usually the composer was also the performer. Many leading musical figures were also known for their prolific improvisation. Actually, the concept of improvisation has been present in the west since the late 15th century (the period in which Western instrumental tablatures first developed) and it was designated to any type, or aspect, of musical performance that was not expressive of the concept of the fixed musical work (Wegman 1980).

The practice of improvisation in the above-mentioned period is a commonly accepted fact. But, if we take a closer look, traditional music improvisation during that time was nothing more than a *fast*, in a sense “*vista production*” composition, or some sort of variation, embellishment or ornamentation of the written material of a score. Improvisation thus stands between composition and interpretation. This shows how traditional understanding of music is coupled with the notation (Karkoschka 1971). As Trevor Wishart suggests, “the priorities of notation do not merely reflect musical priorities – they actually create them.” (Wishart 1985)

Therefore, improvisation will always be seen as fundamentally inferior to composition, a sort of real time composition that could never achieve the mastery of creation (editing and revising without time constraints) at the desk. We need to liberate ourselves from this understanding in order to see the possibilities for making music based on other assumptions or using Wishart’s (1985) concept in our ‘listening experience’: music which is not inferior to composed music but which has its foundations and assumptions in other foundations. Each practice has to be considered in its own accord.

Similarly, Indian and several African or African-derived music practices (e.g. *Vendas* from South Africa), which are also improvised, cannot be compared with old European, or new recent free ensemble improvisations. The aesthetic difference between these practices is obvious and the concept of improvisation (if it exists in their lexicon) is unrelated as well. All these practices have taken completely different destinations in our concept of improvisation. Their aesthetic goals and even their functions are distinct from each other and suggest that the goal of the *improvisation* as a practice has numerous possibilities of solutions and working processes. Furthermore, it also proves that the practice in Western societies can have its own identity and role outside the world of composed music.

The roots of the misunderstanding

The misunderstanding and the non-concise meaning of improvisation in Western societies could be understood by the origin and the development of the concept.

The development of European terms for improvisatory practices began with adverbs and adverbial phrases [...], then continued with verbs and nouns for specific practices or genres (e.g. *sortisare* and *sortisatio*, *ricercare* and *ricercar*), and nouns for agents (e.g. Italian *improvisatore*). Only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have the newer verb

improvise, the noun *improvisation*, and their cognates in other languages been treated as general terms, applicable to a number of practices (through sometimes used as substitute for older terms with a more restricted reference). (Blum 1998, p.36).

The separation of the composer and interpreter in the nineteenth century not only led to the end of a improvisation heritage which had existed for centuries, but also consequently disturbed the implementation of improvisation, because it took interpretation to such high virtuosic level, and led to the inherent path of early childhood education, expertise, and full dedication to the chosen instrument. After years of this development the vicious cycle could not longer be destroyed.

A Western Contemporary Approach to Improvisation

“At present, improvisation is a sequence of negations. If a lot of things happen in register A, for the next few minutes A will be avoided and we shall have B; then has had its outing, it will disappear and we shall have C instead. It is the opposite of what happens in composition, where one combines elements A, B and C sometimes in an extremely complex way.” (Boulez 1976).

In the year of 1976 in an interview undertaken by Celestin Deliège with Pierre Boulez, the latter showed a clear position against (free) improvisation practice, which was in its strongest positions at the time. In the text quoted above, he presented such improvisations as confined, and, again in his own words, as a stereotypical "curve of invention: excitement-relaxation-excitement-relaxation". For Boulez (1976) the complex possibilities of composition were impossible to achieve in real-time improvisation because it would exceed the limits of memory, since the mind is incapable of mixing certain elements. A major composer of the twentieth century shows an opinion common amongst his contemporary composers, who relate this kind of practices to primitive societies as opposed to modern composed notated music which should entail a method from which evolves a resolution of a problem, and an out-coming new solution in every composition. Boulez continues:

“Instrumentalists do not possess invention - otherwise they would be composers [...] True invention entails reflection on problems that in principle have never been posed [...] and reflection upon the act of creation implies an obstacle to be overcome. Instrumentalists are not superhuman, and their response to the phenomenon of invention is normally to manipulate what is stored in memory. They recall what has already been played, in order to manipulate it and transform it.” (Boulez 1976).

Most of these comments here – no matter how polemical, insulting, and culturally blind they may be – are quoted here because they are some of the core commitments of modernistic music, and because most of the contemporary composers counterpoise improvisation with composition in terms of the nature and complexity of the ideas which can be worked with.

The lack complexity of free improvised music claimed by Boulez (1976) is an analysis which is derived completely from his personal stylistic orientation and aesthetic direction and, therefore, a very simple question can be posed: can we use the same analysis tools for both practices? I strongly believe that the answer is an emphatic NO. In order to be able to comprehend and appreciate entirely this practice the necessity of a paradigm replacement is clear.

A parallel discussion to this topic, and most of the times melted into the pointed complexity problem, is how can recent graphic and verbal ways of writing down music be considered in relation to the traditional five-staff system of the musical notation system. By jumping to this issue I intend to cover and clarify both topics under the same exposition.

Some Points of Departure (without a clear destination)

Answer to Boulez (without speaking on his critics)

Around 1950, when several graphic or verbal scores appeared, there were a lot of extreme reactions to this movement inside the music circle. The necessity, during the first half of the last century, of a paradigm replacement, especially in an harmonic sense, led to some composers to present new music systems in order to find a plausible solution for the smooth continuity of music creation. One of the clearest examples of this fact is the statement announced in 1921 by Arnold Schönberg in relation to his dodecaphonic system, who presented the system as a solution to preserve the continuity and hegemony of the German music tradition in the next hundred years. This is just one of several examples that we could mention here. The postwar European reconstruction environment, and the emergent necessity of a "new man" in a social or political view had the same effects in the music domain with a "new music" by several composers.

Even if during this period radical positions were acclaiming or destroying the referred graphic or verbal notation, what is most important for me is to understand whether this notation system is a solution or retreat compared with the traditional music notation system, especially if I make my analysis based on the aforementioned answers. Since "any change in musical thinking will at its beginning will be lost, because the new things cannot be perceived, at first, in their totality as something whole in their own right, rather they will erroneously be put into the old context" (Karkoschka 1971). Both traditional and graphical or verbal ways of writing down the music on paper puts an emphasis in different sound experiences. Pitch and durations does not need to be primary parameters in musical organization as we see in western music traditions (Wishart 1985). This lattice-oriented notation process (even in the most highly notation-structure music) excludes some fundamental aspects of sound experience, which are not conventionally notable (e.g. most of the motor aspects of the performance, or Boulez states "it's often difficult to find codified theories for dynamics and timbre" (Boulez 1971)). Nowadays graphical and verbal ways to notate music, took a natural developing patch, and they coexist with other notations systems in the same work/music score. Even the 5-stave system incorporates some visual elements at the same time. These graphical systems are being exploited towards their main attribute, which is the strong psychological power of communication.

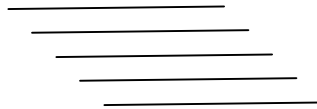
The true invention so many times seen as the route for the successful result that improvisers want to achieve in their discourse, is a hard discussion field, since a full understanding of the mechanisms that involve this kind of mental processes can be covered by a wide range of specialist in the most diverse areas. I will just give a short aesthetical and musicological insight about the question, in the form of some speculative queries. Considering these circumstances, some radical questions must be posed:

Do we need to have new things in music? (I would say yes, and immediately erase this sentence, but... What is "new"?).

Is there only one possible path?

I started this article by expressing the necessity of understanding what is the reality of the world we live in. I'm at least quite sure of one thing: the agents in this play are changing, and very fast. Is not my intention to make here any sort of propaganda about which is the path we should take, therefore, it is my intention to leave the readers of these pages at a point of departure. However, we must still pursue our experience and acts with some creative angst.

Gilberto Bernardes is a Portuguese saxophonist that is mainly engaged with the performance of contemporary music. He splits his activities in several projects from chamber music to multimedia performances with a special focus in improvisation and live-electronic music (theme that is developing as a master research in the Conservatory of Amsterdam). He counts with several presentations in Europe (especially Portugal, Spain France and Netherlands).



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