

ARCANA IV

MUSICIANS ON MUSIC

EDITED BY
JOHN ZORN

HIPS ROAD 2009

IMPROVISATION:
TERMS AND CONDITIONS

VIJAY IYER

Improvisation

If we define it provisionally as real-time decisions and actions, then what *isn't* improvisation? We're improvising from the moment we acquire sensation and motion—you could say it's prenatal. The process by which we acquire cognition—embodied action, situated in an information-rich environment—is improvisation itself. There is a fundamental identity between improvisation and what we more generally call "experience." They are one and the same. Life begins at improvisation. Life is a sustained improvisational interaction with the structures of the world, of the body, of culture. Improvisation is a condition of being alive.

Composition and Performance

Exceptions to the above immediately come to mind: for example, the composition of works to be performed to the composer's exact specifications, and the performance of such compositions. This composer-performer bifurcation is among the more peculiar hierarchical differentiations we have in culture. That statement is not meant to invalidate or pass judgment on the art of composition (I'm a composer, after all). However, this claim does reposition composition as highly unordinary in the scheme of things.

This phenomenon—the micromanipulation of the actions of others at the behest of a single composer-ego—is accepted unproblematically as a structural necessity of music, dance, and theater in the West. We swear by this order of things, so much so that we tend to view improvisation as a rare and dangerous behavior. We tend to forget that the performance of fully composed works is an "extreme occasion," to use Edward Said's phrase, whereas improvisation is not only everyday and ubiquitous, but moreover an utterly central phenomenon in our lives, fundamental to who

and what we are.

A recurring conceit among classical musicians, critics, and listeners is that the best performances of composed works are those that “sound improvised.” (What, I always wonder, are the hallmarks of that sound? What exactly does improvisation sound like and how do we know that it’s occurring? The short answer, it seems to me, is that we don’t; more on this below.) We make similar demands of actors, that utterances should appear unscripted, as though the characters just decided to say those words in that moment.

And yet the extreme occasion of (classical) performance is always one in which we know every gesture, word, and sound to be scripted, sculpted, premeditated, endlessly rehearsed and precisely timed. We know all this to be true, and yet we want to pretend not to know; we want to suspend our disbelief. We crave the unpremeditated, and we construct elaborate, exacting rituals of performance to access fleeting sensations of spontaneity.

Composing for Improvisers

Composing for improvisers differs from the kind of composing described above. Where performers need scripts, improvisers need stimuli and constraints. Composing for improvisers becomes a kind of architecture: the construction of spaces that frame, enable, and contextualize human action, without overspecifying these actions. The composer becomes instead an architect of environments, a contriver of situations. Relinquishing more levels of control to the improvisers, this situational architect loses the traditional composer’s centrality, but is rewarded with an improvised expansion of the music beyond its original design.

Improvising Against the Composer

It seems that the main reason for the scarcity of improvisation in the concert-music world is that the culture that separates composer from performer also maintains and polices that separation. Classical performers are trained to fear improvisation and to place the composer’s “intent” on a pedestal. Composers are taught to mistrust the improvisational input of others and to be extremely possessive of their output.

It feels like an anxiety, this systematic exclusion of the basic human act of improvisation. We should work to unravel this stifling order of things. Why shouldn't performers "liberate" compositions from the tyrannical micromanagement of composers? Why not work with composed material not as a closed system, but as an open text through which to express/explore something else?

Of course, this has gone on for a long time. Early jazz musicians commandeered pre-existing Tin Pan Alley songs as vehicles for improvisation. The point wasn't to worship those songs or their authors, but rather to turn the songs into something they weren't. The improvisers worked not with the songs themselves but with their underlying architecture, finding new ways to navigate through these hidden forms, subverting and undoing them.

An improviser develops an analytical take on a composition's contents in order to improvise against it, to turn the composition against itself and against its composer. Improvising against (or, at the very least, "not with") the composer becomes a path towards discovery—not of the composer's intent (which is a useless concept), but of musical possibility.

The "Whether" Question

It is common to ask "whether" a musical act was "truly" improvised. For example, an anxious composer will decry improvisation as untrustworthy, claiming that it's impossible to improvise something really original, and alleging that an improviser is just selecting from a repertoire of canned mini-routines. Such claims both deny the possibility of real-time invention and place unreasonable demands for newness on the situation. But they also miss the point. It's the real-time nature that has meaning. It's not just the fact that those sounds appeared in the music; it's that someone chose to make those sounds at that moment.

Another complicating factor is that there's nothing inherent in musical improvisation that "sounds" improvised. It's easier to identify things that "sound composed": ensemble synchronies and unisons, very difficult to achieve spontaneously, typically signal to a listener that something was planned. In talking about improvisation, witnesses tend to invoke performers' body language, eye contact, visual cues, or of so-called "mistakes" to prove that these acts were (or were not) spontaneous. But short of such things (which are not essential attributes of improvisation) it seems

awfully difficult to pinpoint improvisation as such.

There are reliable attributes of a specific improvised idiom—culturally specific principles of variation, parameters of expression, and choices to be made—but nothing in the sound of a musical action that announces, “Yes, I was ‘authentically’ improvised! You can tell just by hearing me... I came into existence in the moment that you heard me. It was only just decided that I should exist. My creator chose me over all the options within reach at that time.” And so on *ad absurdum*.

Listeners often want to decode the level of real-time agency in what they just heard, so they tend to ask questions like, “What percentage of that was improvised?” This would seem to suggest that, at least to the uninitiated, it’s impossible to know just from listening. And if this is indeed the case, then how does anyone ever really know? There’s certainly no point in asking what was “intended” in an improvisation, or what an improviser was “thinking” at that moment.

And we still have that “impression” of improvisation discussed earlier, that improvised “quality” that is supposedly conjured by the best classical performers. (It is also common, conversely, to praise improvisations for the apparent presence of compositional elements: motivic developments, a “natural” arc, and so on.) If a listener can knowingly allow himself to believe that a fully composed work has just been improvised into existence, or that an improvisation was instead composed, then of what use is the distinction at all?

But it is a valuable and meaningful distinction. It brings us to a central paradox: the drama of improvised music involves the understanding that those sounds were chosen and deployed at that moment by those people. And yet, you cannot tell this to be true just by listening; you have to already know that this is happening. It follows that you only really know by referring to something beyond the sound.

Improvisation as a Condition

What I submit (after George Lewis and others) is that we agree to understand improvisation not as a quality but as a condition. Muhal Richard Abrams recently provided an activist definition of improvisation as “a human response to necessity.” If we accept the ubiquity and centrality of improvisation in our lives, and if we also accept its contingent, fragile, unknowable status, then we must purposefully frame improvisation as our

very state of being, our particular stance toward the world. Improvisation is our *hexis*: the position we hold ourselves in while taking action. Or, improvisation is simply what we do when we must do something; necessity is its mother.

Improvisation as a technique may be magnified or suppressed in various forms of music, but improvisation as a condition is always with us. We all know exactly what it feels like because we are all always doing it. Is "improvisedness" audible? It doesn't matter. To paraphrase Peter Falk's character in *Wings of Desire*: I can't hear it, but I know it's there.