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Marcel Cobussen

IMPROVISATION. AN ANNOTATED INVENTORY

Abstract: Using a concrete musical experience, the performance of a jazz concert, as inspiration, this essay considers several agents and factors at work in the process of musical improvisation. The main agents: the musicians, their instruments, the audience. Some factors connecting those agents: interaction, listening, freedom, corporeality, resistance, play, reflection-in-action, creativity, fear, courage, beginning, and ending. The essay consists of short meditations, aphorisms, on each of those (f)actors. Musical examples are taken primarily from the jazz world; the theoretical background builds upon poststructuralist philosophers such as Derrida and Deleuze as well as jazz scholars, such as Ingrid Monson, Daniel Fischlin, and Ajay Heble, emphasizing the social aspect of improvisation.

Key words: interaction, listening, freedom, corporeality, resistance, play, reflection-in-action, creativity.

Imagine a concert hall in a mid-sized town in the south of The Netherlands. We are playing jazz standards for some twenty people: ‘All the Things You Are’, ‘Body and Soul’, ‘Wave’, ‘Just Friends’ – numbers like that. We, that is, a drummer, a bass player, a tenor saxophonist who also plays the clarinet, and me on piano. We are having fun, smiling a lot when we look at each other, sometimes actually bursting out in laughter. We’re quite good friends, playing together for more than ten years now.

I am involved in a duet/duel with the drummer, playing a polyphonic invention based on the first five notes of ‘Round Midnight’, *B-flat – E-flat – F – B-flat – G-flat*. The drummer either accompanies my melodic meanderings with a soft rustling of his brushes on the cymbals and stands, or disrupts it with loud strokes on the toms and the wooden floor. After coming to an interim climax – the drummer playing heavy breaks and me pressing wide clusters – which I suddenly signal to a stop with a nod of my head, bass and sax take over, playing vague reminiscences of the main theme in search for its core, its skeleton. This slowly gives way to a long sax solo on one single chord, *A Minor 7*, ending up in a gloomy and noisy soundscape played by the four of us. Duration: 17’54’.

Several weeks later I remember this gig, sitting behind a virgin computer screen that should ultimately be filled with some more or less interesting observations regarding improvisation. *What* to write about improvisation? *How* to write about it? My thoughts wander off to the performance in Southern Holland, and I decide to use it as a point of departure for this essay. Not that it makes my writing any easier: trying to describe as accurately as possible what was going on during that concert – musically, but also on a social and perhaps even an ethical level – seems to be an impossible task. At last I come up with the idea to type in

some keywords that I consider relevant when discussing improvisation. The list is arbitrary, far from complete, the added annotations rudimentary and aphoristic. However, it perhaps opens a space for some reflection, possibly for participation from you, the reader, that is, for adding other entries, following or criticizing my thoughts. In other words, one might improvise on the given material, a mental improvisation, constructing new lines of flight.

1. Beginning¹

When does an improvisation start? In being ready? In breaking the silence in order to tune your instrument once more or to establish contact with its sound? Also weighing in is the question as to who will start or whether everyone will strike up simultaneously. Before the actual playing begins there is already an inaudible play of negotiating and arranging going on. Before the actual playing, ‘it’ has already begun.

Jacques Derrida wonders if it is at all possible to start an improvisation. In an interview he states that, even when one improvises, one ventriloquizes, repeating the schemas and languages already in existence. A great number of prescriptions are already preprogrammed. So, one cannot play whatever one wants; one is obliged more or less to continue the stereotypical discourse. These prescriptions inhibit the ability to ever really start improvising.² In other words, every beginning has always already begun.

However, another approach is possible. Perhaps there are only beginnings, only onsets. Improvisers must always begin anew. But this concept of beginning should not be considered equivalent to an origin. Derrida’s statement makes such an equation impossible. Thus, no *tabula rasa*, but the possibility to take up an interrupted line, to join a segment to a broken line.³ Improvisation as deterritorialization: and ... and ... and ..., that is, always between beginning and (never) ending. With origins erased and conclusions never arrived at, improvisation is left to roam in the middle. Improvisers must always start again, start again from the middle.

And somewhere in this middle, a musician starts to play. He posits a firm statement, seeking to coerce the others into following him or to, at least, clearly relate their contribution to his beginning. Or, he opens a space in which the music can unfold, a cautious exploration of the musical field. This is a making way for his fellow musicians, more like an invitation to the others to participate. The beginning might also be etude-like, motorial, rhythmical: a lick or a riff. Immediately there are dynamics, drive, flow. This beginning often serves as a warming up, a moment for making contact with the others, the instrument, the space and its

¹ I owe a great deal of this reflection to a note from Bart van Rosmalen, researcher at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague, The Netherlands.

² Derrida in: Dick Kirby & Amy Ziering Kofman, *Derrida*, Jane Doe Films Production (DVD), 2002.

³ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues II*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, 39.

acoustics. Perhaps the musician starts with a short phrase followed by a silence: I say ‘a’, you are invited to say ‘b’. Improvisation turning into communication, into a conversation in which the roles can shift as well. It is about confirmation but also about denying or ignoring, for example when the responding musician enters with something completely different. Begin with indefinite creaking, then silence, then perhaps some squealing to disrupt obvious musical sounds or phrases and to break expectations and conventions, cause confusion. Or, begin in the middle in order to be with and in the music right away. The outside world is immediately excluded; No warming up, but coming directly to the point.

2. Interaction and communication

Improvisation is about interaction. Musicians do not improvise in isolation. Every performance is as much about what happens between musicians as it is about each musician’s individual achievements. The act of improvising is an encounter between human beings realized through the medium of sound. Like all human encounters, it also takes place in a physical and a social setting, and those, too, need to be taken into account when considering what improvisation sets into motion. Of course, all music-making situations involve the aspect of interaction: the members of a classical orchestra or string quartet interact in order to become a machine, in order to sound as one body. However, compared to improvised music – although the difference is gradual and not absolute – the frame is tighter; more features are adhered to, determined beforehand.

Every improviser experiences the link between the production of music during the course of a performance and the development of emotional bonds with other musicians through musical risk, vulnerability, and trust.⁴ In the same interactive moment, the social and the musical are thus connected: A moment of community is established through the simultaneous interaction of musical sounds, people, and their musical and cultural histories.⁵ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that players often reflect upon improvisation using interpersonal rather than musical terms (for example, the use of the term *feeling* as a synonym for *groove*).

In *The Other Side of Nowhere*, Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble even go so far as to assert that ‘improvisation is less about original acts of individual self-creation than about an ongoing process of

⁴ Cf. Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz. The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1994; Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something. Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

⁵ In *Musicking*, Christopher Small makes clear that in fact all music-making is actually an experience of interpersonal relationships: ‘If we think about music primarily as action than as thing and about the action as concerned with relationships, then we see that whatever meaning a musical work has lies in the relationships that are brought into existence when the piece is performed.’ In: Christopher Small, *Musicking. The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1998, 137-8. However, later in his book he states that, in general, playing from a score places the musicians at a greater distance from one another socially than does improvising. Improvisation leaves the performing musicians some latitude to respond directly to one another’s actions. It leaves them free to relate to each other much more closely; in fact, it demands that they do so. *Ibid.*, 195.

community building.⁶ Even more important than technical skills is the ability to listen and respond (and to encourage others to do the same) in order to feel, literally, in tune with the others, to feel both a musical and social unity. Improvising may thus be regarded not only as an opportunity for breaking through previous technical or musical limitations; it also opens a space for the improvisers to gain new (mutual) insights through the potential of multiple dialogues with others. As Jason Stanyek puts it, ‘Improvisation becomes not simply a spontaneous action, but an empathetic, hermeneutic interaction that is constituted upon a recognition of the powerful synergy and responsibility that arises when humans with multiple perspectives come together to make music.’⁷

Improvisation, considered as a form of musical interaction, puts a para-verbal social discourse into practice. What is happening during improvisations can be called an *intermusical relationship*, i.e., a socio-musical process that occurs primarily through sounds, rather than words.

3. Resistance

Thinking about interaction perhaps primarily means to think about relationships between humans. It is, however, necessary to consider another kind of relation, namely the interaction between a musician and his instrument. More so than in the playing of predetermined music, in improvising the musicians are invited to (re)discover the specific characteristics of their instrument, its unique and perhaps unexpected possibilities. Improvisation offers musicians an opportunity to explore new ways of making contact with the instrument during a performance.⁸ It is said that pianist Cecil Taylor tests his instrument in the first parts of his performance in order to reveal its weak and strong sides. He attempts, as it were, to worm out its secrets.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a musical instrument can be compared to a blind person’s stick. It has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself. The blind person is transplanted into the stick, or conversely, he incorporates it into the bulk of his own body.⁹ Body and instrument almost merge. The stick as well as the musical instrument become a bodily auxiliary, extensions of the physical synthesis: my instrument *is* me. Between the score and the actual sounding notes, so direct a relation is established that the musician’s body and his instrument are merely the medium of this relationship.¹⁰ The perceptual boundaries distinguishing the bodies (and minds) making music and the instruments through which that music is heard and articulated seem to blur.

⁶ Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (eds), *The Other Side of Nowhere. Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2004, 17.

⁷ Stanyek quoted in *Ibid.*, 95.

⁸ Of course, the aesthetic results of such new encounters might occasionally be disappointing; but even when the audible output is not so satisfying, the mere fact of being present at a musical experiment may be.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962, 165-6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

However, there is something to be said in response to this ostensibly unproblematic interaction between a musician and his instrument. The example of Cecil Taylor shows that there is something more going on. According to Aden Evens ‘the instrument does not mediate and the musician does not strive to make it disappear into immediacy; the aim is not to bring musician and music into a contact without mediary. The material instrument contributes its creative potential to the act of music-making, a potential held in the materiality of its resistance.’¹¹ In short, the instrument cooperates by resisting; there is a friction between the hard surface of the instrument and the soft flesh of the musician: callusless fingertips hitting ivory and wood. Taylor’s piano does not disappear, for it exerts itself against him. The instrument does not simply yield passively to the desires of the musician. Likewise, he does not just bend it to his own will with no consideration to the resistance it offers. Rather musician and instrument meet, each drawing the other out of its native territory.¹² Taylor interacts with the piano, and through this interaction both agents alter. This interaction, continuously de- and reterritorializing identities, is an integral part of any improvisation.

4. Freedom

Musical improvisation is about freedom. Freedom necessarily turns into improvisation when certain details not notated in a score must be filled in by the musician. ‘No performance is possible without some form and degree of improvisation.’¹³ No score is able to cover all details concerning tempi, timbre, attack, dynamics, etc. In other words, there is no music-making without at least a minimum of leeway for improvisation, that is, a certain amount of freedom for a musician. Freedom and improvisation are always already part of performing music; they are not exclusive features of (free) jazz or non-notated music, though these musics might emphasize their roles more. However, even free improvised music operates with many rules and conventions; like every other musical style, it has its various traditions to which its performers somehow need to relate. And exactly behind this ‘somehow’, freedom hides again. Every musician – every performer as well as every composer – modifies the tradition, the rules and expectations, by augmentation and transformation; the tradition is itself improvised upon.¹⁴ The freedom at work in musical improvisation involves a kind of reworking of something that already exists.¹⁵

¹¹ Aden Evens, *Sound Ideas. Music, Machines, and Experience*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 161-2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 160

¹³ Bruce Ellis Benson, (2003) *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue. A Phenomenology of Music*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 26.

¹⁴ In *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, Bruce Ellis Benson sees the compositional process as a kind of improvisational process: ‘one begins with certain ideas or themes and improvises on them until something results.’ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

As such, improvisation oscillates between freedom and a lack of freedom. As Fischlin and Heble state: ‘Improvisations invoke the problem of the relationship of the improvisation to the structure in which it occurs.’¹⁶ Improvisation addresses the exigencies of balancing a necessary organizing action against a freedom of choice which varies greatly among different kinds of music. Improvisation precisely locates this dialectic and offers multiple possibilities for resolving this paradox.¹⁷ When talking about his experiences with the Miles Davis Quintet in the early 1960s, Herbie Hancock (therefore) defined improvisation as ‘controlled freedom.’

5. Listening

Closely connected to interaction is listening. In improvised music the ability to listen carefully is pivotal as to whether a specific musical event is picked up on and developed (or disregarded). Extraordinary aural attention is required in order to react immediately and creatively to changing musical events. In other words, the constant process of decision-making that takes place during an improvisation is for a large part based on the listening attitude of the musicians involved.¹⁸

What this means is perfectly audible in the so-called ‘open bars technique’ of the famous (second) Miles Davis quintet, featuring Wayne Shorter (sax), Herbie Hancock (piano), Ron Carter (bass), and Tony Williams (drums). Here, events take place *on cue* instead of being regulated by preconceived *chorus* lengths. The soloist is not necessarily restrained by a predetermined harmonic and metrical frame by means of which the rhythm section keeps him within the composition’s borders. Rather, the accompanists follow – through significant bits of aural information – the soloist’s capricious splurges. Bebop and post-bops’ stable structures are replaced by melodic and rhythmical explorations in which the soloist takes the lead. Fragmented melodies only faintly evoke relatively simple tunes such as ‘Footprints’ and ‘Gingerbread Boy’. Well-known harmonic progressions are discarded and replaced by single-chord soundscapes. The groove is dismantled through time changes, tempo ambiguity and rubatos.¹⁹ This is music of the here and now, in which the players’ ears determine the direction and outcome of the music.

Listening is often referred to in a passive sense, as a kind of reticence, silent and reserved. ‘The other side of language’, Italian philosopher Gemma Corradi Fiumara calls it. However, for musicians, listening is primarily active; listening (also) means being able to respond to and participate in musical opportunities.

¹⁶ Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, op. cit., 32.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ingrid Monson, op. cit., 43.

¹⁹ Chris Smith, ‘A Sense of the Possible: Miles Davis and the Semiotics of Improvised Performance,’ in: Bruno Nettl (ed), *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 263-9.

‘[Listening] assumes the responsibility of taking its place in the interplay of desire,’ Roland Barthes writes.²⁰ Improvising musicians cannot listen without taking into themselves the sounds that they hear. Their listening always operates on both sides of the active-passive or productive-receptive dichotomy.²¹ Listening means participating; it is a prerequisite for any significant musical action and contribution. However, cautious and attentive listening does not guarantee complaisance. It may induce oppositional reactions as well: rejection and destruction of proposed and already launched material. By taking unexpected turns, Miles forced his fellow musicians to perpetually keep their ears open.²²

6. Fear and courage

What comes to mind here is the story of a middle-aged piano student of mine from the music school where I worked as a jazz teacher. After years of playing notated (classical) music, he wanted to learn to improvise. My refusal to teach him any licks or tricks made him quite nervous and insecure. But he persevered. And more than that: he told me how, due to these improvisation lessons, his attitude towards his work, his colleagues and the inevitable Monday morning meetings had changed. He managed to question and alter basic things such as the seating arrangement at the conference table and the agenda, thereby causing confusion (and even irritation). But he persevered.

Improvisation means to expose oneself. The possibility of failure is an intrinsic element of all improvised music. In *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*, drama teacher turned self-help advisor Patricia Ryan Madson compares improvising to riding a bicycle: you always feel a little off-balance and insecure, but in the act of balancing you come alive. Saying yes to the unknown and unforeseen will open up new worlds: not-knowing is perhaps even a precondition for any creative process. If you improvise, Madson says, you will make more mistakes, but you will also laugh more often and have more adventures. The systems we put in place to keep us secure are often keeping us from our more creative selves. The business mind is mostly looking for a formula to latch onto that will provide tried-and-true ways of solving problems. But that can block fresh insights for approaching a situation.

Try it out, make mistakes, laugh, play, and try again. Improvising means affirming fear and saying yes to insecurity. Allow yourself to be afraid instead of trying to preclude it. Improviser and cofounder of the

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, 259.

²¹ Steven Connor, ‘Edison’s Teeth: Touching Hearing,’ in: Veit Erlmann (ed), *Hearing Cultures. Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*, New York, Berg, 2005, 163.

²² Active listening on the part of the audience very often greatly influences the development of a live improvisation. In other words, I am neither forgetting nor underestimating the important role of the public in the field of musical improvisation. However, space is lacking here to do justice to this topic.

AMM ensemble Eddie Prévost states that risk and doubt are two crucial tools for the improvising musician.²³ Music is perhaps a perfect field in which to experiment with these qualities.

7. Play

Improvisation is about play. Again, the difference between improvisation and the performance of notated or otherwise encoded music is only a matter of degree: all music-making has an element of play in it. The musical field is a playground. Game pieces like John Zorn's *Cobra* are proof. In their enactment, the boundary between conductor and quizmaster blurs. Zorn stands before the ensemble as an emcee, holding up colored cardboards with various (cryptic) clues. As prompter, he combines the unpredictability of improvisations with the speed and structure of conducted music. Zorn's rules operate in the same way as the rules in soccer: they regulate the behavior of the players without determining the final result. As a composer, Zorn stipulates the structure while the proper content (the sounds) appears at the expense of the musicians²⁴: 'The players determine the piece to the same extent as the piece determines the players,' Zorn says. *Cobra* is more than music; it is a play, it is theater. *Cobra* is music to be watched as well as listened to.

Musical performance and play; the terms are often used interchangeably. Play, says Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, lies 'outside the reasonableness of practical life; it has nothing to do with necessity or utility, duty or truth. All this is equally true of music.'²⁵ Play is a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition of its own, an intermezzo in our daily lives. However, although play exceeds duty, it demands order, albeit according to rules freely accepted. Deviation from these rules 'spoils the game.'

As stated above, all music is permeated by play. Improvised music, however, may engage us with a special kind of play. Here, sometimes, the rules are not made prior to the music; they are invented concurrently with the music, constructed during the play and subject to change at any time. Improvisation takes place within certain boundaries, but these boundaries are not incontestable. The game of improvisation permits provocations, re-adjustments, alterations. Listen to Misha Mengelberg: by ignoring cues or deliberately misinterpreting them, by cutting off solos in order to take off in a new direction, by creating situations his fellow musicians are not comfortable with, he disrupts any routine. Performing as well as editing recorded material is for him playing games for which the rules still need to be invented. 'I'm interested in that: to put sticks into the spokes of all wheels,' he admits.²⁶

²³ Prévost in: Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, op. cit., 355.

²⁴ In *Cobra*, the prompter, however, has no full control over the structure. In the first place, he is encouraged to regulate initiatives taken by the musicians themselves. They are also allowed to give cues, although it is up to the prompter in the end to comply with their proposals or to ignore them. Secondly, each musician has the possibility of acting as a guerilla, that is, to disregard any sign from the prompter for a certain amount of time.

²⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, London, Paladin, 1970, 182.

²⁶ Kevin Whitehead, *New Dutch Swing*, New York, Billboard Books, 1999, 149.

8. Creativity

Improvisation, regarded as the presentation of something original, seems closely connected to concepts of creativity.²⁷ According to Vincent Tomas, creativity can be understood as the refusal to follow presupposed rules, forming a counterpoint to goal-oriented purposive activities. In so doing, a creative musician is the originator of the rules he implicitly follows while he is playing. The creative artist does not begin with a clear plan of the final results of his work. However, this does not mean that he cannot adjudge certain directions not to be the right ones: he has a sense that his activity is heading somewhere.²⁸ Tomas' idea of creativity thus consists of an appropriate balance between an intuitive, imaginative dimension (inspiration) and elements of technical, rational, and critical control (elaboration). The creative artist can change the direction of his exploration in response to particular circumstances that have arisen at a certain stage in the artistic process. In other words, the rules are made up as he goes along.

The description of creativity suggested by Tomas is almost a blueprint of what might be considered an apt definition of the concept of musical improvisation: at work in a space where inspiration and control function as important frames, the ideal-typical improviser is 'inventing the message at the same time as the language' and he might change certain musical choices in relationship to what his co-musicians are doing (this is what Ingrid Monson calls 'the ongoing process of decision making' in the act of making music).²⁹ 'Finding, encountering, stealing instead of regulating, recognizing and judging.'³⁰

Between inspiration and control: the one name that surfaces immediately in my thoughts is Keith Jarrett.³¹ He often states that, in order to connect with music, an improviser needs to be familiar with ecstasy. The album *Spirits*, for example, is pervaded by a benign atmosphere of prayer, incantation, and meditation. According to Jarrett, improvisation is a 'blazing forth' of a 'Divine Will' (Divine if only because of its greater-than-the-individual force). He regards himself as a willing victim of a message or impulse quite beyond his own human ideas and thoughts.³² However, this testimony of inspiration is counterbalanced by an excellent technique. His creative impulses – wherever they come from – are in a way presented (or perhaps only possible) through a filter of bodily control. Could one say that if his mind is not so much directing and organizing the music – in Jarrett's rapt state of total inspiration the Self seems forgotten – his fingers, arms,

²⁷ In 'Innovation, Choice, and the History of Music' Leonard Meyer writes that what is commonly considered the most important facet of creativity is the invention of novelty.

²⁸ Vincent Tomas, 'Creativity in Art,' in: Morris Weitz (ed), *Problems in Aesthetics: an Introductory Book of Readings*, London, Macmillan, 1970, 374-6.

²⁹ Jacques Attali, *Noise: the Political Economy of Music*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985, 134.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze in *Dialogues II* (p. 8).

³¹ This association is probably reinforced by one sentence in the Tomas essay: 'There is an ancient tradition that the creative artist is a man possessed.' Vincent Tomas, op. cit., 378.

³² Ian Carr, *Keith Jarrett. The Man and His Music*, London, Grafton Books, 1991, 189.

feet, legs, back, shoulders, and hips are steering this inspiration in the right direction? Creativity is also a matter of corporeality.

9. Corporeality

Improvisation is never without pre-established or possibility conditions. If I bang my fist on the piano, the sound might not be completely predictable before the event. But the piano certainly existed before, as did the shape and weight of my hand. This combination of physical factors, the tangible component of the possibility conditions, might be thought of negatively as a limit, but is really a necessary condition for any creative act.³³ Creativity is always somehow influenced by bodily possibilities.

Improvising – making music in general – is an activity performed by bodies. In many avant-garde practices, the artist's body shifts from the periphery to the center of attention. John Coltrane's later work, for example, is bodily music, not representing ecstasy but presenting it; the body transformed into an energy field. Coltrane hazards his body, not through drugs this time but through music.³⁴ From *A Love Supreme* on, his improvisations become violence, laceration, torture, incapacity, abyss; through the sax we experience his body, which, although highly trained (I'm especially referring to intensification and further development of his 'sheets of sound' period of the late 50's), is almost unable to express his musical ideas.³⁵ His extremely fast runs create sound surfaces, revealing the corps of sound or exploring textures rather than forming consciously organized melodies. Energy Music as opposed to Head Music, Kodwo Eshun calls it, music not so much listened to as withstood.³⁶ Coltrane's music moves from intentionalities to intensities. Paradoxical here is that technique no longer functions as a disciplining element; instead, it becomes a liberating element, making it possible to transgress certain conventions of playing. So it is only by means of his corporeal exercises, that Coltrane can experience musical ideas which he cannot disclose because of his bodily limits.

Through Coltrane's ecstatic playing we can discover that making music is not always a matter of the mind controlling the body. His body *knows* what to do and when to do it. It does not need to be corralled by the brains. Coltrane is one performer who helps us get acquainted with embodied knowledge.

³³ Brian Hulse, 'Improvisation as an Analytic Category', *The Dutch Journal for Music Theory* 13/1, 2008, 11.

³⁴ Compare Coltrane to Arthur Rubinstein. Performances of the latter were usually staged very soberly in order to let the music speak for itself. Rubinstein sits, dressed in black, almost motionless and expressionless behind the piano, as if his body should be ignored, perhaps negated, as much as possible.

³⁵ In *Thresholds. Rethinking Spirituality Through Music* (Ashgate, 2008) I connect this bodily aspect of Coltrane's music to his spiritual quest.

³⁶ Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, London, Quartet Books, 1998, 170.

10. Reflection-in-action

Arising from this short reflection on corporeality is the realization that improvisation is not established solely through mental cognition. Just as important is what can be called *praktognosia*, knowledge which results from acting itself and which reveals itself in the acting. ‘My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my symbolic or objectifying function,’ Merleau-Ponty writes.³⁷ He calls this practical, corporeal knowledge *habitude*. *Habitude* is a way of understanding the world through the body; it is ‘knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort.’³⁸

Merleau-Ponty’s insights, however, do not exclude the possibility that improvisers often think about what they are doing, sometimes even while doing it. This kind of knowing, however, does not stem from a prior intellectual operation. Improvisation includes thinking about doing something while doing it, about know-how implicit in the performance. Improvisers make on-the-spot adjustments to the sounds they hear; they feel where the music is going. According to Donald Schön they are ‘reflecting-in-action on the music they are collectively making and on their individual contributions to it, thinking what they are doing and, in the process, evolving their way of doing it.’³⁹ Why is this reflection-in-action especially related to improvisation? Schön continues: ‘Much reflection-in-action hinges on the experience of surprise. When intuitive, spontaneous performance yields nothing more than the results expected for it, then we tend to not to think about it. But when intuitive performance leads to surprises, pleasing and promising or unwanted, we may respond by reflecting-in-action.’⁴⁰

At the risk of making a fundamental partition between improvised and composed music, Schön claims that the chances of being surprised are higher with performing improvisations than with performing pre-composed music. Habit suppresses the original bodily sensation and allows the element of knowledge to disappear.⁴¹ Improvisation – at least in its most idealized form – constantly defers habit formation.

11. Ending

When does an improvisation end? In being ready? In allowing silence (that is, random noises) to regain its temporarily lost territory? What is also pertinent is the question as to who will end (cadenza) or whether all performers will stop simultaneously (for example, after playing a riff). Will there be a fade-out, long tones held together until the piece seems over, a sudden stop? These and other possibilities are often negotiated and arranged during the actual improvisation.

³⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, 162.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁹ Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, New York: Basic Books, 1983, 56.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ French philosopher Maine de Biran already came to the same conclusion in the 18th century.

According to John Corbett, ending is the single place in an improvisation where something consensual must occur. Even if improvisers have been playing antagonistically for an entire piece, they must in the end decide to agree that the piece is over. or at least decide to stop playing.⁴² As such, an ending is contrary to the very nature of improvisation. Ending means reterritorializing instead of invoking new lines of flight. So, let's try not to stop...

САЖЕТАК

Марсел Кобусен

ИМПРОВИЗАЦИЈА. ЗАБЕЛЕЖЕНИ ИНВЕНТАР

Истраживање како писати о/око импровизације у цез музици. Шта писати о/око импровизације у цез музици. Како избећи бављење искључиво цез солима, анализирати их у терминима музичке теорије. Како рећи нешто друго о/око импровизације, нешто што не занемарује вишеструке везе и процесе који се одигравају у том простору импровизовања.

Замислите цез концерт, мејнстрим или фри цез концерт који се одиграва било где у свету. Замислите музичаре како свирају, публику која слуша, инструменте који звуче. Замислите основне улоге: солисту, клавир, бубањ, бас. Замислите основне музичке функције: солирање, комповање, задржавање (или суспензију) времена. Замислите такође интеракцијске алтернативе које су на располагању музичарима: имитација, позив и одговор, ходајуће, рифоване, задржане педалне тачке, итд.

У суштини, доживљај таквог концерта, било у улози музичара, било у улози слушаоца, доводи до различитих алтернативних уписивања: како импровизација почиње? Како се завршава? Како се музичари односе једни према другима, публици и својим инструментима? Како можемо мислити однос између импровизације и креативности? Шта са елементом игре, присутним у сваком стварању музике? И, како се бавити темама попут мишљења-у-радњи, телесности и прећутног знања – тако важним за импровизацију, но тако тешким за теоретисање? Ова и нека друга питања покренута су у неколико кратких медитација, од којих свака прилази импровизација из различитог, па ипак блиског, угла.

⁴² Corbett in Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble, op. cit., 391.