

INTRODUCTION

In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, the famous Parisian amateur detective C. Auguste Dupin helps the Prefect of the Police to find a stolen letter, the contents of which – if revealed – would be highly compromising. The letter has been thieved from the Queen and the perpetrator is a certain Minister D., now blackmailing the Queen over its return. The police have searched D.'s abode but found nothing, despite having brought into action all permitted means. They have even checked in chair and table legs, under carpets, and behind the wallpaper.

When they meet again after a month, Dupin hands over the letter to the astonished Prefect, receiving a 50,000 franc reward. How did Dupin find a letter which the police were not able to trace? Dupin explains that while the police were very competent, they underestimated the Minister's cunning. D. knew that the police detectives would assume that the blackmailer would conceal the letter in an elaborate hiding place. Realizing this, D. 'hid' the letter in plain sight in a cheap card rack on the mantelpiece, though half-torn and refolded. The police overlooked what was before their eyes. By being obviously visible, the letter became invisible to these professionals. Somebody external was needed to make the invisible visible, to discover what was in fact not concealed at all.

Somehow, the recent growing interest in musical improvisation among scholars makes me think of this story of the purloined letter: improvisation was always there, plainly perceptible, but it stayed almost unnoticed until a few years ago. In desperate pursuit of new research topics, marginalized musics and musicians, and supposedly lost manuscripts, music scholars overlooked an aspect that is almost intrinsic to all music making: improvisation. Improvisation is inextricably bound up with *music*ing, be it composing, performing, arranging, recording, or listening to classical music, jazz, rock, pop, and what is still arrogantly called non-Western music. All music making is to a greater or lesser degree always already permeated and traversed by improvisation. And without the intention to search for origins and originalities, one could say that an ethnomusicologist and a jazz guitarist were needed to bring to our notice what has so long been elusive.¹

Many years after their trailblazing work, a still modest but nevertheless constant stream of publications, research programs, conferences, and festivals on musical improvisation has evolved. However, scholars and practitioners of very different feathers rarely share the same platform to discuss this topic, which is integral to all music production. That is what makes this issue of *New Sound* so special. Distinguished musicians, philosophers, musicologists, anthropologists, and historians were willing to discuss from very

¹ Of course I am referring here to Bruno Nettl and Derek Bailey.

different angles the presence and importance of improvisation in various music worlds: from early music to contemporary electronic music, from jazz to church organ music, from Indian music to the Western classical tradition, from free improvised music to eastern European folk music. Philosophical reflections, in the broadest sense, accompany these encounters with a specific musical style or tradition, critically focusing on one or more specific actors and factors at work in the act of improvisation.

What is the result of this versatility? What is the outcome of this collection of heterogeneous approaches and points of view? Perhaps the most obvious conclusion is that what can be united under the common denominator of improvisation is far from homogeneous. Improvisation has no clear identity; it knows many forms and assumes many shapes. Improvisation is neither a style of music nor a body of musical techniques. There seem to be no limits to what improvisation can or cannot be. It can encompass random noise while simultaneously retaining an organizational dimension.² Composers improvise while composing, performers while performing, listeners while listening – all in a different way and to varying degrees. Improvisation in music is not at all restricted to improvised music.

Defining improvisation is an impossible task, if only because we primarily deal with it as an established musical practice or regard it as a philosophical concept and socio-political ideology. It is telling that none of the authors tries to give a clear and stable definition of improvisation. Instead of definitions, they report on events, paths, ramifications, incidents, and the infinite becoming of improvisation.³ Studying all essays and the music on the enclosed CD, the reader/listener will thus find consensus but also contradictions, supplements but also discrepancies. However, this hesitation, this reticence to delimit the field of musical improvisation – in advance or afterwards as a conclusion – perhaps shows an understanding of the forces and possible claims of improvisation: the mere existence of improvisation implies a degree of openness, recognition of the fact that not everything can be planned in advance, controlled, established, captured. Improvising (also) means entering and exploring unknown territories, wandering through smooth spaces, surrendering to uncertainty and instability, leaving things open.⁴ In fact, the contributing authors were also improvising. What is important is precisely the way in which throughout the regimes of signs an improviser uses or anticipates, s/he puts them in flight or movement. In other words, while cataloguing many possible aspects of improvisation in music, it is clear that it is necessary to simultaneously problematize its circumstances, parameters, and coefficients. The aim of this issue therefore is not to arrive but to set out, not to conclude but to be on the way. Taken together, these audible and readable markers sketch as well as efface the vague contours of what can be called the dynamic field of musical improvisation.

² Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (eds.), *The Other Side of Nowhere. Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2004, p. 31.

³ 'Becoming' is for me the perpetual opening up of different or new, still unknown possibilities.

I can only hope that this special issue of *New Sound* can take many readers on an inspiring journey through this field, a journey with many unexpected encounters.

Marcel Cobussen
Guest Editor

⁴ In that sense improvisation immediately transcends the musical domain. Improvisation plays a role in almost all human behavior, the best example perhaps being conversation.