Fifteen seconds to decide. "Instant composing" and other received ideas about musical improvisation.

By Wade Matthews

"…the difference between composition and improvisation is that, in composition, you have as much time as you want to decide what you want to say in fifteen seconds while, in improvisation, you have fifteen seconds."

Let me open this text on a personal note: over numerous years of academic training and subsequent activity as a composer and improviser, I have frequently noticed that prejudices and received ideas about improvisation appear not so much among those lacking musical knowledge or sensitivity as among those who seem to possess both in abundance. In this text, I would like to offer the reader a brief overview of some of those received ideas in order reconsider the same questions from an improviser's viewpoint. I hope this process will also help us to approach the question: what underlies many of those prejudices, rendering persons with considerable musical culture incapable of understanding this music, even when listening to it?

Logically, I will also give considerable attention to composition, which is the reigning form of musical creation in our culture. I would thus warn the reader that he should not fall into the trap of considering any of what follows as a condemnation of composition, much less of composers. Instead, I seek to point out the degree to which trying to understand improvisation from a compositional standpoint leads to errors. Below, I will offer a series of quotes that I consider especially eloquent expressions of some of the leading received ideas about improvisation, and I will attempt to create a context in which to see them with greater clarity. Lastly, I would like the reader to know that the footnotes combine bibliographic data with commentary intended to shed light on some details of what is expressed in the main text. Thus, I would ask the most impatient readers to go to the trouble of reading all that tiny text running along the bottom of the pages like so many ants.[1]

Improvisation as composition (part 1)

"Even in the choice of the name ICP [Instant Composers' Pool],[2] the term 'instant composing' was preferred over 'improvisation.' That allowed us to avoid the false antithesis in which improvisation was spoken of as a different activity than composition. After all, whether music is played directly on an instrument, read or learned from notes previously written on a page, or constructed on the basis of algorithms or game rules that operate directly on sound sources, or control instrumentalists; in every case, the result is music that, in any given concert, will have a fixed form."[3]

1 Thank you.

2 This was the "Instant Composers' Pool" founded by Misha Mengelberg, Han Bennink and Willem Breuker in Holland.

With these sentences, the British saxophonist, Evan Parker, takes an unequivocal stand on the now long-standing question as to whether improvisation is or is not a form of composition. Here, we must deal with this question, and also with another that, in a practical sense, is even more important: why does it matter whether improvisation is, or is not, a form of composition?

There is no doubt that both improvisation and composition are ways of creating music, and in that sense, they are very similar, but are they the same? And if they are, than is composition also a form of improvisation? Will a group of composers one day form a *Slow Improvisers' Pool?* If both activities serve to create music, what are the *significant* differences? Because some differences will undoubtedly be more important than others.

We might start by asking ourselves why composers do not compose instantly. They take their time, but what, exactly, are they doing with all that time? If Anton Webern spent three years composing a work that lasts three minutes, what was he actually doing? Boulez speaks of the importance of the composer's *"meditated act,"* emphasizing that *"one may have the illusion of inventing in real time, but one can only invent on the basis of meditation."*[4] So then, is that time necessary for meditating, reflecting on one's acts? It would seem so, yet thinking a lot is not the same as having good ideas, and—probably after some meditation— Boulez himself adds that *"meditation is not really a product of writing, nor of the time spend doing so; meditation can be instant and can be found in improvisation."*[5] How about that?

In his text, Evan Parker seems to want to say that all of the various ways of organizing the creation of musical discourse are fundamentally the same, as all result in a "fixed form." He may well be right about the formal aspect, but he doesn't bother to explain what he means by "fixed." Why does that matter? As I understand it, the main difference between composition and improvisation lies in their respective relations to the concepts of process and product, which also influence any concept of form, whether fixed or not… Both ways of creating music have a process, and both have a product (to which Parker seems to be referring when he speaks of "fixed form"), but the relation between process and product, and their relative importance, are not the same in composition and improvisation. Grasping these differences will also help us to define those two ways of making music.

In composition, the process precedes the created product, that is, the work. The audible rendering of a composition before an audience—that is, its interpretation or execution —is posterior to its creation by the composer. In that sense, the audience witnesses the fruits of the creative process, but not the process itself. They are not invited to the composer's studio to contemplate him leaning over the score of a work in progress and so, for them, the process is absorbed by the product, which not only justifies it, but can sometimes entirely hide it. In fact, it is not necessary to know the details of a composition's creation in order to enjoy the results. Those details may not be uniformly irrelevant—some may be mere anecdotes, while others can be quite revealing—but whatever relevance they may have will be directly related to their capacity to shed light on the product itself. Beethoven's second Rasumovsky quartet, Op. 59 n.2 is, to my ears, one of the most thrilling string quartets, and one of the most fulfilling musical experiences I can imagine. But, do I need to know anything at all about its process of

3 Parker, Evan, *"De Motu" for Buschi Niebergall.* Conference read at Man & Machine 1992 — Zall de Unie, May 1992. My thanks to Agustí Fernández for this text.
4 Boulez, Pierre, *Jalons pour une décennie.* Paris, Christian Bourgeois Editeur. 1989. P. 137
5 Ibid. P. 137

creation to enjoy it, to be deeply moved by it? Need I know who Rasumovsky was? Need I know whether the work's various movements were written in the same order in which they are performed? Need I know whether Beethoven took two weeks or two years to write it? I believe this composition will thrill most musically sensitive Westerners without need for any knowledge whatsoever, either technical or historical, of the process by which Beethoven wrote it.

In improvisation, the relation between process and product is totally different. To start with, the improviser creates his work before the public. In that sense, what the public witnesses is the creative process itself. But that is not all, because as all of us who have worked in front of an audience know very well, that audience is in no way a passive element. Every improviser knows that the way an audience listens has an enormous influence on how he makes his work. Their listening capacity, degree of understanding, duration and depth of attention are determinant factors in how, and to what degree, an improviser establishes communication and intimacy. They influence the degree of risk he takes, the speed of events or inner pulse of his discourse, and the degree of nuance or complexity he achieves. They are not the only factor—clearly, improvisers have moments of greater and lesser creativity, energy or "inspiration," days when they are more or less comfortable with their instruments, and so on—but audience presence is anything but passive.[6]

And the product of improvisation—that "fixed form" to which, according to Evan Parker, it leads? Let us consider two hypotheses. First: when an improvisation ends, it's over, and thus there *is* no product. In 1964, one of the true masters of improvisation, Eric Dolphy, observed: "Music, after it's over, it's gone in the air. You can never catch it again."

Second: in an improvisation, the process *is* the product. In a way, these may be two manners of saying the same thing, but they have their nuances. In the first hypothesis, more than one will ask: what happens when the improvisation is recorded? Isn't the recording a product? Yes, but a recording of an improvisation is not an improvisation. It is more like a photograph of a dead friend. It offers an idea of what he was like, but it is no substitute for him.

In the second hypothesis—that in improvisation the process *is* the product—we can finally deal with the idea of form proposed by Evan Parker. It is not that improvisation leads to a fixed form, but rather that the improvisatory process has its own form. But this form is not fixed, it is dynamic. Improvisation is a creative process that occurs in a specific place and moment and it reflects both. It is the interactive process *par excellence.* An improviser interacts with the other musicians, adjusts his discourse to the acoustic characteristics of the space, the density and permeability of ambient noise, the audience's degree of listening, and so on. All of those factors are determinant in the form an improvisatory process takes, and we should emphasize that almost all of them are in a state of continual evolution. Audience listening is not fixed, nor is ambient noise, nor what the other musicians are playing. Even the acoustics of a venue can change when the audience is large, as human flesh absorbs a lot of sound. And if none of those

6 In that sense, see: Fernando Carbonell: "…each musical subject plays "facing the other," subject to the others, both musicians and listeners, who are radically different "others," abysses of life, all rightful owners of their own decisions, intentions and oscillations (for example, the decision not to play, not to say anything, or not to listen, isolating oneself instead), at each and every moment. Indeed, that is a profoundly ethical attitude."

factors is fixed over the course of the concert, how could the improvisatory process be fixed?

There is no doubt that some of these factors also influence musicians performing a composition, but almost none of them influence the compositional process itself, for the simple reason that they are not present when the composer creates his work. Beethoven, seated at his desk writing the second Rasumovsky, could not possibly respond to how long or how well an audience could maintain its concentration, nor to their degree of interest, nor to the degree of ambient noise or resonance in a given hall, for the simple reason that none of those variables were present during his creative process. But they are perfectly present when one or more improvisers create music at a specific time and place in front of an audience.

Improvisation as composition (Part 2)

And this, finally, brings us to the second question, revealing the degree to which Evan Parker's statement above actually stems from socio-cultural, and even economic, rather than purely musical or esthetic considerations. The question is: *why does it matter whether improvisation is or is not a form of composition?*

We have seen that it is so for Evan Parker and he shares this opinion with Misha Mengelberg, Han Bennink and Willem Breuker, as well as with the British improviser, John Butcher, who directly states that *"improvisation is a type of composition."*[7] Yet, when the French percussionist, Lê Quan Ninh was asked what relation he thought existed between composition and improvisation he replied: *"I would be tempted to say: no relation."*[8] And Ninh is by no means the only improviser with that opinion. Still, these improvisers can profoundly disagree about this question without its having any effect whatsoever on their capacity to improvise together (9)[9] because what matters is not how the question is answered, but rather the fact that it is asked at all.

Ours is a society that attributes special value to writing. The capacity to express oneself perspicuously in writing is considered (and often *is*) an important indication of the cultural and intellectual level of any member of our society. From the perspective of a culture of writing, musical composition enjoys a certain status simply because it is a means of setting down musical ideas in writing. And this is even true when the ideas themselves are not especially interesting.[10] It is much like admiring someone able to speak a foreign language fluently without asking oneself whether what he is actually saying in that language has any relevance.

It is this question of social status that has led certain improvisers to struggle so much to have improvisation considered a type of composition. And Evan Parker himself touches on this when, speaking of Mengelberg, Bennink and Breuker, he reminds us that *"as founders of the Instant Composers' Pool […] they made their position clear from the start: their work had to be included at the highest level of national cultural programming and, significantly, no sort of false*

7 "Thirteen questions for improvising musicians" in the program notes of the Hurta Cordel '97 Festival, Madrid, Musicalibre, 1997, p. 11
8 Ibid, p. 11
9 Anyone fortunate enough to have heard the trio of Lê Quan Ninh, Evan Parker and the late Peter Kowald perform in León, Spain, last summer needs no more proof than that.
10 I should emphasize that I am referring to social attitudes towards composition here, not to the unquestionable value of composition as a form of musical creation.

distinctions were to be made between 'art' music and 'improvised' music on the basis of the role played by notation in their creation."[11] And how did they make this position clear? By including the term "composer" in the name of their group ("Instant Composers' Pool").

It is here that we see how the word "composer" is almost the only term used to refer to musical creators. The visual arts use the word "artist" to refer to anyone who creates art, and then distinguish between them according to the medium or technique they use—for example: painter, sculptor, engraver, and so on. But in music, there is no global term for a musical creator. The term "musician" is not limited to those who actually create music. It equally refers to those who recreate it, that is, performers. I am not underestimating the creative capacity of most performers, instead I want to point out that such a capacity is often simply prohibited. It is enough to watch twenty violin bows moving in unison in any orchestra to understand that the creative will of the orchestral composer could not possible be clearly reflected if each violinist played his part with bowings generated by his own individual understanding of the work. If we define "interpreting" as *understanding* the music and bringing that understanding to bear, audibly, in how one performs it, then we will quickly see that there is little room for such creative freedom by any member of the orchestra except the "soloists."

So, the term "musician" can be, and is, equally applied to composers, songwriters, rock stars, jazz musicians, folksingers, orchestra members and chamber music players with no regard whatsoever for how much or little creativity is present, or allowed, in their work. As such, it is certainly not equivalent to the term "artist." In fact, there is no common term for all musical creators. For the word "composer" doesn't refer to musical creation itself, but rather to the method employed to create it, that is: composition.[12] This makes it equivalent to terms like "painter" or "sculptor." Of course, to those outside the music business, this may seem little more than lexical hair splitting, but the reality becomes quite clear when commissions, grants and scholarships are awarded.[13] Very few music administrators recognize that composition is not the only serious form of musical creation in the West. Those that do are much appreciated.

That, then, is the reason why improvisers ask themselves whether their way of creating music can be understood as composition. An affirmative answer might just allow them to enjoy the social standing, funding, grants, scholarships, access to festivals, critical attention in the media, and so on, which composition regularly receives.[14] In the daily life of an improviser, the elements that would have to be taken into consideration in order to answer the original question—the relation between product and process, the presence of 'pre-compositional' elements in improvisation, the manner in which the simultaneous presence of various creators improvising collectively alters the concept of 'intentionality,' or the relative balance between conception and perception in

11 Op. cit. Evan Parker

12 Some may ask: Why not simply use the term "artist?" Music is clearly an art, and it certainly is fine. But, if we go to the school of fine arts of any Spanish university and ask for the music section we will find none at all…

13 For example, it would be "refreshing" to see a Spanish *improviser* receive a scholarship to the Spanish Academy in Rome as a musical creator.

14I in no way seek to imply that composition, much less composers themselves, live on "easy street." It is simply that things are even worse for improvisers. As I pointed out in an earlier article: "Nowadays, most musical improvisers recognize that what we share with composers—the drive to create, the choice of music as our medium, and a commitment to our art—is much more important that our differences. The great distinction between contemporary composition and improvisation does not lie in the value or commitment of its practitioners, nor in the value of what they create, but in the nature of the music itself."

compositional and improvisatory practices—these considerations, fundamental for a serious treatment of that question, are forced into the background by the improvisers' daily effort simply to carry on as a musical creator.

Improvisation as seen by the critics[15]

This section is rather problematical because, in general, improvisation goes unseen, and unheard, by critics. Most concerts of improvised music take place outside so-called "serious music" circles[16] without finding much greater access to "alternative" or "independent" music circles. Indeed, the latter terms are all-too-often reduced to mere marketing terms (though rarely by the practitioners themselves). As a result, improvised music concerts generally receive no attention at all from the press. This was especially clear in the 2001 *¡Escucha!* Festival in Madrid, Spain. It offered more than twenty concerts of improvised music in leading venues in that city, including the Circle of Fine Arts, the Reina Sofia Museum of Contemporary Art, the National Auditorium, and so on. It lasted a full month, but was almost totally ignored by the press except for a column in a monthly music magazine in which the critic wrote in very positive terms after apologizing for only attending two of the twenty-one concerts. In one of the two concerts he did attend, he mentions two musicians as especially interesting. Both were on the program, but one actually didn't play a single note at the concert in question as he was handed his instrument in two pieces by the airlines… So, we should not assume that the following quotes by another critic are representative of any general attitude towards improvised music by critics, as they generally do not pay enough attention to it to reveal any attitude at all. Still, in the context of the present article, his text is useful for its capacity to express a series of conceptual error that merit consideration here.

"…at the beginning of the second part… a cell phone rang with the music from Mozart's symphony number 40. It was… the only moment of real improvisation… The entire show corresponded to a calculated plan that makes it impossible to speak of improvisation."

This review of a concert of the first concert of improvised music ever performed at the International Festival of Contemporary Music of Alicante—Spain's largest new music festival—appeared in a self-proclaimed "International Music Daily" and is the work of a known Spanish critic. It deserves to be reproduced in its entirety here, for it is brilliant in its capacity to concentrate, in relatively few words, a truly outstanding number of prejudices and received ideas about improvisation, avant-garde movements from the nineteen seventies, the audience's "intellectual deafness," and a long list of so ons. If any clear conclusion can be drawn from it, it is that ignorance is the mother of prejudice. Sadly, neither space nor copyright law allows us to reproduce more than a few words here.

15 I have avoided names and bibliographic references here to protect both the innocent and the guilty in equal measure.

16 Another excellent indication of the prejudices surrounding different forms of musical creation is the variety of terms applied to musical styles, apparently with no awareness of their semantic implications. Thus we find references to "serious music" but none to "casual music," and "easy listening," but no "difficult listening." Things are so out of whack that "Heavy" rock would be categorized by some as "light music." There is "progressive" rock, but no "regressive" rock, "Indy" or independent rock, but no mention of "Dependent Rock," and so on.

The first error this critic commits is confusing improvisation and chance.[17] If we are even minimally well-intentioned, we will accept that the owner of the cell phone in question left it on by mistake and thus, the fact that it rang in the middle of the concert was nothing other than chance. But improvisation is not chance, and its relation to chance is so different from its relation to most compositional forms and practices that it merits attention here.

In practical terms, we could say that, in music, chance is everything that makes itself noticeable independently of the will of the music's creator (or re-creator, that is, performer). In most cases, these are sounds (we could call them noises) clearly unrelated to the musical discourse. They span a broad range from the musicians' involuntary noises (the screeching of a classical guitarist's fingers sliding along the strings, for example) to the all-too-familiar coughs, the beep-beep emitted by cheap digital watches to mark the hour, noisy candy wrapping, and so on. In most cases, the composer doesn't even consider these noises because he writes his work to be performed in an ideal space. Were it to exist, this utopian space would be acoustically sterile, lacking any noise outside the composer's own discursive will except, perhaps, some flattering resonance.

At first, Cage's famous "silent" piece, *4'33"*, would appear to be the opposite, as it brings all chance noises to the foreground while the "performer" carries out his mute theater on stage. But in both Cage's work and more conventional composition, the performer's role is extremely structured, and neither contemplates allowing the latter to freely respond to those chance sounds as he sees fit.

This, then, is chance—something quite different than improvisation. In fact, Cage himself repudiated improvisation because, in his opinion, it was overly bound by the musician's taste and memory. For him, the problem with improvisation was precisely its lack of chance. That does not mean, however, that improvisation has no relation to chance, rather, its relation is significantly different than the cases mentioned above.[18] Improvisers make their music in a specific time and place and as the characteristics of that place and moment change, they also adjust their music for those changes. That is what allows improvisers to respond to chance events in a way that almost no other musician can.

But such on-the-spot creation is not *ex nihilo*. An improviser's spontaneity is not rooted in his capacity to invent language extemporaneously, but rather in the skill and fluidity with which he employs a language he has already mastered. He may well have invented some or all of it himself, but he is generally not doing so on the spot. Anyone who has faced the challenge of expressing himself in a foreign language will understand that it is practically impossible to be spontaneous when one is struggling with the language itself. In that sense, improvisers work with musical and instrumental resources they have already mastered, but they frequently use and reshape them to express themselves in new ways. In that sense, their discourse is similar to that of composers. For both, the same musical language can be used in numerous works, and the evolution of such a language is generally slower than the generation of individual pieces. Here, some will

17 This error also reveals an almost total ignorance of the avant-garde movements of the nineteen fifties and sixties.

18 For more on this subject, see: Wade Matthews, "Intimacy and Limits; Reflections on Stockhausen's Dog" at: www.wadematthews.info under the link: "Books and Articles."

undoubtedly seek to disinter the argument as to whether music is even a "language" at all. As a metaphor, however, it is very useful and that is enough for me.

In light of all this, it is difficult to understand what, exactly, could be improvisatory about the ringing of a cell phone during a concert. But the critic's confusion doesn't end there and it is his second sentence that reveals how thoroughly subjugated he is by his own ignorance. His attack reveals that he is sufficiently perceptive to grasp that what is happening on stage is coherent. So much so, in fact, that he qualifies it as a *"calculated plan."* Curiously, for him, this is directly opposed to the idea of improvisation. According to him, it *"makes it impossible to speak of improvisation."* Should we then conclude that, for our critic, improvisation can only be carried out in surroundings characterized by chance and a lack of organization? That approach recalls other more generous but equally erroneous appraisals of this music, including "this music doesn't sound improvised to me." ¿How is improvised music supposed to sound?

In fact, we need to clarify two things:

1) It is totally possible to express oneself coherently without the presence of a preconceived plan; and
2) the presence of a predetermined plan does not at all need to conflict with spontaneous expression.

In the first case, we need only ask ourselves: if the capacity to express oneself coherently conflicts with spontaneity, then what on earth are conversations for? Can't two people exchange ideas in a spontaneous conversation without sinking into incoherence? In the end, an improviser needs to be able to think coherently and to express those thoughts through his instrument. Instrumental expression is part of the mastery of language we mentioned above while the capacity to think coherently is part and parcel of being a musical creator, whether improviser or composer. Surely no one thinks a composer can only think clearly because he has an eraser glued to one end of his pencil?

In the second case, we should repeat that a good plan can also serve to foster improvisation rather than limiting it. What's more, I believe there is considerable danger in the idea that the method employed to create music (improvising, composing, etc.) influences its degree of coherence or spontaneity. That music sounds coherent and organized does not at all mean that it cannot be improvised, and that becomes obvious when we consider the opposite case. If a composer has the good fortune that his work receives a performance that makes it sound fresh and spontaneous, does that "make it impossible to speak of composition?"

As it happens, European free improvisation has been around for over thirty years. It has schools and "styles" clearly perceptible to any listener with a passing knowledge of this music… which is the least one could ask of a critic supposedly prepared to write about it. In the case of the concert subjected to the review quoted above, the musicians belonged to the reductionist school that originated in Berlin in the nineteen nineties. Their way of playing is immediately recognizable—that may explain the allegation of a "calculated plan"—by the use of silence as an active element (especially to structure time

proportions), a certain preference for very low volume levels,[19] and an exploration of sound objects as musical materials.[20]

Improvisation as viewed by a composer (first example)

"Nowadays, improvisation presents a problem: most of all because among the participants there is no true unanimity of discourse, but only, on some occasions, a unanimity of behavior […] it seems to me that it is the elements that establish a relationship to a more-or-less explicit idea of notation that have meaning —even when that relation is one of antagonism […] normally, improvisation acts on the level of instrumental praxis rather than that of musical thought."

These comments extracted from an interview with Luciano Berio[21] reflect the attitude of a composer blessed with exceptional creative and musical gifts. His observations merit special attention here specifically because they are based neither on ignorance nor on any imaginable perceptual incapacity, but instead on a profound commitment to composition as a model of musical creation. In Berio's case, this commitment has borne fruits of unquestionable musical and artistic value, yet it also seems to have distorted his understanding of what underlies the current practice of improvisation.

The historian of science, Thomas S. Kuhn,[22] observed that when two scientists defend the relative merits of their respective scientific paradigms, their arguments may be not only unconvincing, but almost incomprehensible to their adversaries, as each bases his argument on the paradigm he defends, while the other seeks to understand it on the basis of his own paradigm. In the case of Luciano Berio, this observacion by Kuhn seems especially relevant. Berio possessed far more than sufficient hearing capacity, intelligence and critical capacity to perceive improvisation's constituent elements with clarity. His failure to understand lies in the relative value he assigns them. As a composer, he values most highly those elements that make a composition work, observing quite correctly that improvisation is often weaker than composition in those areas. This idea that composition constitutes the ideal against which any process of musical creation should be measured (an idea fundamental to the make-up of the compositional paradigm) leads Berio to discard improvisation's strengths as if they were the proof of its weakness. What he fails to realize is that *the goal of improvisation is not to make compositions, but rather, and quite simply, to make music.*

First of all, Berio qualifies the lack of unanimity of discourse as a "problem" for improvisation, implying that unanimity of behavior is not only something of lesser value,

19 These aspects actually correspond to the desire to generate a music open to chance, in which external sounds can find their place, rather than always sounding *outside* the music. That is what created the context in which the critic erroneously heard a cell phone as improvisation.

20 This exploration of sound matter as such, rather than as something that functions as a *sign*, is incipient in Chopin's music and evolved in contemporary composition throughout the twentieth century by composers such as Debussy, Varèse, Schaeffer, Xenakis, Ligeti, Penderecki, Lutoslawski and Berio, among many others. Something very similar occurs in the visual arts since at least Brancusi, and the list is enormous. In literature, it is already audible in the recitals of Dada poems organized by Hugo Ball and Emil Janco, or Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate* as well as in the work of Gertrude Stein, among others. As to the active use of silence, it is enough to see the finest sculptures of Julio González to understand the use of "negative space" in artistic discourse, and the same can be said, for example, of Robert Morris's predilection for mirror-like polished surfaces in his theoretically "minimal" cubes.

21 Dalmonte, Rossana and Bálint András Varga, *Luciano Berio, two interviews.* Ed. Marion Boyars, New York. pp. 81-85

22 Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* second edition, Enlarged. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. 1970

but also something that doesn't even always happen in improvisation. For a composer, unanimity of discourse is not so much easy as inevitable. When a composer writes a trio, for example, there are three instruments. But behind those three "voices" there is only one creative mind, that of the composer. It is like the dialogs in novels; theoretically, various characters are conversing, but this is pure fiction. In reality, all of the voices, opinions, attitudes, ideas or proposals correspond to the pen of a single author.

When a trio of improvisers make music, however, it is a trio in all senses of the word, and with all its consequences. Behind the three instrumental "voices" there are three musical creators. And, as in a real conversation, unanimity is the most boring of all possible situations. If everyone is in total agreement, what is there to discuss? It becomes much more interesting when each has a different opinion and each brings his own understanding and ideas into play.

This very multiplicity of minds, proposals and creative wills is one of the most fascinating aspects of improvisation. It is also what underlies what Berio seems to consider a secondary aspect: behavior. But even the use of that term reveals Berio's compositional bias because, instead of "behavior", an improviser would speak of "interaction." Fully aware of their multiplicity, improvisers propose ways to interact, moving among musical relations based on support, competitiveness, relative autarchy and so on—often in the same piece. How much an improviser chooses to adapt his own discourse to that of the other musician(s) at one moment or another is a question worthy of consideration as it defines the interactive dynamics that shape the entire musical flow. Take, for example, an improvisatory practice sometimes employed by musicians in London: two improvisers begin a piece. They start at exactly the same time, but without having informed the other in any way as to what they intend to play (could this be another "calculated plan"?). Thus, as the piece begins, each discovers what sort of material, idea or way of playing the other has chosen, he also discovers whether that choice is producing something musically compatible with what he, himself, has chosen. And therein lies the "lack of unanimity of discourse" that bothered Berio so much.

If the two materials seem incompatible at first, what can the improviser do? An inexperienced or insecure (often the same thing) improviser will quickly adapt to what the other is playing, even going so far as the abandon his opening material in favor of something he considered more compatible with what the other is doing. A more experienced improviser knows that when that happens, the music will become less fresh because what the insecure improvisers is doing is adjusting the music until it sounds more familiar, and thus, safer. The real challenge is to stand fast with his initial material and discover, over the course of the improvisation, exactly *how* that material can work with what the other musician is doing. The result will be something that neither has played before, despite the fact that each is using material he has used on previous occasions.

This example has multiple implications. First of all, it illustrates the degree to which interaction (what Berio called "behavior") is determinant in improvisatory discourse, revealing that its importance is far from minor. Second, it shows how improvisers approach the challenge posed by Cage's rejection of music excessively dependent on personal memory and taste. The decisions taken by two mature improvisers working in duo often generates a musical discourse that is not only new for the audience, but also for the musicians themselves. Third, this matter goes beyond purely musical

considerations, for the underlying question is: in any human relationship, how do we achieve compatibility without sacrificing the individuality of any of the parties involved? In that sense, a notion such as "unanimity of behavior" doesn't even begin to cover the huge wealth of possibilities. Perhaps that unanimity is ideal for an orchestral violin section—remember the bows rising and falling at the same time—or for an ant colony, but not for a group of improvisers.

When Berio adds: "it seems to me that it is the elements that establish a relationship to a more-or-less explicit idea of notation that have meaning—even when that relation is one of antagonism," he offers us not so much an appreciation of improvisation as an analysis of his own manner of understanding it. For a composer, it is logical that the relation of a given music to notation would be of particular interest, as the composer himself faces the daily challenge of expressing his musical thought in a system of notation that doesn't always offer ideal solutions. In reality, for an improviser, notation tends to be irrelevant. It's not that he values musical illiteracy—many improvisers come from a background of rigorous academic training and in no way disdain the musical intelligence and wealth of ideas that innumerable composers have set down for posterity in their scores—it is simply that he does not employ notation as a vehicle for musical thought.

In composition, the relations between idea and notation are multiple. It is undoubtedly possible to conceive an idea with great clarity and only then write it down, but it is equally possible to use notation as a vehicle for thought and conception as well. Neither music notation nor the experience of seeing and reading it are activities divorced from compositional creativity. Suffice it to look at the autograph score of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* to understand how even the apparently mechanical act of making a clean copy to send to the publisher can become a final opportunity to continue changing, improving and even inventing. This is the context in which we can understand Berio's observation, but once again, the compositional paradigm distorts his appreciation of improvisation. As we observed above, notation is irrelevant for most improvisers. They not only discard it as a means of communicating their ideas, they do not even ask themselves whether the sort of ideas they have could possibly be notated. Of course some are more easily notated than others, but often those improvised phrases that sound most polished are those least interesting to the improvisers themselves for they are often his stock phrases, the ones his hands know all too well. They sound polished because he has played them many times, for, like the stock phrases one finds oneself repeating again and again in one's conversations, they emerge unbidden, apparently independent of the emitter's expressive will. Their polished sound may attract the attention of a composer, who especially values the capacity to polish ideas offered by the compositional process—after all, "you have as long as you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds"—but they will give him a rather distorted understanding of what is going on in an improvisation.

And when Berio states: *"normally, improvisation acts on the level of instrumental praxis rather than that of musical thought,"* he establishes the classic compositional separation between the act of creating music and the act of playing it. Jack Lemmon observed that *"God gave man a brain and a penis, but not enough blood to use both at the same time,"* and if for "penis" we substitute "instrument," we will understand Berio's phrase a little better. But this separation between thought and practice fails at both ends. It constitutes an excessively limited (and limiting) definition of both thought and practice. We can illustrate this with a comparison to speech. Imagine a writer of a level comparable to that of Berio

affirming that most speech acts on the level of oral praxis rather than on that of verbal thought. This would mean that when we speak, we are basically wagging our jaws with greater or lesser skill. As an image, the idea could be quite humorous, and I'm certain that all of us have suffered through "conversations" in which the absence of cognition was painfully clear. Still, I believe that, as a general affirmation, it is patently ridiculous. Thinking is much more complex and multiform than Berio's comment would seem to indicate. The fact that he doesn't recognize this cannot change it.

As to instrumental practice: for an improviser, it exists precisely as a vehicle for musical thought, and can have the same variety of relations to it that we listed above for notation. Given that there can be no conceptual thinking without a previous comprehension of concepts, we can recognize, along with Foçillon,[23] the comprehension is born of prehension—the capacity to grasp that characterizes the human hand. And if we apply cognitive concepts, we can see that the same process functions in the other direction as well. Learning a musical instrument involves transferring innumerable movements from the field of declarative memory—which recognizes things—to that of procedural memory, which recalls procedures. In that sense, even the most mechanical aspects of instrumental praxis are born from a recognition of something external and its posterior assimilation. Conception is inherent to praxis and, in that sense, praxis is a vehicle not only for *expressing* thought, but also for thinking itself.

Perhaps Berio is simply trying to say that most improvisation lacks new and interesting ideas, which is equally true of the greater part of composition, painting, literature and so on. If that is the case, then he is certainly right, but the lack of really original ideas does not convert these processes into purely robotic acts. Let us consult Pierre Boulez who, renouncing his own *Improvisation sur Mallarmé,* warns students at the Collège de France that a composer should never offer improvisatory freedom to a performer, as that would be *"relegating the question of gesture to an inferior level. And I insist that it is inferior."* And he adds:

Improvisation as viewed by a composer (second example)

"The performer's gesture refers, most of all, to his memory or his playing habits. Memory consists of references to works he has already played and has consciously or unconsciously stored up. […] he grinds up original gestures and inserts them into a routine of fabrication that is the opposite extreme from the freedom to which he aspires. Perhaps psychologically this manipulator feels free; in reality he is completely manipulated by his memory, he is a toy in the hands of his own knowledge […] the musical knowledge he displays is precisely what he has assimilated through contact with his instrument. […] he is a prisoner of brute reflexes that lead him inexorably to avoid the fundamental questions of invention, that is, the relation between structure and material."[24]

These declarations by Boulez are so outspoken that they could only have been uttered by someone capable of writing an essay titled "Schoenberg is Dead," when the latter, though gravely ill, was still alive. Perhaps what most shocks us is not what he writes but, rather, the clear disdain with which he approaches any musician that picks up an instrument with the intention of making his own music with it. First of all, he doesn't recognize the figure of the improviser, whom he qualifies instead as "performer," "manipulator," "prisoner of brute reflexes," and, in a moment of extraordinary generosity (in the paragraph following the one quoted above"), "interpreter." This last

23 Focillon, Henri, *La vida de las formas y Elogio de la mano,* Madrid, Xarait ediciones, 1983.
24 Op. cit. Boulez, pp. 137-138

term would seem to indicate that Boulez considers him capable of interpreting (rather than simply performing) a composer's ideas, but not of actually having ideas of his own. Apparently, what this manipulating performer mistakes for his own ideas are no more than a compendium of "brute reflexes" made up of works he has already performed and stored up in his memory in order to later grind them up. But an instrumentalist's muscular memory is only one part of what feeds an improviser's discourse. His sonic memory and imagination, his taste and his intellect are also present, and can often lead him to play *against* his intuition. This set of factors is well explained by Paul F. Berliner in his seminal work, *Thinking in Jazz*.

According to Boulez, the only musical knowledge that this sort of performing automaton can employ in an improvisation of his own is what he has received through the experience of playing his instrument ("*the musical knowledge he displays is precisely what he has assimilated through contact with his instrument."*). Apparently, such an improvising musician is incapable of reading, listening to recordings, attending concerts—unless he, himself, is playing—or learning from his conversations with other musicians. Or maybe Boulez means that he can do all these things, but is so stupid that he is unable to actually apply any of what he has learned that way when playing without the guidance of a composer. Apparently, if this poor improviser has any real imagination, it is barely enough to allow him to imagine that he is free when creating his own music.[25]

But Boulez's utterances raise a rather important question: what happens when the improviser is also a composer? When Bach improvised, for example, did he become a mere *"manipulator,"* a prisoner of brute reflexes that "*lead him inexorably to avoid the fundamental questions of invention"*? When, on his international concert tours, Liszt asked members of the audience to furnish him with a musical theme and proceeded to create an improvisation on it, did he just *imagine* that he was free? Did he really lack his own ideas? And when Messaien improvised at the organ, did he suddenly become incapable of any reflection about the relation between structure and material?

Perhaps Boulez is trying to tell us that only composers are capable of musical thought, and thus, only they can improvise. In all fairness, we must admit that the immense majority of classical performers receive no serious training in the art of improvisation at all. And most of them consider themselves incapable of improvising. And I ask: if we send a child to a language school—where he studies a foreign language for, shall we say, seven years—and when he finishes, he knows how to read the language, writes it with difficulty, and considers himself totally incapable of speaking it spontaneously. What would we think of such a school? And yet, it seems quite normal to many professional musicians that, for example, a violin student studies at a conservatory for seven years and, having finished his degree, is capable of reading music, writes it only with difficulty, and lacks even a minimum capacity to play spontaneously.[26]

Improvisation as viewed by two musicologists

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25 The implicit idea that a performer will be freer when following the composer's orders rather than playing his own music according to his own criteria leads me to encourage the reader to consult Eric Fromm's *The Fear of Freedom,* Kindle Editions, 2007.

26 In this sense, the efforts of Alain Savouret and Benjamin Dupé deserve special attention. At the Paris Conservatory, they are busy opening the minds of innumerable future classical music performers, providing them with the technical skills, and more importantly, the conceptual ones, to face the challenge of improvising. In the process, they are also changing their students' understanding of the interpretation of written scores.

Perhaps this is the moment to recognize the figure of the professional improviser, who is not a performer of compositions, but instead, a musical creator. Of course, some also perform compositions, and some are also composers, but many times this is not the case. Musicologist Willi Apel does not seem to have realized there is such a thing as a professional improviser when, in the Harvard Dictionary of Music, he states: *"Nevertheless, the great art of improvisation has been lost because it is no longer practiced by composers…"*[27] His colleague, Abraham Veinus, adds that: *"The capacity to improvise varies in direct proportion to compositional skill."*[28]

In this argument, Veinus[29] is quick to mention the extraordinary improvisatory capacities of Beethoven, Mozart and Händel, reinforcing his idea that no one can be a better improviser than composer, and that improvisation is a skill that somehow depends on composition. The surprise comes sixteen pages later when, without seeming even to notice the contradiction, he informs us that: *"Paganini was an improviser—one of the greatest ever known in this world—not a composer."* Following a rather negative criticism of this great violinist's compositions—*"nowadays, even the most well-intentioned performance cannot manage to discover any special sentiment"*—he explains that *"the modern virtuoso is more than satisfied if he manages to master the dry difficulties of its solo parts just as they are written in the score; but for Paganini, the soloist's written part was not the final result of his invention, but only the guideline*[30] *for a musical structure that he created in an extemporaneous manner during the concert itself."* And he concludes: *"Without the creative fire of Paganini, the technical difficulties of his concerts have converted them into a sort of monstrously intricate and useless bit of machinery that produces nothing but its own movement."*[31] Were we to accept both Veinus's affirmations, we would have to conclude that one can only be a great improviser if 1) one is also a great composer or 2) one's name is Paganini.

With regard to Willi Apel's quote, we find ourselves obliged to ask whether the fact that the finest composers in the history of Western music were also improvisers is sufficient to allow us to speak of a *"great tradition."* If we understand tradition as a series of skills and values—a craft, if you will—that is transmitted from generation to generation, then we must admit that we have no real proof of a specific passing down of improvisatory craft. In reality, in the historical context of Bach, Mozart or Beethoven, it would seem to be more a general mastery of musical language, a mastery so outstanding that it allows those musicians to express themselves in coherent, interesting ways both extemporaneously and in writing. In that same sense, the importance of improvisation during the Baroque era is, as we see it, now rather distorted. At that time, improvisation was inseparable from all the other skills needed to perform a work (the ability to read music, mastery of one's instrument, a good ear, and so on). In fact, all of them coincided as part of a real understanding of musical language, and it was that rounded understanding that allowed Baroque musicians to interpret not so much the composer's writing, as his musical ideas, set down on their written parts. This understanding, born of the musicians' integral involvement with a great musical tradition, allowed them to offer interpretations rich in adornments and nuances, a rendering of *continuo* filled with the freedom they could allow themselves specifically because they were guided by that

27 Apel, Willi, *Harvard Dictionary of Music,* Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass. Tenth Printing, 1977. P. 404
28 Veinus, Abraham, *The Concerto.* New York, Dover Publications, 1964, p. 150.
29 Apel offers no supporting argument at all.
30 Could this be another "calculated plan?"
31 ibid. p. 167

musical tradition. Most of all, that freedom of interpretation which is now understood as Baroque improvisation is partially due to the fact that composers had full confidence in the performers' capacity to understand and interpret their ideas. The current lack of anything similar to confidence is clearly reflected, for example, in Boulez's text, quoted above. This, then, is the lost tradition.

So in our opinion, if there is a great European tradition of improvisation, it is the current practice of free improvisation.[32] First of all, it is the principal activity of many musicians, rather than something secondary to their work as composers or performers of written music. Second, like other European traditions of artistic creation, it is characterized by a healthy balance of stylistic continuity and innovation, a dynamic vitality born of the collision between evolution and revolution. Finally, the memorial concerts held in numerous cities following the recent death of German improviser, Peter Kowald (1944-2002), reveal a respect for historic figures—not only for the value of their art, but also for the vitality and elegance with which they take on the commitment to share their wisdom with the following generations of improvisers. That, indeed, is a great tradition.

Conclusions

In this text, if any words have appeared as much as "improvisation" and "improviser" they are almost certainly "composition" and "composer." And that should come as no surprise. As I observed above, composition is the reigning form of musical creation in our culture, and it has been for so many centuries that even today it is the only method recognized by many. Its value as a method is unquestionable, and the work of its maximum exponents are among the only human manifestations capable of reviving our belief, if only for a moment, in the Romantic concept of genius. The problem comes when, rather than a method for creating music, it becomes a paradigm. And I use that word in the sense proposed by Thomas S. Kuhn: a set of concepts, criteria and values capable of guiding research and orienting the evaluation of its results.

Obviously, the compositional paradigm is ideal, not to say indispensable, for any understanding of the complex cultural structure our society has erected around composing: the composer, the score, the performer, the concert hall, the orchestra, its conductor, and so on. But when this paradigm constitutes the basis for approaching other musical practices, whether Western or not, it produces the sort of distorted perception that has been so thoroughly criticized as ethnocentrism in fields like anthropology. The compositional paradigm imposes a hierarchy of values, a form of understanding, criteria for evaluation and points of reference that cannot help but distort understanding, appreciation and even enjoyment of other forms of musical creation.

In this text we have not attempted to define the compositional paradigm and we must recognize that the very depth of its roots in our society makes it more, rather than less, difficult to recognize. What we *have* tried to do is to point out the degree to which certain aspects of that paradigm underlie numerous prejudices about improvisation. Of course there are others that do not stem directly from it—the confusion of spontaneity with

32 This affirmation in no way seeks to slight Jazz, whose greatness as both music and tradition is unquestionable. Moreover, since at least Django Reinhardt, there have been great European jazz musicians. But in essence, and especially in its origins, Jazz is not a European tradition, but rather, an Afro-American one.

creation *ex nihilo,* for example—as well as those born of a considerable ignorance of any practice of musical creation, including composition. But, as I tried to point out in the introduction, the truly damaging prejudices are those caused not so much by ignorance as by misunderstanding. It is our desire, then, that the present text help the reader to assemble a constellation of concepts, data and values that will form the basis for a paradigm of improvisation.

Wade Matthews
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