Queen's University
Belfast

Q

Autobiography and Invention: Towards a Critical Understanding of Identity, Dialogue and Resistance in Improvised Musics

Published in:
Contemporary Music Review

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

Autobiography and Invention: Towards a critical understanding of identity, dialogue and resistance in improvised musics

Paul Stapleton

Improvisation is a tricky subject. Over recent decades we have witnessed a proliferation of words that describe forms of music making which rely on the ability of performers to create music in real time, often without explicit constraints to rhythmic, dynamic, harmonic and other timbral relations. Such terminologies are often created to distinguish differences in locality, genealogy and ideology – EAI, echtzeitmusik, onkyo, afrological, lowercase, free, non-idiomatic and reductionist to name a few. I will use the word *improvisation* as an umbrella for these practices, while keeping in mind that this too is a loaded term.

In this article I will argue that acts of improvisation are not productively understood in opposition to other practices which form our wider musical culture. Improvisation might be better understood as both rooted in, but not limited by, personal and cultural memory. Improvisational activities are legible to the performer and audience through a shared understanding of social norms, but only become a singular instance of improvisation through unique performative actions. This tension between experience and invention is played out in a dialogue between performer and listener, demanding a response that crucially takes the form of self-articulation, or autobiography. Finally, I contend that it is from this position that improvisation offers the possibility to transgress established personal and cultural identities.

'Writing about music is like dancing about architecture – it's a really stupid thing to want to do.'

This common saying, employed by Elvis Costello in an interview for *Musician* magazine (1983 p.52)[1], represents an animosity that is held by a number of professional musicians. I carry along this quote with me whenever I attempt to write about improvisational practices, or for that matter music making in general. The value of discourse on music has often been questioned from the vantage point of music makers. For instance, the literary critic George Steiner writes: 'In music, at a more radical level than in either literature or the arts, the best of intelligence, interpretive and critical, is musical. Asked to explain a difficult étude, Schumann sat down and played it a second time' (1989 pp.19-20). Foreshadowing Costello, Schumann's actions suggest that music is best articulated and understood purely in the domain of its own sounding. In contrast to this position, my view of music making extends beyond sonic activity, often into the realm of conversations taking place in different social contexts and in different registers (e.g. the bar after the show, peer reviewed journal articles, grant applications, online discussions). This expanded view of music, which resonates with Christopher Small's (1998) notion of 'musicking', positions

---

[1] First relayed to me by Simon Bowes during a discussion on the merits of Practice-as-Research.

critical discourse as integral rather than supplementary to music making. I am interested in the performative possibilities found within the practice of writing, including the role writing can play in the critique of other cultural happenings. With this said, I am still cautious in this endeavor as I agree with the concerns of many musicians that writing by members of the academy or the press can often cause more harm than good to the complex ecology that is improvisation. Although written scholarship in the area continues to improve, many commonplace understandings remain problematic. My aim here is to raise questions about how we discuss improvised musics with the longer term objective of improving our ability to better critically understand our improvisational attempts at self-transformation, dialogue and resistance.

Cultural Identity and the Problems with Autonomy

George Lewis's frequently cited concept of Eurological and Afrological perspectives on improvisation continues to shed light on two widely practiced, yet culturally distinct, 'musical belief systems' (Lewis 2004a p.133). David Borgo has summarized these two attitudes as follows:

> An Afrological perspective implies an emphasis on personal narrative and the harmonization of one's musical personality with social environments, both actual and possible. A Eurological perspective, on the other hand, implies either absolute freedom from personal narrative, culture, and conventions – an autonomy of the aesthetic object – or the need for a controlling or structuring force in the person and voice of a 'composer' (2002 p.171).

For Lewis, one of the dangers of the Eurological is its historical tendency to erase the contributions of, and in some cases plagiarize from, the Afrological (Lewis 2004a p.140). This violent tendency may stem from the difficulties found in defining one's identity, or recognizing that of others, particularly from a position of social dominance. A recent conference announcement from the University of Oxford titled *Perspectives on Improvisation*, paraphrases (without reference) from Derek Bailey (1992 p.ix): 'Improvisation is arguably the most widely distributed form of musical practice – and yet remains the least studied or understood'[2]. While the academy is only just beginning to fully embrace musical improvisation as a worthy scholarly activity, this statement by the University of Oxford spectacularly ignores the work of improvisers and theorists who have been active over the last three decades.[3] Such ignorance is nothing new. Rather, as Lewis and others have pointed out, it is consistent with the exclusion of 'non-white'[4] experimental music traditions by avant-garde historians (Lewis 2004a pp.140-1).

---

[2] http://www.music.ox.ac.uk/research/cpccm/project-events.html Accessed 30 August 2011.
[3] My observation here emerged from an online discussion with a group of musicians, initially prompted by Han-Earl Park.
[4] Lewis is careful to caution against 'the dangers of essentialist thinking with regards to the connection between music, race, and national origin' (2004 p.152); yet, it is understandable how Lewis's Afro- vs. Euro- formulation might lend itself to various forms of identity politics. However for myself, sometimes defined as a Mexican-American living in Northern Ireland, I remain ambivalent on the possibility that any form of identity politics can escape the paradox of dependency on that which it attempts to overcome or resist. In the words of political theorist William Connolly, 'Identity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty' (2002 p.64).

From such marginalized and dominant positions two very different conceptions of freedom have commonly emerged: the freedom to have one's voice recognized, versus the freedom from the need for external validation. Lewis compares contrasting perspectives on freedom held by improvisers working in different social contexts, ranging from post-Cagean composers expressing anxiety over the lack of structure in 'free' improvisation, to the use of the word 'free' by performers who were active in human rights movements (Lewis 2004a pp.153-4). As an example of the Eurological perspective, Lewis cites Mildred Chase who claims that while improvising: 'You are responsible only to yourself and the dictates of your taste' (ibid. p.154), a position I find both narcissistic and based on the assumption that one's tastes are intrinsic rather than constructed through external relationships. Moreover, I would argue that the desire to resist any form of external responsibility is symptomatic of the practice of distancing oneself from existing traditions. One of the best known examples of this attitude is Bailey's description of his practice as 'non-idiomatic improvisation' (1992 p.xii & pp.83-5), a formulation Borgo likewise claims, 'betrays a Eurological perspective' (2002 p.171).

Bailey's aspiration for a context-less form of improvisation can be further problematized by intertwining the nature of experience and invention. This relationship has been explored in detail by Sara Ramshaw in her deconstruction of the concepts of precedence and spontaneity in Western law and jazz (2006). Ramshaw argues that law can have no claim to justice unless it adapts generalized rules to specific cases through acts of interpretation (ibid. p.6). The circumstances of each trial are unique, but the actions of the accused can only be judged by their commonality with the past actions of others. It also follows that an improvisational act which has no past or future would render such an event incomprehensible. Improvisation and justice are thus impossible without what Jacques Derrida has termed 'iterability' (ibid. p.8). For a spontaneous action to have meaning, to be recognized as a distinct action, or even to be conceived as a possible future action, it must be understood through knowledge of prior actions and therefore must – at least in some way – be a reiteration of that prior knowledge. Thus, Ramshaw suggests that improvisation cannot possibly live up to the claims of a pure originality that have often been made in its name, yet each act of improvisation is a unique iteration which opens up the possibility for future creativity. Otherwise stated, 'In its failure, improvisation survives' (ibid. p.8). Ramshaw's conclusions resonate with Bennett Hogg's observation that:[5]

> […] even the most inexperienced or naive improviser is always-already trained,
> bringing complex layers and relays of knowledge, learned capabilities, and a creativity
> that can emerge from the interplay of these factors. Were this not the case,
> improvisation would not be possible nor, I suggest, would culture or consciousness
> (2011 p.90).

Based on this understanding, acts of invention in improvisation do not appear *ex nihilo*, but rather are formed from a complex array of cultural and personal experiences. Hogg goes on to suggest that improvisation might be better understood

---

[5] Hogg's essay cited here draws on Derrida's concept of the 'metaphysics of presence' to critique the originary trend in Bailey's discourse on free improvisation.

as a 'practice that illuminates the workings of the culture of which it is a part - rather than as something that claims a distance from that culture' (ibid. p.90).

From Lewis and Borgo, it is clear that Afrological approaches to improvisation celebrate collaborations between personal and sociocultural identity, while identity is generally effaced by Eurological ideology. Although the erasure of cultural identity appears essential to Bailey's promotion of non-idiomatic improvisation, it is in fact Bailey's book that first suggested to me that identity might play a crucial role in our understanding of improvisational practices. In Bailey's words, 'The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it' (1992 p.83). Although here Bailey presents a simplistic understanding of what constitutes identity, he does also suggest that 'for musicians of integrity' improvisation provides the opportunity to escape from a musical identity that is rigid, formal and predefined (ibid. p.84). Lewis promotes a more nuanced position, citing Malcolm Goldstein and Erroll Garner's view: 'that the improvisative act demands from the improviser that an answer be created to this important question: "Who are you?"' (2004a p.158). Both of these quotes focus on the role of identity and Lewis strongly suggests that improvisation is directly shaped by personal narratives that are not only sonic in nature.

One might presume that the question 'Who are you?' is best answered by an autobiographer, rather than a musical improviser. However, both of these disciplines require creative acts of self-emergence and transformation. Social psychologists Hargreaves, Miell and Macdonald, writing on the formation of musical identities, make a similar assertion: 'The continual construction and reconstruction of the self through autobiographical narratives can occur in music as well as language' (2002 pp.10-11). Hargreaves, et al. elaborate on these processes by drawing on the infant stages of identity formation:

> The early interactions and narratives which are constructed between babies and their caregivers display inherently musical features, but also exist in other activities such as linguistic play and physical movement, as well as in musical activities themselves. These can be seen as the origins of musical identities (2002 p.11).

The construction of personal narratives through music or language does not merely entail the expression of preexisting sonic or linguistic ideas. Eric Preito's article on Michel Leiris helps elaborate this position by claiming that for Leiris, 'the art of autobiography […] is no longer identified with representation - the accurate transcription of memories - but with invention - the "shuffling", "arrangement", and "refinement" of those memories' (2003 p.10). Likewise, musical improvisation can be understood as the real time manipulation of sonic memories, or the restructuring and honing of past materials and interactions. While autobiography shares this structural similarity to musical improvisation, it also more crucially shares the opportunity to inventively iterate on one's own identity.

Through this discussion I am advocating that improvisational identities are neither stable nor self-contained. Ajay Heble makes a similar argument, claiming that improvisation is not 'an expression of an autonomous identity that is deeply and naturally within us' (2000 p.94, citing Stephen Nachmanovitch). Rather, Heble suggests, 'improvisation might be more productively understood in the context of

contemporary theoretical accounts of identity formation as a social, dialogic, and constructed process' (2000 p.95).

Doing/Being Improvisation

Following on from Heble, I would argue that improvisation is not an expression of a diachronic personal narrative, but rather one of the conditions in which a self comes into being. Such acts of self-emergence are not achieved autonomously. Identity, musical or otherwise, forms through our external relationships. From a social constructivist perspective, 'we are not just influenced by others, but are in effect made up of interactions with others – we are ultimately social and not personal beings' (Hargreaves, Miell and Macdonald 2002 p.10). Hargreaves, et al. imply, by drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, that contemporary notions of the social nature of identity formation have been prefigured by dialogic philosophy. According to Bakhtin: 'I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another' (1984 p.287).[6] Similarly, Martin Buber[7] contends that our identities are shaped not through internal contemplation, but rather through our relations between ourselves and others: 'Distance provides the human situation; relation provides man's becoming in that situation' (1965 p.54).

More recently, Judith Butler has elaborated on the role that the 'other' plays in the formation of personal identity and responsibility. Butler invokes improvisation as an important part of the performative act of gender construction: 'If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint' (2004 p.1). Butler puts forward the view 'that the "I" has no story of its own that is not also the story of relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms' (2005 p.8). It is through these norms that we both emerge as a subject, and understand the activities of ourselves and others. A musician gains the title of improviser through participating in a form of music making that is shaped by certain rules and expectations, tacit or otherwise. Although Butler argues that 'the "I" is not causally induced by those norms' (ibid. p.7), she clearly dismisses any notion that personal narratives can be constructed outside of the constraints of existing social conditions. In the specific performative context under diascussion here – that of improvised music – this view can be usefully adopted to highlight tensions between the collective experience of performers and audience, and the inventive ambitions of any improvisative act.

---

[6] Inaccurately cited by Hargreaves, Miell and Macdonald (2002 p.10) as (Bahktin 1981 p.287).
[7] The broad philosophical influence of the writings of Martin Buber has been well documented in Maurice Friedman's *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (2002). The book contains two essays on Martin Buber's relationships with Emmanuel Levinas and Mikhail Bakhtin, which are of relevance to the discussion of alterity and dialogue in this article. Friedman cites an interview in which Bakhtin describes Buber as, 'the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century.' Bakhtin goes on to say that, 'I am very much indebted to him. In particular for the idea of dialogue. Of course this is obvious to anyone who reads Buber' (2002 p.353). [Originally in Russian language in Mariya Kaganskaya. 1984 "Shutosvski Kohaarovod." *Sintaksis*, Vol. 12, p.141. First quoted in English language in Joseph Frank. 1986. "The Voices of Mikhail Bakhtin." *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 33, No. 16, p.56 n.2.]

If performances are not 'causally induced' by the social norms that support their legibility, from where are they then born? How might an act of improvisation exceed its own history? To what extent can an improviser fully respond to the question 'who are you?' Butler questions the limits of self-narration, arguing that if we are not capable of reflecting on our entire personal histories, and have a limited understanding of the complex social context in which we exist, any account of ourselves must be incomprehensive. Butler is mindful that a lack of accountability to one's origin might suggest that 'there is no concept of the subject that can serve as the ground for moral agency and moral accountability' (ibid. p.8). In contrast to this position, she argues that the contingent nature of self-knowledge should form the foundation for our understanding of the limits, as well as the vast potential, of personal responsibility. Also crucially, the source of this responsibility is not our own origin or history. Rather, ethical action relies on our ability to respond to unique moments. Butler touches on this in her discussion of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, subject formation is not diachronic but rather synchronic and 'infinitely recurring', born out of an address from an irreducible Other 'whose "face" makes an ethical demand on me' (2005 p.90). Responsibility comes from this iterative demand, from our contingent response to the question of 'who are you?', a question that must be answered anew in each improvisational act.

Implicit in this discussion of improvisational responsibility is the notion that all aesthetic decisions are also actively ethical. Drawing on Mark Slobin, Simon Frith describes the role of ethics in music as follows: 'It is in deciding – playing and hearing what sounds *right* […] – that we both express ourselves, our own sense of rightness, and suborn ourselves, lose ourselves, in an act of participation' (Frith 1996 p.110, emphasis in the original). Frith also argues that music, as an experimental, social and aesthetic process, is in a unique position to '[articulate] *in itself* an understanding of both group relations and individuality, on the basis of which ethical codes and social ideologies are understood' (ibid. pp.110-111, emphasis in the original). Here the synchronic nature of identity formation is again key. Improvisational acts do not merely illuminate or represent our personal or cultural identities; they directly define who we are as individuals and shape the values of our communities. Or as Frith aptly puts it, 'Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them' (ibid. p.111).

This is not to say that musical improvisations lack meaning, that they are simply an abstract way of being. Rather, improvisations share with other discursive acts what Bakhtin describes as a 'responsive understanding […] a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse' (1981 pp.280-1, emphasis in the original). This *productive resistance* is what allows improvisation to function as a critical practice in socially discursive contexts. Returning to Butler,

> […]critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which my life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living; in other words, not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation (2004 p.4).

I feel that this understanding of critique illuminates how improvisation offers an opportunity for different voices to coexist. This strategy of resistance is distinct from

oppositional forms of identity politics in that it openly employs the codes and conventions of the culture it attempts to critique, a culture it is ultimately part of. In *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler repurposes the linguistic concept of *performativity* as a means of disarticulating dominant social norms. Such disarticulation takes place through the practice of iteration, which seeks to bring into question that which it repetitively enacts. Otherwise stated, in my attempts at improvisation I hope to show that each new performance is *also* what the practice of improvisation has become.

Butler later states, 'when one gives an account of oneself one is not merely relaying information through an indifferent medium' (2005 p.130). Both the sonic and extra-sonic results of an improvisation form an account which is inescapably tied to its context. Butler continues,

> The account is an act – situated within a larger practice of acts – that one performs for, to, even *on* an other, an allocutory deed, an acting for, and in the face of, the other and sometimes by virtue of the language provided by the other (ibid. p.130, emphasis in the original).

Such acts are not without risks, for performers and listeners alike. Personal narratives and social norms are revealed as fragile and contingent, while newly acquired yet equally provisional knowledges critique and revitalize traditions and beliefs. I would argue that such conditions are an ethical requirement for improvisation. Perhaps more than any other form of cultural production, improvisation requires personal risk in often unpredictable circumstances. It requires a willingness to risk one's values (although of course improvisation in itself may be deemed 'a value'), to give up a stable understanding of identity, to risk one's very being, in responding to the address of another. This ethical responsibility found in improvisation is not without danger. Things can go horribly wrong, and accepting this reality is par for the course. However as Butler eloquently states, such ethical actions provide a unique opportunity, 'to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient "I" as a kind of possession' (ibid. p.136). In improvisation, the only 'right' response to the question *who are you* is not to perform *who you were*, but to play *who I and you are becoming*. Butler concludes her book with this vital insight: 'If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven' (ibid. p.136). Improvisation resonates, then, with Butler's description of ethics, complete with the risk of forgivable failure to which many improvisers are well accustomed.

At the end of Lewis's Afterword to 'Improvised Music after 1950', he is cautiously optimistic that 'the tradition of American experimentalism in music [...can] assert its character as multicultural and multiethnic, with a variety of perspectives, histories, traditions, and methods' (2004b p.170). Likewise Heble claims that improvisation 'can facilitate new kinds of global and intercultural conversations [...] new networks of understanding, new models of human relationship, alternative kinds of pedagogical practice[...]' (2005, p.1). I share a similar optimism that improvisation in music will be more widely understood as an opportunity to both challenge and further develop our personal and cultural identities.

References

Bailey, Derek. 1992. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. London: The British Library National Sound Archive.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. "Discourse in the novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Borgo, David. 2002. "Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music." *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2.

Buber, Martin. 1965. *The Knowledge of Man*. New York: Harper & Row.

Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Connolly, William. 2002. *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Costello, Elvis. 1983. "A Man out of Time Beats the Clock." Interview by Timothy White in *Musician* magazine, No. 60.

Friedman, Maurice. 2002. *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 4th Edition. New York: Routledge.

Frith, Simon. 1996. "Music and Identity." In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall & Paul Du Gay. London: Sage.

Hargreaves, David J., Dorothy Miell, and Raymond A.R. Macdonald. 2002. "What are musical identities, and why are they important?" In *Musical Identities*, edited by Raymond A.R. Macdonald, David J. Hargreaves, and Dorothy Miell. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heble, Ajay. 2000. *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, dissonance, and critical practice*. London: Routledge.

Heble, Ajay. 2005. "Improvising Matters: Rights, Risks, and Responsibilities." *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, Vol. 1, No. 2.

Hogg, Bennett. 2011. "Enactive consciousness, intertextuality, and musical free improvisation: deconstructing mythologies and finding connections." In *Music and Consciousness: philosophical, psychological, and cultural perspectives*, edited by

David Clarke and Eric Clarke. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, George. 2004a. "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." In *The Other Side of Nowhere*, edited by Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Lewis, George. 2004b. "Afterword to "Improvised Music after 1950" The Changing Same." In *The Other Side of Nowhere*, edited by Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Preito, Eric. 2003. "Ethnography, improvisation, and the Archimedean fulcrum: Michel Leiris and jazz." *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1.

Ramshaw, Sara. 2006. "Deconstructin(g) Jazz Improvisation: Derrida and the Law of the Event." *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, Vol. 2, No. 1.

Small, Christopher. 1998. *Musicking*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Steiner, George. 1989. *Real Presences*. London: Faber and Faber.